

# Search for Happiness in Shashi Deshpande's Novel "Roots and Shadows"

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## ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to study the search for happiness in Shashi Deshpande's novel *Roots and Shadows*. The wives in Shashi Deshpande's novels are the ones who treasure extramarital relationships and look for 'fulfilment' in such behaviour, whereas the husbands never seem to want them. Instead of empowering women, this reduces their sense of worth. Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* is a novel that delves deep into the psyche of its protagonist, Indu, who stands in for a class of educated, socially active modern women struggling with issues such as romantic love, sexual desire, the pursuit of personal fulfilment, marriage, establishing roots, and finding one's own identity.

**Keywords:** Happiness, Identity, Struggle, Quest, Society.

## INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande is accomplished contemporary Indian women writers in English, and her works often focus on the struggles of Indian women from the middle class. Her true legacy is the debunking of two myths: that of man's absolute superiority, and that of woman as victim and paragon of virtues. She depicts the struggles of an educated middle-class woman caught between conservatism and progressivism. Her primary motivation is the need to advance the status of women in today's patriarchal culture.

The sensitive heroine, Indu, goes through an identity crisis in Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*. The character Jaya from *That Long Silence*. It's not just Jaya who tries to find safety in marriage in order to assert her independence; Indu does the same, only to come to the same conclusion. The truth of the matter is that confirmation is necessary for survival. They both discover, however, that this standardised behaviour is viewed as a threat to their individuality. The only self that can be achieved is the self which sprouts in inter-personal relationship that made Indu cry out in agony: "This is my real sorrow, that I can never be complete in myself" (Deshpande, *Roots and Shadow* 34).

Indu had run away from her home in an effort to find happiness and independence. As time went on, she learned that one's relationships are fundamental to their identity. With so many phantoms to keep track of, her life has become nothing more than a shadow. Running away from her family only led Indu into the arms of Jayant, who represented another trap into the shadowy realm. "I have got away. But to what?... to what have I got away? Is that any better than this?" (RS 176).

In marrying Jayant, Indu had thought that she had found her alter ego and had gained in him a spiritual and psychological level of closeness. But marriage with Jayant had forced her to realise that self is an elusive centre, that one could never exchange roots with another – that this was illusion "a chimera" and Indu felt "cheated" (RS 114).

In a very creative way, Shashi Deshpande contrasts two groups of women in Indian culture. The Akka, Narmada, Atya, Sumitra, Kamla, Sunania, and Padmini rivers all make up one group. They believe that in order to succeed in life, a woman must have a ruthless, cunning, and dishonest attitude. Indu, a young, educated lady who presents herself as "contemporary," stands in stark contrast to this traditional model of women's roles.

She takes a look at and reflects on ideas like "self," "sin," "faith," "love," and "etc" She has her own ideals of liberty that she strives to realise. She takes great joy in rebelling and embracing her religion. However, she is unable to achieve any success despite her best efforts, either because of the influence of her own Sanskaras or because of her extreme shyness and fear. Indu wants to grow up and find fulfilment in her own right. Because she wants freedom, happiness, and wholeness, she moves to a new residence. The futility of her search becomes apparent to her quickly.

Many years ago, Indu had agreed to marry someone other than her father and the rest of her family, and she has now returned to the ancestral place from where she originally came. She returns for the funeral of the old, wealthy family tyrant, Akka. Even though no one realises it yet, the enormous family is on the cusp of significant change. Indu holds the key to their success.

Indu was a headstrong young lady who craved liberty and autonomy from a young age. But now she faces a series of questions that have her scratching her head. She wonders if she has freed herself from the constraints of tradition and family just to be enslaved by her love for her spouse, which she doubts to be genuine. She comes to terms with the fact that the real reason she accepted Jayant was to prove her success to her family, and not because she loved him. Is she still herself even while she's at work, or is it her tragedy that she'll never be really at peace with herself? She visits her childhood home in search of answers but instead discovers more darkness. For her, this is the moment of truth. She mulls on the events of her own life, work, romantic relationships, the institution of marriage as a whole, her own love-based marriage, etc. She figures out her family's and her own destinies thanks to enlightening conversations with the many distinct characters who make up her family. She wants to find her roots, so she goes back to her old neighbourhood.

Indu is a sensitive young woman who also happens to be quite intelligent. She wants to strike out on her own and compete well, but she faces many challenges along the road. She wants to be independent and whole, but Akka's domineering nature and her family's expectations stand in the way of this. Akka forbids her to socialise with male students while she is attending college. Eventually, Indu runs away from home and marries Jayant, the man she's always wanted. Maybe it's marriage that's taught her tricks like lying and putting on a show: "Her desire to arrest herself had driven her from affection to hypocrisy" (Bhatnagar 1991). Indu herself realises: "I had learnt to reveal to Jayant nothing but what he wanted to see... I hid my response as if they were bits of garbage" (RS 41). These sobering realisations about her future as a mere extension of her husband's persona fill her with fear and scarcity. There is a paradox at play here: she is not content with Jayant, yet she cannot bear to be without him. She feels complete with Jayant, but it is not the kind of completion she seeks. When Naren finally gets her alone in the novel, he makes an attempt at making love to her. But, later, she offers herself twice to Naren. And then the question haunts her how she will view the act of adultery. Immediately after the act, she goes to her own bed, but deliberately avoids sleeping as it would erase. "the intervening period and what happened between Naren and her" (RS 167). On the one hand, she does not take love-making as a sin or crime, but on the other hand, the very next day, she starts thinking of the enormity of what she had done: "Adultery.... What nuances of wrong doing... no, it needs the other stronger word... What nuances of sin the word carries. I will now brood on my sin, be crushed under a weight of guilt and misery" (RS 170).

Indu is an agnostic when it comes to romantic love. Although she acknowledges the existence of "love" in fictional works, she does not believe it exists in the real world. She claims that "it is a gigantic hoax." That is not all there is to life. If a person buys into it, they will be caught in a state of dependence and humility. She was taught from an early age to be compliant and quiet, without asking questions. She joked around and assumed she'd never try to reveal her true nature. But there are daily shifts in a marriage. To her dismay, she realised that Jayant had not only expected but taken for granted her surrender, and that she had, albeit subconsciously, subjected herself to him step by step in the name of love. Since she had always hoped to avoid arguments after getting married, she was shocked to learn that what she was feeling was not love but an adjustment. She did not want her parents to blame themselves for her decision to marry for love.

Indu argues that people should follow their inner voice and act in accordance with their values. As O.P. Bhatnagar says: "In the end, comes the realisation that freedom lies in having the courage to do what one believes is the right thing to do and the determination and the tenacity to adhere to it. That alone can bring harmony in life." But, unfortunately, she herself has failed to do so either for fear of failure or because of timidity. The very fact makes her see herself as a sinner and deceiver and becomes a cause of her sufferings.

Fighting against her womanhood is, in a way, Indu's quest for self-awareness, mental freedom, and emotional and intellectual definition. Indu tells Naren, "A woman I felt hedged in, limited by my sex. I resented by womanhood because it closed so many doors to me" (RS 87). She hopes and despairs at the same time. She tries to come to terms with her own self in context of her love for Jayant. She returns 'home', the one she lived in with Jayant: "That was my only home... I would put all this behind me and go back to Jayant" (RS 205). Indu returns equipped with 'quality of courage' necessary to face the challenge of identity crisis and challenge of conviction. She proclaims: "Defeat is relief: and freedom only relative. For human being there is no escape from relationships; no less for women. New bonds replace the old, that's all" (RS 16).

Until recently, Indu only saw Akka as an annoying old woman who got in the way. But after her death, Indu listened to her stories and got to know her better. For her, Akka was an anchor of strength that allowed her to follow her convictions. After that, Indu knew she had to live up to Akka's lofty standards. Indu's irrepressible spirit and bravery had been a source of faith for Akka. Through the power of her will, Akka revealed all of this information about Indu.

Now that she knows her faith was correct, Indu feels compelled to prove it. Indu must uphold this duty and responsibility to his loved ones. She could only pursue the independence she had imagined within the framework of her responsibilities and commitments. She realised the wisdom of her elderly uncle's words from a long time ago: that

living by the rules affords one more sense of dignity and refinement. You can do whatever you choose within them. The fight for Indu's independence paid off, and she was finally set free. None of her friends or family had stopped her from doing what she thought was right; not Akka, not Atya, not even Jayant. She was no longer afraid and her life was at peace. The narrative promotes neither triumph nor defeat but rather peace and reconciliation between competing values and different identities. What's more impressive is that she gained this knowledge after receiving Akka's fortune as an heir. The argument doesn't matter because of this hidden power of money.

And so, like Jaya, Indu in *Roots and Shadows* looks for safety in matrimony in her pursuit of personal independence, only to learn, all over again. Indu had run away from her family in search of happiness, but she eventually came to appreciate them for what they were. As time went on, she learned that one's relationships are fundamental to their identity. With so many phantoms to keep track of, her life has become nothing more than a shadow.

Indu wants to be flawless in herself, and one of her goals or ideals is to reach a condition of dispassion and isolation. She had used Naren as a benchmark for success. She aspired to be just like Naren, uncaring and uninterested in everything around her. But she wonders if she'll ever get to the point where she has no desires or goals and is completely content. She discovers, unexpectedly, how deeply invested and devoted she may become. She anticipates caring actions from others; for example, she requests that her parents formally invite them to their home, even if her father does not see the need to do so. Similar to how she had unrealistic expectations about Jayant, which leads to her being let down: "I am grading expectations down. Each month, each day, I expect less and less and less from... why can't I compromise for what he can give... deep affection, yes; total, absolute commitment" (RS 61).

Indu realises with piercing clarity that her marriage has not elevated her social status to that of the aforementioned women, despite the fact that she has progressed far further in life than they have. Her husband, Jayant, sabotages her pursuit of communal bliss by undermining her desire for peace and unity. Due to marital constraints, she is no longer free to follow her natural female impulses. She realised that marriage means something different to her than it does to a man. Patriarchal society created artificial barriers between the sexes, despite the fact that both are essential to human survival. As per Simone de Beauvoir: "This necessity has never brought about a condition of reciprocity between them; women have never constituted a caste making exchanges and contracts with the male caste upon a footing of equality" (446).

Indu works hard to comprehend the truth of her situation, the true source of the problems in her marriage. Her certainty, confidence, and assurance all seem to be eroding when she is with Jayant. And if she were to confide in him about her sentiments in this way, he would dismiss it as "nonsense" and nothing more. This points to the central issue. Jayant is too lazy to try to figure out what it is that she actually needs or how she truly feels. We can tell with certainty that they are not communicating with one another. On the other hand, her inquiring intellect wonders why she is in such a muddled state. That's where most of the issues with Indu stem from. She's not afraid to injure, but she won't risk striking. Because of this, she keeps returning to Jayant in the hope that things will eventually improve, even though she knows that this is a waste of time. Her mind unrolls thus: "Go back to Jayant. What kind of a life can you build on a foundation of dishonesty... Now I would go back and see that have could stand the scorching touch of honesty.

Nevertheless I knew I would not tell Jayant about Naren and me" (RS 205).

Because her new efforts are built on the same dishonesty as her previous ones, her failure is obvious. Indu is split between two opposing viewpoints. On the one hand, she has formed an inextricable bond with her childhood home; on the other, it has become a prison where she is unable to escape the confines of its walls or the voices, smells, and people who live there. She never seems to be able to sort out her thoughts and feelings and come up with a clear plan of action. Thus, through the figure of Indu, Deshpande has very precisely targeted the inner battle and pains of the new class of Indian women, who are anchored in and formed by Indian norms yet affected by western scientific knowledge.

Once revered as a *pativrata* and *sati* and something which must be preserved by man, the modern Indian woman is someone who feels the tug of her own conscience, her own quest, her own identity, her own unique place and role in the family and society. The character Indu stands in for this lady. At this juncture, society faces a choice: either reject and condemn her, or support and assist her in building a new reputation. The novels of Vijaya Deshpande are often referred to as "novels of woman's self-quest," with the implied goal of promoting the view that the women depicted therein have established themselves as autonomous beings, free from the constraints imposed by society, culture, nature, and their own fears and guilt.

Shashi Deshpande's protagonists recoil in horror from some of womanhood's most basic biological processes, including childbirth. In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu frequently recalls the birthing room where so many women before her had given birth, and the secret exit from which she always seems to emerge in her nightmares. Indu is childless because she is too scared to have one. She tells herself, "The truth is, I will have no child that is not wholly welcome" (RS 3). Indu

contemptuously describes marriage as “behind the façade of romanticism, sentiment and tradition, what was marriage after all, but two people brought together after cold-blooded bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce...” (RS 3). Her heroines long for control on their bodies. Marriage like the parental home seems to be the chalked lines drawn by others. At the idea of demolition of Akka’s house Indu comments “yes, the house had been a trap too, binding me to a past I had to move away from. Now, I felt clean, as if I had cut away all the unnecessary uneven edges of me” (RS 204).

The most shocking fact revealed about Indu is that she manages to free herself from her husband's controlling grip and take on a position of independence. To this day, she harbours neither remorse or regret over her sexual encounter with Naren. Jayant, her husband, has nothing to do with what transpired between her and Naren, so far as she is concerned. “That had nothing to do with the two of us and our life together” (RS 205). They hoped to finally have some privacy by marrying the person of their dreams, but were ultimately let down by their spouses. The wives in Shashi Deshpande's novels are the ones who treasure extramarital relationships and look for 'fulfilment' in such behaviour, whereas the husbands never seem to want them. Instead of empowering women, this reduces their sense of worth. The decision Indu made not to tell her husband about her sexual meetings with Naren was not made in a completely fearless manner. Additionally, it should not be seen as evidence of her independence or self-awareness. Her bold declaration that “she is essentially monogamous” (RS 81) proved of little value to evaluate her on her own words.

Shashi Deshpande's work *Roots and Shadows* features a female protagonist named Akka who endures unimaginable mental anguish. Even though Akka, his wife, took excellent care of him during his illness, he still pined for his mistress. Akka is beaten by both her in-laws, her mother-in-law and her husband. Since Akka can't have children, her mother-in-law abuses her mentally and physically, and her husband brutally beats her since she can't meet his sexual needs. Tragically, Akka tied the knot with an adult when she was just 13 years old. Atya tells the story of Akka : “Her mother-in-law I heard, whipped her for that and locked up for three days, starved as well. And then, sent her back to husband’s room ... Her husband... you know how men were in those days, especially when there was a lot of money.

He had weakness for women. How could a child satisfy him. He always had mistresses” (RS 70).

When women in Shashi Deshpande's novels are placed in situations that aren't conducive to their own needs, urges, ambitions, and goals, they act in a variety of ways, displaying a wide range of temperaments and responses. She's played a number of women who are unhappy with their lives. It seems that her characters' struggles to find their place in the world, both inside and beyond the family, serve as a unifying thread, and that they adapt and develop as they do so. In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu, the protagonist, marries Jayant against the counsel of her surrogate mother Akka, only to find that she is still unfulfilled. Shashi Deshpande's novels *Roots and Shadows* and *That Long Silence* are about women's search for meaning, and they present the idea that the women in these books have become fully realised individuals, independent of the bonds of family, marriage, culture, and even their own repressed anxieties and guilt.

Indu rejects the illusions she had accepted as her true identity and life. She once declared, “I would never go back” (RS 20) to the family she had left earlier, yet Indu returned to the family once again to find her roots.

*Roots and Shadows* is filled with instances of isolation. By choosing to wed on her own terms, Indu displays her autonomy. In this work, Indu argues that both men and women are victims of cultural norms and marriage. Marriage in Deshpande's work is shown as a cycle of servitude and an instrument of patriarchal sexism. Her protagonists, who claim in their novels that they will escape the 'cradle of bondage' of their families by leaving to find happiness in a marriage of their own choosing, often find themselves trapped in a different kind of relationship with their husbands. The darkness engulfs their lives. Indu finds that “a woman’s life contains no choices” (RS 6).

Thus, Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* is a novel that delves deep into the psyche of its protagonist, Indu, who stands in for a class of educated, socially active modern women struggling with issues such as romantic love, sexual desire, the pursuit of personal fulfilment, marriage, establishing roots, and finding one's own identity.

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