CHAPTER 2
2.1 INDU AT THE CROSS ROADS OF LIFE

In the preceding chapter we have examined the myth of womanhood, which defines the pattern of behaviour, which women were supposed to adhere to. We have seen how this myth was prevalent all over the world, in different races, cultures and countries. It is the omnipresence of this myth in Indian society that Shashi Deshpande is concerned with, which results in the hypocritical double standards that are enforced upon women in our country. She portrays her women characters as persons struggling to strike the right balance between the tradition encapsulated by this myth, and the modern world in which they live.

Shashi Deshpande's novels deal with the women belonging to the Indian middle class, who are brought up in a traditional environment and are struggling to liberate themselves and seek their self-identity and independence. She is also the only contemporary writer who has given graphic details about the girl-child and her psychology. Most of her women characters are able to transcend their identity crisis by analyzing their childhood and the process of their upbringing. Roots and Shadows projects the educated women who are unable to enfranchise the traditional background in which they are reared.

The crux of all the prevailing problems of women are their subjugation, which is always present in the form of silent servitude not only in Roots and Shadows but also in other novels of Shashi Deshpande like the Dark Holds No Terrors, and That Long Silence also deals with the same problems. In the novel Roots And Shadows which explores the inner struggle of Indu, who represents a set of modern women who are educated and are very much in contact with the society, dealing with the critical problems like love,
sex, marriage, settlement and individuality. As O. P Bhatnagar says: “The novel deals with a woman’s attempt to assert her individuality and realize her freedom. It depicts how it brings her into confrontation with family, the male world and the society in general”\(^1\) (27).

Shashi Deshpande writes her own experiences through the character of Indu in *Roots And Shadows*. She has written about the women who do not accept anything without reason and that is why they are trapped by myth and are standing at the cross roads of life.

Indu and all those women had their roots in the same place.

“Life as I saw it in a small town as a child, as a growing girl, Life as I saw it in Bombay as a woman. To be a child is to live in a world apart from the world of adults, to see the world of adults from a distance. And I saw it, the sharp, clean line dividing the world of men from the world of women. As a child I could cross over easily from one world into the other. Often I was the bridge. But as I grew up, I realized the bridge wasn’t there any more. I had ceased to be one myself. I was trapped into a world of my own, but still, for same reason, outside the claustrophobic world of women.”

“If Indu, motherless and with an absentee father didn’t belong, if she was an outsider because of this, so was I because of an agnostic father who had broken from orthodoxy and family. But the women came to me all the same. And I watched them from a distance.” (29-30)

Indu comes back to her ancestral place from where she, against the wishes of her father and the other members of the family, had accepted so many years ago to get married to a person of her own choice. She comes back
to attend the funeral ceremony of Akka, the old rich family tyrant. The large family is on the threshold of change though everybody is unaware of it. And the key to their future lies in the hands of Indu.

Indu has been a determined girl, who always wanted to be free. But, how, a number of questions come before her, which leave her puzzled and baffled. She is uncertain about the fact whether she has broken the stronghold of family and tradition only to be dominated by love for her husband, which again, she feels, is not true love. She realizes that she has accepted Jayant not for love but because she wanted to show her family that she was a success. Is it her tragedy never to be free and complete? She goes back to her parent’s home to find out the roots but she finds shadows instead.

Indu is projected against the women belonging to the older generation. Thus, the writer has very artistically juxtaposed two sets of women in the Indian set-up—one set is represented by Akka, Narmada, Sumitra Kaki, Kamla Kaki, Atya, Sunanda Atya; and Indu represents the other set To the old generation, a woman’s life is nothing “But to get married, to bear children, to have sons and then grand children” (128). And the ideal woman is the one who does not have her own identity: “A woman who sheds her ‘I’ who loses her identity in her husband” (54). The new generation reviews everything with reason. As Indu tries to listen to the voice of her conscience and revolts. But unfortunately, in all her efforts, she fails miserably either due to the impact of the culture and tradition, or fear of stigma, or timidity or all these combined together.

Indu aspires to become independent and complete in her but finds so many hurdles coming in her way. She finds dominant Akka and her family to
be a great hindrance to achieving her goal of attaining independence and completeness. So later on, Indu leaves the house and gets married to Jayant, who is her own choice. We find that, she leaves one house and enters another to be independent and complete, but ironically enough, soon she realizes the futility of her decisions: “Jayant and I . . . I wish I could say we have achieved complete happiness but I can’t fantasize”. (14)

Indu laughs at the idea of not calling one’s husbands by his name as it shortens the age of the husband. Later, she realizes that she too is not different from other women, as she always wants Jayant to be with her. The only difference is her reason for thinking so.

At one point in the novel when Naren tries to make love with her, she declares: “I’m essentially monogamous, for me, its one man and one man alone”(89). But, later she offers herself to him twice. And then the question haunts her how she will view this act of adultery.

Indu longs to be detached and independent but to no avail. She feels ashamed of herself when she does not see the things in practical form. She tells Naren: I am still and dead. And how when you tried to kiss me, I thought . . . this is Jayant. So that’s all I’m, Naren not a pure woman. Not a too faithful wife. But an anachronism. A woman who loves her husband too much. Too passionately. And is ashamed of it (192). So we can see that Indu is not happy with her husband and has extra marital affair but so trapped in tradition that she does not want to cheat on her husband. This situation places her squarely on the crossroads of life.

On the one hand, she is ashamed of her not being a pure woman, but on the other hand, she hates her womanhood. She stops working for the
woman magazines: “Women, women, women…. I got sick of it. There was nothing else. It was a kind of narcissism. And as if we had locked ourselves in a cage and thrown away the keys”(85-86).

Through the character of Indu Shashi Deshpande analyses “The woman who burnt herself because her mother said she had shamed the family by talking to a boy in public.
The clever girl taken out of school because she got engaged and “they” did not want her to study any more.
I saw these again with Indu. And how, the knowledge shaped itself into words, ideas… the vulnerability of women. The deviousness of women. The helplessness of women. The courage of women. (90-91)

And the thought- was Indu’s or mine? - I won’t belong to that world, I won’t be like them, my God, and I don’t want to be like them.

Indu struggles hard to understand the life in reality, the actual cause that is destroying her married life. She feels that her sense of certainty, confidence and assurance is being destroyed in the presence of Jayant. And when she talks of such feelings to him, he would call it only “nonsense” and nothing else. Jayant never bothers to understand what she really wanted, what her feelings are. She joys with the idea of leaving Jayant. When she sees that there is no real understanding between them.

Shashi Deshpande writes. “Indu sprang out of the claustrophobic world with a courage I admired. She was free. But often to be free is to be lonely. I shared this bleak thought with Indu. Even today, the smell of Bombay is to me the smell of loneliness. But there is always the beacon light of love. And love leads to the certainty of marriage. But marriage invariably takes you back to
the world of women, of trying to please, of the fear of not pleasing, of surrender, of self-abnegation. To love another and to retain you intact—is that possible? To assert yourself and not to be aggressive, to escape domination and not to dominate? ... Oh yes, you can’t escape the shadows. The clearer the light, the darker the shadows. They follow you everywhere."

As a result of this instead of leaving Jayant, she goes back to him with the vain hope that the things will change.

Thus Shashi Deshpande has very exquisitely pinpointed the inner struggle and sufferings of the new class of Indian women through the character of Indu, who raised many basic questions regarding modern women who are rooted and shaped by Indian customs but influenced by the scientific knowledge of the West. There was a time when the Indian woman was hailed as a “Prativrata, “a Sati” and something which has to be protected by man, but now she is aware of the stirrings of her conscience, her quest, her identity, her individuality.
2.2 SARU’S QUEST FOR IDENTITY AGAINST GENDER DISCRIMINATION

Like her first novel, Shashi Deshpande’s second novel, The Dark Holds No Terrors is about a well educated, economically independent woman’s search for her identity which leads to uncover the dormant strength in human beings. It is the story of Sarita (called Saru) and her relationship with her parents and husband and her agonizing search for herself. It is the story of a marriage on the verge of breakdown and of a woman who has been made acutely conscious of her gender since childhood.

This novel explodes the myth of man’s superiority and the myth of woman being a paragon of virtue.

The Dark Holds No Terrors is the story of Sarita, often referred to as Saru in novel, and her confrontations and conflicts. The novel reveals the life of Sarita who is always neglected and ignored in favour of her brother. She is not given any importance; no parental love is showered upon her even on her birthday. Her brother’s birthday, however, is are celebrated with full enthusiasm including the performance of the religious rituals. When her brother is drowned, she is blamed for it. Her mother, in particular, always scolds her for being responsible for her son’s death: “You killed him. Why did you not die? Why are you alive, when he’s dead?” (173). Due to her mother’s accusations, Saru begins to wonder if in reality, she had killed him. It is much later, after rethinking and pondering over the event, after her mother’s death, that she realizes the accidental nature of her brother’s death.

Saru grows up and acquires education against her mother’s will. As an educated young lady, her sense of reasoning and questioning develops. She
can, no more, tolerate inequality between brother and sister. She remembers how her brother was named. “They had named him Dhruva. I can remember, even now vaguely, faintly, a state of joyous excitement that had been his naming day. The smell of flowers, the grinding stone....” (152).

The mother is very attached to her son. Her attitude is typical one—after all; he is male child and therefore one who will propagate the family lineage. In other sense, also, the male child is considered more important than a girl, because he is qualified to give “agni” to his dead parents. The soul of the dead person would otherwise wander in forment. The first thought, when Saru hears the news of her mother’s death, is: Who lit the pyre? She had no son to do that for her. Dhruva had been seven when he died.” (17)

When Dhruva was alive her mother’s discrimination between the two had been very evident to Sarita. Saru had also to put up with constant reminders from her mother that she was dark complexioned and should not step into the sun lest it should worsen her colour. In one conversation with her mother:

“Do not go out in the sun, you’ll get darker”

“Who cares?”

“We have to care if you don’t. We have to get you married.”

“I don’t want to get married”

“Will you live with us all your life?”

“Why not?”

“You can’t.”

“And Dhruva?”

“He’s different. He’s a boy” (40).
Seeing the discrimination between her and her brother, as she grows up, resentment and hatred drive her to leave home and obsessively seek success in medical college. There she falls in love with a college mate and marries him against her parent’s wishes. Her mother, being an old, traditional, orthodox woman, does not want her daughter to get married to a person who is from a lower caste:

“What caste is he?”
I don’t know.
A Brahmin?
Of course, not.
Then, cruelly... his father keeps a cycle shop. (87)

But Saru thinks that Manu is a means of that love and security which she had always lacked in life. He is the ideal romantic hero who has come to save her from the insecure, loveless existence. And she is hungry for love:

“I was hungry for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love.
Of my being loved. Of my being wanted.”(35)

But happiness, as she soon discovers is only an illusion and one is left with memories, which are weighed with grief. As long as she is merely a medical student and her husband the breadwinner there is peace at home, even if ‘home’ is surrounded by filth and stench. The problems arise only when she gains recognition as a doctor. Saru remembers even the exact incident, which becomes a turning point in their existence. Once, there is a fire accident in a factory near- by and she returns home late, in a stupour, after helping out the victims, still wearing her bloodstained coat. The news spreads in the neighborhood that she is a doctor. Gradually people start paying more
attention to her than previously. Her neighbours keep coming to her with sundry complaints, glad to have a doctor in their midst. Saru does not observe the slow change in her husband, in the initial exhilaration at her exalted status as a doctor. In a retrospective mood, much later, however, she is able to trace the events, which lead to the disastrous condition of her marriage, saying: “He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband”. (42)

Her inability to secure time for herself and her family (husband and children) upsets her family life. Manu, her husband, cannot tolerate people greeting her and ignoring him. He can not expresses it openly but says out of irritation: “I am sick of this place. Let’s get out of here soon”. (37) He does not love her the way he used to earlier. Saru realizes it: “Now I know that it was there it began … this terrible thing that has destroyed our marriage.” (37). She starts hating the man-woman relationship, which is based on attraction and need and not love:

“Love… how she scorned the word now. There was no such thing between man and woman. There was only a need which both fought against, futilely … turning into the thing they called “love.” it’s only a word she thought. Take away the word; the idea, and the concept will wither away. (65)

It is easy to identify the consequences of the shattering of the male ego. Saru dwells upon this at length in her father’s house and tries to objectively analyse her share of the blame in the disaster that her marriage has been. Her rumination makes her think, “My brother died because I heedlessly turned my back on him. My mother died alone because I deserted her. My husband is a
failure because I destroyed his manhood.” (217) Though this statement suggests a study in guilt consciousness, the novel in reality presents a stark picture of the gross inequality prevailing in our society: gender discrimination by the parents towards their own children and the superiority of the male in a marriage, if it must survive.

When asked by her friend Nalu to talk on “Medicine as a profession for woman” to some college students, Saru makes up an imaginary speech, which sarcastically sums up the condition necessary for a successful marriage:

“A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he is an M.A., you should be a B.A., if he is 5' 4" tall you shouldn’t be more than 5' 3" tall. If he is earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety, if you want a happy marriage. Don’t ever try to reverse the doctor-nurse, executive - secretary; principal teacher role .It can be traumatic, disastrous. And, I assure you, it is not worth it. He’ll suffer. You’ll suffer and so will the children. Women’s magazines will tell you that a marriage must be equal. Partnership. That’s nonsense, rubbish. No partnership can ever be equal. It will always be unequal, but take care that it’s unequal in favour of your husband. If the scales tilt in your favour, god helps you, both of you” (137).

Saru’s bitter realization is that a woman must necessarily remain a step behind her husband. Surprisingly enough, no less a person than John Ruskin holds a similar view. “A man ought to know any language or science he learns, thoroughly; while a woman ought to know the same language or
science only so far may enable her to sympathize in her husband’s pleasures, and in those of his best friends.\(^4\) \((63)\)

This is an awkward situation in which she is placed. At a personal level, she feels a gradual disappearance of love and attachment, which she had once developed. It is now replaced by a psychological conflict, which is uncalled for but inevitable, given the situation in which both of them have been placed. Most of the solemn duties towards her husband and children are unattended to. The children do not get proper love and care from their mother as she gets late in returning home. The husband sits waiting: “I came home late that night.... when I came home I found him sitting with a brooding expression on his face that made my heart give painful, quivering little jumps” \((71)\).

While there is a decline in her conjugal relationship, her status in society rises day by day. It may imply at one level that her risen importance is inversely proportionate to the fall in the importance of her husband, creating a conflict between her achieved position and the ascribed position of Manu. People visit her for different purposes, which widen the gap between them. The financial ascendance of Saru, at the same time, renders Manu impotent. The only way he can regain that potency and masculinity is through sexual assault upon Sarita, which, for him, becomes an assertion of his manhood leading to a sort of abnormality at night, as he is a cheerful normal human being, a loving husband during day, turning into a rapist at night. It terrifies and humiliates Saru so much that she cannot even speak about them, even to him. “And each time it happened and I don’t speak. Put another brick on the
wall of silence between us. May be one day I will be walled alive within it and
die a slow, painful death “(88)

Marital life is nothing but a queer combination of several forces acting
upon two human beings in different capacities to fulfill the marital ambition
and play a vital role in society. The given roles of two human beings do
undergo a change both at the functional and psychological levels. This is
precisely what happens to Saru when with her economic independence,
reinforced with the fact that she earns more than Manu, she still feels stripped
of her independence by virtue of being assigned to the job of a house wife, i.e.,
bringing up children and subserving the interest of her husband. Tired of both
the duties, indoor and outdoors, she wants to leave the latter one: “Manu, I
want to stop working. I want to give all up… my practice, the hospital,
everything”(72). But Manu doesn’t want her to leave job, as they cannot
maintain the same standard with only his income: “On my salary? Come on,
Saru, don’t be silly. You know how much I earn. You think we can live this
way on that?”(73).

This burden of double duties is not only a feeling in itself but gradually
takes on a force imbalancing the martial balance that normally sustains
conjugal relation. With this growing feeling of disenchantment and imbalance,
separation becomes inevitable.

At this juncture of life, Saru hears the news of her mother’s death and
goes back to her parent’s home, though emotionless. She does not feel at home
at her parent’s place where once she was born and brought up, everything
looks strange to her in spite of the fact that there is no change in the setting:
“Inside here, though, there were no changes. The seven pairs of large stone slabs leading to the front door on which she played hopscotch as a child. The yard was bare as always” (11).

Though she comes back a totally changed woman, everything looks strange to her. Her father sounds strange while talking. The absence of affability in the house sets her pendulum rolling between the two houses: “As she drinks her tea ... too sweet and strong... he (father) sat gingerly on the edge of his chair like an unwilling host entertaining an unwelcome guest. And that, I suppose, is what I really am. What gave me the idea I could come back?”(14)

She cannot say all that she wanted to. All this happens due largely to a guilt consciousness that she has developed.

She expects sympathy from her father but to no avail. Rather, her father, after listening to all the failures in her life adjusting with her husband, turns his back on her pretending to put rice on the stove. Under such circumstances, Saru feels that if it had been an arranged marriage, she would have got support from her parents. But now she is suffering from guilt consciousness. These feelings remind her of the fate of one of her friends:

“If mine had been an arranged marriage, if I had left it to them to arrange my life, would he have left me like this? She thought of a girl, the sister of a friend, who had come home on account of a disastrous marriage. She remembered the care and sympathy with which the girl had been surrounded, as if she was an invalid, a convalescent and the girl’s face with its look of passive suffering. There had been only that there, nothing else, neither despairs nor shame. For the failure had not
been hers, but her parents, and so the guilt had been theirs too, leaving only the suffering for the girl” (199).

Acute confusion prevails upon her. She feels that she has done injustice to mother, husband and everybody else.

The wheel finally comes full circle Saru tries to compromise with the situation and the novel ends with a tiny hope of resettlement. The psychology of a woman placed in such a situation is given a physical revelation. She receives a letter from Manu of his arrival. The bitter emotions strengthen further. It is not the scorn for her husband and a sense of vengeance that gathers up a storm, but the sense of guilt that sweeps her off her feet. She reacts to every situation and becomes sensitive to every sound, all the time conscious of Manu reaching and knocking at the door. She asks her father not to open the door when Manu comes, perhaps believing that after being tired of knocking, Manu would depart. At the same time, she waits for someone to come and support her: “If only someone would tell her what to do, she would do it at once, without a second thought. It was strange that after all these years of having been in full control of her life, she now had this great desire to let go. To put herself in another’s hands.” (88)

Taking into consideration the personal life of a character, one accepts the fact that every individual fantasizes about sex. But in the realm of every fantasy, there is the tinge of reality. This reality is at times gloomy and at times it leads towards the fulfillment of emotions. Saru grows and through the process of growing she inevitably comes across a number of novel situations which she could not have imagined, e.g. her entrance to the college life as a very simple, straightforward and studious girl, but later on, affected by the
company of her friends, coming out as a totally changed person; her becoming a woman and all the time being reminded by her mother of the same: "You should be careful now about how you behave. Don’t come out in your petticoat like that. Not even when it’s only your father who’s around"(55). And ultimately she starts hating her own womanhood: I can remember closing my eyes and praying… oh god, let it not happen to me. Let there be a miracle and let me be the one female to whom it doesn’t happen”(55).

The agonizing feelings bred by such growth are monstrous. With the physical growth, she, is, supposed to have passed one phase of life. The barriers of society spread their frightening tentacles over her. She feels abhorrent, but helpless: “A kind of shame that engulfed me, making me want to rage, to scream against the fact that put me in the same class as my mother”(55).

She develops hatred towards her mother who always comes in the way of her progress. The writer has shown the gap in the mother-daughter relationship. In other words, it is a conflict between the old and the young: the tradition and the modernity. She is brought up in the traditional atmosphere but the education she receives makes her a changed person with a rebellious attitude towards tradition. As an educated young woman, she does not accept anything without reason. Her mother almost forces her to stay within the four walls of the house. She does not give her the permission to take admission to the medical college, but Saru does not even listen to her: “I’m not talking to you, … you don’t want me to have anything. You don’t even want me to live”(128).
Here, a kind of hatred towards the mother is shown, as it is the mother who puts all the restriction on her daughter without considering the fact that the times have changed and the next generation is passing through a transitional period where the daughter is sandwiched between tradition and modernity.

Now, education invokes in her a consciousness, which was not present in the older generation. In many cases, as Maria Mies says:

"The non-conforming conduct of the women is not the consequence of an external necessity but of changed consciousness. They are not satisfied with the rhetoric of equality between man and woman but want to see that the right to an individual life and the right to development of their individual capacities are realized in their own lives."³