Chapter II

My Life is My Own: Assertion of Self
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She who seeks light must learn to walk in darkness on her own road.

-Sujatha Modayic.

The social and cultural change in the post independent India has created awareness among women about their place in society and their relationship with their surroundings. It is generally believed that a nation, or society or even a family could progress only with the active participation of women in the overall development. Thus women are an integral part of the society. They have become conscious of the need to attain self-hood and establish their identity as individuals.

The growth of a girl child in Indian society is seen mainly in relation with her attitudes towards her family and her duty towards it. Down the ages gender discrimination has always been prevalent in the society. These gender inequalities are the creation of patriarchy and by-products of social cultural and economic conditions. It generally denied opportunities to women in the field of education and employment which hindered their personal growth and development. It paved the way for male domination which is based not on mutuality but on oppression and suppression thereby relegating inferior position to them.

Socialization plays an important role and bears an important link between social values and male domination in the society. The society is in a state of confusion on account of the conflict and confrontation between human
relationships especially within the family. There is a need for establishing their identity, self-hood and adherence to traditional values. It had enormous influence in conditioning not only a girl’s psyche but also a boy’s psyche. This confrontation created within women a feeling for self identity. The full identity is formed at the end of the conflict and the successful realization depended on the delicate balance that the girl maintains between submission and revolt. The girl is generally advised to withhold, conceal and suppress her real self. Thus the picture of a woman one gathers is that of subordination, exploitation, violence and oppression.

The chapter titled ‘My Life is My Own’ deals with the two novels The Dark Holds No Terrors (1980) which has been translated into German and Russian languages and Roots and Shadows (1983) that has won the Thirumathi Rangamal prize for the best Indian novel for the year 1982-83. The Dark Holds No Terrors rejects the traditional concepts that the sole purpose of a wife’s existence is to please her husband. It reveals a woman’s capacity to assert her own rights and individuality and also to become fully aware of her potential as a human being. The Roots and Shadows highlights the agony and trauma experienced by women in a tradition bound society dominated by Akka, the matriarch.

Shashi Deshpande is genuinely interested in issues pertaining to the lot of women. The chapter analyzes and traces the feminist concern of the author through the lives of the protagonists Sarita and Indu. The novelist possesses a rare
insight into the entire panorama of women's plight in the present day custom bound society. In his preface to the *Legacy and Other Stories*, G.S. Amur remarks:

Woman's struggle in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important of all, as human being is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer, and this appears in all her important stories. (10)

Thus in her move towards freedom and selfhood, the contemporary Indian woman has to struggle against the insensitive fatality of options and the indoctrination of centuries which endeavour to fashion her into the mould of womanhood with passive persistence.

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* begins at a very crucial point in the life of Sarita who returns to her parents home when her marriage fails after her mothering two children and taking the profession of a medical doctor. The husband shows no sign of disturbance but asserts himself by assaulting her sexually. Terribly humiliated and haunted by her childhood memories she returns to her parent's house after she learns, incidentally of her mother's death. The novel is one of Shashi Deshpande's favourite works. In an interview she remarks:

It has a simple theme and fewer characters. It gripped me so much that I whipped through the writing. The wife had a better job and there was a very obvious tension between them. He was aggressive and surly. That set it off. (15)
The Dark Holds No Terrors is a novel based on the problems faced by a career woman. The protagonist Sarita, called Saru is a doctor by profession. She attempts to assess her relationship with her husband Manohar – called Manu. The novel also deals with the self analysis. By SARU At this point of time she recalls her relationship with her mother, father, younger brother Dhruva and her two children - Renuka aged 9 and her son Abject aged 5.

In the novel the novelist takes up the question of a husband’s brutality to his wife night after night. The protagonist Sarita is a middle class woman. She seeks freedom without impinging on her obligations and responsibilities to achieve harmony in life. The novel opens with Saru returning to her father’s house after fifteen years although she had once sworn never to return there. During her stay she confesses to her father how she was unable to bear the sexual sadisms of her husband.

I introduced him to her and while we were having our tea....

She knew by then what he was doing.... She asked him… “How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?”

“Do you know what that meant?” She asked him angrily as if it was he who had said it.

“you were earning more than him”, he said.

“Yes, I was. But it hadn’t mattered till then. I swear it hadn’t....”

(D H N T 200)
The recollection and remembrance of the past helps Sarita to a better understanding of herself and the others. The novel is unfolded through Saru’s memories of the past which continue to be compared and contrasted with her present life. The review and analysis during her stay helps her to gain courage to confront reality so that she could boldly declare that “The Dark” no longer terrifies her and hence ‘The Dark Holds No Terrors’ for her any more.

Sarita had admired Manohar during her college days. He was a student leader and young poet like Shelley who was to take the literary world by storm. Theirs was a romantic love. Manu adored her and found her beautiful. He talked of Keats and Shelley and said romantic words to her. The simple need to be independent eventually becomes an inflated ego. Premila Paul observes:

When Saru wins Manu’s love, she sees it as her victory over the glamorous Padmini. The dream of total submission to “A superior, super human male”, working with him for him and being his subordinate is only a transient stage in the emotional growth of her personality. (61)

Her outsized ego and innate love for power over others makes Saru surrender herself completely to Manu to love him and to be loved by him.

There was no ‘I’ then, not as yet, craving for recognition, satisfaction. The craving which when it came, was always accompanied by a feeling of guilt if the ‘I’ dared to over – reach a male as if I was doing something that took away shreds of my feminity. (D H N T 47)
Thus, the highly self-willed girl’s desire to be free and to gain a space of her own eventually, becomes the goal in her life.

Saru even as a child had seen the predicament of her grandmother who was considered to be an “unwanted burden” by her own people when she was separated from her cruel husband. Saru had realized from then on that economic independence alone could be a guarantee against subordination and suppression. So every step in life had been for Saru towards the realization of that goal.

Sarita’s quest for self-identity *The Dark Holds No Terrors* leads her into her past in the course of which she comes to terms with a traumatic childhood experience and a problematic marital relationship.

The socialization of a girl for her future role as wife and mother begins in early childhood when the prevailing social modes and norms are internalized into her through myths, legends, folklore and rituals. Leela Dube writes: “Gender roles are conceived, enacted and learnt within a complex relationships.” (166). Despite the patriarchal character of the Indian family, there is an independent community of women which evolves as a consequence of the taboo on the relationship between sexes. This community which has already internalized the values of patriarchy ensures the conditioning of the female child into a social framework of docile daughter, wife and mother.

The protagonist Sarita of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a victim of her mother’s gender bias. As a child, she is fully aware of her mother’s preference for
her brother, although she does not understand its intensity, except the experience of hurt. Coming back to her parental home as a grown up woman, Sarita recalls various episodes that focus on the difference in the upbringing of her brother and herself. As a professionally qualified woman and feminist, she revisits her childhood with an awareness of gender inequity.

The *Dark Holds No Terrors* reveals the conflicts and convulsions of Sarita. Her mother had been an orthodox old fashioned woman. It was the general practice then for the mothers to be more strict with their daughters. The daughters were trained from the beginning to submit and adjust in the new household when they were married. Saru’s mother had brought up her children with some amount of strict discipline. The process of preparing the girl towards her ‘otherness’ which begins in early childhood and is intensified from the moment she attains puberty. As the girl grows up she is made to feel different from her male siblings, made to feel conscious about revealing her feminity to the male members of the family. Her mother constantly reminds her: “You should be careful about how you behave. Don’t come out in your petticoat like that. Not even if it is your father who’s around. (DHNT 55) Thus the young girls sexuality is repressed and confined as any expression of it would invite unwanted male attention.

Saru had been always at war with her mother. She felt that she had been neglected and ignored by her mother in favour of her brother Dhruva. When Dhruva was alive, her mother’s discrimination drove her to resentment and
hatred towards her mother and family. The mother was attached to the son. Her attitude was natural because they believed that the male child alone would propagate the family lineage and household chores were meant for daughters. The duty of the son is to earn bread for the family and light the pyre for his dead parents. She resented this discrimination.

Saru was also depressed by the constant reminder by her mother the fact that she was a girl and that too an ugly one. If she found Saru looking at herself in the mirror she would taunt her by saying:

You will never be good looking. You are too dark for that....

Looking at yourself in the mirror? I will give you a certificate to say that you are beautiful. (DHNT)

Saru did not want to be like her mother because of the hatred and resentment she had developed for her mother. “If you are a woman, I don’t want to be one”. (TDHNT 62) She could no longer tolerate the discrimination and the inequality between her and her brother.

There was always a puja on Dhruva’s birthday. A festive lunch in the afternoon and a aartee in the evening during which Dhruva, as an infant, sat solemnly on Baba’s lap and as a child, by his side, cap on head, fatuous smile on face while I helped my mother to do the aarti. My birthdays were almost the same...a festive lunch with whatever I
asked for, (it was always shrikhand for me, creamy saffron tinted
and nutmeg flavoured), an aarti in the evening; but there was no
puja...(TDHNT 168)

Saru recollects what her mother had said about the day she was born.

I was born. But of my birth, my mother had said to me once... ‘It rained
heavily the day you were born. It was terrible’. And somehow, it
seemed to me that it was my birth that was terrible for her, not the
rains. After Dhruva’s death there were no more celebrations.
My birthday was passed over in silence, both at home and at school.
(TDHTN 169)

Saru’s mother could never forgive her for being alive when her brother was
dead. Sara is a perplexed child she kept asking herself ‘why was I alive?’ because
of her mother’s accusations.

And she ... She turned instantly to me and said...

You did it. You did this. You killed him.

I didn’t. I didn’t know. I never saw him.

And then it began. The hysteria, the screaming, the words that
followed me for days, months, years, all my life. You killed him.
Why didn’t you die? Why are you alive, when he’s dead?
(TDHNT191)
Saru growing in an environment of hatred hostility and lovelessness nurtures seeds of rebellion within her. She has the fear of rejection ingrained in herself. Being unwanted she defies her parents specially her mother because she has lost the sense of belongingness.

In Sarita’s views, her mother was always a dominating woman who, in a traditional set up, had gained power from her position as the lady of the house. The power that Sarita’s mother exercises is the power of one who has accepted the ascribed role which provides the certainty and security of tradition. This power over the domestic throne is different from that of ‘Akkas’, who had enjoyed authority in the family because of her age and money. Adele King explains:

This (was) not the power behind-the-throne often held by European wives, but rather an inner certainty gained from willingly accepting a defined role in society.

Women take the role of wife and mother as the ultimate goal of their life. The woman’s world is her home and given an opportunity she rules. Thus it is with Sarita’s mother.

Sarita’s mother had also a very unhappy childhood. Her maternal grandmother had been deserted by her husband. And she had to take care of both her children. And they were taken care by her parents unwillingly. It is evident that her childhood feelings of insecurity had made her so. Also she had been conditioned to consider girl child as a burden, hence the domineering treatment to Sarita.
Sarita’s mother is a typical Indian mother. The hostility is the consequence of the collective moments of rejection due to gender inequity. As a result Sarita rejects her mother whom she perceives as an agent of oppressive patriarchal practices. Sarita totally dislikes all that she stands for to a great extent that she rejects her mother as a woman:

“If you are a woman, I don’t want to be one.” (DHNT 62). Rich explains thus in *Of Woman Born* thus: “Matrophobia as the poet Lynn Sukenik has termed it as the fear not of one’s mother or of motherhood but of becoming one’s mother….But where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull towards her….An adolescent daughter may live at war with her mother, yet borrow her clothes, her perfume. (235)

Later, one comes to know that as she grows older, Sarita begins to identify with her mother. It is ironical that she begins to wear her mother’s sarees during her stay in her parental house after she leaves Manu.

She married Manu because her parents opposed the marriage. Her mother questions:

What caste is he?

I don’t know.

A Brahmin?
Of course not.

Then, cruelly ... his father keeps a cycle shop.

Oh, so they are low caste people, are they? (TDHNT 96)

The more vehemently they opposed, the more determined she became to marry him. She recollects her mother’s prophetic words:

You won’t be happy with him. I know you won’t. A man of a different caste, different community ... What will you two have in common?

How little her mother knew! We belong to the same caste really. Both of us despise ourselves. What he does to me, he does it not because he hates me but because he hates himself. And I... I hate myself more for letting him do it to me than I hate him for doing this to me. (TDHNT 98)

As time passes the old flame of regard and care between Saru and Manu extinguished because of her involvement in her profession, lack of communication with her husband and the difference in the social status. Manu remains a college lecturer earning an unspectacular salary, while Sarita becomes a successful doctor with highly lucrative practice. He begins to suffer from feelings of inferiority, arising from reversed social roles. He resents her for her success, but cannot prevent her from surging ahead in her profession. He enjoys the luxury that her money provides. When Sarita, unable to bear the tension (that her superior
financial position is causing between them) proposes that she give up her work, Manu retorts the idea. He tells her: "...Saru don’t be silly. You know how much I earn. You think we can live this way on that?...No...there can be no going back. We have to go on". (DHNT 81)

Not able to assert his manliness over her (in economic terms) he resigns to sexual harassment every night, while playing the most loving husband during the day. His aim, though repressed in the subconscious, is to punish her for taking on the “male role” and to assert his male superiority and power through physical violence. In the words of Allison M. Jaggar: “Rape is typically an act performed by men and its social meaning is to degrade and feminize the victim”. (263) After each such episode, Sarita is helpless against his brutal strength and submits:

At home, sitting in the same room with him, watching the familiar glaze come over his eyes, the mask-like rigidity come over his face; at night, waiting for the terror to strike, she became just a terrified animal. Thinking of how she could do nothing against his maniac strength, of her panic that made her incapable of resisting...signs and portents she had become clever at understanding his silence. A heavy, dull, brooding silence, following immediately after a spurt of gaiety.

Saru suffers the bruises of a terrible physical trauma. Manu turns out to be a sadist. He is a man with two completely different personalities. He is a normal loving husband during the day and at night a brutal animal who ruins her physically and mentally. She becomes the victim of physical assault by her
husband. She is broken mentally and she is a pessimist to the core. Manu wants her to forget the harm and pain that he had inflicted upon her at night. She is offended that she could not talk about it to him, nor discuss with anyone. The dual behavior of her husband shocks and surprises her.

Domestic violence has always been an inalienable component of patriarchy, employed specifically to quell rebellion of any sort. Agnes Flavia points out that:

In a socially acceptable that within the family the man is the master and the woman is the inferior and the subordinate partner. Social pressures force women to maintain this status quo. A woman who does not accept the traditional role of submissiveness and subordination needs to be advised or tamed into accepting this position and any means including violence is justified in achieving this goal. (152)

In patriarchy power and success are inextricably linked with male sexuality. This is seen in the character of Manu. His inability to play the ascribed social role is eroding his self-esteem. In a way Saru also plays a dual role:

So, for the world, she is a lady doctor, with a loving husband and two lovely kids, but, in reality she is a victim of the most unkindest act of all. This duplicity of her life has been killing and choking her real self.

Psychologists have dealt with the mental makeup of the unwanted children and the after effects of being unwanted. These unwanted and neglected children
are highly reactionary and they develop deep rooted sense of fear, insecurity and rejection. Angelino observes:

Children have primarily the fear of supernatural agents (ghosts, witches); being alone in the dark or in a strange place or being lost, animals, injuries, accidents, pains etc. Being unwanted has a disastrous effect on one’s self esteem. People with low esteem feel isolated, unloved, and incapable of expressing or defending themselves and too weak to confront or overcome their deficiencies, are afraid of angering others and shrink from exposing themselves to attention. (87-88)

Thus with such children there is always a connection between the environment they lived and connection between the environment they lived and the kinds of fears they possessed.

The social prejudices have damaged her personality. Her personality is continually eroded by the fact that she is a mere girl. Much of her character is shaped by her childhood and social prejudices prevalent then. The very existence of the girl is subordinated to the fact that she must someday please and serve, obey and sacrifice for her man.

She is constantly being reminded that she is a girl and her destiny is to get married and leave the house. Saru grows up as a victim of her mother’s gender based bias. Her mother is concerned about the appearance of the daughter, the colour of her skin. If she should grow dark it would be difficult for them to get her married.
Don’t go out in the sun. you will get even 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 is a boy. (DHNT45)

One is reminded of Kamala Das who in her ‘My Story’ recounts how worried her grandmother was about the duskiness of her skin and rubbed raw turmeric every Tuesdays and Fridays before her oil bath.

One of the features of the upbringing of women is their inculcation as girls and preparing them for their future status and roles as daughters, wives and mothers. The process of growing up becomes something to be furtive about.

The concept of honor of the family depends on the important role and the behaviour of the girl. Any misbehaviour on her part would bring shame both to her family and herself resulting in reducing the chance for a good match. Saru revolted against her parents and ran away to get married to a person of her choice. She always felt loveless and insecure in her parents’ home. According to Saru, Manu is a romantic hero who has come to rescue her from her loveless, insecure existence.
Saru meets Manohar and falls in love with him. He had commanded great admiration from her as a promising poet and as the efficient Secretary of the Literary Association, Debating Union and Dramatic Society takes her by storm. Some of his poems have already been published in the college magazine. She marries him only when she meets him as her equal. She defies her parents and enters into marriage. She is very happy because through this marriage she was able to find a versatile husband and was able to fulfill her dream of conquering a superior male. She is ecstatic in the early period of her marriage although she marries a person of another caste, of lower economic and social status. In the beginning when she says:

\[\text{I became in an instant a physically aroused with an infinite capacity for loving and giving, with a passionate desire to be absorbed by the man I loved. (DHNT34)}\]

Even Indu in Roots and Shadows shares the same feeling:

\[\text{that I can never be complete in myself. Until I had met Jayant I had not known it….That there was somewhere outside me a part of me without which I remained incomplete. Then I met Jayant and lost the ability to be alone. (RS 31)}\]

and Urmi of *The Binding Vine* ‘feels like death without her husband’. She tells her husband “Each time you leave me, the parting is like death”. (BV 138)

Despite her intense admiration and love Saru feels that she is being raped by her husband and that it was not love making but an onslaught when their
marriage begins to break. She joined medical college and later on married Manohar of her own choice, she probably married him to escape the claustrophobic atmosphere of her own home and also to bring a change in her mother’s attitude towards her.

But ironically her success as a lady doctor leads to the degeneration of Manohar. He is totally ignored and ultimately becomes a man she does not know. When asked by an interviewer: ‘How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?’ (TDHNT, 200) it injures his male ego. Kalidas Misra comments in his essay *Writing a Narrative and a Self in Silence.* “As Sarita rose up the ladder of success Manohar degenerated in esteem, ultimately becoming ‘a man she does not know’, someone becoming so violent and cruel”. (76)

Manohar as a college teacher or as a free lance writer feels small and loses his identity. As a sort of retaliation he becomes very rough and abrupt in his dealings with Saru. And Sarita’s household is burdened and complicated with the web of failed dreams and ambitions and unfulfilled desires. The old flame of love, regard and care gets extinguished.

It is clear that the character of Saru is completely shaped by her childhood experiences and the social stereotypes prevalent then. She is a woman who is broken down both mentally and physically. Social prejudices have damaged her personality to a very large extent. Her mother chides her. Saru is perplexed. As a
child she is unable to understand her mother’s behavior. It is only later she realizes that she did not matter to her parents because she was a girl, unwanted and also one who has survived her brother.

Saru is haunted by her traumatic experiences as a physically assaulted woman, because of her bitter experience Saru becomes a pessimist to the core. She is perplexed and lost. She hates men. Her happiness after getting married is not only short lived but also is marred by her fear of rejection. She is a woman having a dual life. She leads an abnormal pattern of life, who in the day time wears a ‘white coat and an air of confidence and knowing’ and at night becomes a terrified trapped animal. Her life of duplicity appears to be hypocrisy or pretence but it makes her life tragic. She is sometimes only a shadow.

At the end of the novel Sarita is not only ready to face Manu but also to face life as well. Saru realizes ‘My life is my own’ (220). This realization helps her to accept the different roles of the guilty sister, the unwanted, undutiful daughter, the unloving wife, the mother and the responsible career woman – the lady doctor assigned to her. ‘The acceptance of these different selves helps her to become whole and complete in herself.

The death of her mother provides an opportunity for Sarita to return to her parents’ home under the pretext of consoling her father. It was here in the quiet of her father’s company she realizes that it was essential for her to find out ways to
confront her own true self and the others and should not look for means of escape. It was here in her own home through the fragmented broken parts of her life she understands her mind and she becomes conscious of her own being. Saru says:

We come into this world alone and go out of it alone. The period in between is short and all those ties we cherish as eternal and long lasting are more ephemeral than a dew drop. (DHNT 208)

Sarita had desired for a ‘room of her own’. But she believed that neither she nor her mother had rooms of their own. To accept womanhood and be her true self in a conservative male dominated set up is a very difficult task to perform. Saru realizes that her own domineering mother had perpetuated the patriarchal role model before her by restricting her movements and making her conscious of her femaleness by discriminating her from her brother Dhruva. Saru too had perpetuated those ideals held dear by her mother. Sometimes she too had shown preference for her son Abhi than her daughter Renu.

At the end of the novel a sense of dejection takes over Sarita as she recollects her memory. She suffers terrible pain from her dejection. She feels her body as a burden and a reminder of the brutal torturous nights she has spent with Manu her husband. Here the pain brings an occasion for transformation. It undermines the questions of the identity of the others. Sarita is not filled with the cruelty of her husband but with the loss of her dream of finding happiness through a man.
Dhruva’s death and Sarita’s dejected life bring her mother and herself together at the site of pain and suffering, as if pain is not only accidental but the very destiny of a woman: “Pain, suffering and death”. (DHNT 91)

Saru’s sufferings are not glorified. Deshpande tries to extend her sympathies for her protagonist. Saru, as a realist understands the ultimate human reality and the process of decay. Loneliness no doubt is painful but at the same time is also inescapable human condition. She learns that the sufferings one has to witness the way happiness recede from one’s life. There is no escape. It is this realization which helps her understand her mother’s words: “We are alone, we have to be alone.” (DHNT 208) The feeling of homelessness questions her very existence. She ponders, ‘Would it always be a failure, any attempt to reach out to another human being? Was she chasing a chimera all her life, hoping for someone? Perhaps the one and only truth is that “man is born to be cold and lonely and alone”. (DHNT 219)

However, Saru does not permit alienation to destroy her. Her self-confidence is underscored thus:

All right, So I’m alone. But so’s everyone else. Human beings...they’re going to fail you. And because there’s just us, because there’s no one else, we have to go on trying. If we can’t believe in ourselves, we’re sunk. (DHNT 220)
Thus the circles of pain ultimately become a means of self discovery that enables her to take a firm decision of confronting Manohar and leaving her house and returning to her home. The protagonist successfully recovers her hidden self with hope of redefining her whole life.

Deshpande projects the conflicts of her protagonist without presenting any solution. She permits the different choices speak for themselves, the choice to conform or break the shackles and be free.

A woman must give expression to her inner space and self; at the same time she need not repudiate the social institution of marriage and family or her basic human values. Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* has deeply internalized the dominant modes that sometimes, despite being better endowed than most other Indian women, she cannot visualize an independent identity for herself and so becomes submissive.

Deshpande is trying to explode the myth that the educated Indian women are liberated. Their education should have given them all the freedom to be free from evil. However, they have failed to utilize their education. It is all because of the latent, patriarchal mind-set that is engrained in their minds right from their childhood.

There have been conspicuous changes in all spheres of life. The age old institutions of family, marriage, values of the society and the roles of women especially in the patriarchal society have been under tremendous stress during the
modern period. For ages woman has lived all her life under the protection of either her parents, husband or her children. Until the sixties and seventies man was considered to be the bread winner of the family and woman was confined to the household. Although the pattern of living made her life safe and smooth, it drove her into a state of slavery and dependence. The changes in the patriarchal attitudes, and in the socio-economic conditions affected the attitudes of women. As a result woman started craving for independent and self-reliant status in life and she began to shun the protection provided by man. Traditionally great importance was given to the family unit. The family, the interpersonal relationship between man and woman undergoes change. Modern woman strives to be free and self-reliant. She not only began to earn money independently but also attended to her household chores.

Shashi Deshpande’s novels are generally a sensitive portrayal of the lot of woman concerned with the modern woman’s effort to carve out a place for herself to find out her position and to establish her self-autonomy and freedom.

‘Roots and Shadows’ is the first full length novel published in 1983, after The Dark Holds No Terrors, which, features Indu an educated, middle class woman protagonist who struggles to free herself from the suffocating stronghold of the tradition bound society. Indu, exemplifies a woman in the transitional period who is torn between age old traditions and individual views. The novel shows clearly how Indu defies the worn out traditions, pushes aside all her fears about her imagined inadequacies and asserts herself as an individual.
In an interview to Lakshmi Holmstrom, Deshpande talked about the novel *Roots and Shadows*.

...Roots and shadows started out by trying to be a detective novel but Indu, my protagonist just took over and changed the form. So in many ways I feel that it’s The Dark that actually breaks new ground while *Roots and Shadows* is a sort of continuation of my short stories.

In reply to another question Shashi Deshpand says

For me, every novel starts with people. One character may be two and then there is the locale. In the case of *Roots and Shadows*, there was Indu and there was the house. It was only when they came together that there was a novel. (RS 243)

The novel reveals the story of Indu, an educated young woman, who is highly sensitive and very ambitious. She aspires to become independent and complete in herself. Her attempt to assert herself as an individual brings her into confrontation with her family and society in general. The experience of Indu, the central character who journey’s across a hostile masculine world which is represented by the inmates of the grand ancestral home is a common experience of any woman.

Indu returns to her home after a gap of eleven years. The eighteen year old rebel, who leaves home to lead life her own way now returns on being summoned
by the old matriarch Akka, who is on her death bed. She makes Indu the sole beneficiary of all her property. The returning makes Indu think retrospectively about the events that had taken place many years ago.

Deshpande brings alive a large Maharashtrian Brahmin household. Indu, as motherless child was attended and well protected by all the members of the joint family. Akka was the very dominant senior member of the family. To Indu she was a hindrance obstructing her to her goal of independence and completeness. Indu rebels against the suffocating authority of Akka and the oppressive atmosphere of the family where women have no choice but to submit and accept their lot. Education has made Indu conscious of the futility of the long preserved notions and age old beliefs and traditions which she starts opposing.

*Roots and Shadows* is a multi layered novel which tells the story of intricate relationships within a traditional joint family. It addresses the specific issue of the protagonist’s quest for self – identity, position of women in traditional Indian society. The story moves back and forth in time. It is a saga of three generations of her joint family ruled over by the domineering Akka, her grandfather’s younger sister. Deshpande writes:

Akka who came into the house long ago as a childless widow literally presides over the destiny of her brother’s children, ruling over them, their children and their grand children with an iron hand.

(RS 6)
Thus the mother figure ‘Akka’ in the novel is a domineering figure and rules everyone in the house. She is the symbol of absolute authority.

Indu had lived in this house during the first eighteen years of her life. A malicious remark by Akka about her mother wounded Indu and made her leave the house. Now, it is Akka’s urgent summons in her death bed that makes Indu return to the ancestral household. Just before her death Akka discloses to Indu that she has been chosen as Akka’s heir. When the news gets around that Akka has left all her wealth to Indu, there are speculations among the relatives as to how Indu would use the money. Indu wonders why she had been selected by Akka to shoulder the responsibility of the family after her. Probably Jayant’s remark helps her to understand the reason.

You! And tears! You know, Indu, when I first saw you, I thought you a frail, little creature. Now I know you better. You are indomitable!

The word fell into me with a heavy thud. ‘Indomitable’? But Jayant, that’s what we called Akka!

‘Perhaps you are like her’, he began lightly, but seeing my face, he went on more seriously, ‘Aren’t you? Isn’t that why she chose you...Only a great neice, really...from among all the family?’

I was aghast at the idea.

‘Like Her? But then... Will I have my victims, too?

May be I have already...’ (RS 16)
During the three weeks that she is at the ancestral home following Akka’s death she finds herself once again amidst family bickering. Indu also reflects on her marriage with Jayant and realizes that a love marriage is not really different from an arranged marriage in the matter of freedom of choice that it offers a woman. She understands all the freedom and contentment that she thought she had gained by leaving the family and by making a love marriage was merely an illusion. She discovers that in her relationship with Jayant what had really mattered is her willingness to conform to his expectations of her rather than the spontaneity and inclination of her own self. Indu makes adjustments in the name of love while Jayant remains immune to adjustments. She understands that she had been actually deluding herself and that she had been no better than any of the woman she had despised for not having a will of their own. It is at this critical point she returns to the ancestral home which helps her to understand herself better.

Indu returns to her ancestral home at a very critical point when she feels hedged in, incarcerated, unable to continue through the ordeal of live. As she feels that she has been endlessly chained and trapped she leaves a sigh of relief when Akka summons her. She says.

It had been a welcome reprieve. A chance to get away. To avoid thinking about what was happening to me... to Jayant and me.... And our life together. (18)
She recollects her last meeting with Akka in her death bed. Akka is angry that Indu has come alone and had not brought her husband Jayant with her. The last reprimanding words that Akka speaks to Indu

Her eyes showed hurt, ‘you think that what you do is no concern of ours, do you Indu? You think your life is none of my business? You haven’t grown up child’ (19)

Her words of gentleness and hostility set Indu to review the nature of her relationship with Akka. She recalls how Jayant had dissuaded her from going back to the family after receiving the summons from Akka because in his opinion she was only a distant relation.

“Do you have to go? After all she is...

What is she of yours? Your father’s aunt, Isn’t she? Rather a distant relation....” (20)

Indu remembers how furious she was of this comment. To call Akka a distant relation sounded disloyal, treacherous and at that moment she had decided to go.

The story begins with Indu’s arrival at the family during Akka’s illness. Shortly afterwards Akka dies leaving the ancestral house and property in the name of Indu making her the sole beneficiary in the family. During her stay after Akka’s death Indu reviews the events of the past. While trying to do justice to the responsibility that has been thrust upon her shoulders, she also tries to solve her own internal crisis.
"So, why did Indu come? Did she come because she wanted to disprove her husband's opinion or was it like result of a sneaking desire in her for the family reunion, some deep bond which trickled in her in spite of her anger and hatred for all that Akka stood for. Did Indu finally forgive Akka for her ruthlessness and her autocratic ways? Is there really a complete break, an unbridgeable chasm, between the world and the values of Akka and those of Indu? Can one entirely breakaway from one's root and live a life in complete isolation from others, from obligations and responsibilities that normal social life involves? (RS 98)

It is at this point of time she discovers her inability to assert herself. It is the major cause for her discontentment and dissatisfaction.

Akka's life had been a stunning example of how a woman had been subjugated to frustration and disappointment. Indu learns the life story of Akka, through Narmada Attaya's narration only after her death. Akka herself had been a victim of gender oppression who perpetuated the same victimization and oppression as far as her influence extended. Akka is a rich, childless widow who opted to stay in her brother's house after the death of her husband. She wielded tremendous power and influence from the day she entered the house. She maintained absolute control over her brother's children and family.
For example, when Naren’s mother wanted to learn music, Akka had stood firm and refused her by saying:

“What, learn music from a strange man! Sit and sing in front of strangers! Like THOSE women? Are we that kind of family? Isn’t it enough for you to sing one or two devotional songs, one or two aarti songs? What more does a girl from a decent family need to know?” (54)

Her word is a law and no one objected or questioned her authority.

Indu states how often she established complete control over the family. Compared to Akkas’s formidable power all men in the family - Anand, Govind, Madhav, Vinayak and even Old Uncle are languid. The following description gives a picture of Akka’s power over everyone. “Kaka even after becoming a grand-father, could be reduced to a red-faced stuttering schoolboy by Akka’s venomous tongue”. Till her death Akka had maintained her power and authority over everyone.

Marriage, often enslaves and subjugates woman, likewise it had enslaved Akka’s life as well. Indu often recollects Attaya’s narration about Akka’s life which not only evokes pity but also focuses the attention on the plight of all those victims of child marriage who were forced to undergo inhuman treatment. Akka was just twelve when she was married. Her husband was thirty, a tall and hefty
man with coarse features. Akka lost her mother when she was a child and her father was not easily approachable. She never told anyone what she had to endure at her husband’s house. Narmada says:

But I heard that twice she tried to run away - a girl of 13. Her mother-m-law, I heard, whipped her for that and locked her up for three days, starved her as well. And then, sent her back to her husband’s room.

The child, they said, cried and clung to her mother in law saying:

“Lock me up again, lock me up.” But there was no escape from a husband then. (77)

Such child brides nevertheless could revolt sex as a punishment and continued to suffer. Indu now realizes that she and Akka have incompatible temperaments and they represent two different worlds altogether. Akka represents the old order of tradition and authority while Indu represents the new generation of modernity and freedom.

Indu right from her childhood days had seen that women occupied only a secondary place in the family. Indu is always told that she is a woman and so she has no choice but to submit to her lot.

As a girl, they had told me I must be meek and submissive.

Why? I had asked.

Because you are a female. You must accept everything, even defeat, with grace because you are a girl, they had said, it is the only way, they said for a female to live and survive. (174)
Indu also bitterly recollects how crudely the idea of her womanhood was thrust upon her and how she was first made to be aware of it:

My womanhood.... I had never thought of it until the knowledge had been thrust brutally, gracelessly on me the day I had grown up.

“You’re a woman now,” Kaki had told me. “You can have babies yourself.” I, a woman?... And then, she had gone on the tell me, badly, crudely, how I could have a baby....

“And don’t forget”, she had ended, “for four days now you are unclear. You can’t touch anyone or anything”.

And that had been my introduction to the beautiful world of being a woman. I was unclear. (78)

Thus the exaggerated importance laid on a woman in terms of virginity is greatly responsible to enforce obstruction on his movements after she attains puberty. The concept that her body is unclean is set in her mind. She is taken by guilt and feels that her womanhood would stand against her progression.

I’ve grown up.

‘Have you?’ He made a comically surprised face.

‘Now I Dress the way I want. As I please.’

As I please? No, that’s not true, I think of Jayant. When I dress, I think of Jayanth, when I undress, I think of him. Always what he wants. What he would like, what would please him and I can’t blame
him. It’s not he who has pressurized me into this. It is the way I want it to be. And one day, I had thought... isn’t there anything I want at all? Have I become fluid, with no shape, no form of my own. (53)

Indu wanted to be more assertive and independent but she realizes that her feminine instinct is curbed and suppressed. She plays the role of an ideal housewife but the role of a wife restricts and curtails her self-development by taking away her freedom of thought and expression. The chance of giving a free play to her artistic creative potentiality is denied to her. She confesses “As a woman I felt hedged in by my sex. I resented my womanhood because it closed so many doors to me” (87). In her professional life she had to surrender to the dictates of editor. She is unable to compromise on her profession and her martial life which encloses and imprisons her life. Indu voices her views of marriage through the uncompromising stance that she takes.

Indu hopes that her marriage with Jayant would enable to realize the need “to belong”, “to be wanted”, needed and loved and the freedom to articulate herself to the whole world.

It’s a trap.... That’s what marriage is’.

A trap? Or a cage? May be the comic strip version of marriage... a cage with two trapped animals glaring hatred at each other... isn’t so wrong after all. And it’s not a joke, but a tragedy. But what animal would cage itself? (63)
However women like Indu are alienated from their self. Their experience is primarily defined usually through interpersonal, domestic filial relationship mainly serving the needs of others. In the eyes of all those conventional women who had their own standards for judging people. Indu's academic distinctions, her career, her money would not impress them. The only success and achievement for a woman is to get married, to bear children, to have sons and grand children.

Indus husband shatters her hopes for peace and integration. He is in no way a refuge for her. Instead she finds herself totally surrendered before Jayant's masculinity-by being his wife. Indu's role as a wife restricts her self-development to the extent that she was not permitted to go for creative writing. He denies her the freedom. From Indu's outburst it is obvious she is disillusioned with her husband. But at the same time it is difficult for her to remain totally indifferent to her husband.

However, in spite of her obvious feminist stance, in spite of her being highly sensitive to the injustice shown to women, and in spite of being educated and economically independent, Indu realizes that she is no different from the women like her Attayas and Kakis. (RS 41)

Indu struggles to release herself from the circumscriptions of the traditional and tradition bound institution of marriage. The novelist portrays through the struggles and sufferings of Indu the hapless plight of educated middle class women under male domination. Like Indu, women search for an autonomous self
and realize that it is hard to achieve. Indu ultimately travels the road of self realization and reaches her destination which is the point of comprehension of the mystery of the human life.

Indu is a free thinking woman, whose thoughts are with the future generation of women steeped in a scientific rational way of life. Dr. S.P Swain puts forth the following questions.

Should women as passive characters be put on a hypocritical stance towards themselves as well as the society? Should they out of fear for the male put on the mask of unreasonable submission? These are the questions that the society puts before the dominating male. Woman as a subordinate sex is characterized by obedience and submission, and under male dominance women have “developed a tendency to prevail by passive means”. (Klein 1971 p.167) Women surrender before men whom they really love. (RS 59)

But Indu submits before Jayant not out of love for him but because of scorn. Indu is scornful of love. According to her love is false hence it is a hoax and a fraud. She surrenders to Jayant “not out of love alone” but because she was “afraid of failure”. (145) She wanted to show to the family and the world she was a success and so she had put on the mask of an obedient and subservient wife.

Indu has her own say to what people say:
And I... I had watched them and found it to be true. There had to be if not the substance, at least the shadow of submission. But still, I had laughed at them, and sworn I would never pretend to be what I was not.

The gender roles imposed upon women in a patriarchal male culture distort their relative identity as role models and problematize her self-perception. Such women like Indu are reduced to a mere thing or a mindless body, suppressing her desire for articulation. Ultimately Indu is ready to please Jayant, does everything that reflects his will and image. She gradually realizes that she does not exist for herself but for Jayant, and that as Dr. S.P Swain expresses:

Indu ultimately realizes that she has been chasing shadows leaving her roots far behind in the family and in Jayant. ... forgotten her roots, feeding on only dreams and shadows. She has failed in love not Jayant. She has escaped from the familial responsibilities of the home, chasing after oneiodynamic and uncrystallising shadows. She realizes that marriage had stunted and hampered her individuality for she saw it as a ‘trap’ and not a bond and that the home where the family is housed, she saw it as a ‘cage’. Now she realizes that all those were mere illusions and not reality and all the struggles of her life was an act of futility. (RS 60)

Indu’s retrospection of the past makes her realizes that the self-expression for the articulation of her feminine voice, the freedom and independence that she
had been longing for is only with her life together with Jayant. She thinks that marriage has given her freedom but ironically she soon realizes the futility of her decision. After realizing her failure Indu returns to the ancestral house remains there till the house is disposed off. It is here that Indu realizes what her roots are - an independent woman and a writer and her shadows are a daughter a mother and commercial writer, what her freedom is, and what is her moral responsibility.

Thus, when in the end Indu finally finds her feminine self and its roots in her home and with her husband:

Shadows disappear from her vision and she sees the clear light of day with the realization and discovery of her authentic female self. (61), She understands that real freedom lies in the courage and determination to do and adhere to what one believes is the right thing to do and that alone could bring harmony in life. She feels a sense of hope for life, for existence.

Thus the meek docile and humble Indu emerges as a bold, challenging conscious rebellious woman. It is her search for roots that helps her to ascertain her identity through the assertion of her feminine self: The novel ends with a note of affirmation. She assets her individuality as a woman and as a partaker in the endless cycle of life and the possibilities of growth.

Loneliness is a symptom of modern man's predicament which creates an awareness to search for the true meaning of life. For long women have been
seeking an identity and that she could also live in the world where men also live. In trying to find out a place for herself she becomes more and more assertive of her position and her rights. Her efforts and pursuits to free herself from the wretched state and her attempts to find a place for herself in the male dominated society has made her lonely. Her constant search for self-autonomy and freedom has proved otherwise self deceptive and meaningless. But the protagonist of Saru of The Dark Holds No Terrors and Indu of ‘Roots and shadows’ are able to strike a balance between heir individuation and their obligations towards the family.

The chief concern of this novel is self assessment of the protagonist and her realization of her independent identity and authentic self-hood. There is a fear and darkness within oneself. Darkness implies the fear and incapability to face the problems objectively. When one is ready to face the problems the darkness is removed. Finally she refutes the notion of man’s superiority over woman and affirms her conviction by quoting the verse from Dhammapada which is the epitaph of the novel:

You are your own refuge.

There is no other refuge.

This refuge is hard to achieve.

Saru longs to break away from the traditional norms of the society and yearns for freedom. She is presented simultaneously as an individual and as a woman who undergoes the trauma of alienation and discrimination. At the end she
confronts reality and realizes that the dark no longer holds any terrors to her. She survives in the male dominated society. Indu of Roots and Shadows also seeks freedom within the boundaries of obligations and responsibilities. She conquers her fears and achieves harmony in life discovering her roots.

Saru returns to visit her father on hearing of her mother’s death. She had left her father’s house defying her parents to marry the man Manohar whom she loved. But now she appears to be apprehensive, confused, hopeless and dull mainly to escape from the hell of life. Initially she feels a recluse like a ‘stranger’ as ‘Sudama’ in rags standing at the gates of the palace of Krishna and Ruckmani. Her stay at her parental home helps her review her relationship with her husband, her dead mother, her dead brother and with her own children. Her early memories of her relationship with her mother speak of the gender discrimination and favoritism shown by her mother. She had an insecure childhood and her mind is filled with indelible scars of rejection by her mother. She feels that her marital happiness is destroyed because her mother had cursed her’...let her know more sorrow she has given me”. But gradually her hostility towards her mother changes to a positive one and she even makes an effort to understand and identify herself with her mother. Finally Saru is able to bring together her split self and her own individual personality. As S. Prasanna Sree observes: “Thus, she finally emerges from her ordeal a person more whole, more capable of accepting and forgiving herself that she has been at the start (99).
Her ruminations make 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)

After reliving the memories of her brother’s death when she was a child, her mother’s accusations now, Sara is able to confront her problems more deeply. She begins to think of her husband Manu. Sara happens to meet her childhood friends Smitha and Nalu. Smitha is a married housewife, who has given up her identity (her name changed to Anju Gitanjali since her husband likes Tagore) and has surrendered herself totally and is completely dependent on her husband. Nalu is a spinster at a college, who moulds herself with an air of dignity and confidence.

Acute confusion prevails upon Sara. She feels guilty. She feels that she has done injustice to her mother, husband, and children and to everybody else. She takes this opportunity to test, to establish and to reinforce her indispensability. It seems that she would subordinate all her emotional ties to please her ego. However, Sara is not destroyed by her sense of alienation. She is able to think sensibly and logically. Her father urges her to confront reality and advises her to face the situation. She feels that although she had been .... Off the moment of confrontation she feels that she has to face the situation courageously. According to her the ultimate reality is one’s own self. It is Madhav who makes her realize the reality when he says “I can’t spoil my life because of that boy. It’s my life,
after all”. Gradually the need for quest arises in Sara. She realizes she has to accept all these selves – daughter, sister and wife as they are. She understands that escaping is no permanent solution to the problems but it has to come from within. She needs to apply to herself the caution she had given Dhruva once. ‘There is no need to escape from the darkness or curse the darkness’ seems applicable to her.

The dark holds no terrors. That the terrors are inside us all the time. We carry them with us and like traitors, they spring out, when we least expect them, to scratch and maul. (TDNHT 85)

Thus Sara began to understand that,

Darkness makes one incapable to see things clearly and objectively. Darkness is also a source of constant fear when viewed from outside. It hampers the darkness of mind, ceases to be terrible the moment one is prepared to face the situation. Sara has begun to understand things as she finds that the dark is not terrible. (113)

Escape has always been her mode of resolving the tangled knots. But now she has already broken from her past, like before she is not willing to exchange old horrors for new ones.

At the end of the novel when she receives a letter about Manu’s arrival, although initially she is indifferent, she tells her father “Baba, if Manu comes tell him to wait. I’ll be back as soon as I can”. (221)
These words show that Sam has emerged as a new emancipated woman who can assert her individuality by taking control of herself. She sets out to attend a patient. This is an indication of her assertion of her career. It is clear that she would not remain passive as an object for Manu to vent his frustration anymore. She lives in a transitional society. She passes from illusion to reality, from frustration to submission and ultimately attempts to reconcile herself to face the hard realities of life. This is true not only of Sam but of all middle class working women in modern India.

It is clear that Sam desires to liberate herself from the shackles of tradition, exercise her individual rights and exhibit her capabilities, and her identity through assertion and affirmation of herself. In the words of S.P Swain: Her journey is a journey from self-alienation to self-identification, from negation to assertion, from diffidence to confidence. She learns to trust her feminine self. Sam is not glorified as a suffering individual or a martyr. Instead, she is portrayed by Shashi Deshpande as a purposeful conscious representative of the modern Indian woman. (116)

In *Roots and Shadows* Shashi Deshpande observes that economic deprivation and physical torture are the instruments used to cure the spontaneous development and growth of a woman. Indu is a highly sensitive intelligent, educated middle class woman who could be said to be a representative of modern young woman. Indu feels styled and suppressed. Losing her own identity Indu is
unable to come to terms with her love for Jayanth or her true self. According to her, money not only confers freedom but also access to power, grace, prestige and altogether confidence and positive attitude towards oneself. It also expresses the inner conflict and predicament of Indu as an artist to discover her real self through her potential for creative writing. As Shuba Dwivedi expresses:

Indu is an educated ‘New Woman’ who has the desire and freedom to talk about things and to question the seriousness and nature of matters related to her. She thrives on emotional conflicts and oppositions. Her creativity and her observant nature make her sensitive to issues like discrimination against girls, the trimming of their bodies, speech and marital rape. She shows a lot of anger and resentment against her immediate family. (236)

Indu traverses the road of self realization and ultimately reaches her destination of comprehending the mystery of human life. Indu seeks freedom within the boundaries of obligations and responsibilities. She conquers her fears and achieves harmony in life by discovering her roots.

Thus Shashi Deshpande explores the inner world of women especially of Saru and Indu, the protagonists of The Dark Holds No Terrors and Roots and Shadows, who are striving towards self - realization. As she puts it:

There is more to these women than this mother or wife self. I knew from my experience that while wifehood and motherhood were a
great and important part of my life, even before I became a wife and a mother there already was a self, a clearly developed self that was me, a self that was distinct from the different roles I played. (36)

Both Indu and Saru are engaged in search for their distinct self, trying to retain their own individuality and try to find meaning in marriage. In these two novels the novelist presents an image of modern young women struggling to synthesize both their professional and private lives (Saru as a doctor and Indu as a creative writer). It is generally said that a career woman has to face not only the oppositions of her surroundings but also has to subscribe the idea of womanhood prescribed by the Indian society. Both have similar predicaments in life. They adopt marriage as a means to get away from their families and in order to achieve their freedom they seek marriage as an alternative to escape from the bondage created by their parental homes. Their financial, professional success leads to disharmony and discord as a result both experience disappointment and humiliation.

Thus at the end of both these two novels the protagonists neither escape from nor surrender to the problems but with great strength accept the challenge of their own class. Saru achieves a rare level of authenticity.

Shashi Deshpande adopts the use of a double perspective in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* – the shifting of the narrative from the first person to the third person in every alternative chapter. The present in the third person and the past in
the first person – thus making the story a retrospective narration of events and as such the past and present are juxtaposed. The novelist touches the very predicament of human existence in Roots and Shadows that an existence without relation to society and an existence in isolation is no existence at all. She provides for Indu and attitude of compromise towards the end. Yet, the existence dilemma, conflict and anguish faced by Indu can be ascribed to any woman in the society.

Deshpande has successfully and artistically presented the predicament situations faced by the modern Indian woman – presents her as a person thus bringing out the human relationship. To do and that alone could bring harmony in life. Thus Indu the meek, docile and humble protagonist of Roots and Shadows emerges as a bold challenging conscious rebellious woman. She feels a sense of hope in life for existence. The novel ends with a note of affirmation. Indu asserts her individuality as a woman and a partaker in the endless cycle of life and the possibilities of growth. It is her search for roots that help her to ascertain her identity. For long, women have been seeking and trying to find a place for herself in the male dominated society.

The novels *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *Roots and Shadows* are concerned with woman’s quest for self and projects the view that women in these two novels have succeeded in establishing themselves as autonomous beings, free from societal restrictions. They have also understood the fundamental truth that they are their own refuge.