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The Body and Voice in Trauma: A Feminist Reading of Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*

Fathima M. S.

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Abstract:

This article examines how trauma manifests in women's bodies and voices in *Roots and Shadows* by Shashi Deshpande. The analysis, which is based on feminist trauma theory, focuses on the protagonist Indu, whose embodied experiences of silence, gendered expectations, and inner fragmentation are a reflection of both intergenerational and personal trauma. According to the article, Indu's quest for bodily autonomy and self-expression opposes established patriarchal systems and represents a healing movement. As a result, Deshpande's book turns into a potent story of resistance that examines how women can overcome the traumas ingrained in their cultural and domestic realities by reclaiming their bodies and voices.

Keywords: Trauma Studies, Feminist Theory, Shashi Deshpande, *Roots and Shadows*, Body, Voice, Silence, Patriarchy, Gendered Trauma.

1. Introduction

The female body and voice have become powerful symbols of oppression and resistance in Indian English literature, especially in the field of women's writing. In stories that aim to examine the gendered experience in a patriarchal society, these themes are commonly present. In these works, the female body is not just a biological entity but also a space that has been politicized

and culturally inscribed, characterized by discipline, control, and erasure. Likewise, the female voice—or lack thereof—represents the structural repression of women's autonomy, desires, and subjectivities. Together, the voice and body function as platforms for the exercise and contestation of power. An important addition to this feminist literary tradition in India is Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* (1983). In order to examine the psychological and emotional landscapes of its protagonist, Indu, the book deftly combines themes of memory, silence, familial expectation, and personal rebellion. Indu's story, set in a strict Brahmin household, becomes representative of the conflicts that emerge when a woman starts to challenge the inherited standards that have traditionally determined her identity and value. Instead of presenting trauma through the prism of obvious tragedy or spectacle, Deshpande presents a subdued but eerily disturbing account of commonplace traumas—those that are subtly ingrained in gender norms, domesticity, and generational conditioning.

Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* (1983) is a significant contribution to this feminist literary tradition in India. The book skillfully blends themes of memory, silence, familial expectation, and personal rebellion to explore the psychological and emotional landscapes of its protagonist, Indu. Set in a rigid Brahmin home, Indu's story serves as a metaphor for the tensions that arise when a woman begins to question the inherited norms that have historically defined her identity and worth. Deshpande offers a quiet but uncannily unsettling description of everyday traumas—those that are deeply embedded in gender norms, domesticity, and generational conditioning—instead of viewing trauma through the lens of overt tragedy or spectacle.

In order to place Indu's personal experiences within more comprehensive theoretical discussions of trauma and gender, this article suggests a feminist trauma reading of *Roots and Shadows*. The study will look at how trauma manifests in the contested boundaries of the female



body as well as in the silencing and awakening of the female voice, drawing on feminist trauma theorists like Judith Herman, Cathy Caruth, Laura Brown, and Susan Brison. It makes the case that Indu's fight to recover her narrative voice and bodily autonomy represents both a personal healing process and a symbolic opposition to systemic and intergenerational patriarchal violence.

2. Theoretical framework

Literary studies of trauma have progressively broadened their scope to include the more complex, pernicious, and cumulative types of trauma, especially those that impact marginalized communities, in addition to the conventional emphasis on catastrophic or isolated violent incidents. This change has made it possible for feminist literary criticism to examine in greater detail how long-term gendered oppression—represented by embodied subjugation, social expectations, and silence—creates trauma that is less obvious but no less real. Such trauma is ingrained in the day-to-day struggles of voice, autonomy, and identity in *Roots and Shadows*, particularly for women like Indu who are torn between personal agency and inherited tradition. Indu's disjointed consciousness resonates with Cathy Caruth's idea of trauma as a delayed, haunting experience in which the person finds it difficult to completely comprehend or express the cause of their suffering. Caruth's idea of a wound that speaks only belatedly is illustrated by her trauma, which develops through repressed memories and emotional detachment rather than erupting dramatically. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman highlights how trauma can lead to a disconnection from oneself and others, a phenomenon that is evident in Indu's strained relationships and inner dissonance. This analysis is further refined by Laura Brown's feminist trauma theory, which argues that trauma, especially for women, frequently results from systemic oppression over an extended period of time rather than from isolated incidents. Such trauma is mediated by the gendered roles, familial expectations, and emotional repression that characterize

Indu's world. Indu's journey of reclaiming voice and narrative, on the other hand, is consistent with Susan Brison's concept of "speaking trauma." Her eventual telling of her story serves as a form of both healing and resistance, confirming the ability of voice as a healing medium.

3. Silenced bodies: trauma and patriarchal control

The female body is a location where patriarchal authority is etched and upheld in *Roots and Shadows*. Similar to Judith Herman's claim that trauma frequently entails a violation of bodily integrity and autonomy, Indu's body turns into a battlefield between cultural norms and individual autonomy. Rules about modesty, obedience, and conformity are among the gendered norms that Indu is exposed to from an early age, which stifles her autonomy. The domestic space scrutinizes, sexualizes, and politicizes her physical presence, exposing the body's role in power structures. As a matriarchal figure who supports patriarchal ideals, Akka shows how internalized patriarchy feeds trauma by enforcing moral and physical conformity from younger women.

Indu's discomfort with her own body can be understood as the result of long-term oppression rather than overt abuse thanks to Laura Brown's framework. Far from being a simple act of rebellion, Indu's extramarital affair turns into a complex assertion of bodily autonomy—a last-ditch effort to regain control over a body that has long been subject to external regulation. However, this action also exposes her psychological disarray, which is a defining feature of Cathy Caruth's delayed trauma reaction. Her mixed feelings about shame and desire imply that her trauma stems from her ongoing denial of who she is rather than from a single incident. In this situation, the body is not only silenced but also made to carry the burden of suffering and conflict across generations. Deshpande thus depicts the body as a location of trauma as well as a means of confronting and resisting it in the end.



4. The voice as resistance and recovery

The female voice functions as a crucial location for trauma and healing in *Roots and Shadows*. Susan Brison's idea of "speaking trauma," according to which reclaiming one's story is essential to recovery and regaining agency, is reflected in Indu's journey from silence to articulation. First of all, Indu's silence is a learned reaction to systemic suppression rather than just a lack of speech. Her thoughts, desires, and inquiries are either disregarded or condemned in the strict patriarchal home, thereby teaching her that it is safer to remain silent than to speak. This dynamic is highlighted by Judith Herman, who contends that trauma frequently silences victims by preventing them from serving as valid witnesses—something Indu knows all too well in her family.

However, Indu's inner monologue becomes a potent form of resistance as she starts to consider her past and her place in the family. Despite her initial hesitation, her voice gradually becomes more assertive, indicating a change in her mental state. This process is framed by Cathy Caruth's theory of delayed articulation, which states that Indu's trauma is not immediately apparent but rather emerges gradually through emotional dissonance and fragmented memories before finally taking the form of language. Indu's verbal self-assertion is revolutionary in her context—not because she speaks louder than others, but because she dares to name her discontent—as Laura Brown emphasizes the everyday silencing of women. Thus, voice is positioned by Deshpande as a therapeutic tool as well as a symbol of individuality.

5. Memory, silence, and intergenerational trauma

In *Roots and Shadows*, the intergenerational nature of trauma is revealed through the intricate weaving of memory and silence into its psychological fabric. The silences that Indu's family has practiced for generations are not just omissions; rather, they are coping strategies for patriarchal norms. According to Judith Herman, trauma impairs one's capacity to combine

memories into a cohesive story, which frequently leads to dissociation and emotional numbness. Cathy Caruth's theory that trauma is a delayed reaction that defies complete integration into consciousness is reflected in Indu's fragmented memories, which occasionally surface as startling flashbacks or unexpected realizations.

A learned disempowerment is exemplified by the silence of women like Akka, Kaki, and even Indu's mother. In order to maintain social cohesiveness and family honor, these women have internalized the necessity of repressing their suffering, desires, and resistance. According to Laura Brown's feminist trauma theory, this kind of ongoing silence is psychologically violent, particularly when it is accepted across generations. Silence is both a legacy and a prison in Deshpande's story. Indu inherits this silence, but she starts to question it, in contrast to the older women. Understanding Indu's place in the family requires an understanding of Susan Brison's claim that speaking up is an act of psychological and political resistance. Indu breaks the cycle of trauma and starts a process of group healing by speaking up, challenging ingrained conventions, and recognizing the suffering that lies behind generational silences. Therefore, Deshpande uses memory and silence to show how trauma is passed down and how reclaiming one's past and identity begins with breaking that silence.

6. Rewriting the self: healing through narrative

Through the restorative and transformative process of storytelling, Indu begins to regain agency and reconstruct her damaged sense of self in *Roots and Shadows*. As the book tracks her introspective path to self-awareness, writing, remembering, and storytelling all turn into vital therapeutic techniques. In order to regain a coherent sense of who they are, trauma survivors must narrate their experiences, according to Susan Brison's "narrative reconstruction" theory. Instead of merely recounting events, this process entails reinterpreting them from a position of awareness



and control. For Indu, being able to narrate her own stories means that she is the author of her own stories rather than the object of others'. Writing and self-reflection are closely linked to Indu's recovery. Her self-narration serves as a political act as well as a personal catharsis, challenging the conventions that have silenced women in her family for many generations. According to Laura Brown's feminist trauma theory, rewriting the internalized scripts imposed by patriarchal authority is frequently necessary in order to regain voice and agency. This is exactly what Indu does in Deshpande's story—she challenges inherited beliefs, revisits her past, and faces the emotional lingering effects of guilt, shame, and obedience. Indu is able to transition from passivity to authorship through this narrative reconfiguration. She starts to acknowledge the trauma she previously denied through the retelling of her story, creating a space for both resistance and healing. By doing this, Deshpande presents narrative as a potent healing tool—a method of rewriting oneself outside of trauma.

7. Conclusion

Roots and Shadows by Shashi Deshpande is a profound examination of how trauma functions through regular control, conditioning, and silencing of women's bodies and voices in addition to overt acts of violence. Deshpande exposes the deeply ingrained patriarchal structures that splinter female subjectivity across generations via Indu's journey. According to this study, trauma in the novel is cumulative rather than incidental; it is layered in memory, etched on the body, and reverberated in silence. This reading demonstrates how Deshpande portrays the female body as a site of both oppression and reclamation, and the voice as an essential tool of resistance and healing, drawing on the feminist trauma theories of Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, Laura Brown, and Susan Brison.

More than just a personal metamorphosis, Indu's slow transition from a marginalized subject to a self-aware narrator represents a symbolic break in the cycle of trauma across generations. Her readiness to face up to traumatic experiences, defy social norms, and claim her story turns into a feminist act of recovery. In addition to reclaiming herself, Indu provides an example of how women's narratives can challenge, resist, and eventually overthrow oppressive structures by taking back her voice and rewriting her story. In *Roots and Shadows*, trauma is both political and personal, and the brave act of narration—rather than forgetting—makes healing possible. Thus, Deshpande's book is a potent illustration of women's tenacity, the redemptive potential of speech, and the need to rewrite oneself from a feminist perspective.

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