

An Analytical Study of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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Abstract— Shashi Deshpande, one of the eminent writers in the field of Indo-Anglo literature, occupies a prominent place in the galaxy of Indian women writers in English. She was born in 1938, in Dharwad, a small town in Karnataka, to a Kannad father and Maharashtrian mother and is their second child. Her father Adya Rangachar, better known as Sriranga, was a noted Kannada dramatist as well as a distinguished Sanskrit scholar. In an interview with Sue Dickman, Deshpande stated that her birth in a well educated family indirectly helped her to be what she is now,

“I started writing very late in life, and I never spoke to my father about my writing, nor did he ever speak to me about it. We never communicated about writing at all. But nevertheless, it did matter. It does matter, to some extent, particularly in a country like India, where I think women wouldn’t have been very educated in those days—I’m not talking of now—unless you had parents who were different and wanted their daughters to be educated. Normally it’s so difficult for a girl, if her family is against her, to go ahead and do anything, in our day at least.”

She pursued her early education at a protestant mission school in Dharwad and was an excellent student. Since her childhood Shashi Deshpande was fond of classical English novels and had a particular liking for the works of Jane Austen and was very much influenced by her. The first book that she read as a child was Jane Austen’s “Pride and Prejudice”. In an interview with Chandra Holm she tells,

“I was a great reader, an absolutely voracious reader. I started reading at the age of eight. My first book was Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen. I was told, “You are too young for this book. Don’t pretend to understand it.” But I enjoyed reading that book, even though I may not have understood it.”

Keywords— Indo-Anglican, Culture, Patriarchy, Commonwealth.

I. INTRODUCTION

The appearance of women novelist is an important development in Indo-Anglican literature and Shashi Deshpande is an outstanding novelist of Indian English literature. She explores Indian woman in her social relations, emotional reactions and psychological inspirations. Deshpande highlights the problems encountered by the Indian women caught between the native Indian and invading western cultures. Shashi Deshpande’s novels are concerned with a woman’s quest for self; an exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life and the protagonist’s place in it. The novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is Deshpande’s first major novel which deals with multiple issues concerning women. The novel was published in 1980 and has been translated into German and Russian languages. The novel is divided into four parts and Deshpande commences her novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* with an epigraph from the Dhammpada, which says,

You are your own refuge;
there is no other refuge.
This refuge is hard to achieve.

It depicts the vulnerability of woman who seeks shelter in a man's house through marriage and not in herself. But even in her husband's house she doesn't find a room of her own. The eternal female dream of finding happiness through a man shatters after marriage. As the real shelter of a woman is her own self but it is very difficult to achieve this refuge as she has to face a lot of obstacles in the form of social codes and morals.

Through in this novel Shashi Deshpande has made an extensive study of a woman in society and has very accurately presented different facets of a woman's life. She awakens the conscience of her readers and makes them feel guilty for what they have made of woman. The novel reminds us of Simone de Beauvoir that a woman is not born but is made by our patriarchal culture. Deshpande begins the novel with Sarita's, also known as Saru, returning to her parental home, after a time period of fifteen years, when she learns of her mother's death. Her mother died before her husband and Saru meditates, "Wasn't that what all women prayed to the tulsis for?"¹ The novel depicts the story of an unsuccessful marriage where the protagonist, Sarita, being overpowered by her husband, finally, in her quest for home, returns to her parent's house. Saru, who is a successful doctor and is socially and financially more successful as compared to her husband, is subject to her husband's sexual sadism, physical torture and constant abuse. She describes it in this way,

"The hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar body. And above me, a face I could not recognize. Total non-comprehension, complete bewilderment, paralysed me for a while. Then I began to struggle. But my body, hurt and painful, could do nothing against the fearful strength which overwhelmed me."²

Deshpande deals with the psychological problem of an educated and professionally qualified woman, earning not only the bread but also the butter for the family. Her problems start from her childhood and intensify when she marries a person who is not highly qualified and has a lower financial and social status. As a two-in-one woman she wears a white coat and an air of confidence and knowing at the day time whereas at night she becomes a terrified and trapped animal. Manohar, Saru's husband, is an English teacher in a third-rate college and therefore, the victim of inferiority complex. He uses the bedroom to manifest his male ego and power. Her husband, Manu, is a man with dual personality as he does not remember the strange action and behaves normally in morning. Even after fifteen years of marriage he remains a stranger to Saru as she says, "A man I didn't know."³

The novel reveals the quest of an anxious, eager, ambitious and self-assertive and self-righteous woman. Sarita is an ordinary middle-class woman, who is aware of her own limitations but lacks self-confidence. Though she had left her parental house with the determination that she would never come back again but she is unable to bear the sexual sadism of her husband and thus her unsuccessful marriage leads her to her primitive environment. It is not only the cruelty of her husband that fills her with grief, but her brother's death, her dejected life, the pain and suffering of her mother and herself also affects her mentally, psychologically and physically. Sarita was welcomed as she expected. Both she and her father feel uneasy to meet each other after such a long period. And she has to ask her father, "Can I come in, Baba?"

While staying at her parent's house she has a lot of experiences and a better understanding of herself due to which she gets courage to confront reality. She forgets about her own femininity and gets time to consider over her life, "...And now? It was as if she had lost awareness of her own femininity. Since coming home she had almost ceased to think of herself as a woman; a woman, that is, with the attributes of attracting a man."⁴

Also, she gets a chance to introspect and analyse her relationship with her husband, father and her dead mother; and to confess to her father about her strains and sufferings. Saru endeavours hard to get rid of her psychological fears and to gain back her lost confidence. She states that,

"The dark holds no terrors. That the terrors are inside us all the time. We carry them within us, and like traitors they spring out, when we least expect them, to scratch and maul."⁵

Shashi Deshpande has used the stream of consciousness technique and the novel advances with the help of flashback, recall, retention, contemplation and introspection. In Indian society, the personality of the female child is crippled by the discriminating socio-cultural values, attitudes and practices. The novelist has very efficiently highlighted the physical as well as psychic conflict of the protagonist, Saru, caught between two divergent cultures, i.e., the Indian conventions and regional customs on one hand and the new western culture and English education on the other hand. According to G. Dominic Savio,

“The entire novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* depicts the emotional and spiritual conflicts of the woman caught between the colonising and colonised cultures – a predominant feature of the Commonwealth.”⁶

Existing between the two divergent cultures, Saru searches for herself and ultimately grows into an individual rather than an object pinned down by the Indian society to gender roles. Though, Saru disentangles herself from the clutches of Indian conventions, chooses western education and becomes a doctor by profession but fails as a wife, for her male counterpart is a typical Indian who considers himself the lord and the master. Since her childhood Saru has suffered a lot, firstly because of her mother, a symbol of Indian orthodoxy, and after marriage due to the dominating Indian husband, who takes himself for a demi God and treats her as an unpaid servant. She has faced animosity from her mother and her husband. Both of them represent the values and norms established by the patriarchal society.

Apart from the other problems faced by Indian woman the strange mother-daughter relationship is a significant component in understandings of this novel. The relationship between a mother and a daughter is at once very complex and strange. Normally, the daughter is her double. Saru recollects how she suffered during her childhood because of the indifferent attitude of her parents. In Indian society the male-child or the son is treated as an ultimate solution to all problems whereas a girl child is unwanted in birth and neglected during childhood and adolescence and in the same manner Saru also suffers from gender discriminating right from her birth. Saru’s mother reared her in a particular fashion with gender-based discrimination as right from the beginning Saru is made to understand that she is a girl and she is inferior to her brother, in every way. Therefore, when she learns about her mother’s death she thinks that, “who lit the pyre? She had no son to do that for her.”⁷

The novel exhibits the trauma of a girl-child who has grown up as a victim of her mother’s biased nature, which further reduces her whole life into a desperate struggle to overcome the initial victimization and makes her too vulnerable and insecure in her relationships with others. She was unwelcome in the family because her parents preferred a male child to a girl child. She was the wronged child, the undesired and the unloved daughter, while her brother was always allowed to have his way. She remembers how her brother was named after the mythological ‘North Star’,

“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 black grinding stone that I held in my hand.”⁸

The reminiscences of her past life show that Saru was an unwanted child and had always disliked her younger brother Dhruva because being a boy he had always received more attention, love and care from her parents. As she recollects that there was,

“always a *puja* on Dhruva’s birthday. A festive lunch in the afternoon and an *arti* in the evening.... My birthdays were almost the same.... but there was no *puja*.”⁹

The struggle for importance is seen when she thinks, “I must show Baba something, ‘anything’ to take his attention away from Dhruva sitting on his lap. I must make him to listen to me and not to Dhruva. I must make him ignore Dhruva.”¹⁰

The hostile and discriminatory behaviour of her mother fostered revolt in her against her mother. Her mother rebukes her when she goes out in the sun and states that,

“Don’t go out in the sun. You’ll get even darker.... We have to care if you don’t. We have to get you married;” whereas her brother is allowed to do what he wants because “he’s different. He’s a boy.”

But Saru did not care for the harsh words of her mother. Once, on a stormy afternoon, when Saru and Dhruva went to play near an abandoned pond, Dhruva unfortunately drowned into the muddy water. Though, she desperately attempted to save him but could not. The accident was quite traumatic as it brought the mother-daughter conflict to the forefront and further alienated her from her parents by putting a guilt consciousness permanently on her psyche. Saru recollects, “We were like the three points of a triangle, eternally linked, forever separate.”

Her mother cursed her and made her feel guilty of his death and Sarita’s initial alienation starts with this accusation, “You did it, you killed him. Why didn’t you die? Why are you alive, when he’s dead?”

These harsh words of her mother followed Sarita all her life and her initial alienation began with this accusation. Dhruva’s demise has always been her subconscious desire and therefore her guilty conscience ever haunted her like a ghost. Saru has always felt an inner desire to make him the mythological Dhruva and now after death Dhruva has become an enticing North

Star controlling her happiness from afar. After her brother's death the family slides into a perpetual mourning and there were no celebrations. The ruling nature of the mother and the bitter contradiction between the mother and the daughter is illustrated on Saru's fifteenth birthday, when Saru returns from a walk and her mother scolds her for being late.

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