

Saritha's Self Exploration in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds no Terrors*

Dr.K.K.Sunalini

Associate Professor, Koneru Lakshmaiah Education Foundation
Green Fields, Vaddeswaram, Guntur -522 302, Andhra Pradesh India

Abstract.

The post-Independence period has brought to the forefront a number of noted women novelists who have enriched Indian English fiction by a creative release of feminine sensibility. The works of Indian women novelists like Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande can be compared with those of Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, Aritha Van Herk and Anne Tyler. All these writers write of life as seen by women and life as affecting them. Shashi Deshpande has contributed a great deal to the emergence of the new novel whose differentiating attributes are seen in bold experimentation in narrative strategies and use of language. Deshpande's maiden novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* traces the heroine Saritha's growth to womanhood through a bitter, claustrophobic girlhood, followed by an industrious studentship, idyllic romance, and finally a horrific wifehood. The present paper shows how Saritha goes through the traumatic experiences when her professional success casts a shadow on her marital life.

Keywords: Experimentation, womanhood, claustrophobic, traumatic

1. Introduction

The sense of marginalization, insecurity and segregation experienced by women has been effectively depicted by women writers in the Indo-Anglian tradition. Their writings portray the numerous facets of the woman's experience emphasizing in particular the trials and tribulations of being a woman in a rigid patriarchal culture. Shashi Deshpande, a renowned Indian novelist, has garnered critical acclaim for her poignant and insightful exploration of domestic violence in her works. Through her female protagonists, Deshpande delves into the complexities of gender relations, patriarchal societal structures, and the psychological impact of abuse. Her novels serve as powerful testaments to the resilience of women amidst oppression and their unwavering quest for self-identity and liberation. Deshpande's novel "The Dark Holds No Terrors" (1980) paints a vivid portrait of domestic violence through the

life of Sarita, a woman trapped in an abusive marriage. Sarita's husband, Manju, is a man of fragile masculinity, threatened by his wife's professional success and emotional independence. His resentment manifests itself in verbal and physical abuse, leaving Sarita psychologically scarred and questioning her own worth. Recent accounts of oppression take many forms, and refuse to identify one form as more basic or fundamental than the rest. Iris Young describes five faces of oppression: exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and systematic violence (Young 1990 2).

2. Feminism

During the 19th century there has been debate regarding the proper sphere of women, and when they obtained some legal and financial rights the universal suffrage was achieved in Britain in 1928. Later on in the 20th century, women anticipated more independence and wider opportunities. The two World Wars had a significant effect of validating what women were capable of doing; the fact of their ability to do men's work could no longer be denied. Feminism, as liberation struggle, must exist apart from and as a part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination in all its forms. (Hooks 22). Ellen E. Jordan observes that, "[...] the English feminists endowed the new woman with her hostility to men, her questioning of marriage, her determination to escape from the restrictions of home life and her belief that education could make a woman capable of leading a financially self-sufficient single and yet fulfilling life (Jordan 19).

Asked whether she would like to call herself a feminist, she told Geetha Gangadharan, "Yes I would. I am a feminist in the sense that, I think, we need to have a world which we should recognize as a place for all of us human beings. There is no superior or inferior; we are two halves of one species" (*Indian Communicator* 20 November 1994).

3. Marital Conflict

The Dark Holds No Terrors explores how Saru resents the role of a daughter and looks forward to the role of a wife with the hope that it will give her relief from the oppression of the mother. Saru's marrying Manu, against the parental approval, marks the severance of the umbilical cord and is an act of defiance proving her strength, power and self-reliance. Her mother is prompt in predicting the consequences of love marriage, "I know all these 'love marriages'. It's love for a few days, then quarrels all the time. Don't come crying to us then" (62). This is a sure prediction of Saru's future and failure. The novel probes issues such as

women's oppression, rape, male dominance, victimization and gender discrimination. Critics like Premila Paul, K.M Pandey, P.Venu Gopalan, P. Ramamoorthi, Sarabjit Sandhu and V.T. Giridhari considered it as a feminist novel. It is unique in exploring the myth of man's superiority as well as the myth of woman being the paragon of all virtues. The novel opens with Sarita, the protagonist of the novel returning to her father's house, after fifteen years, a place she had once sworn never to return to unable to bear the sexual sadism of her husband. Her rapid academic and social climb evokes inferiority complex in Manohar, her husband. The unhealthy male ego poisons his mind. The lover in him dies. He is metamorphosed into a mean loathsome individual. The first incident that shatters Manohar's peace and tranquility happens when Sarita suddenly becomes the darling of the slum-dwellers by attending to the wounded in a factory explosion. Sarita's overnight fame as a lady doctor leaves "nothing" for Manohar who feels "totally ignored" (Deshpande 1980 42). He begins to get "rough and abrupt" with her in love-making. It is thus the terrors of the night begin. The second disruptive incident happens when a girl, interviewing Sarita for a women's magazine, asks Manohar, "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?" (200) Manohar turns an animal at night and attacks Sarita. Thus begin her nightmares. Unable to come to terms with the fact that he is a failure in life, Manu lets his wounded pride manifest itself in sexual sadism, "the hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar body"(102). Bed is the only place where he can assert his animal power over her. Manu becomes a mean, despicable fellow when he basks in her glory by day and gives vent to his rage at night. Thus he becomes a rapist of his own wife. His ferocity and sadism are so violent that she feels, "this is not to be death by strangulation, it (is) a monstrous invasion of my body" (11-12). As Adrienne Rich puts it, rape does not deal with the rape of the body alone but with the rape of the mind as well. It is the ultimate violation of the self that denies the woman the right to her body. Deshpande underlines the pain of a woman who is the victim of the legalized rape and is destined to die in pain. To Saritha it is not the cruelty of her husband that fills her with grief but the loss of her dream. "[...] the thing she knew she has lost forever the eternal female dream of finding happiness through a man. It would never come alive for her again and it was like silent mourning wail inside her" (124). The framework of the novel provides good acoustics for woman's voice without glorifying her sufferings. Though she enlists a sufficient amount of sympathy for her

protagonist, it is not on the grounds of her being a female sufferer or a martyr in patriarchy. Through out the novel Shashi Deshpande maintains commendable objectivity and avoids generalizations and partial views. Deshpande in depicting Manu, seems to show how the stronghold of tradition makes scapegoats of men and turns them into victimizers. In fact, the novel explores questions like, “Who is the victim and who is the predator? Are the roles so distinct, so separate? Or are we, each of us both?” (144) Saru analyses further, “[...] there is something in the male that is whittled down and ultimately destroyed by female domination. It is not so with a female. She can be dominated, she can submit, and yet hold something of herself in reserve. As if there is something in her that prevents erosion and self-destruction [...]. Does the sword of domination become lethal only when a woman holds it over a man? (77)

4. Self exploration

Premila Paul points out, “*The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a feminist novel not on the lone basis of the female centrality in it. The novel focuses on woman’s awareness of her predicament, her wanting to be recognised as a person than as a woman and her wanting to have an independent social image” (Pathak 36). During her stay at her parental house, Saru comes to know the reality of her mother’s life. Mai Kaki informs Saru that her mother was a courageous woman because she never complained, “She never told anyone what was happening to her. The amount she ate [...] I tell you, a sparrow would have eaten more. Your father never noticed because she never ate with him” (ibid 108). To Saru, her mother’s suffering is more of an idea than reality since she has not seen it with her own eyes. Saru understands the silent suffering of her mother who never told anyone about what was happening to her and notes the strength of her in not running to the hospital for petty health problems. Saru learns from her Kaki that her mother refuses to see her even on the death bed. In spite of all these conflicts with her mother, Saru understands the reality of human existence when her father discloses the last words of her mother, “that’s what all of us have to face at the end. That we are alone. We have to be alone” (194). The thought leads Saru to doubt the permanence of human relationships and family ties, “Is it all a fraud then, the eternal cry of [...] my husband, my wife, my children, my parents? Are all human relations doomed to be a failure?” (195) Saru realises that the paternal home cannot be a refuge. She is her own refuge and establishes peace in her life by killing the ghosts that haunt her and find her own

way to salvation. Prasanna Sree observes, “But gradually her hostile attitude towards her mother changes to a positive one. She even begins to see her mother as the creative essence of the feminine one” (Sree 69). It is important to observe Saru at her father’s house remembering the little needs of her children like seeing Renu off to school every morning and covering Abhi with a blanket every night and longs for the children. Constantly she is under the fear that, “her unhappiness was a taint that would eventually stain them as well” (Deshpande 1980 134). The sexual assaults of her husband lead Saru to think of divorce a number of times. The growing feeling of disenchantment leads her to think of separation but she does not do so because of the trauma it would cause to her children.

Conclusion

Saritha dismisses outright the typical role of an Indian wife who religiously practises abject acquiescence and shows no sign of self-respect. represents the journey of modern woman towards financial independence, emotional balance and social recognition. As a victim of marital rape, Sarita endures pain and suffering and finally realizes that she is her own refuge. Sarita reviews her life during her stay at her father’s place; decides to continue with her profession and to return to her marital home. She is not explicit about her changed situation, how she is going to stall her sexual nightmares from her husband. The wife, in the end, is therefore not a rebel but a determined wife – one who has broken the long silence, one who is no longer afraid of the dark. R.S. Pathak observes, “Deshpande has portrayed the new Indian woman and her dilemmas, her efforts to understand herself and to preserve her identity as wife, mother and, above all as a human being in the tradition-bound, male dominated Indian society” (Pathak 19). Saritha is a wife re-conceptualized as woman and an individual – a marked contrast to the older generation of women around her with their uncomplaining, unresisting, fatalistic attitude. Hers is the dilemma of the new woman that, could be resolved when the claims of selfhood are reconciled with the claims made upon her by the family and society.

References

- [1] Deshpande, Shashi. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* New Delhi: Vikas, 1980.
- [2] Gangadharan, Geetha . “Denying the Otherness.” *The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande*. Ed. R.S. Pathak. New Delhi: Creative Books, 1998. 251-254.
- [3] Jordan, Ellen. “The Christening of the New Woman.” *The Victorian Newsletter*

(Spring1983).

- [4] Pathak, R. S, ed. *The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 1998.
- [5] Paul, Premila. “*The Dark Holds No Terrors: A Call for Confrontation.*” *The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande*. Ed. R.S. Pathak. New Delhi: Creative Books, 1998.
- [6] Sree, Prasanna S. *Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande: A Study*. [Dissertation]: Tirupati: Sri Padmavathi Mahila Vishwavidyalayam, 2001.
- [7] Young, Iris. “Socialist Feminism and the Limits of Dual Systems Theory.” *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana University, 1990.