

Dreadness and Tranquility in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* deals with the theme of gender bias, marriage and the psychological problems faced by the doctor heroine Saru, earning not only the bread but also the butter for the family. Sarita remembers and resents the gender discrimination made by her mother between herself and her brother. Hence her relationship with her mother gets strained. Her intercaste marriage with Manu becomes a failure and she turns to her parental abode with the heaviness of heart. Her father mentally prepares her to face the situation and not to run away again. She faces the world and her husband again asserting herself as a wife, mother and daughter. Deshpande makes it clear that a woman's life is her own and she must reorient herself as an assertive woman to face the trials of life.

Key words : Gender bias , Marital problems , Psychological problems , Assertion.

Shashi Deshpande, an Indian novelist of great repute is chiefly concerned with the psychological tendencies of the individual mind. She deals with the problems of career women of the middle class, parent child-alienation, domestic discard and man -woman relationship. The women characters of Shashi Deshpande as children rebel against the treatment meted out to them by their mothers. When the mother's shower favours on boys, the girl children raise their brows in interrogation. Boys are given freedom always whereas the girls are curtailed of their liberties. Hence the girl children naturally rear a sort of hatred towards their mothers and brothers.

Sarita, commonly known as Saru, the protagonist in Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, is an unloved daughter. From her early childhood she is brought up under the severe discipline of her mother. Ai shows gender bias to her female child Saru whereas she adores her baby boy Dhruva. He is the pet of the family and the darling of his parents. His shortcomings and mistakes are overlooked by the parents. But whenever Saru has a slight slip she is accused. His mother always points her accusing finger at her.

Saru's mother is a rock of tradition and so she has the opinion that a girl child need not be educated as she has to sit before the hearth cooking for her husband in future. She takes no interest in Saru's education and denies her love and attention which Dhruva, her younger brother receives in abundance. The mother's remark that she is nothing more than a burden, a responsibility that has to be transferred at the appropriate time makes Saru detest the tradition which limits the life of a girl to marriage. So Saru grows up feeling herself as an unwanted, unloved and insecure child. "The mother had always appeared an authority figure and posed a threat to her individuality and self-will. The power that the mother exudes repels her" (Paul 66).

Being a girl child Saru is never allowed to loiter anywhere alone because her mother has been told and taught to rear a girl child in a particular fashion and she does it with implicit faith. Saru is never allowed to go to her friend's house or to see a film with her friend Smita's family. When Smita presents a pair of ear-rings to her on her birthday, Saru is afraid to wear it because her friend's gift would not be approved of by her mother. Saru has a favourite spot in the mango grove where she pours her troubles of her heart all alone. But her mother restricts her because Ai is concerned about her daughter's safety. Saru says :

The strange place,the darkness that enfolded me in an unusual solitude, the fragrance of the blossoms,the sticky crunchiness of the leaves under my feet... Grassy slopes on which trees grow slanting... white starry flowers gleaming in some of the trees. There was an enchanting air of secrecy about the place that enraptured me....(185)

Though the place is enchanting,it is lonely and not safe for a girl child to go there alone. Saru's mother would not allow Saru to go out in the sun fearing that her daughter may turn darker and there will be difficulty in getting her married. She is an image of a typical Indian matriarch. Saru remembers a dialogue between her mother and herself in her childhood:

Don't go out in the sun,you'll 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 is different.He is a boy.(45)

She cannot tolerate the inequality shown between her brother and herself. She feels jealous whenever she finds Dhruva getting all parental affection and attention. She struggles to attract her father's attention to her.

Saru's mother never forgives her daughter Saru for the death of Dhruva.Though the boy dies accidentally by drowning, her mother accuses for his death. "*The Dark Holds NoTerrors* deals with the vicious,prejudiced and cruel attitude of a mother, a strong product of patriarchal society who considers her daughter responsible for her son's death"("Gender"). Her mother points out her accusing finger at Saru and says, "You did it. You did this... You killed him. Why didn't you die?Why are you alive, when he's dead"(Dark 191).Ai's harsh words have traumatised Saru all her life. Her mother's accusation gets instilled in her mind and generates a great emotional stress. It becomes a blemish on her character and she is desperate to free herself from this guilt by revealing her thoughts to her parents.But they never ask her for the details of her brother's death. Saru ascertains to herself," I didn't. Truly I didn't. It was an accident. I loved him, my little brother. I tried to save him.Truly I tried. But I couldn't And I ran away. Yes, I ran away,I admit that.But I didn't kill him"(Dark 146).

The hostile chauvinistic societal environment has moulded the psyche of Saru's mother as a woman who persecutes her daughter. She cannot bear the death of her son and longs that instead of her son the daughter should have been dead. This is because society treats the male child or the son as an ultimate solution to all problems and the girl child or the daughter as an unwanted burden who cannot fulfill the parental needs or ambitions.

Saru experiences an emotional lacuna even as a child when she is aware of her mother's preference for her brother Dhruva. He is given the best dress, best food and best care.His birthday is celebrated with pomp and festivity whereas Saru's birthday is ignored. Her mother makes preparation for his birthday even months earlier,but on Saru's birthday there is not even a prayer chanted to the Gods.Saru recollects sadly, "There was always a puja on Dhruva's birthday.A festive lunch in the afternoon and an aarti in the evening... My birthdays were almost the same... but there was no puja(Dark 168-69).

The protagonist Saru considers her mother as her rival. When she wants to study medicine, her mother is deadly against a girl becoming a doctor. Being an orthodox brahmin the mother detests her daughter becoming a doctor. She tries to persuade her husband not to send her to the medical college. She tells him:

You don't belong to that class. And don't forget,medicine or no medicine, doctor or no doctor,you still have to get her married, spend money on her wedding. Can you do both? Make yourself a pauper, and will she look after you in your old age? Medicine! Five,six,seven.... God knows how many years. Let her go

for a B.Sc...you can get her married in two years and our responsibility will be over. (144)

The mother considers marriage as the most important factor in a girl's life rather than becoming a reputed doctor. Sooner or later she has to be a wife and mother. However Saru, succeeds in persuading her father to send her to the medical college. Saru's life after her brother's death seems dull and dreary. But Saru is determined not to follow the life pattern designed for her by her mother. She rebels against the tradition of her caste and in spite of her mother's objection joins a medical college in Bombay. She leaves home and gets success in college.

The Indian society has traditional codes for marriage and it assigns a wife only a secondary status. A woman is not supposed to supersede men in any field but to keep an inferior status in order to maintain smooth relationship in the family between husband and wife. Sarita who has fallen head-over-heels to marry Manu, keeping aside all Ai's warnings feel distance from her husband. The reason for her domestic discard are trifold. In spite of her love marriage with Manohar outside her caste, Manu becomes a sadist husband. The initial flavour of love subsides when Manu and Saru confront the reality of life. Manu is a mere lecturer in a local college whereas Saru is a prospective famous doctor. When people around recognise Saru and nod at her, Manu feels that he is unrecognised and slighted. Saru ponders about her popularity as a doctor thus:

And so the esteem with which I was surrounded made me inches taller. But perhaps, the same things that made me inches taller, made him [her husband] inches shorter. He had been the young man, I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband. $a + b$ they told us in mathematics is equal to $b + a$. But here $a + b$ was not, definitely not equal to $b + a$. It became monstrously unbalanced equation, lopsided, unequal, impossible. (42)

Manu's male ego is hurt and it instigates an inferiority complex within him. Incidentally when a woman's magazine reporter poses a direct question to him, "How does it feel, when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?" (Dark 200). Manu's psyche is jolted and he feels that his inferior status is established. This creates problems in the marital life of Saru.

Nights are unbearable because the brute in Manu wakes up and feast on Saru. She feels physically and emotionally hurt when Manu behaves brutally in bed. The beast in him sleeps during the day and wakes up only at night. He thinks that the only way he can retain his potency and masculinity is by turning into a rapist at night. Saru realises that Manu is taking revenge on her at night though he is normal at daytime. The brutal behaviour and the rapist attitude Of Manu create a discord in their marital life. Emotionally, she feels alienated. But she remains silent to the cruelties perpetrated on her. Night by night the torture of Manu increases.

Saru is so desperate that she wants to save her marriage and prepares to sacrifice her profession. But Manu disapproves of Saru's idea of leaving her job. As her income is tempting, Manu does not allow Saru to quit her job in spite of his inferior Status in the society. Paul rightly observes "Saru's career exactly is Manu's problem. But he shudders at the suggestion of her giving up the job and tries mediocre tricks of cajoling her by offering to take her out for a movie. He cannot dream of going back to the shabby middle class way of life"(33). Saru reviews the social gender value system in India when she addresses the young college girls:

A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he's an M.A, you should be a B.A. If he's 5'4" tall, you shouldn't be more than 5'3" tall. If he's earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety-nine rupees. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage. (137)

Marriage normally subordinates a wife to her husband and it also idealises female martyrdom. A woman's success in her profession will always be considered secondary to her success in her marriage. All her intellect, her career, her achievement and her ambition are set aside in order to please her husband. Manohar's sense of inferiority changes him into a sadist, who gets pleasure by him Insulting his wife, harassing and hurting her sexually. According to Majumdar:

Saru has to suffer a sadistic relationship with a husband who cannot accept the fact that his wife is more professionally successful than him. But the greater problem in Saru's life is her own inability to accept the fact that the husband whom she married out of much love and respect is in fact such a tormented individual who has let out his complexes through a sadistic relationship with her. ("Aesthetics")

Shashi Deshpande discusses several problems related to women, marriage, caste, religion and tradition. There are several faceless wives like Saru who do not even utter or register any emotion, but serve their husbands, his relatives and friends without a murmur. Saru remembers one couple who had invited them to tea. The man sits and talks to them. Saru describes the wife:

She came in silently, unobviously like a shadow and went out in the same way, her husband's conversation not interrupted even by a fraction of second by her presence. He did not introduce her to us, and so strong was the man's disregarding her presence, we ignored her too. We ate the food, sipped the tea and gulped the waters as if they had been brought to us by a nameless waiter in a hotel. (158-59)

Domestic disharmony and conjugal conflict lead women to take shelter in their parent's home. Women who are wounded in the psyche because of the brutal behaviour of their husbands return to their parents for consolation and comfort. The matriarchs being dead, the father reveals the truth of the situation and makes these women realise the seriousness of their duty as a career woman and their role as wife and mother.

When victimised by Manu, Saru starts her exodus to her parental home which she has rejected long back. Hoping to find some solace in her parental home, she visits her Baba. But she is not able to speak out what she expects from her father. She unconsciously lingers in the past and then swings back to the present. This recuperates her mental dilemma and leads her to an ultimate realisation of herself. The epigraph of the novel emphasises:

you are your own refuge

There is no other refuge

This refuge is hard to achieve. (10)

when this realisation dawns on her, she accepts the reality and her role as wife and mother. She realises that she has been carrying the light, the solution within her. Hence dark doesn't hold any terrors for her. Earlier she saw only Manu's inadequacy; later she reviews her own inadequacy too, her perspective on her own psychology, her place in relation to others in the family and her status as doctor in the society clear her vision. She takes the opportunity to question, examine and test herself and then establishes and reinforces as wife, mother and doctor.

When she undergoes traumatic experiences, she receives a letter from her daughter Abhi informing the arrival of Manu. She tells her father not to open the door. Sarita who has not prepared to face her husband at one stage decides to leave her father also. But her father advises her not to escape from reality but to face the situation boldly. He says "don't turn your back on things again. Turn around and look at them. Meet him" (Dark 216). Her father also insists that she should forget about her brother and her mother, both of whom are dead already.

When Saru hears the whistle of the train by which Manu is expected to arrive, she knows she cannot run away from reality, Saru realises that she has to accept all these roles as daughter, sister, wife and mother. "Saru understands that integration alone would make her whole again and confrontation of the disintegration elements would never make that possible" (Sree 64). Saru feels that one has to be sufficient within oneself because there is no other refuge elsewhere. The reality dawns on her and she resolutely steps out of the house as a doctor to attend the ailing girl. She tells her father to ask Manu "to wait, I'll be back as soon as I can" (Dark 221). Saru is now ready to assert herself as a bold woman, a dutiful doctor, a good wife and a doting mother. According to Sree:

She rebels against tradition, But ultimately tries to compromise with existing reality. This is because Saru lives in a transitional society.

Saru passes from the illusion to reality, from frustration to submission and as the wheel finally comes around she makes an ultimate attempt to reconcile herself.(66)

Saru's urges to be assertive makes her realise the value of family, profession and society. Her query, " Do we travel, not in straight lines, but in circles.... Is life an endless repetition of the same pattern? is suggestive of her independence(*Dark* 173). Saru, though an assertive woman, understands that loneliness is a painful human condition. She sadly ruminates, "To be alone? Never a stretching hand ?Never a comforting touch... Are all human relationships doomed to be a failure?(*Dark* 195). True, Saru places her trust on her "self" and the possibility of human interdependence to lead a life of autonomy and assertion. She realises life as convulsions but her mind ranges over possibilities.

Shashi Deshpande has revealed the emotional world of Sarita with great dexterity and poignancy. When She realises the hard facts of life, Saru reconciles herself with reality. She has detected that balancing and binding are the two ways to solve the problems of life .This idea is expressed by Deshpande through the character Saru and events in this novel. In spite of all the social,cultural and traditional shackles which cuff Saru, she accepts life as it is and try to assert herself in solving the problems of life .Though the victimised women bent like grass amidst ghastly trials and tribulations, She is brave enough to face life bodily. Instead of crying over crises and calamities for countless days, the women have far- sightedness and they are able to stand above the tragic situations. They are questing for a distinct identity and in this process of quest, they revolt and rebel against the hoary customs and convention which obstruct them from becoming independent autonomous individuals. Once the women are strengthened to stand on their own legs and face the hard realities of life there is no more fear or terror or darkness.

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