

A Circular Vision of Female Identity in The Dark Holds No Terrors

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Abstract:

The Post-Independence period has brought to the fore front a number of noted women novelists who have enriched Indian English fiction by a creative release of Feminine sensibility. The woman has been the focus of many literary works in this period. Women who were till then treated as second class citizens were assigned their due place in these works. In modern Indian fiction the credit of representing the “silent voice” of woman goes to Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Bharati Mukhejee. These writers novels present a picture of the impact of education on women, her new status in the society and her assertion of individuality. Shashi Deshpande has created authentic female characters. They are flesh-and-blood characters with recognizable credentials. Deshpande’s maiden novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* traces the heroine Saritha’s growth to womanhood through a bitter claustrophobic girlhood, followed by a industrious studentship, idyllic romance, and finally a horrific wifehood.

Key words:

Assertion, authentic, credentials, claustrophobic, idyllic, horrific

Introduction

Woman is considered weak and ineffective and is compelled to estrange herself from her own society. There have been numerous attempts by woman of different ages and different countries to make the world realize their significant role in societal activities. However the feminist quest for identity has been one-dimensional and inconclusive. Feminism means different things to different people, including a wish to change and challenge the existing order of things so as to achieve a more balanced and equality between sexes and to human dignity as individual and woman. It is only after the Second World War that woman novelists of repute started enriched Indian fiction in English qualitatively.

A few Indian writers in English attempted to challenge the traditional myths about man-woman relationships, some succeeded in their attempt, if not in finding an ideal viable solution, but at least in bringing home to women an awareness of the existing inequalities and imbalances in society. Men writing about Women tend to become unrealistic by either highlighting their weakness or their defiance or thus belittling them at home and in society. But Contemporary women novelists who are avowedly feminists have taken a different stance to present women in a position and contributing role.

Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* probes issues such as women's oppression, rape, male dominance victimization and Gender discrimination. It is unique in exploring the myth of man's superiority as well as the myth of woman being the paragon of all virtues.

As Anita Myles points out

"Her characters are so realistically portrayed that there is a tendency to recognize oneself in them it would not be an exaggeration to say that their experience extend a soothing and healing touch for the readers".(64)

In the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* through the trial of the life of Saru, Shashi Deshpande speculates on the fate of the middle class Indian woman who accepts professional independence to carve out spaces for alternate identity beyond the burden of patriarchal and parental authority. The life of Saru, the protagonist, is evidently a saga of a modern woman, how she redefines her "self" to escape the shadows of the perpetual darkness of torture, injustice and ignominy. The stream of consciousness makes Saru recall her childhood experiences, her estranged relationship with her mother, her marriage with the handsome versatile-looking young poet, Manohar and the suffering which follows, and her relationship with her daughter Renu and son Abhi.

The novel opens with Saru's return to her maternal home with a twofold purpose after the death of her mother. She wants to look after her widower father and also seek solace from the nightmarish brutality of her sadist husband, Manohar. Earlier she had resolved never to return to her parents, house. Her stay in her father's house enables her to recall the events of her life, which get unfolded through her memories of the past, and she compares and contrast her past with her present. These reflections reveal to her that "Happiness is so evanescent, nothing is left. Except sensations and feelings."(41).

The novel highlights the story of a marriage on the rocks. Saru is a "two-in-one woman", who in the day is a successful doctor and at night "a terrified animal" in the hands of her husband, Manohar, an English teacher in a third-rate college. The rest of the novel is the remembrances of things past and a brief confession to father, with whom she had hardly communicated before.

Saru reaches her father's home after fifteen years. Her father welcomes her "like an unwilling host entertaining an unwelcome guest."(18). The novelists unfold the narrative through the memories of Saru. Saru recalls the past and realizes the truth about her marriage. She begins to sense that the unloved daughter was also the unloving daughter. She knows that the expression on her face is not different from that of her hated mother. In her words,

"And behind this fear the uneasiness that comes from losing something. No, not losing it, but being unable to find it because I've hidden it to keep it safe. Hidden it so well that I can't find it myself now. And each day the thought ...I can't go on ". (23)

She recalls the discrimination shown by her mother and how problems had started right in her childhood. The problems in her life aggravated after her younger brother Dhruva's death, referred to in the novel as A.D (after Dhruva), which symbolizes the prelapsarian and postlapsarian life for Saru. Dhruva's death overshadows all other memories of her life as if that was the point of her fall. She remembers how she was treated second to Dhruva. She recalls her conversation with her mother,

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's different. He's a boy. (45)

In Indian society people believe that a daughter is a source of misery while a son is the savior of the family. This shows the gross inequality that is observed by the parents. The daughter faces a treatment of rejection at home where as the son receives royal treatment. R.K.Dhawan observes:

“ In the Inner world, sudhir kakkar explains that a child's emotional life is wholly determined by the kind of relationship hs/she has with his/her mother. A child see the world as “benevolently disposed” if the mother brings security and love, the world is “forebonding” if she generates insecurity and fear”.(25)

Saru's world is thus conditioned by her mother.

The grave discrimination between Saru and her brother leads to a sense of insecurity and hatred towards her parents, especially her mother, and to her resultant rebellious nature. She was in the grips of insecurity. Even her father has not taken any particular interest in her studies or development; as a man, “He had never exhibited what he didn't have...neither love, nor anger, nor dislike “. (33). Saru's feeling of being unwanted was so acute that she began to hate her own existence as a girl or woman. Thus, unloved and unwanted, she developed hatred towards the traditional practices during her impressionable years.

Saru craved for love and security elsewhere when she got attention from Manohar, she wondered,” how could I be anyone's beloved? I was the redundant, the unwanted, an appendage one could do without”(59). Manohar was her savior and the romantic hero who rescued Saru- a damsel in distress. She experienced love in his company. Saru's love dreams begin and end with Manohar. Love has neither been Plotinic to her nor an abstract emotion; It is always housed in the domain of sex. Saru says, “Today everthing has a sexual nuance, and when a girl she loves another it can mean only one thing.”(122)

Saru's family life and happiness start declining as her popularity started increasing day by day. The financial ascendance of Saru renders Manohar less significant and impotent. The confusion in and between love and sex of the early years of Saru's marriage has disappeared, for her “sex was now a dirty word”. (133). Thus marriage doesn't bring any satisfaction to Saru. She sees “marriage only in terms of a dark room where terror awaits her”. Her married

life, which was once beautiful, has become ugly. For the second time Saru leaves home, this time defying her husband.

In the bitterness of her personal relational ship, She seeks the shadows of the curses of her mother. She comes to the bitter realization that the idea of love in marriage is an illusion because marriage is nothing but it is only an accommodation of interest. Absolute confusion prevails upon her. She feels that she has done injustice to her mother, her husband, and her children as well.

In domestic life, there should be a blend of acceptance and rejection, flexibility and rigidity, and above all revolt if the occasion demands, and compromise for peaceful life. All these characteristics are blended in Saru, Who represents the middle-class society in modern India.

A Tradition-bound woman may sacrifice anything for the sake of her family's welfare and she may not zealously guard her individuality. On the other hand, an educated woman is crushed by family life, happiness, and children and later between work and herself.

Towards the end of the novel Saru remembers Madhav's words: I can't spoil my life because of that boy (his brother Sathish).It is my life after all".(208).It is enough to make her realize the inner strength which she has forgotten for some time. The wheel has come nearly full circle for Saru. With fresh vigor she feels that she has now come out of her "dark smelly hole" of a body, and her wretched shamed body begins to feel beautiful again .She feels she has now sloughed off the last vestige of the disease that gripped her life and mind .At the end a new, more energetic Saru goes to Manu not to seek help but to complement him. Now her nights would no longer terrify as the dark holds no terrors to her.

Saru comprehends the meaning of human life and energizes, "It's my life...But it's true. 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". (208) Saru's coming back to her husband is not indicative of submission to patriarchal edifice constructed by her mother, rather she comes back to reconstruct her emotional role without deconstructing her gender identity.

Thus *The Dark Holds No Terrors* portrays the life of Saru, who becomes a doctor not only as a measure of self-reliance but also to achieve an identity of her own.

CONCLUSION

Modern women challenge the injustice and demand redress .The craving for individual freedom and happiness might lead to the breaking up of family and relationships at times

causes clash of wills and personalities and thereby paving the way to the breaking up of the age-old institution of marriage.

Shashi Deshpande's novels present a realistic portrayal of contemporary middle-class woman. With a focus on woman's issues, her novels give a comprehensive feminist perspective on modern Indian woman. As a sensitive writer, she presents her protagonist's convoluted self-abnegation and servitude in her novels. She concentrates on the typical dilemma of middle-class educated and employed woman who struggle and segregate themselves from their family to choose their own life style, a feature that has been increasingly in vogue today in urban India. Deshpande's women are the products representing the period of transition in Indian society and also shouldering greater responsibilities than their predecessors. Her protagonists reject rituals which she considers vestiges of the past. They have a number of avenues open before them; and in many fields, they have also proved themselves better than their male counterparts.

The Dark Holds No Terrors is a telling example of how men are intolerant about playing a secondary role in marriage, and how their manhood gets hurt when their wives gain a superior status in society. In the novel, Saru sets out to break her middle-class connection and find her identity by breaking free of her dominating mother and cutting the shackles of silence in which tradition binds a woman.

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