

Marriage, Family and Society in Shashi Deshpande's The Dark Holds No Terrors

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande has depicted the status of women in the contemporary Indian society, marriage and family through her novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. The woes and suffering of a woman derive from gender bias, patriarchy, male dominance, suppression and alienation gives them a feeling of pain and sense of loss.

Keywords: Gender, Patriarchy, Bestiality, Social norms, Conservatism

Shashi Deshpande, born and brought up in India, assimilated Indian culture and absorbed the native customs and traditions. The essence of Indianness in her writing in English is authentic and faithful. We find in her novels the social and cultural milieu and the people she observed around her existence. Close analysis of her novels, singles out Shashi Deshpande as a 'woman writer', who wrote about woman. Most of her writing comes out of her intense and long suppressed feelings about what is to be a woman in our society. The present paper aims at how Shashi Deshpande has depicted the status of women in the contemporary Indian society, marriage and family through her novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*.

Shashi Deshpande is alive to the socio-cultural trends that worked upon her mind during the growth of her personality. Her mind does not travel in the exotic world of strange happenings, yielded by farfetched imagination. She stands to the reality of life, surrounded by persons dwelling in down to earth reality and undergoes trials and tribulations as normal human beings do. We find, in her novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, the woes and suffering of a woman derived from patriarchy, male dominance, suppression and alienation on one hand. On the other, new avenues opened to the intellectual educated women finding self-expression, asserting individuality and the freedom in the present-day context.

Shashi Deshpande has presented women as character to carry burden of social representation, "...the characters with whom I live for years about whom I know almost everything..." (Deshpande 19). Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* has been made acutely conscious of her gender,

the family and society she lived in since childhood and the discriminating socio-cultural values, attitudes and practices which cripple her personality as a female child. She also fails as a wife, for her male counterpart is a typical Indian representative of the patriarchal structure. The stark presentation of Saru's childhood, her trauma of being an unloved child and the candid presentation of her marriage to a man who is overtaken by an inferiority complex, manifests itself in the form of sexual brutality. This has happened in her life due to the traditionalists in family and society.

The Indian families, under the impact of cultural orthodoxy, view the arrival of female sex as a curse. Saru's mother, Kamala, hates Saru for being a girl and is neglected during childhood and adolescence. The earliest memories of Saru underline the discrimination shown by her mother in favour of her brother. Saru feels that her birthday was a cause of displeasure and a horrible experience to her mother. "...of my birth, my mother had said to me once... "It rained heavily the day you were born. It was terrible." And somehow, it seemed to me that it was my birth that was terrible for her, not the rains" (p.169). Saru remembers that at her brother's birthdays, there was always a 'puja' held in the evenings. She even recalls the joyous excitement in the house on the occasion of his naming ceremony. It is here she learns that she is a liability and the son is an asset to her parents.

The turning point in her life is the accidental death of her brother by drowning. Her childhood memories are filled with her mother accusing her. "You did it, you did this, you killed him" (173). The mother, a woman, hates woman in her daughter. Saru's mother's discriminatory behaviour makes Saru feel unloved and unwanted. It creates a sense of hostility and estrangement with her and precipitates a sense of rootlessness and insecurity. In fact, a girl is a victim of gender discrimination in the Indian social set up. "The supremacy of the male is so well established that the average Indian is surprised to even be queried about it. Whatever the ecology of the social group, even in communities where the woman may be breadwinners, the male is consider superior....the birth of a son gives a woman status..." (Anandalaxmi 31).

Saru's mother loses interest in life after her son's death. She puts the blame for her own stress on Saru's shoulders. The mother's rejection of her daughter leaves deep scars on Saru's mind. Her mother does not take interest in her education and personal achievement. This sense of rejection by her mother and the feeling of being unwanted are so intense that she begins to hate her own existence as a girl or woman in the society. On attaining puberty she resentfully thinks, "If you are woman, I don't want to be one" (63). Saru hates the traditional practice in her orthodox home where she is treated like a pariah, an untouchable, segregated from the other members of the family during her monthly ordeal. Subsequently, she develops hatred towards her mother, for she always comes in the way of her progress. When Saru expresses her desire to study medicine, her mother does not permit her desire to go to Mumbai and stay in a hostel. Her argument is that "Saru is a girl" (p.143). She rebels against her mother by going to Mumbai. She resolves to be a doctor, hoping that a professional career could be "the key that would unlock the door out of this life." (126)

Saru is a medical student in Bombay and Manu is a lecturer in a local college. Manu's interest in her for the first time makes her feel wanted and loved. It is this feeling which is partly responsible for making her rush into marriage with Manu. These feelings are outcome of pathetic and discordant attitude of her mother. Saru's mother is shocked to hear her daughter's decision to marry a man of her choice, a non-Brahmin. The bride and the groom is of the same caste is one of the essential conditions in Indian traditional marriages. Saru fights back paternal pressure, breaks the societal shackles and marries Manu. In fact, she takes a vicious pleasure in deliberately going against her mother's rigid conservatism. Saru's defiance cannot be analysed as an inherent quality in her. She is, in fact, shaped by the family and society. The reason behind her defiance is the prevailing environment which influences the mind process of an individual.

In her utter desolation she turned towards Manu in search of affection, security and consolidation. When her relations with Manu get strained, she regrets for having rushed into marriage, unconditionally. The circumstances that led her to take such a step are the making of her parents. "If her mother had provoked her by her blatant hostility, her father had contributed to her present predicament by remaining a mute spectator in the family drama" (Reddy 56). The initial years of her marriage are sheer bliss. She thinks that she is the luckiest woman on the earth.

She soon realizes that happiness is a token of an illusion. As long as she is a medical student and her husband is a

breadwinner, there is peace at home, even though their financial condition is bad. The problem arises only when she gets recognition and social acceptance as a doctor who really works for people. Manu cannot tolerate people greeting her and ignoring him. Saru feels a gradual disappearance of love and attachment in their relations. Shashi Deshpande shows how success for a woman in the patriarchal society can cause subversion of roles in the family and destroy happiness.

In the beginning Saru could not realize the slow change in her husband. Her success as a famous doctor becomes the cause of envy and so her marital relationship is strained with Manu. Shashi Deshpande, however proves that in the institution of marriage, an economically independent woman is still in shackles and must never hurt the ego of her husband. In the Indian culture, a woman's identity is defined by the others, in terms of her relationship with men, i.e. as daughter, as wife, as mother, which go in making of her traditional identity and not the new one, she has acquired in the changed context.

With the steady rise in Saru's status, there is an inverse decline in her conjugal relationship with Manu. As the rift between her and Manu deepens, Manu becomes hostile towards her. Saru's growing reluctance to share physical intimacy changes Manu into a wild animal at night. He begins to physically abuse her in the privacy of their room. "Even if she were to show someone her bruised body, not to talk of her battered psyche, she is not sure the person would understand what she is talking about or going through." (Sitesh 201) In an interview with Saru for a magazine, the interviewing girl happens to ask Manu: "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but the most of the bread as well?" (p.200) at that moment, Manu, Saru and the interviewer laughed over it as if it were nothing. But later he feels very humiliating, helpless and effeminate. That night Manu gives vent to his feelings by attacking her like a wild animal. Although he is a cheerful normal human being during day, he turns into a rapist during night to assert his manhood.

In yet another incident, Manu and Saru meet his colleague and his wife while shopping; Manu says that they are going to Ooty and some other places in the south. His colleague expresses his inability and bad luck in not affording such an expensive vacation. The colleague's wife tartly replies that he also could have afforded it, had he married a doctor. A humiliated Manu vents his frustration once more on Saru that night, making her a victim of his bestiality. She later relates this incident to her father, "...I couldn't fight back. I couldn't shout or cry, I was so afraid the children in the next room would hear.

I could do nothing I can never do anything. I just endure (p.201). The circumstances seem all the more intolerable as Manu pretends ignorance in the morning of his beastly behaviour at night. She is unable to bear the torture any longer by her husband and returns to her parent's home. The male dominated culture has withered her dreams and hopes. The sense of marriage is lost and family is in state of complete destruction.

Through her relation with Padmakar, her former classmate and homosexual Booze, she achieves no happiness and fulfilment. After a few meetings with Padmakar, Saru dissuades him from attempting to force a deeper relationship with her and brings an end to their relations. Now she had no illusions left about romance or love: "Now I knew it was not just the consequences I feared and hated, but the thing itself, what had I imagined? Love? Romance? Both, I knew too well, were illusions and not relevant to my life anyway. And the code word of our age is neither love nor romance but sex. And for me, sex was now a dirty word" (p.133). These extra-marital relations are no solace and compensation for her in her tensed married life.

Shashi Deshpande denies that women find fulfilment only in marriage. Saru reviews her past, her own place in relation to others in the family and the society around. She thinks over the reasons of her disastrous marriage.

With the self-realization, she comes to the decision to confront the problems. She must open the door to her husband and confront him fearlessly. "Sarita cannot forget her children or the sick needing of her expert attention; and so, she decides to face her home again." (Nandakumar 821) Saru establishes herself neither as a totally liberated woman nor as an orthodox Indian woman. Shashi Deshpande, has presented a realistic picture of the gross gender inequality that prevails in our society and through Saru, topples down the previous cultural norms.

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