

Problematising Feminine Discourse in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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Being so caught up

So mastered by the brute blood of the air

Did she put on His knowledge with his power

before the indifferent beak could let her drop ?1

On a cursory reading of Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*² I was struck by the coincidental similarity in the situation of Leda, the mythical woman, and Sarita, a present-day woman. Despite this similarity, there is a vast gap in viewing the two authors in that Leda's being overpowered by Zeus (in the form of a swan) and its consequence are considered a romantic text while Sarita's being overpowered by her husband is a feminist text. Had Yeats been a present-day poet and dare write such poems eulogizing any male (God or Man), he would certainly have been taken to task by the so-called feminists. Yet when confronted with a character like Sarita, one is inadvertently compelled to feel that hers is a case of romanticization of radical feminism.

Feminism as a literary theory entered the academic circle in the late 1960s with the advent of post-structuralism. This movement is different from the traditional approaches of literary criticism in the sense that it does not emerge from or address itself to literature in practice. The post-structuralist theory asserts that literature can be written according to the literary theory. As Jaidev points out: "Such a premise seems depressing because it expects literature to learn from a theory. In any case, several post-structuralists are feminists and naturally therefore they are busy creating

a feminist aesthetics, a feminist literary theory which, out of politeness, is supposed to illumine past texts for theory.”³

It seems Shashi Deshpande’s novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is written under the sweeping influence of such a literary theory in its moments of euphoria. This contention of mine is rooted in the concern when her protagonist Sarita voices her anxiety:

There is the strange new fear of disintegration. A terrified consciousness of not existing. No, worse, Of being just a ventriloquist’s dummy, that smiles, laughs and talks only because of the ventriloquist. The fear that without the ventriloquist, I will regress, go back to being a lifeless puppet. A smirk pasted onto its face.

Ventriloquist is “one who can speak so that his voice seems to come from some other person or place.”⁴ This is precisely the situation not only with Sarita but also her creator. In the process of creating not only with Sarita but also her creator. In the process of creating an exclusively feminist text, Shashi Deshpande seems to be tremendously influenced by the individualistic feminism propagated by the Anglo-American feminist tradition. This appears more so in the deliberate distortion of her female and especially male characters and sacrificing of many human values at the alter of a trendy feminism. In this paper, I shall attempt to analyse Shashi Deshpande’s use of feminism as a literary device in the portrayal of her male and female characters from a post-feminist point of view and critique how far her feminist discourse contributes to the context of Indian society.

At the outset of the novel, the protagonist Sarita is discovered as a victim of her husband Manohar’s sadistic torture through physical and sexual violence. Her mental state, is expressed in a very realistic and touching manner

It was a monstrous invasion of my body. I tried to move twisting my body, wriggling under the weight that pinned it down. It was impossible. I was pinioned to a position of an abject surrender of myself. I began, in sheer helplessness, to make small whimpering sounds, piteous cries. The small pains merged all at once into one large one. And still the body above mine, hard and tense, went on with its rhythmic movements. The hands continued their quest for new areas of pain. Now the horror of what was happening to me was lost in a fierce desire to end it. I could not, would not, beat it. I began to fight back helplessly, savagely.

Going through such gory details of excruciating pain and unendurable agony. Who could ever imagine of such a nightmarish event not in a criminally assaulted rape scene but in a decade-old marriage bed on a mother of two children? And not an ordinary housewife, but a doctor by profession, a working woman of considerable social repute? What sense does the author aim at evoking in her readers through such unbelievable stuff? Expecting the readers simultaneously to be sane and naïve enough to take her for granted, is not that asking for too much?

In any case, in order to create a complete female text, one must create a female space that demarcated women as different. As Dorothy Kaufman-McCall writes: “This was specifically the trend in post-1968 French movement of the groups known as *Psych et Po* [Psychoanalyse et Politique] which emphasized the centrality of biological differences between the sexes. Drawing heavily on Lacanian psychoanalytic postulates, this group argues that just this women’s difference which lies in a sexuality that has been repressed by patriarchal culture is the source of women’s potential liberation.”⁵

Considering Shashi Deshpande’s protagonist Sarita in *The Dark Holda No Terrors*, one cannot fail to notice this differentness in her since her childhood till she is a grown-up woman. Her kid brother Dhruva is her primary target in her contestation

with the male power. Being a son, he had the advantage of receiving more attention, care and love from her parents. Her childhood jealousy comes to the forefront when she pushes him from her father's lap when he was hardly a year old. He had been completely loyal to her in all respects, always running after his beloved Sarutai. But she spared no occasion to assert her authority over him on every little opportunity :

Just three years between them. But what immense advantage those three years gave her. She had ruled over him completely. No dictatorship could have been more absolute.

It seems, at first, that against the patriarchal power of domination, her relationship with Dhruva forms the battleground on which she is fighting for a space of her own. However, the novelist, surprisingly enough, chooses the mother to represent the patriarchal power. One is impelled to ask why the mother (not the father) should be chosen when her protagonist is meant to carve a female space by challenging the old order, the myriad bondages of tradition imposed by a male dominated society. Probably, it presupposes a psychological conflict in the protagonist's own self to problematise her femininity through the mother-daughter relationship. Simultaneously, with a decisive stroke of her pen the author brings the brother-sister relationship to a catastrophe. Before the very eyes of Sarita, her kid brother drowns in a pit full of muddy water. Her desperate attempt to save him reflects her concern for her brother but she vehemently denies any knowledge of him when asked by her parents. Inevitably, she is confronted with her mother's hysterical accusation:

"You did it, You did this. You killed him."

"I didn't. I didn't know. I never saw him."

Dhruva's death should have restored Sarita to her parental love and care as she is their only child left. On the other hand, this event becomes instrumental in alienating her from them by putting a guilt consciousness permanently in her psyche.

Throughout the novel, this guilt-consciousness seems to act like a fatal flaw, at times driving her to a mental state bordering on schizophrenia. This is the turning point in the novel that brings the mother-daughter (Matriarchal vs Filial) conflict to the forefront. Every suggestion of her mother like “Don’t go out in the sun. you will get even darker.” which differentiated her from her brother, made her contemptuous of her femininity. Even the onset of biological changes like menstruation is unbearable for her. She prays to God that it should not happen to her any more and save her from being ashamed of herself forever. In these and many more occasions, her reactions betray the influence of individualistic feminism on her author who seems to put Jardine’s textual process of “Gynesis” to work in her present undertaking: “The putting into discourse of ‘women’ as that process diagnosed in France as intrinsic to the condition of modernity; indeed, the valorization of the feminine, woman and her obligatory, that is historical connotations, as somehow intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing and speaking.”⁶ In projecting her protagonist in conflict with the hegemonic power structure and the social institutions, Shashi Deshpande carries the true spirit of feminism very problematic a personality to her positing her as a kind of psychotic rebel.

During all these moments of mother-daughter problematic, the father is either relegated to a non-entity space or seen silently supporting the daughter against the mother. When Saru decides to pursue a course in medicine in Bombay, the mother is traditionally ill-disposed to let her have her way. But the father who already understands the modernized idea of a professional woman, supports her morally and financially to achieve her goal. Sarita is at least able to escape the maternal tantrums of dos and don’t. yet, at a later stage, her father’s momentous help appears to her as a too tacitly committed act:

Standing up against her, asserting her will against her ... that had seemed impossible. But she had done it. I won that time.

But I was not alone then. Baba was with me. He helped me. Without him, I would never have succeeded. Now I wonder whether his was a fight for me or against her. Whether he used me as a weapon against her? Whether that hurt her more than my own rebellion did?

Either way the father seems the villain. But she takes her sweet revenge on her mother, at least she feels so, by another more shocking decision in choosing Manohar, a lower caste man as her husband. By breaking away from the barriers of caste system, she frees herself from the matriarchal and patriarchal bondage.

Although she is dark and not so good-looking, Manohar becomes the recluse in whom she finds her belongingness. To her inferiority complex-stricken psyche and love-starved body and mind, he proves the much-needed panacea:

I was insatiable, not for sex but for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love. Of my being loved. Of my being wanted. If ever I had any doubts, I had only to turn to him and ask him to prove his love for me. And he would again and again and again.

It is his moral support that restores her self-confidence. He proves that she is as much desirable as any other beautiful woman. With his help, she completes her medical degree and embarks on a profession that has a high social respect. Already they have two children—son Abhijeet and daughter Renuka. But she is no more interested in the family life as she is possessed with a psychotic will to defy socially ascribed role of a wife and a mother. To Manohar she can only offer hollow suggestion to resign her job and devote her time to family. But, the truth is that she, once again, wills to be different, be free from all bondage as she had done by breaking away from her parents.

Once a big catch, a handsome and virile an for husband, Manohar fails her in bed in satisfying her nymphomaniac urge. Now she is empowered to ride over him either by blackmailing to resign her job or corner him to accept her domination as the bread-earner of the family.

Does the sword of domination become lethal only when a woman holds it over a man? . . . I will never dominate. I will never make my husband nothing as she did. And yet it happened to them. It puzzled, sometimes it frightened her, giving her a feeling that there was something outside herself, driving her on.

Her domination over her husband despite herself and her confession of being under the spell of a force outside herself strengthens the earlier assumption in that she is feminist rebel all set to assert her autonomy in the patriarchal society. Poor Manohar, with his meager income as a lecture in a private college cannot accept the first suggestion and must resist the second. As Michel Foucault says: “Where there is power, there is resistance.”⁷ Must not Manohar fight for the little space that he owns? She is now her old self again, clamouring to assert her power as she did with Dhruva and her parents. After the father, it is the turn of Manohar to be proved a villain for denying her authority. In a complete about turn, the novelist sweeps him off his ground through a few master strokes. The very person who provided a paradise of sex (or love) now turns a monstrous sadist inflicting inhuman fortune on his wife. Is this real or imagined? Does not it point to a certain hallucinatory discovery on the part of the protagonist?

Yet again, freedom from all social bondage and escape from personal obligation is not enough for a Shashi Deshpande heroine. She must try her possessed idea (or idealism) of freedom in sex too. Her brief stint of adultery with Padmakar Rao, her classmate and now a colleague, reflects not only the fall of her character but also her maniac obsession with self. Such an arduous journey for rebellious self-assertion

must tell upon her psychic health considerably. She now has to find another recluse for convalescence and introspection.

It is in this moment of crisis that her parental home provides her recluse. Her mother is long dead of cancer. During all their days of difficulty and suffering. She had kept herself selfishly and grudgingly absent. Ironically, her lone father once again comes to her rescue. Far away from the humdrum and incessant heat of Bombay city, in this remote village, she regains her control over herself. She comes to terms with the fact of her mother's death and the boundless jealousy and hate she bore for her evaporates. Realization descends on her that she and her mother did not have "a room of their own." Desperately, she had been searching for this room in her parents, in Dhruva, in her husband Manohar and her children, always outside herself but in vain. The epilogue of the novel, taken from the Dhammapada, authentically reflects her self-realisation.

You are you own refuge.

There is no other refuge.

This refuge is hard to achieve.

All biological dread and psychological difference subside in her. Now she must step forward and open the door of all human relationships as an enduring persona. Yet her final words to her father, "And, oh yes, Baba, if Manu comes, tell him to wait. I'll be back as soon as I can," only suggest that she has overcome her earlier hesitation and is now capable of facing her husband and asserting her own rights and individuality. While her achievement of autonomy and restoration to the pride of her profession is a welcome change in her person, her complete transformation is deterred, as no positive hint is given regarding her willingness to accept the social responsibility by going back to her husband and children.

Shashi Deshpande's art of characterization needs special mention here. Who are those who crowd her canvas? The protagonist Sarita, a possessed and psychotic woman, who is ready to ride roughshod over every male she associates with for her self-assertion and her selfish ulterior gain. Is she supposed to be the role model for the new woman? What a nightmarish world she inhabits? Intolerant nagging mother, indifferent father, sadist husband, womanizing professor, and lecherous sex-hunting colleagues—it is a world crowded with too many dark creatures full of dark desires. It but natural that women like Sarita must rise above all this, putting their dark knowledge viciously against them and declare boldly: "The Dark Holds No Terrors." This is no world for the sane men and women.

Finally, it is time again to refer to the quoted lines of W.B. Yeats. Sarita, a middle-class woman, is mastered by the brute blood of sadist husband as much as her author by the western individualistic feminism. In problematising the feminal discourse, she does deserve our praise holding out a bold suggestion for feministic autonomy. In so doing, she comes closer to Chaman Nahal's definition of feminism: "I define feminism as a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is a dependence syndrome: whether it is a religious group, ethnic group, when women free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materializes."⁸

While her protagonist Sarita frees herself from the dependence syndrome, her final disposition in the novel leaves little scope to surmise that she would lead a normal life, henceforth, as a responsible member of family and society. The problematic of her life, in the process of search for a feminist space, only brings out the inner conflict of the modern Indian woman who is trying to balance her multiple role as a member of the family, as a professional and above all, as a human being. In the case of Sarita, her author seems to have made no attempt to bring her finally anywhere close to accept the new feminist moral vision proposed by Robin Morgan: "The

women have over the centuries developed an ethic that is appropriate to the world view that is emerging out of the new physics: they see in terms of relationship. Their primary value is a reverence for life. This ethic must become the governing world ethic.”⁹

Achievement of individual identity and female autonomy must not be the only goal of Feminism. After having accorded that autonomy to her, she should be brought onto accept the basic human values like motherhood and responsibility of the family, thereby, of the society, at least on her own terms. There is a need to harmonies the man-woman relationship as equal partners. As Toril Moi views, “In a non-sexist, non-patriarchal society, feminism will no longer exist.”¹⁰ Victory is there, not in the subjugation and destruction of the male, rather in bringing him to see the indispensability of each other’s space. The onus lies upon women writers like Shashi Deshpande who are using feminism as a literary device to further the cause of Indian woman, if any social transformation is, at all, to be effected.

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