

Life is Just an Experience of Reality: Shashi Deshpande's Illustration on *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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Abstract

The traditions, culture and society in India have given precedence to men over women in multitude of issues concerning family, administration, decision-making and several other matters of high magnitude. This gender bias has gradually taken a shape as male chauvinism, which resulted in the oppression of women and subjected them to insufferable physical, psychological, moral and ethical castigation. Women, albeit contribute equally with men in societal and domestic affairs, are not allowed to enjoy equal status with men in traditional India. Indian society has always manifested them as obedient daughters, dedicated mothers, devoted wives and loving siblings. The funniest thing in Indian culture is a mother, being a woman, alienates her daughter and manifests antagonism to her, if she makes attempts to question gender-bias in her family or in society. The novel is an impeccable

manifestation of post-colonial period where a woman is fighting for her constitutional rights for education and power. The female protagonist Saritha in the novel acquires good education and becomes a doctor despite her mother's antipathy to girl education. She sustains her mother's antagonism to her who perpetually maltreats her with her offhand attitude to her very existence in the family as she wrongly concludes her as the murderess of her dear brother, Dhruva. Further, she is estranged from her family as she marries a person of her choice. Her husband, Manohar is a school teacher. Saritha, being a doctor, achieves a quick identity in the society which is quite distasteful and unendurable to Manohar. Consequently he develops inferiority complex and starts humiliating her. She realizes that her professional success has made hers an ill-starred marriage. She decides not to be a victim of her husband's sadism. Her introspective thinking fills her mind with abundant strength to move ahead in her life. The article delineates Shashi Deshpande's powerful portrayal of a woman, who undauntedly fights with the world that gives no countenance to her aspirations, and proves her identity by being independent and self-reliant.

Keywords: post-colonial literature, cultural introspection, women identity, feminism, women writer, feminine writing

Introduction

The country India that is acknowledged as the birth place of Vedas is not free from the taint of gender discrimination today. Indian tradition does not encourage male chauvinism and instruct a woman to be inferior to a man. A sagacious attempt to comprehend Vedas brings realization in mankind that women during early Vedic period enjoyed equal position with men in all walks of life. Women in ancient India were educated and by and large had freedom to select their husbands through **SWAYAMVARA**. Women characters in Holy Scriptures in ancient India assisted them in wars and administration. By and by the position of women deteriorated during medieval period where '**women grandeur**' has become intolerable and unacceptable to men and consequently they are subjected to confinement and restrictions. In spite of facing this strong antagonism, women have not backed out of the battle but persisted to fight indefatigably through deluge of movements to restore their status to teach the world that a man is incomplete without a woman. Man has obtained approval from the society to exercise ascendancy over women by setting draconian rules which dictate that a woman should be confined to a house and look after only her family and children and go by the decisions of her husband. Women education is very much discouraged with a flimsy excuse that she does not require any education as she has to marry someone in her adult age. The novel of Shashi

Deshpande “**The Dark Holds No Terrors**” is her bold attempt to expatiate the fact that economic independence is a significant cause for women to keep the decorum of their existence which, beyond the question, helps them stand beside men as equal contributors in balancing the world affairs. The novel depicts the tenacious search of a woman to discover her happiness where she is identified not as a shadow of a man but as a body herself. The novel encapsulates many of the central themes of Sheshi Deshpande’s writings that any trials of the society would prove abortive to make an educated woman captive by any attrition. Saritha’s decision to return to her husband excusing his maltreatment as a kind of disease is another twist in the novel. By giving this unexpected end to the novel Sheshi Deshpande has made the world applaud the power of endurance in Indian woman

Family is a sacred institution where the members of it feel an emotional and loving attachment with one another due to biological connectivity. Its purpose is not just grouping the people of divergent psychologies under one shelter but promoting a feeling of oneness and sacrifice among them where every individual of the group willfully accepts the apportionment of the responsibilities for its common bliss and peace. Individuals for whom a dollop of solicitude to their vicissitudes is vital and people to call their own are primary, cannot be antagonistic to the system of the family and that is why its pervasiveness is distinct all over the globe. The contrast Indian family

system has with other nations is obviously due to its male dominance and female submissiveness and her complete surrender to male rule.

The reconstituted Indian culture is still in want of perfection as it has streaks of superstitious beliefs that marriage is vital in the life of a woman and her cohabitation with a man is accepted with this license and children born out of this societal approved bondage are legitimate. Even the educationally, technically and scientifically advanced India is no laggard in saying that marriage and motherhood should be the goals of a woman's life. True it is that inordinate changes are discovered in the Indian society after postcolonial period but the convention of marriage and its indispensability in the life of a woman seem irrevocable even today when Indian women have received plaudits for their potential by world's powerful nations.

The spread of western education and orientation towards western culture has to a large extent brought changes in the attitude of women as they started struggling to extricate themselves from the fetters of conventions and rebel against the oppression of male domination to keep their identity in male dominated society. This abandonment of impaired social norms which is the consequence of a woman's judicious thinking has made her the archetype of Indian society. Sheshi Deshpande through her novels exhibits a different perspective of the image of a woman that a woman has ability to build her

career, to divest herself of the impediments in order to produce propitious results.

The novelist, while accentuating that academic education has no power to mellow the man, also exposes educated men who are chauvinistic. This is where one has to realize the disparity between education and literacy. While literacy is the ability to read and write, education is the beauty of character. Manohar, who is supposed to build an unflinching character in students as a teacher, has become a slave to his male ego and opts a scandalous strategy to terrorize his educated wife for her merits.

The Concept of Relationship

The novel opens with Saritha's return to her parents' house after the estrangement of fifteen long years an account of her marriage with Manohar who belongs to another caste. Her deep dejection due to her misjudging the true character of her partner forced her to backtrack to the place where she had come from to find solace in loneliness. Saritha's sudden visit was neither a comfort nor a pleasure to her father and he in his usual way revealed to her his stolid attitude that hardly dragged her to him to be enfolded in his arms to feel invulnerable security from the fusillade of misfortunes in her life. The reality of her existence has been expunged from the mind of her father due to her silence with him for a decade and a half. Her sudden appearance at his door step was indeed

an unpalatable shock to him which he could not conceal from his daughter.

"They stared at each other. She smiled slightly to see the shock of enquiry

turn into a blank looking-at-a-stranger one. It was, she supposed, the

unexpectedness of her presence. His eyes moved from her to the suitcase

at her feet, and then beyond her to the rickshaw standing on the road.

And now back to her." (TDHNT 16)

Parent-child relation in Indian families is made out of love. Parents act as the custodians of their children's safe and sound life and extend their support to them in times of need. In this novel the absence of this affection and sensitive feeling between parent and daughter is conspicuous. When Saritha's father saw her after her long absence, there was no glint of elation in his eyes yet his visage had a tinge of bewilderment which did not escape her notice. They speak to each other as a customer speaks to a sales man while enquiring the quality of an article. He did not look like the one who would not digest the reality of finding someone whom he had never hoped to see again. There was no satisfaction in his eyes that his waiting had ended.

"Can I come in, Baba?"

"I didn't expect you."

"No, How could you?"

"You didn't write."

"You came by the Mail, I suppose."

"Was it on time?"

"I don't know. What time is it supposed to arrive?"

"Ten-fifteen"

"Yes, it was on time"

"The familiar irritation, the familiar exasperation. To meet after fifteen years and feel only that."(TDHNT 16 &17)

He allowed his daughter into his house with no warm welcome.

".....he sat gingerly on the edge of the chair, like an unwelcome host entertaining an unwelcome guest." (TDHNT 18)

Saritha has not felt any sensitive bondage with her parents either. During fifteen years of her married life she has never even once made any attempt for rapprochement with them. She never wished to do any service to her aged parents. She always backed up herself that they deserve harsh comeuppance for their tyranny over her. Her major cause for her animosity to her parents, most importantly to her mother, is due to her partiality between daughter and son. Had she been happy with Manohar, she would never have thought of returning to her father. Her priorities encircle her wishes and she projects herself as ego-centric. Her return to her house

is undoubtedly not out of any love for her widower father but to take an intermission to relieve her mind of quite a distressing stress that left her thoroughly exhausted.

“Yes, that’s why I am going. To go away from this house, this paradise of matching

curtains and handloom bedspreads. This hell of savagery and submission. But what if

I carry my own hell within me? Then there is no hope for me at all. But that too I have to

know. And therefore I am going home to my father. To tell him that I know my mother is

dead. That I know she died unforgiving.” (TDHNT 28)

Saritha’s unbroken line of recollections of her amorphous childhood in her house with her parents prevents her from making any attempt to deplete the distance between her father and she. She is least anxious to unburden to him of her silent suffering. She was deliberately trying to be very casual.

“You know I have two children?” “It was easier to talk this way,

without looking at him, without having him evade her eyes.”(TDHNT 20)

A girl in traditional Indian family is trained by her parents to gladly accept male government in her private and social affairs and it is for this reason they become the diehard supporters of male chauvinism. Saritha had contemplation

on memories when her father enjoyed autocracy in her house.

"She stepped into the room which had been her parents'.

It had been 'their' room but it had always seemed only his." (TDHNT 19)

"He brought her a straw mat and a pillow. It made her

uncomfortable to have him attend on her. He had always been so much a man, the 'master of the house' and

not to be bothered by any of the trivials of daily routine." (TDHNT 20)

Sheshi Deshpande exposes a typical Indian woman who values orthodox Indian culture and refuses to violate its rules. Saritha's mother who disliked any kind of insubordination to her husband is a perfect image of a traditional Indian woman. Her respect to orthodox culture alienated her daughter from her family who married a person of another caste. Her adherence to family tradition augmented her bitter feelings for her daughter and made her too obstinate to feel any penitence for discarding her permanently. She unfolded her animosity to her daughter when she eloped with Manu.

She said, "...Daughter? I don't have any daughter. I had son

and he died. Now, I am childless" (196).

As a child she was deprived of her mother's love. To her mother Saru is just a governess of her brother Dhruva. The tenderness of a mother's heart is not visible in the case of Saritha's mother in the novel. Saritha does not experience an affectionate upbringing of her mother who commonly is expected to be a guide and the first teacher to her daughter.

*"But 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." (TDHNT 169)*

This uncanny mother-daughter relationship is a generator of antagonism in the protagonist Saritha who grew as a victim of her mother's gender-based bias. As a child she was aware of her mother's preference for her brother Dhruva.

*"There was always a puja on Dhruva's birthday. A
festive lunch*

*in the afternoon and an aarhi in the evening during
which Dhruva,*

*as an infant, sat solemnly on Baba's lap, and as a
child, by his side, cap*

*on head, fatuous smile on face, while I helped my
mother to do the aarhi.*

*My birthdays were almost same..... a festive lunch,
with whatever I asked*

*for, an aarthi in the evening, but there was no puja.
After Dhruva's death
there were no more celebrations." (TDHNT 168,169)*

Her mother named after her brother Dhruva, who having been pushed off his father's lap by his step mother, grew with commitment and became a North Star. This showed her deep love for her son whom she wanted to be universally acknowledged as a Polar Star, Dhruva. When Saritha pushed off Dhruva from her father's lap her mother furiously asked her why she had done it. Saritha, having failed to prevaricate the truth, replied that she tested if he deserved the name, 'Dhruva.' After her brother's premature death she retailed this incident to her relations as Saritha's criminal activity and treated her as a murderess.

*"This story had been later retailed to friends,
relations and acquaintances,
but without the vestige of a smile, making a major
crime of my
childhood misdemeanor. Or that was how it had
seemed to me then." (TDHNT 168)*

There are no instances in the novel when Saritha enjoys a conversation with her father. Saritha's undisclosed emotions burst and she rebuts that she is not responsible for the death of her brother as her parents have imputed an allegation on her.

*"I took him out? I... ?" ' I didn't take him
anywhere i could do nothing with him.*

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*He was utterly spoilt. He was always
allowed to have his way. And I had to give
in,
go on giving him..”*

*“All the grievance of an old but
monumental injustice was in her words.*

*She was not a wife, not a mother, not a
professional woman whom others*

*looked upto. She was the wronged child
again, the unloved daughter,*

the scapegoat.”(TDHNT182)

Saritha's experience at home has remained in her life not as a genial reminiscence but as an abominable memory. Her mother's tenacious efforts to bring her up in a way that she is a girl and is therefore bound to relinquish several of her desires filled her mind with antipathy and she loved to hate her. She had to put up with gender biased discrimination which is common with traditional middle class people in India. She was forced to realize that being a girl she was inferior to her brother.

“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.

Why you live with us all your life?

Why not? You can't.

And Dhruva? He's different. He's a boy" (45).

She never wished to unfold herself to her mother nor accepted her as her soul mate. Her mother's frigid nature kept her away from her and made her rebel against the injustice done to her, just for being a girl. Her mother strongly opposed when she expressed her desire to study in Bombay. It was her father who supported her because she had made up her mind.

"Ae you sure you want to do it? Have you thought it over?" "What is the

last date for sending in your application?" (TDHNT 144)

She once again experiences the cruelty of her mother when her request was met w rebuff. For the first time the volcano in her bursts and she declares that she has no value her opinion.

"My voice was high and shrill, there was a pain in my chest, my throat

ached intolerably, and there was a buzzing in my eyes, a blur in front of

my eyes. I hated her. I wanted to hurt her, wound her, made her suffer." (TDHNT42)

The shadows of her unpleasant relationship with her mother enveloped her youth in darkness and she, unlike

other daughters did not feel moved on hearing the news of her death. When she came to know about her mother's death through Prof Kulkarni, she did not break down.

"Do you know your mother is dead?"

"When"

"What was wrong with her?" I asked as indifferent as any stranger" (TDHNT 25 &26)

Saru, being dejected with her role as a daughter, proceeds with optimism to discover her happiness as a wife. She runs into Manohar at an Inaugural Ceremony of the Literary Society and instantly falls in love with him.

"After that day he was a figure I fantasised about, the person round whom

I wove my foolish dreams. No, not dreams, just one dream really.

Always the age old feminine dream of a superior conquering male." (TDHNT 53)

She was thrown in raptures when Manohar proposed her.

"The fisherman's daughter couldn't have been more surprised when the king

asked her to marry him, than I was by Manu's love for me."(TDHNT 66)

She was captivated by his charm and decided to welcome him into her life. Her bitter past left a grievous scar on her mind that her existence was of no value to anybody. She felt baffled by the sudden twist in her life when Manohar had his successful entry into her life in the name of love.

"It seemed incredible to me that I evoke an emotion so strong in anyone.

That anyone could care for me in that way and to that extent."(TDHNT 65)

She did not feel downhearted to defy her parents to marry Manu. Her attempt to gain happiness through marriage proved futile as Manohar began to feel inferior to her for her dexterity and social recognition as a doctor. He could not endure the fact that his wife had overtaken him professionally and financially. The feeling of inferiority set in him when he was asked by a girl,

"How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?"(200).

As he was aware that it was beyond his capacity to outclass his wife in achieving limelight, he began to content his embittered soul by hurting her sexually. Her union with him was a ghastly experiment which was too difficult for her to conduct.

Taking her mother's demise as an excuse, she finally escapes from his brutality by going to her father's house which she promised not to step into after her marriage with Manu. Saru, being a doctor was certainly not oblivious of husband-wife physical relation but what she wanted was the kind of sex that was melded with love.

"I was insatiable, not for sex, but for love; each act of love was a triumphant

assertion of our love. Of my being loved. Of my being wanted. If I ever had any

*doubts, I had only turn to him and ask him to prove
his love for me. And he
would...again and again and again" (The Dark Holds
No Terrors 40).*

Saritha was afraid of the jeopardy of marriage as she was trapped in the snare of her husband's sexual passion. His graceless attrition on her body caused excruciating pain to her.

*"I woke up to darkness and an awareness of fear.
Panic. Then pain again.*

*There it was for the second time what I had just
lulled myself into believing*

*was just a nightmare. The hurting hands, the savage
teeth, the monstrous*

*assault of a horribly familiar body. And above me, a
face I could not recognize.*

*Total non-comprehension, complete bewilderment,
paralyzed me for a while.*

*Then I began to struggle, But my body hurt and
painful could do nothing*

*against the fearful strength which overwhelmed
me." (TDHNT 112)*

Marriage is a sacred bond that binds two souls together and sex is the fantastic and decent way of expressing one's love to his/her partner. Saru found in Manohar two dark sides; one a monster at night and played a heartless game with her body while making love, and a hypocrite in the morning who spoke with so an affectionate concern.

"Morning Saru. Slept well?" (TDHNT 112)

She could not utter her pains in public. She felt moved when her father insisted upon her to disclose the cause of her pain. It was a kind of learning to her that one has to communicate to puzzle out many questions. She shared with him what she could not with anyone earlier. She shed off the veneer of her feminine shyness and disclosed her helpless surrender to masculine lust.

"He attacked me like an animal that night. I was sleeping and I woke up

and there was this. ...The man hurting me. ...I could do nothing against him.

I couldn't fight back. I couldn't shout or cry. I was so afraid that

children in the next room would hear. I could do nothing. I can never do

anything. I just endure" (TDHNT 201).

Many times she tried to revolt against his callous treatment of her but she failed as it was against the social norms

"I struggled to utter the usual words of protest, to say, "No, not now, stop it.

But the words were strangled in my throat. The face above mine was

the face of a stranger. Blank, set and rigid, it was a face I had never seen.

A man I did not know." (TDHNT 19)

She realizes that marriage in a woman's life is a disguised form of sex with no tinge of love.

"It was the other thing..... the thing she knew she had lost forever..... the eternal

I female dream of finding happiness through a man"
(TDHNT 124)

Saritha struggles hard to liberate herself from the ineluctable social norms. She is desperate for identification as an individual of interests and specifications. She bottles up her resentfulness as a weak female for a long time and silently endures the humiliation and taunts as a daughter before her marriage and as a wife after marriage. Her repulsion against the ill treatment becomes evident when she violates the social conditions by studying Medicine in Bombay and marrying a man of another caste. Her suppressed revolt against her husband's brutality is noticed when she abandons him by coming to her father's house. The mother in her remains intact in spite of deluge of her sufferings. Her last conversation with her father leaves an ingrained effect on her mind that she has to face the situations boldly instead of running away from them or accepting them mutely.

"Give him a chance, Saru. Stay and meet him. Talk to him. Let him know

from you what's wrong. Don't turn your back on things again. Turn

round and look at the." (TDHNT 216)

Her quest is for self-identity, which ends in self-realization. The novel is a beautiful study of how women feel in their life. The novelist Sheshi Deshpande has adroitly presented the character of a distraught husband who monstrously treats his wife to satisfy his sexual passion. The novel presents Saritha's internal journey from repulsion to admittance. Saru's realization of her '**self**' enlightened her with a new understanding that her diversified roles as mother, as a mother and as a professional had to be vindicated. She realizes that she will be destroyed if she does not believe in herself.

*"Aii right, so I am alone. But so's everyone else.
Human they are going to fail you.*

*But because there's just us, because there's no one
else. We have to go on trying. If*

*we can't believe in ourselves, we're sunk." (TDHNT
220)*

She realizes that happiness or misery is dependent not on fortune or misfortune but on individual's perception. Everything depends on how we look at things. Life will stand before us as everything in nothing or nothing in everything. True philosophy lies in practical thinking. She determines to be realistic and confirms that life is to live, not to sit and brood. This enlightenment bolsters hope in her to continue her battle to get what she has felt lost.

*"My life is my own.... If I have been a puppet it is
because I made myself one.*

*I have been clinging to the tenuous shadow of a
marriage whose substance*

*has long since disintegrated because I have been
afraid of proving my mother right. (TDHNT 220)*

She carries herself towards the perfect destination where she asserts to treat her husband for his disease to reestablish tranquility in her life. She is afraid of no terrors of darkness as she prepares herself to surrender to the realities of life.

Conclusion

Life is a store house of experiences. Every past experience provides an access to future experience. Whether the experience is pleasant or unpleasant, it is totally dependent on how a person treats it and accepts it. To an individual to whom every experience is a teacher, life does not mean frustration or disgust but an enlightenment of spirit. Happiness has no any confined definition. It is only the result of self-realization.

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