

Relational Feminism in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

Dr. Shalini Sharma

Associate Professor, P.G Department of English, GGM Science College, Cluster University of Jammu (CLUJ).

Abstract

The paper attempts to analyse how Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) exhibits the cruelty of undue gender discrimination inflicted by a mother on her girl-child. A woman in a family contributes as much as a man. But she is always left unrecognized. She has to face more stringent criticism in the family as well as in society. Like most Indian writers, Shashi Deshpande has documented female dilemmas, anxieties and sufferings. She deals with the inner world of Indian women in almost all her writings. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, she remarkably brings out the love, the estrangement, the alienation and the discord between a mother and a daughter.

Keywords: Women, mother, daughter, society, feminism

Theoretical Grounds

The relationship between mother and daughter has been studied from psychological, sociological and biological perspectives to understand its inner workings. There has been a varied response towards understanding this complex bond. Adrienne Rich, in her seminal book *Of Woman Born* (1976) observes that the mother-daughter relationship "[had] been minimized and trivialized," while the mother-son relationship was studied extensively in a positive light. (2021) Rich saw this relationship as a mutually destructive one, characterized as such not due to faults of the individual, but due to patriarchy. Patriarchy made mothers prisoners of and victims of the experience of motherhood, and that victimization is carried over to the daughter. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (1976) succinctly says, "A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman... The mother's self-hatred and low expectations are the binding rags for the psyche of the daughter."

Dorothy Dinnerstein and Jane Flax also expressed concerns about the consequences of motherhood, with the latter specifically focusing on its impacts on the psyche of daughters. (1978, 171) Flax's concern was with how the mother-daughter relationship is overly undifferentiated, with the two existing in a symbiotic co-dependence full of unresolved anger and resentment. (171) Still, many thinkers do see the relationship as a more positive and beautiful one, to the point that Suzanna Daunta Walters, in *Lives Together/Worlds Apart*:

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Mothers and Daughters in Popular Culture (1992), broadly typologized the field into views that either “valorize” the mother-daughter relationship “as a transcendent bond” or see it as a harmful connection that keeps women tethered to self-destruction and “patterns of submission.” This co-existence of such divergent theories makes the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship clear. “Not only does the mother-daughter relationship contain multitudes, but it is also not even necessarily stagnant, adding another dimension of possible complexity.”

The final layer of complexity lies in intersectionality. Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis wrote about race intersecting with the mother-daughter relationship. (1986) According to Joseph and Lewis, not only are there broad differences between black and white women’s lives, their conceptualizations of the mother-daughter relationship differ as well. Joseph and Lewis claim “that the current feminist fear of ‘becoming like your mother’ is a particularly white and middle-class phenomenon” that cannot be generalized to black women. (1986) Why should those outside of a given mother-daughter relationship even bother considering this complex relationship? The mother-daughter relationship is not compartmentalized from other domains of a woman’s life; its impacts, good or bad, are not insulated from the individual outside of the relationship and in society, and thus, the mother-daughter relationship may have impacts far beyond those immediately involved. In *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1986), Jean Baker Miller makes a similar claim that is more explicit in how the resonant influences of the mother-daughter relationship can go beyond family life, claiming that making and maintaining relationships—with their mothers and others—is the decisive factor around which “women’s sense of self becomes . . . organized.” Thus, the mother-daughter relationship impacts every woman and, indirectly, the people around them—our entire society.

Discussion

Relational feminism popularised by Mary Wollstonecraft, Jeanne Schmahel and Helene Lange advocated for women's rights as women in terms of their child-bearing and nurturing capacities in relation to men. Indian women writers generally focus on themes such as the complexities of the man-woman relationship, disturbed adolescence, and the attempt to break narrow traditional moulds in which women are trapped. Very few writers focus on the theme of the relationship between mother and daughter. Shashi Deshpande very deftly presents women who suffer from parental control. In her novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Shashi Deshpande exhibits the cruelty of undue gender discrimination inflicted by a mother on her girl-child. There are difficult daughters and difficult mothers.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* Deshpande shows there are difficult daughters as well as difficult mothers. The novel is about a girl child Saru who is victimised by her mother's sexist and gender-based biases, which leave an indelible imprint on her psychology and also makes her claustrophobic. Saru desperately tries to overcome the gendered victimization and assert her identity as an autonomous being. Shashi Deshpande's novels beginning with *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) and *The Moving On* (2004) are woman-centric works wherein she uses the stream-of-consciousness technique with Saru as a narrator. Through Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), Indu (*Roots and Shadows*, 1983), Jaya (*That Long Silence*, 1988), Urmi (*The Binding Vine*, 1993), Sumi (*A Matter of Time*, 1996), Madhu (*Small Remedies*,

2000), and Manjari (*The Moving on*, 2004), Deshpande paints the picture of a woman who is much stronger and independent in her thinking. The women who have so far been subjected to the marginalization and oppression of the male-patriarchal society have suddenly transformed themselves.

'That long silence' is a phrase of the past; the volcano of silence and the power of endurance have now exploded. The protagonist of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* can be taken as the role model for the New Woman because it was she who defied and overthrew the male-patriarchal system represented by her mother and her husband. The novel uses the cinematic technique of flashback and flash-forward.

When the novel opens, we find Saru leaving her marital home and coming back to her parental home. She reflects on her past and remembers eventless existence at her father's place. While ruminating she introspects the dark corners of her soul, judging people, life and relationships. We find her true self while she is unweaving her mind through memories and dreams. The novel, to a certain extent, resembles the Canadian novel *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood wherein the unnamed female protagonist has been hurt and deceived by her lover. At the suggestion of her boyfriend, she has her pregnancy terminated but later on the wounds and the dark memory start surfacing in her conscious mind and she becomes rebellious.

The novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* portrays Saru's callous, intolerant nagging mother, nonchalant father, sadist husband, womanizing professor and lecherous sex-hunting colleagues. Society treats the male offspring as the ultimate panacea for all problems but the girl-child is an unwanted burden as she cannot fulfil the parental needs or ungratified ambitions within the given social calculus. The plenitude, warmth and importance given to a male child are denied to the girl and this makes her either depressed or rebellious. The patriarchal society also considers only the male offspring as worthy enough to carry on a family line (Shukla 83). Kakar notes that for Indian women, in patriarchy, delivering a male child is a deliverance from insecurity, it is a "certification and redemption" (Bhavani 25).

Saru was victimized and persecuted by her own mother and husband. Her mother could never forgive her daughter for being alive after her brother had drowned and Saru could never forget the traumatizing effect of her mother's hysterical outburst. Although plenty of time has passed, still her mother's words are ringing and haunting her. The words follow her for days, months, years, all her life, "you did it. You did this, you killed him... You killed him, why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead? (191), Saru recollects that there was "always puja on Dhruva's birthday. A festive lunch in the afternoon and an arti in the evening. My birthdays were almost the same but there was no puja". Saru is puzzled and feels fettered in her parental home. The conversation between the mother and the daughter makes it clear, "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 such a gender-discriminatory society, a boy is freed to indulge in his interests while a girl is expected to submit to whatever directions are given to her. On Dhruva's birthday, there will be every type of celebration but Saru even on her birthday is not allowed to have a long walk with

her friends. She is questioned by her mother, 'Why are you so late? We went for a walk', 'A Walk? Such a long time? Don't you know it's dark?'..... I kept silent and that enraged her even more. Can't you talk? Am I so much below your notice? You can talk to your friends for hours, but you can't speak a sentence to your mother. What am I? An enemy?' (170). Saru feels that a mother should not differentiate between her children, whether a boy or a girl. Meera Bai writes:

Modern women find no sense in being an acquiescent, suffering and sacrificing lot. As they feel the need for self-expression and individual fulfillment, they have begun to question the conventions and defy traditions. This craving for individual freedom naturally results in breaking up of family and relationships. (6)

Saru's buoyancy and gregariousness are gradually suffocated by her mother's constant criticism and fault-finding tendency. Even the natural process of growing up is made shameful for her, "I knew it was something that happened to all girls..... it was like death... Not just the three days when I could not enter the kitchen or the puja room... I was served from a distance for my touch was, it seemed pollution. (62). Her mother had declared that she was not good looking, "I was an ugly girl. At least my mother told me so, you will never be good looking. You are too dark for that". (61)

Winnie Cott writes about the crucial role a mother plays in her children's lives, "When the child looks at its mother, it sees itself. The child has to be seen in a way that makes it feel that it exists. Poor Sarita gets back from her mother a picture of ugliness" (78). It is clear that the mother had projected her own ugliness onto Saru, and Saru's spontaneity had been marred by life-negation. A particular woman who dances madly as if possessed by the divine spirit very symbolically represents this life-negation or false self-organization. Her mother clearly conveyed that outward beauty was the road to worldly success. Saru grows up with many limitations, "you should be careful now about how you behave. Don't come out in your petticoat like that. Not even if it's only your father who's around" (62). She was not allowed to use anything of the house. Lost in the labyrinthine complexity of her emotions, she feels shattered and humiliated when the parents fail to show any sympathy towards her. She remembers only one occasion as she recollects while opening the almirah when she was considered more important than her brother. Only the daughter of the house could apply attar with tiny attar-drenched swabs of cotton to the backs of women's hands.

Shashi Deshpande's novels reveal women's quest for self. She delves deep into the inner psyche of her female characters and makes each of them realize her own position in the society. In the beginning she is shown as a lady tied tightly in the suppressive, oppressive and depressive restrictions of the male-dominated society. She is shown as tolerant, obedient and subservient. But there is a transition from subservience to self-assertion, from anonymity to identity. She cannot face discrimination for a very long time. The patience of silence and endurance is broken and its outcome is a New Woman with egotistical affirmations and emotional explosions. Saru is a non-conformist, displays her intrepidity in saying, "if you're a woman, I don't want to be one". Saru has now got fed up with the maternal tantrums of dos and don'ts. Her father whom she calls 'Baba' was more or less a non-entity in the family. She nurtures seeds of rebellion within her. She becomes a psychotic rebel. She joins the medical college despite her mother being drastically against the idea. The novelist makes her protagonist narrate her pathetic

plight, but she starts reacting against the discriminating nature of her mother. She showed interest in getting admitted in the medical college because she secured good division in Intermediate. When she expressed her desire, the mother was taken aback. She had been serving us with dal and as I spoke, the spoon clanged noisily against the side of the vessel, as if her hand had let go too suddenly. "The mother was not interested in sending her to hostel, she was interested in B.Sc. Mother says: 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). Saru says, "No forever a "no" to anything I want. You don't want me to have anything, you don't want me to do anything. You don't even want me to live" (142). Such an apathetic nature of the mother was intolerable and she dreamt of her death. Her father does not have a say in the family. She chose the word "pusillanimous" for him. "But this time he was with me" (143). She won, and for the first time, she disobeyed her mother and defied the rigid conservative patriarchal system represented by her mother. She has now given up the masque of feminine servitude and asserted her individuality. The hostel is a temporary refuge where she can escape from the obnoxious environment. By leaving home, she broke the umbilical cord: Freedom at last, she had exulted when she had left home and joined medical college. It had been not just a relief but a kind of rebirth to get away from home to the hostel, so different with its cheerful feminine energy. She had never known the kind of effortless, casual intimacy. The second bold and shocking decision taken by her was her marriage with the person of her own choice. Thematically the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* resembles one short story written by Shashi Deshpande in her early literary career. The short story entitled *A Liberated Woman* is about a young woman who falls in love with a man of a different caste and marries in spite of the opposition from her parents. She becomes a successful doctor but her husband can't see her rising. Her marriage breaks up. As a respected public figure, she realizes that the best advice she can give to young Indian girls is "never overtake your husband in anything." She says, "Have you seen really old-fashioned couples walking together? Have you noticed that the wife always walks a few steps behind her husband? I think that's symbolic, you know". Manohar, in the novel, belongs to a low caste and her conservative parents would never allow her to marry a person of that type: "What caste is he? I don't know. A Brahmin? Of course not. Then, cruelly.... His father keeps a cycle shop. oh, so they are low-caste people, are they?" (96). In this matter, the mother was all the way throwing cold water upon her. Saru married Manohar and broke away from the barriers of caste-system. She freed herself from the matriarchal and patriarchal bondage. She has a dark complexion, yet Manohar was attracted to her. To her inferiority-complex-stricken psyche and love-starved body and mind, he provides the much-needed panacea. The departure of the heroine from the mother is the first step towards autonomy, for the mother is the first one to dictate the dos and don'ts to the daughter. The protagonist of one novel is sufficient reason for generalizing about the category woman:

The woman in order to achieve her freedom seeks marriage as an alternative to the bondage created by the parental family. The simple need to be independent eventually becomes a demand of the inflated ego and takes shape as the love for power over others. She resents the role of a wife with the hope that her new role will help her in winning her freedom. (Prasanna 17)

For convalescence and resilience, she desired the company of Manohar but destiny also disappointed her. Even God was testing her capacity for endurance. Saru is dissatisfied with her marital life. As time passes, her involvement in her profession, the communication gap, and differences in social status distance her from Manu mentally. In a traditional society, marriage curtails the freedom of a woman.

When Saru comes back home, she “felt herself enclosed”. Women like Saru cannot accept this role of a wife because this is really an onslaught on one's individuality. Saru's picture is the picture of a career woman. She proved herself and became a distinguished doctor. Her husband was simply a teacher and this widened the chasm between them. Manohar had become fed up with the people knocking at the door and saying, “Is the doctor in”? (41) Manu eventually was bound to say “open it Saru, it must be for you.” Saru was very exhilarated with the dignity and importance that her status as a doctor seemed to have given her. She really enjoyed those moments when she was meeting, listening, examining, advising and giving prescriptions to her patients. Her popularity and fame were increasing by leaps and bounds “and now, when we walked out of our room, there were nods and smiles, murmured greetings and namastes. But they were all for me, only for me. There was nothing for him. He was almost totally ignored” (42). Her husband could not see all these things, he said: “I am sick of this place. Let's get out of here soon” (42). She used to remain very busy in her profession, “So the esteem with which I was surrounded made me inches taller. But perhaps the same thing that made me inches taller made him inches shorter. He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband” (42).

She was socially and economically superior to her husband. She realizes the falsity of the notion of equality she had read in books. She has experienced that femininity is confined to the books only and in practice it has no takers. It became a monstrously unbalanced equation: lopsided, unequal, impossible. Manohar started feeling an inferiority complex and once his male ego was very much hurt when a female journalist asks this question, “How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?” (36). That night he ruins her physically as well as psychologically. He is not only a sadist, he is a man of dual personality: the benevolent, cheerful husband by day and a lecherous libidinous rapist at night. She sees herself as a “two in one,” a doctor in white coat by day and “a trapped woman” by night. Saru rejected her parents to marry Manohar who proves to be a villain in her life, “I had come away come away from my parents in a fever of excitement after the last battle. The die was cast, the decisions taken, my boats burnt. There could be no turning back. Then, this ridiculous anti-climax” (31-32).

Saru's autonomy is questioned by her mother and by her husband. She becomes dejected and while addressing the girls in a college, she says:

Wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he's an M.A., you should be B.A..... If he's earning 500 rupees you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety-nine. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage. Don't ever try to reverse the doctor nurse, executive secretary, principal teacher role. It can be traumatic disastrous... You can nag, complain, henpeck, whine, moan, but you can never be strong. That's a wrong which will never be forgiven (137).

This gender discrimination unfortunately forms an integral part of the socialization of a girl child in the male-dominated society of India in which she is conditioned to accept submission and silence as a natural process (Bhatnagar 51). But the story does not end here. The novelist does not depict her as a woman surrendering herself before the adverse circumstances. Whenever her individual self was hurt, she rebelled. She exerted her individuality by marrying a person whom her parents did not like. She has shown her husband that she has an independent self. When she comes back to her parents' home to escape from the monstrous brutalities of her husband, she decides to face the situation. First, she instructs her Baba to open the door if Manu comes and then she herself thinks of opening it. This does not show her subservience but a will to face the odd circumstances. The dark really does not hold any terror. One must learn how to face it. Escape is not the right decision for a person seeking to escape from oppressive forces. In the case of Saru, neither her father's home nor her husband's is her permanent home for perennial pleasure. One must seek it within oneself as is suggested in the epigraph of the novel: You are your own refuge; There is no other refuge. This refuge is hard to achieve.

Conclusion

Saru has to develop the fortitude to overcome the phantoms who are constantly haunting her. She has to remove the darkness alone; nobody else can help her out. In order to live without fear she will have to look into the face of reality and grapple with it alone. As Karen Offen rightly points out, "Feminist victories are not, strictly speaking, about getting the argument right, nor is gender merely 'a useful category of analysis'; sexual difference lies at the heart of human thought and politics." The novelist made an endeavour to shape the picture of a New Woman in the image of Saru and this picture was later perfected in the role of Jaya in *That Long Silence* which was given the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award and was highly commended by the literary men.

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