



THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS : A FEMALE PERSPECTIVE

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The immediate appeal of Shashi Deshpande's novels lies in the original treatment of feminism. There is something modern in Deshpande's attitude to women. She is one of those modern writers who represent the genuine crisis of women in her writings. Quite naturally, she tirades against the orthodox, the traditional position of women in Indian society. She deplores the plight of women in Indian society. Women have been servile, silent and marginalized in Indian society. She has been dependent on the man. She has been deprived of any free choice to live. In other words, Shashi Deshpande deals with the basic problems of women as human beings.

ISSN : 2348-5612 © URR



Keywords: Feminism, Female, Silence, Gynocriticism, Myth, Arbitrarily

Feminism is one of the major movements in Modern English literature. As a literary criticism, feminism is essentially linked to the political movement for equality of sexes and end discrimination against women. Feminist criticism seeks to disclose the ideology of patriarchal society in works of art. The chief concern of feminist criticism is to appreciate literature for the representation of women thereby focusing the oppression and marginalization of women through male-domination and hegemony. In western criticism the origin of feminist ideology dates back to the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, J.S. Mill, Friedrich Engels, Schreiner, Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beavoir, to name the few. Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, James Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women*, Engels in *The Origin of the Family* wrote about the exigency to rethink and reevaluate the role of women and social oppression against them. In the Twentieth century, we come across such powerful feminists like Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Kat Milet, Elaine Showalter who target the male hegemony in their writings and seeks to restore women to their original, deserved stature and stature Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* attack gender oppression, patriarchal arbitrary institutions which prevent women from realizing their natural potentialities to the full. Woolf powerfully pleads for the establishment of an "Outsiders' society" for socially marginalized women wherein they may keep their holistic, life-affirming ethics and morality. Simone de Beavoir in her classic work *The Second Sex* bitterly criticized the brutal male-hegemony against woman and declared that "a woman is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." (Beavoir, 295)

Elaine Showalter posits three phases in the growth of feminist tradition: "limitation, protest and self-discovery". According to Showalter, "In constrast to this angry or loving fixation on male literature, the programme of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories." (Showalter, 149) The present paper is a critical attempt to study Shashi Deshpande's famous novel *THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS* from a female perspective.

Shashi Deshpande's novels are concerned directly with all these phases. They encapsulate her artistic vision of femininity. In her novels, she explores in long smothered wail of the imprisoned psyche of her female protagonists confined to the four walls of family and sandwiched between tradition and modernity. Concerned with quest for an authentic selfhood and an understanding of existential problems of life, Deshpande's heroines are all agog with to retain their individuality in the face of disintegrating and divisive forces that threaten their identity.

The Dark Hold No Terrors is one of the finest novels written by Shashi Deshpande. She herself acknowledged it her favourite novel. Like *That Long Silence*, this novel is divided into four parts. As in *That Long Silence*, so in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* it is the women who dominate the incidents/actions of the novel. Like Jaya in *That Long Silence*, Sarita constitutes the crux, the kernel of the thematic strains in the novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. The novel is a brilliant narration of the writer's distinctive feminism. The novelist renders a clinical analysis of the psyche of the heroine, her trials and tribulations, her chequered experiences of life vis-à-vis social forces. The novelist reveals an existential perspective in the novel. She sought to emphasize on the nexus between social institutions and individual development. She categorically stresses that the institutions of family, marriage, education are far from perfect. They are arbitrarily designed by the male-dominated society as an instrument for the maintenance of the masculine hegemony through the oppression, exploitation and marginalization of women.

The novel opens with the narrator's nightmarish description of matrimonial alliance with a stranger who is her husband. The introduction of a new man into her life has robbed Sarita of her freedom, individuality, reality, independence and joy. She felt stifled. She was destined to begin an abrupt beginning after her marriage. She expresses her fear of the invasion vividly:

The beginning was abrupt. There had been no preparation for it. There were no preliminaries, either. At first it was a nightmare of hands. Questing hands that left a trail of pain. Hurting hands that brought me out of a cocoon of a blessed unreality...I'm=dreaming this-is-not-real...into the savage reality of a monstrous onslaught. And then, the nightmare was compounded of lips and teeth as well. Hands and teeth? No, hammers and pincers. I could taste blood on my lips.

(TDHNT, 11)

The novelist says that her marriage led her to "the familiar world of rejection". She was subjected to an endless terrain of schedules and was being haunted by a "fearful regularity". The heroine of the novel reveals that the abrupt marriage fixed her to an outsider who was far from recognizing her individuality and joy. She expresses her panic and terror succinctly:

This was him, the stranger who had come into my dreams for a few nights, leaving behind a fear that invaded even my waking hours. The stranger with the brown scarf whom I discovered standing that night at the head of my bed. And I, so frozen with terror that I could not move. Not even when his hands moved slowly, like some macabre slow motion sequence, towards my throat. I tried to call out, to scream. Nothing issued out of me but silence.

(TDHNT, 11)

Though she is married, yet she suffers the menace, the lurking fear of her parental family which had been ritual-ridden and patriarchal. Though she was least responsible for the untimely death of her brother (Dhruva) by drowning, yet her father and, especially her mother, cursed her badly. She still feels haunted by the 'male' complex of the society. Years on, she still remembers her mother's bitter words uttered when as a little girl she was unable to save her younger brother from drowning:

Why do I never tell her..... Dhruva was my kid brother
Who died when he was seven. He was drowned. I watched him
drown. And my mother said.... Why didn't you die? Why
are you alive and he dead? (TDHNT, 34-35)

Sarita's profound sense of the failure of marriage in society is what the novelist considers responsible for the said plight of women. Marriage is no longer a sacrament. It is a convenient arrangement to the disadvantage of woman. Marriage traps woman like animals. The novelist portrays the woman's painful lot vividly:

But when we got married it was like nothing I had ever
Imagined. After the first moment of apprehension... a
Purely physical response, or lack of it, rather.... There
was never any withholding in me. I became in an
instant a physically aroused woman, with an infinite
capacity for loving and giving, with passionate desire
to be absorbed by the man I loved. All the clichés, I
discovered, were true, kisses were soft and unbearably
sweet, embraces hard and passionate, hands caressing
and tender, and loving, as well as being loved, was an
intense joy. It was as if little nerve ends of pleasure
had sprung up all over my body. (TDHNT, 40)

So Sarita started realizing that in the male-dominated society a woman cannot have life of her own. A woman has to surrender herself to "a superior, superhuman male". In fact she epitomized the said plight of the entire women kind that they cannot dream even beyond the male, the husband. The dream but the dream is limited only to the domains of the male-world. She feels:

After that day, he was the figure I fantasized 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.
Sometimes he was a great writer, a poet, and there were
throng around him, offering him gifts, praise,
adulation. He saw me among the many, our eyes met,
his carrying a secret message to mine. So that I met
him alone later and offered him my small foolish gift.
and he said.... This is more precious to me than
anything else in the whole world. (TDHNT, 53)

Sarita, therefore, revolts, like a rebel, against the societal myths which arbitrarily discriminate among human beings and divide them into man and woman. She seems to agree to the observation of Simone de Beauvoir about the myth of woman:

Few myths have been more advantageous
To the ruling caste than the myth of woman:
It justifies all privileges and even authorizes their
abuse. Men need not bother themselves with alleviating
the pains and the burdens that physiologically are
women's lot, since these are 'intended by nature', men use
as a pretext for increasing the misery of the feminine. Lot
still further, for instance by refusing to grant to woman
any right to sexual pleasure by making her work like a
beast of burden. (Beauvoir, 285)

After joining medical college, she realized that she was more than a wife. She was an individual and freedom of self is most important. She expressed it frankly:

And that was now sheer necessity, the only thing that held
me the cause of my disease as well; and the temptation
was frequent and strong to let go. The reasoning was
simple, clear and remorseless. It is because I am
something more than his wife that he has become what he
is. If I can go back to being nothing but his wife....and
yet was I ever that? he may no longer resent me. And
then..... (TDHNT, 78)

She feels like a free soul living in a room of her own as Virginia Woolf would call it. She asserted:

Tell him. Tell him now. Tell him what he does. Tell him
you can't stand it any longer. Tell him you're prepared to
sacrifice everything as long as he leaves you alone. To
sleep alone in a room, to be by myself on a bed, to be
untouched, unhandled...Only then can I be clean again.
(TDHNT,

80)

Saru grows philosophical and she is eager to know the reasons behind the unending alienation, suffering, oppression of women. She does not know why a wife should believe in a husband who always leaves her:

When going I went into take my leave of her. I smiled at
her. She did not respond. Her face was unchanged,
expressionless, as if she had fallen in with her husband's
desires and successfully effaced the person that was her.
At the door, I looked back for a moment. She stood under
a light, a strong, unshaded bulb hanging in the centre of
the room. I looked down at her feet and saw that there was
no shadow. For some reason, the words came to my

mind.... If I cast no shadow, I do not exist.

(TDHNT, 156)

But then Saru does not lose heart. She is still hopeful of possibilities. A woman and a man have to believe in each other to live. The novelist describes the optimistic, the affirmative aspect of women's psyche in the end of the novel:

All right, so I'm alone. But so's everyone else.

Human beings there's no one else, we have to go on
trying. If we can't believe in ourselves, we're sunk.

(TDHNT, 220)

Hence, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a study in gynocriticism. Herein, the novelist creates a novel of herself, by herself and for herself. It is where the novelist solely explores herself uncompromisingly, not wasting much of her creative energy on male-dominated society or masculine world.

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