

Crossing Patriarchal Threshold in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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Abstract:

In the previous times, the novels were focused on the social and political issues of the society. They presented stereotype description of women characters- showing them either as self-sacrificing angel given to their family, their near and dear ones or as vamps. These novels were lopsided presentations as they were mostly written by male novelists and they analyzed and evaluated women from the point of view of men. After independence, many women writers broke into the literary circuit and they tried to represent the real experiences, feelings, sufferings and emotions of women. These writers tried to reveal the inner psyche, feelings, longings and actual experiences of the Indian women. In women's discourse of the Indian milieu, the female's assertion becomes a polemical site for representation. Refuting the patriarchal dominance, the female writers have given a new meaning to self-assertion and establishment of identity of women. The main objective of this paper is to show how the female protagonist refuting all patriarchal dominance crosses patriarchal threshold to assert her own identity.

Key words: Patriarchy, feminist, identity, discrimination, womanhood

Man's cruel treatment to women proves a driving force for women to get united against all discrimination. According to Mary Caruthers, "Traditionally women's lives have been imagined in relation to men's lives as the daughters, mothers, mistresses, wives of men. They have in consequence been imagined either in terms of a single role psychologically important to men in terms of their single social and biological function in male society" (Caruthers). In ancient Indian literature, a woman is projected in relationship to man. The husband-wife

relationship bears more importance than the daughter, father, sister, and brother and mother relationship. Conventionally a good woman is always identified with a good wife and a good wife must show her fidelity and trust to her husband like mythical characters Sita and Savitri. In religious scriptures and myths, a woman has been shown either as a goddess or a sub-human creature, never a full perfect human being. On the one hand, woman has been depicted as the object of respect and worship, on the other hand she is considered as man's personal property. Feminist writer Nayantara Sahgal believes that women should be afforded the same opportunity as one afforded to the so-called superior sex. The personal sufferings and treasures besides intolerable humiliation should find a place in the literature.

C.T. Indra, in her essay "Some Aspects of Feminism Relevant to Indian Society", presents a persuasive analysis in favour of an Indian ideology regarding women. She argues that Patriarchy is a social construct rather than a traditional norm. The ancient Indian thought is predominantly metaphysical and oriented towards reaching the truth. Human personality is regarded as a composite of many plains or layers with the soul or "atma" as the supreme centre. The "soul" or "atma" is "sexless", i.e. there is no distinction between men and women in relation to one's soul.

In this context, it is quite relevant to note what S.P. Swain in his essay “Roots and Shadows: A Feminist Study” says: “The ideal of *Ardhangini* enshrined in Indian culture renders man as the complement of woman, her other half. Together, they make a whole. *Prakriti* and *Purusha* are one. Man and woman are one in the concept of *Ardhanariswara*” (Swain 79). Indian woman under thick layers of convention, prejudice and tradition has hardly any autonomous existence. Aunt Lila in Anita Desai’s *Voices in the City* observes “Our country belongs to its man” (58). Indian women are no longer Damayanti. She is Damini or a Nora or a Joan of Arc. Social reformers like Gandhi, Iswar Chandra Bidyasagar and Raja Rammohan Roy have given a new dimension and impetus to women’s movement. In this way, feminism has emerged as a new way of life free from “dependence syndrome” (Nahal and Singh). A new perspective has arisen in the Indian social horizon with the feminine psyche trying to redefine woman’s role in the society and re-assert her identity.

This paper is an attempt to place Deshpande’s fiction within an Indian culture-specific feminist framework. The study is carried out with the help of Postcolonial feminist theory using comparative and analytical methods. The study is a literary work using primary and secondary sources. The secondary sources are based on library resources like reference books, scholarly journal and internet also. The subject matter is analyzed in the perspective of feminist theories. The study has been interpretative, descriptive and exploratory using various feminist theories put forward by feminist critics like Simon de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Mary Caruthers.

Shashi Deshpande with a writing career of around thirty years in the Indian literary scenario still seeks for a gender space of the writing process. Deshpande’s protagonists are shown to display the resistance to patriarchy. She has attempted genuinely to give a new voice to her female characters despite

her denial of being a feminist. Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a remarkable novel. The protagonist of the novel is Sarita, shortly known as Saru. She is a well educated middle class woman. Her bitter relationship with her family and husband ultimately pushes her to search for her identity. Her brother Dhruva always gets family attention whereas she is almost neglected. Since her childhood, Saru feels that she is unwanted family member. Family does not bother her importance. She has been deprived from parental care. The birthday of her brother is celebrated with pomp and much fanfare. Special Puja is offered on this auspicious occasion. Though Saru’s birthday is also celebrated but no special Puja is offered. This partial treatment makes her hostile. This is a stereotype notion of gender discrimination and Saru’s feminism is a manifestation of this. Her idea of being an unwanted daughter to her parents is proved from the words of her mother that it rained cats and dogs on the birthday of Saru. Her feminist ideas get bolstered by the fondness of her mother towards her brother. Indian traditional society prefers the birth of son as it bears the burden to carry on the family legacy. The first impression which created in Saru’s mind when she heard about the death of her mother was that who would lit the pyre since her only son was no more.

The family comes to an action when Saru attains marriageable age. Saru’s mother forbids her to go out in the Sun as it would darken her skin’s colour. According to Saru’s mother the dark skin colour will create a serious problem in case a marriage proposal is approached. The patriarchal society is of the opinion that marriage is only the ultimate destiny for a woman. The conversation between the mother and the daughter reflects the prevalent gender discrimination and the patriarchal mind set. Discussing the mother-daughter relationship, Simone de Beauvoir remarks:

The daughter is for the mother at once her double and another person, the

mother is at once overweeningly affectionate and hostile towards her daughter. (Beauvoir)

Fondness for a son who is considered as a real asset for the family leaves Saru devastated and alienated and this kind of perception makes Saru a rebel against the rigid social system. Dhruva's accidental death in a pond haunts Saru perennially as she holds herself responsible for this. Her mother holds her solely responsible and considers her guilty. Saru's fault is that she is a girl. The mother would have preferred Saru's death instead of her son's death. Saru's hatred gets intensified when she attains puberty. She resents the onset of her womanhood: "If you are a woman, I don't want to be one" (62). Filled with a sense of shame at her monthly ordeal, she resents the conventional practice in her orthodox home when she is considered almost as an outcaste and untouchable during the period of menstrual cycle. Saru begins to express her feeling through the acts of defiance which spring from resentment against her mother as a young girl. Saru begins to express her displeasure at the treatment meted out to her and defies the existence tradition. Recollecting her scornful attitude towards her mother, Saru says: "I hated her. I wanted to hurt her, wound her, and make her suffer" (62). The strong instructions made by her mother make her grow more wild and defiant. After being subdued on each occasion, Saru finally decides to cross the patriarchal threshold and leaves for the city to pursue medical education ignoring her mother's advice.

After her admission into medical, Saru falls in love with Manohar (shortly known as Manu) and finally marries him. Initially marriage provides her everything that she never got in earlier life. When the conjugal life of Saru and Manu becomes soar after sometimes, Saru regrets herself for taking the hasty step of marriage. She feels that her parents are also responsible to take such step. In the initial years of

their marital life, Saru regards herself as a successful person. Marriage happens to be a panacea for her. Her husband Manu looks like a romantic hero and a perfect life partner. Marriage provides her everything that she never got in her life. It provides her an identity in society. S.P. Swain opines: "Her marriage with Manu is an assertion and affirmation of her feminine sensibility" (Swain).

With the passing of time, Saru becomes a successful doctor. Manohar remains a teacher in a third grade college. Saru's rapid success as a doctor makes her popular in their residential place. When they walk out from their room there are a lot of greetings and Namaste for Saru not for Manohar. In this way, Manohar's self esteemed is hurt and he becomes jealous of Saru. Manu's patriarchal whims get a setback at the sudden development. Things start changing from onwards. He gradually becomes rough to Saru. A question mark appears on their conjugal life. Manohar's masculine pride gets hurt and he decides to take revenge. He starts sexually torturing Saru. It looks as if patriarchal structure gives a man discretionary power to use the body of a woman the way he likes. Manu gets humiliated when people greet and say Namaste to Saru but not to Manu while going on the street. Saru does not get enough spare time to spend with her husband and children due to her busy schedule. 'In course of time, on the one hand, Saru's position in the society rises up but on the other hand, her marital life declines. Boozie, a class mate of her medical college, helps her to a great extent to build her career. Both of them use to flirt a lot together. In fact, Boozie helps Saru financially to set up a clinic. Saru's high ambition pushes her to develop an unscrupulous relationship with Boozie for which she is not much bothered.

Saru's rising financial and professional status becomes the bone of contention between the couple. Though Saru is absolutely satisfied with her career but she is not at ease in her domestic life. In real fact, she fails

to achieve true success. In course of an interview, an interviewer asks Manu humbly about his reaction under the circumstances when a wife becomes the sole bread earner for the family. Manu's ego is hurt to a great extent at this question. Initially Manu, Saru and the interviewer take it lightly as if nothing has happened but this has added fuel to the fire to Manu who has already been wounded. Thereafter, Manu vents to his feelings by his sexual onslaught on Saru. During the day time, he remains a descent and humble person but at night he turns into a terrible rapist to prove his masculinity. Unable to bear her mental suffering Saru lets her father know her pathetic condition: "I can never do anything. I just endure"(201). In the eighteenth century, William Blackstone, a distinguished professor of law at Oxford, describes marriage as a "civil death" of woman. In his *Commentaries on the English Constitution* (1758) and *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765), he states: "By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law;..... or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband" (Quoted by Helsinger). The word marriage does not mean reconciliation of both sexes but rather pushes a woman to perpetual slavery.

Saru finds herself in a very precarious situation. By that time, she knows that her mother has died already. Then she plans to return to her parental home thinking that there will be none to taunt and humiliate her. She is in search of security and emotional support. Saru in desperation seeks her father's support and at the same time her feeling raises against her husband's brutality. She tells her father loudly and harshly: "My husband is a sadist" (199). With heavy heart, she tries in every possible ways to convince her father about her predicament. It looks as if she talks to her father not as an intimate daughter but as woman who is in dire need of someone's help. Saru's father does not give any serious hearing to Saru's problems and eventually turns away from her. Saru is saddened by

her father's lukewarm response. At this moment, Saru feels that they are like persons who "are fated to be strangers" (105). Though she wanted sympathy and consolation from her father but in reality she gets nothing. The picture would have been different had she been a boy. It is the irony of the life of a woman in patriarchal society. Saru disgustingly digs at the patriarchy while talking to a group of college student. At one moment, Saru regrets for having come to her parents house. Actually her coming to her father's house is a kind of escape from her brutal husband and her failed marriage. It is a kind of mental solace from her busy schedule. Her present status quo is a big relief to her. She also becomes nostalgic about her past life. Her present life makes her a new woman, a totally changed person.

Saru recalls her relationship with Padmakar, one of her class mates in medical college. But she avoids him after meeting him several times. Later on, she feels that this kind of relationship cannot give her permanent mental peace rather it would bring more misery in her life. Her relationships with both Padmakar and Boozie open her eyes. She comes to realize that they cannot provide her escape route from the horrible life.

During her stay at her father's house, neighbourhood women come to visit her to discuss about their illness. But most of the time it is seen that they keep their ailments a secret. It compels Saru to think over that: "Their very womanhood a source of deep shame to them." (107). Being irritated, she questions them "Why didn't you do something about earlier" (107). Saru adopts all possible medical methods to cure the patients. Saru has a great desire to settle at her father's place but she abandons the plan thinking over possible problems that may come in between. In this regard, we may recall what Betty Friedan said in *The Feminine Mystique* "it was easier for her to start the women's lib movement than to change her own personal life" (Friedan). Saru's condition is similar to

her neighbourhood women who cannot raise their voice until the circumstances compel to do so. Now Saru becomes restless and her patience loses its control. Her pondering makes her to realize: “My brother died because I heedlessly turned my back on him. My husband is a failure because I destroyed his Manhood” (217). She is neither a typical traditional Indian enduring woman nor a Western liberated woman. In search of identity, she does not want a separation from her husband but tactfully asserts her identity within the conjugal life. Her life is her own and she wants to enjoy it in her own way.

Finally, Saru resolves that she will not hold anybody responsible for her predicament. She will have to be fearless to face her husband. The fear of dark starts receding gradually. Deshpande candidly expresses that her protagonists are new and emerging women. They are capable of displaying any assigned role. They are also independent and capable of crossing patriarchal boundaries. They are autonomous being and can find their ways to salvation. Saru feels that she will have to dispel the darkness of her life. She is eager to set the things right in her own ways. To achieve her target, she also wants help from her father. She regains her lost strength and realizes that none but she is the only guardian of her destiny.

The novel is resolved by Saru’s readiness to return to her husband’s house with newly found strong will power to solve the problem with Manu. She becomes a new woman who is now capable of challenging her husband. She has emerged as a woman who can handle the patriarchal system tactfully.

An increasing awareness of injustice, subjugation done to women slowly makes them raise their voice against the patriarchal dominance. Consequently women have in recent times made endeavors to set them free from the boundary of patriarchy. Due to some societal norms such as customs, traditions, and

culture women struggle in gaining their individuality. Consequently they rebel and go beyond the boundary of femininity and try to establish that they are also human beings. There is a changing trend in the society and so called conventional and traditional women are going away from their portrayal of enduring and self-sacrificing women to assertive women making the patriarchal social order aware of their needs and thus giving a mood of self assertion. This novel has charted out the growth of Indian womanhood from submissive traditional type to bold and progressive one. It seems to be the personification of ‘New Woman’ who understands the importance of her identity and space in the progressive Indian society. Novelist vehemently criticizes the ethics of marriage where women are supposed to play a subordinate role. Women’s lives are regulated by patriarchal framework. It does not matter whether women accept them or not. Husband’s ego-centric views are unilaterally imposed upon wives without considering wife’s emotions and personal needs. This coerced situation leads to disturbance in conjugal life.

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