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MARITAL DISCORD IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS*: A FEMINISTIC CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the theme of marital discord in the selected novel of Shashi Deshpande, one of the most significant contemporary Indian feminist writers in English. For the purpose of analysis, I will look at Shashi Deshpande's *Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980). In this novel, marriage, a racial bond, is shown breaking through the chains of traditional sanctity. More often than not, it is merely pooh- poohedas a kind of "euphuism for lust", a mere "jug! Jug!". Her female protagonist goes in for love-marriage, against the wishes of her parents and kickstart her life in her own way. This is how the whole thing begins with a kind of "marriage", a source, basically of joy and gratification. But see the irony of our conservative culture! The "darling" husband can't digest the spectacular progress of his wife. And the result is – "A marriage on rocks", a horrible discord! Deshpande's female protagonists, considerably educated and self-conscious as they are, are no longer willing to be at the feet of their *Patiparmeshwar*. They are not ready to follow the rut. They are rather out to be on a par with them in life. Her Sarus and Jayas are pining for a neck and neck race with their partners who have been riding a rough shod on them now for centuries together. As "awakened" individuals, they are not ready to take things lying down.

The most irritating cause of conjugal disharmony in their lives has its roots in their changing social set-up, especially their attitude towards love, sex, and marriage. In this respect, Deshpande's heroines seem to have a mind to break through the chains of centuries old traditions. They are not ready to waste away their lives in the chillgrip of traditions that seek to bind them hand and foot. They are madly itching and scratching for "freedom of choice in life". These female protagonists, inspite of being brought up into traditional society, show the courage to voice their opinion for female emancipation in male-dominated society.

Keywords: emancipation, traditions, conjugal, discord, contemporary, feminist, conservative

Introduction

As a novelist, Shashi Deshpande (1938 -) occupies a place, quite apart and secure, near the very first flight of contemporary Indian women

novelists. In novel after novel, she concentrates upon the problems of women from women's point of view. In her novels, she concentrates upon women's sorrows and sufferings in our male

dominated society. Often she seems to have fully absorbed – consciously or unconsciously – Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* (1949) – "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman (cf. TSS 247) ... it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... described as feminine" (TSS 267).

Besides, like de Beauvoir, the contemporary feminist, Shashi Deshpande lays stress on how woman undergoes her apprenticeship in early life, how she experiences her situation, in what kind of universe she is confined, what modes of escape are vouchshaped her" (TSS XXIX). This is how during her apprenticeship to life she is confined to a sphere traditionally worked out for her by men. This is how unconsciously, moreover, she imbibes the art of being safe and secure under a kind of *sheltering tree* at every stage of her life. But in the "contemporary" world, as underlined by de Beauvoir, "...it is through gainful employment that woman has traversed most of the distance that separated her once from the male ..." (639). But, according to de Beauvoir, "still nothing can guarantee liberty in practice" (639).

In this respect, Shashi Deshpande goes, in fact, a step further. The type of women she creates in her novels – her Sarus and Jayas – fly higher towards "liberty in practice," concentrating fairly frequently upon their "unconventional female experiences". Deshpande foresees the possibilities that in the days to come women may break through the chains of male domination, not only in the biological facts of life but also mental goings-on.

Shashi Deshpande, as a middle class educated woman, concentrates upon the feminine consciousness of this class of women – with all their sorrows and sufferings vis-a-vis male reality in the centuries old Indian traditions. Her Sarus, Jayas are not just the members of their social set-up but they are upstarts working for their own identity in the male oriented patriarchal society. They boldly try to break through the conventional bonds that shackle them. In no case, therefore, are they ready to take things laying down. The novelist in Deshpande seems to say something of her own through her protagonists. Naturally, they get strength through their creator's view point. The novelist in Deshpande takes the position of *anterdrishti* – as she

sees and oversees and sees into the goings-on in women's lives.

When Deshpande started writing, the position of women in the pre-independence era was either of "inflation" or "negligence". The women we have in pre-Partition works of fiction are all helpless creatures who have come into this world only to suffer and suffer at every step in life. Hence there is no place for any confrontation, discord, or disharmony. They are simply governed by the laws established by their *pati-parmeshwar*. So, they are all helpless beings eagerly searching for help and support at every stage of life – may it be maiden-land or marital domain. The popular slogan "Betibachao and Betipadao" – save the girl-child and give her the type of education that may lead to her empowerment still speaks of her miserable condition. In Indian society, it is not the question of neck and neck race; it is still the question of coming up as an individual – so very miserable she is still in the chains of "property". A few exceptions apart, Indian women are still fighting for a kind of "equality" in the social set-up. They don't have the guts to face the realities of life. Just think of those women who luckily win positions in their lives. The situation has given way to its new land of hardships. It's their husband – the male partner, who rules the roost. They are – in themselves – mere rubber stamps ready to give ground to their husband, even the chair they are supposed to occupy. In meetings, in celebrations, in all goings-on of life, it is the husband who is there to carry the procession.

Discussion

The Dark Holds No Terrors (1980)¹, a lucky first novel by Shashi Deshpande tells the story of "a marriage on rocks" (Mohan 100) – the marriage of Sarita (popularly known as Saru), an educated middle class woman, a successful lady doctor. As a popular professional, she is loved and liked by crowds of people who need her services at every step in life. She naturally earns the gratitude of all concerned and is held in great respect. But that is only one side of the picture – her professional services to the suffering fellow beings. There is another side of the picture too – a "horrible picture of her personal life" -- in the arms of her husband at night. Because she is his wife, an Indian wife of a

middle class Indian husband, she is his personal “property”, something he can “handle” in any way he likes. In the lonely hours of the night, Saru, the “successful doctor” is, therefore, no more than an ordinary woman at the mercy of her *pati-parmeshwar* – a kind of god, at whose altar she is there to be virtually sacrificed – no better than “a terrified trapped animal in the hands of her husband” (Mohan 100). Though only an ordinary lecturer in a third-grade rural college, he is, as her husband, a kind of proprietor, a sole owner. He has the divine right to look upon her as his “personal property”. And, as per centuries-old norms of Indian society, he has every right to “use” her in any way he likes – even to give her “extremely torturous moments.” The poor Saru has to undergo all this, night after night. Quite often, therefore, she feels “extremely unnerved.” The poor “prisoner” seems to have lost all sense of toleration. Life virtually bares its bones to her – till at last she can bear this “nonsense” no more. She is always on the lookout for chance to escape. But what does not allow her to run away is her devotion to her patients and, of course, the love of children, her “soul’s soul.” The poor Saru has been going through this hell of a life for long fifteen years with Manohar, “a heartless brute”, when she quietly slips out of his clutches and comes back to her father’s house, the house she had once made up her mind never to enter again. At the time of her love-marriage with Manohar, her “darling” college mate, she had no desire to come back to her mother’s house again. And she had openly declared it. But now, under the horrible sexual sadism she comes back to her father’s house.

Deshpande here takes us through the by-lanes of Saru’s earlier life, not only through the days she had spent in Manohar’s house but also those spent earlier still with her parents under her paternal roof. The backward and forward movements of the narrative focus on many a horrifying situation in the process, the narrative frequently moving from the dead past to the immediate present, and vice-a-versa, clearly showing situation by situation how she had spent the earlier days of life with her parents, how she disliked her mother’s attitude, especially after the

death of Dhruv, the little child, her only brother, how she turned against everything traditional and embraced Manu against the wishes of her parents, especially her mother who was not in favour of this poor match for her. Utterly sick of her mother’s treatment, Saru wanted to lead a different type of life. She was forced to embrace a new type of relationship, a relationship that would give free reins to her will and vision. And her tie-up, a different type of relation with Manohar offers her a hope of security and love of life. Manu, her “dearest,” seems to enter her life as a kind of ‘romantic hero’, an ideal alter-ego in the race of life. Manu seems to make for the fulfilment of a long cherished dream. Hence, as Saru puts it: “I was insatiable, not for sex, but for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of love. Of my being loved. Of my being wanted” (DHNT40). And the love her darling Manu had for her seemed perfect in every respect. Her “romantic” hero was always there beside her like a colourful dream: “If I ever 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” (DHNT40).

Naturally, shifting over to Manu’s world, she feels – for a time – sufficiently fulfilled. And in the environment now she finds herself in, she begins to shine in her profession as a doctor. She becomes an object of regard for the whole world! And this naturally does even her Manu proud. He loves to be the “proud” husband of a noble doctor. But that is only a nine days’ wonder. It does not last long. Soon it begins to weigh heavy upon his nerves and ultimately proves to be a challenge to his “paling manhood”. The roaring success of Saru, a mere woman, “a weaker vessel,” a subjugated member of a traditional Hindu family, upsets the whole world. It is too much for Manu, a traditional husband, to live with all this. That a woman – “his personal property” – should outshine her husband! Saru’s popularity and her busy life become in Manu’s flesh an ever pricking thorn – something unbearable day and night. Her ever-increasing popularity as a professional begins to weigh heavy upon her family life. The more she earns the more it makes Manu, her husband, feel smaller. It is not possible for him to live with this humiliation. Like a middle class

Indian husband, he wants to keep Saru, his wife, all too under his heels. He wants to prove his "manhood" like his father, grandfather and great grandfather. That he can't do through his earnings—as an ordinary lecturer in a third grade rural college. So, the only way open to him now – the only way to retain his "masculinity," so to say, is naturally through an upper hand as a "rapist" at night". The poor Saru naturally feels utterly terrified and acutely humbled: "And each time it happens and I don't speak, I put another brick on the wall of silence between us. Maybe one day I will be walled alive within it and die a slow, painful death. Perhaps the process has already begun and what I am is a creature only half alive. And it seems I can do nothing to save myself" (DHNT 96).

The problem naturally gives rise to critical crosscurrents. The poor Saru is crushed under the torturous weight of goings-on – as a working wife, all try to over-burdened work on the one hand, and as a victim of conjugal disharmony, on the other. The situation cries for a kind of equilibrium. But that is not easily possible. There is hardly any way out.

Saru often thinks of the day when a chance meeting with Manu had brought back the fond memories of her college days – when she was just a slip of a girl, a student of first year at college. She was madly charmed by Manu, a post-graduate student. Manu was the "golden glory" of the institution – a popular student, secretary of the literary association, an active member of the dramatic club, a budding writer and a poet of promise – a hero, a real hero in her bewitched eyes. Manu's good looks with "a firm chin, dark thick, straight eyebrows and full lips" had left a deep impression on her mind. But because the examinations were quite at hand their association could not be a prolonged one. But a kiss once given is never lost. "The sparks under the ashes never die". A recent meeting naturally "triggered a romance". By now Manu had lost the colours of his college days. Gone were the past hopes of his life. So, he immediately responded to Saru's interest in him. Saru, "still blinded by the image of the charismatic Manu of college days, fails to notice his present professional failure and wavering confidence" (Sinha and Jandial 133). Saru's mother

disapproved of the match, particularly because of Manu's lower caste. But "blind" as Saru is with "passion," she is not ready to go by her mother's advice. She goes her own way and marries Manu the day he acquires a room of his own to live in. This is how Saru ignores her mother's warning and overlooks the conventional difference between their castes and professions to marry Manu.

And the marriage brings "the thrill of sexuality." For Saru, it makes the fulfilment of love and affection she had always longed for. The man in her life transports her from the hell of her early days to a new heaven of joy and freedom. The days were all the days of heavenly glow that seemed to have no end at all. But that was only an airy dream!

As long as the traditional order remained intact, Manu's meager income from his job of a college lecturer and their one room residence in a *chawl* did not shake their "conjugal bliss". "Basking in Manu's love, Saru continues to feel that she has surely achieved the traditional aim of being chosen by a superior male" (Sinha and Jandial 133-34).

But Soon Saru began to realise that Manu, her husband, had no god-like superiority, as such. Once, while she was coming back home in a blood-stained overcoat after treating the victims of an accident, all in the area became aware of her professional identity. At once her profession of a doctor achieved for her a position all too superior to that of her husband. She came to have a great respect and regard in the eyes of all, who now frequently called on her for consultation. The respect that Saru came to have in the process disturbed the traditional equilibrium of her family-life. The balance obviously tilted in Saru's favour. "The esteem she was surrounded with made her inches taller. But, perhaps, the same thing. . . made. . . Manu inches shorter. He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband" (DHNT 42). This is how our Manu began to lose the traditional superiority of an Indian patriarch. Deshpande here tries to explain the situation with the help of an algebraic equation: " $a+b$ they told us in Mathematics is equal to $b+a$. But here $a+b$ was not definitely equal to $b+a$. It became a monstrously unbalanced equation, lopsided, unequal, impossible" (DHNT 42).

Saru surely came to have an edge over Manu. He naturally became more and more irritable and short-tempered and before long, grew tired of being ignored everywhere around. Saru, his wife, was getting all attention and praise everywhere. The situation was obviously degrading. It “kills” Manu’s manhood. And, in his heart of hearts, he begins to experience a kind of “defeat” which was, in the eyes of our society, all too humiliating.

Aiming at greater heights, Saru willingly responds to Booze’s interest in her. He fondly shapes and moulds her into “a polished, sophisticated urban woman” (Sinha and Jandial 134) and helps to achieve still greater heights in life. Saru’s association with Booze stains her reputation, no doubt, but Manu, her husband, ignores the affair. He fondly allows Saru to continue with this friendship, as it helps Saru attain to her ambition. But Manu is not conscious of the adverse effect all this is going to have on their marital life. The social balance is tilting in favour of Saru – what is going to happen is something unacceptable in Indian society. Saru is moving forward as a successful lady doctor while Manu is still what he has been, an ordinary lecturer in a third grade rural college! This disparity naturally causes a rift in their relationship. And things take a horrible turn when a reporter from a women’s magazine comes to interview Saru – now a successful lady doctor. And in a light moment, the reporter turns to Manu with the question: “How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?” (DHNT 200). The question makes him conscious of the inferior position he is now holding in the eyes of all around him. All through the day he remains at pins and needles—in a kind of tension. And in the dead of night when he is the master of all he surveys, he loses his balance and physically assaults Saru in bed – trying, like a hawk, to tear his prey to pieces: “The beginning was abrupt . . . no preparation for it. . . no preliminaries, either. At first it was a nightmare of hands...[then] a monstrous onslaught . . . compounded of lips and teeth . . . I could taste blood on my lips” (DHNT 11).

Saru did try to confront Manu in the morning. But “his normal natural behavior” and “feigned ignorance about his behaviour” last night

leaves them all too untouched. “However, the repeated rape and bruises over her body leave no doubt in her mind” (Sinha and Jandial 135). Later, Saru came to realise that Manu assaulted her whenever he was reminded of his economic dependence on her. So, what is “grinding his soul” and “killing” his spirit is the “ingrained traditional force of values which rigidly declare that it was the husband’s duty to provide for the wife and the children. And this is what makes Manu feel that he is a failure in life. The fact that Saru, his wife, a subordinate member of the family, has grabbed his superior position, infuriates and frustrates the egoist in him. It hurts his ego. And to gratify his pride, therefore, he employs the only means through which he can now assert his manhood. He tries to prove his superiority by physically assaulting and raping her. But as an intelligent and independent woman, Saru endures all this because of two reasons – the “shock” she receives in the process and her love for her children. Her efforts to break the silence, no doubt, take her to a lawyer, but the thought of talking about it and the social stigma a divorce may involve unnerves her all at once.

Saru, a sensible educated woman as, does feel at times that her success as a professional and her economic superiority are weighing heavy upon her husband’s mind. Once she openly offers Manu, of giving up her job. But Manu is not unmindful of the financial loss her decision would cause. See the irony of the situation! “Manu’s pride is not hurt while enjoying the luxuries that Saru’s money provides. He is hurt not by what she is doing for the family – the money she is earning – but the reminder of her success in life and his own failure and inferior position awaken a beast in him” (Sinha and Jandial 136).

But the way Manu regularly plays ducks and ducks with Saru’s body, makes her dislike everything about him. Saru’s faith in love and marriage is completely shattered. She begins to hate the “very act of sex”.

It is at this critical juncture that Saru happens to hear of her mother’s death – the mother who hated her so brutally before marriage. But, then, utterly upset as she is in life, she desperately decides to go to her father’s home, for sometime at

least. She goes there not so much to mourn the death of her mother as to find a moment of relief from Manu's brutal attacks! Though she tells Manu that she is going to see her father, in reality, she takes this as the opportunity to escape – to escape “those inhuman nightly tortures” that she can now bear no more. She goes to her father's house but she knows not what to say and what to expect. She had once left this house against the wishes of her parents. Here Saru naturally underlines the plus-points of a conventional marriage – the marriage arranged by the elders – when the daughter accepts the man of their choice. In that case, parents always take care of the daughter's well-being and are all out to help her at every step in life. If Saru had followed the traditional main road of Indian life, she would have – in that case – definitely received the sympathy of her father. But after what she had done, what could she expect from Baba? She was there now with eyes down cast and head hung. But once she is at peace with Baba and Madhav at home, she comes to have peaceful nights and the joy of waking up fine in the morning – without aches and humiliations. It is at this peaceful moment that she is reminded of her mother's words spoken to her years ago: *“I know all these ‘love marriages’. It's love for a few days, then quarrels all the time. Don't come crying to us then”. And her own reply, “To you? God, that's the one thing I'll never do. Never!”* (DHNT 69).

Thinking of the tortuous life she is herself undergoing, Saru has a brainwave to warn the young students of Nalu, her friend. She longs to speak of the rigid rules of the tradition, according to which: “A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he's an M A., you should be a B A. If he's 5'4” tall, you shouldn't be more than 5'3” tall. If he's earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety-nine rupees. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage . . .” (DHNT 137).

But poor Saru fails to get any support from any quarter, whatsoever. Even her father, her own father, does not come to her help. He shows no sympathy because her marriage, as already pointed out above, was a marriage of her own choice. Hence she has to suffer all by herself. Here Deshpande tries

to uncover the inner working of her mind. This is how her life becomes a kind of journey – “a journey from self-alienation” (Mohan 103). It is also “a journey from negation to self-assertion” and “frustration to confidence”. Sarita, who was – at one stage of her life – not prepared to face Manu, her husband, now makes up her mind to leave her father too and go away somewhere else. This is how, ultimately, she comes to grips with her situation. She makes up her mind to live her present with determination: “My life is my own . . . somehow she felt as if she had found it now, the connecting link. It means you are not just a strutting, grimacing puppet, standing futilely on the stage for a brief while between areas of darkness. 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” (DNHT 220).

As a kind of feminist, Deshpande here seeks to make it clear that “a woman's life is her own, that she must develop the thinking that she is an individual – not a dependent. She is being capable of withstanding trials in life alone” (Mohan 104). Modern woman is, according to Deshpande, more than a mere mother, or sister, or daughter. In the contemporary world she is a multifaceted individual capable of playing any role. What she needs, therefore, is a “strong” mind and “iron will”. Her identity is no longer seen in terms of the identity of her male counterpart.

It is at this critical juncture that she happens to receive a letter from Manu about his arrival at her father's house. A deep sense of vengeance overpowers her wounded psyche. And she asks her Baba not to open the door when Manu knocks. But this is only an outward show of things – not the inner feeling of her heart. She is obviously in a fix: “If only someone would tell her what to do, she would do it at once, without a second thought. It was strange that after all these years of having been in full control of her life, she now had this great desire to let go. To put herself in another's hands” (DHNT 97).

The letter she receives from Manu upsets her whole being and for the first time in her life she

"breaks her silence", and opens her heart to her father. Horribly afraid as Saru is of going back to her "nightly tortures", she is determined not to see Manu again. But her father's advice that she must have the courage to face the problem rather than evade it "sows the seeds of a new order". Hence the realisation that one can't run away from realities forever. She makes up her mind to fight her own battle. She realizes that her life is her own – which she will have to make or mar. There is no refugee other than one's self. With this end in view she is ready to confront Manu with courage and fortitude.

Conclusion

This clearly shows that as a novelist, ShashiDeshpande is not "an idle singer of an empty day". She has her own church, her own chair, her own philosophy—her own concept of man-woman relationship in the context of present day world situation in general and male-dominated Indian society in particular. She is not unaware of the fact that the relation between husband and wife in middle class educated Indian families is still that of a master and a slave. The wife being a wife is still a wife. She cannot have the courage to go against the wishes of her husband. These conditions naturally ask for a radical change in men's outlook. As a novelist, Deshpande is all out to assert the dignity and equality of woman in family as well as the wider social sphere.

SashiDeshpande is a feminist with a difference. She is keen to bring women at a par with men so that they are not exploited as they have been over the centuries. Deshpande tries to bring into focus not only the plight of women in society but also the solutions to the problem she can point to. But the solutions she divines are not very drastic indeed. She is not in favour of any trepidation. She wants a change, no doubt, but a change that can make for harmony and adjustment.

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