

A Journey to Individuation in Shashi Deshpande's novel, The Dark Holds No Terrors

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Abstract

The women writers in India, placed in an orthodox culture, have their roots in their native soil but encounter an invading western sociological phenomenon in the name of feminism/women's liberation. Shashi Deshpande, an outstanding novelist of Indian English literature highlights the problems encountered by the Indian women caught between the native Indian and invading western cultures.

Existing between the two cultural polarities, Saru, the protagonist of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, searches for herself and ultimately grows into an individual rather than an object pinned down by the Indian society to gender roles. In this society, the discriminating socio-cultural values, attitudes and practices cripple the personality of the female child. Extricating herself from the clutches of these chains, Saru chooses the western education and becomes a doctor by profession but fails as a wife, for her male counterpart is a typical Indian who considers himself the lord and master. First her mother, a symbol of Indian orthodoxy, hates Saru for being a girl; now the dominating Indian husband takes himself for a demi God and treats her as an unpaid servant.

Though Shashi Deshpande avoids the western obsession with feminism she still presents the Indian version of the modern woman who searches for her identity and establishes herself. The entire novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* depicts the emotional and spiritual conflicts of the woman caught between the colonizing and the colonized cultures- a predominant feature of the Commonwealth.

The discriminating socio-cultural values, attitudes and practices which cripple the personality of the female child are highlighted in the novel. A girl child is unwanted at birth and neglected during childhood and adolescence. Saru suffers from gender discrimination right from her birth. She is unwelcome in the family because her parents' s preference is for a male child as their first-born. Saru sees the jubilation over the arrival of her brother Dhruva at the family as a reinforcement of her discrimination. She remembers how her brother was named, "They had named him Dhruva. I can remember, even now vaguely, faintly a state of joyous excitement that had been his naming day. The smell of flowers, the black grinding stone."

The son is named after the mythological 'North Star.' When the 'North Star' Dhruva appears in the family horizon, Saru becomes an 'asteroid,' as a prefigurement of women who are treated as the "eternal minor."

The deep-seated hatred in Saru towards the favoritism shown to her brother by her parents makes her think of blotting Dhruva out of the family. The struggle for importance is seen when she thinks: "I must show Baba something, 'anything' to take his attention away from Dhruva sitting on his lap. I must make him listen to me not to Dhruva. I must make him ignore Dhruva." (The Dark Holds No Terror p.32) When the untimely death snatches the boy away, her mother says that Saru has killed Dhruva: "You did it, you killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead?" (The Dark Holds No Terror p.191) Saru puts herself in the dock. The guilt clings to her and haunts her like a ghost. Saru never boldly refutes or denies the charge of murder except in the confession to her father. Dhruva's demise has always been her subconscious desire and there is very thin demarcation between her wish and its fulfillment.

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In the novel, The Dark Holds No Terrors, the protagonist Saru, develops a sense of hatred towards her mother who always comes in the way of her progress, imposing restrictions on her daughter without understanding that the new generation is passing through a transitional period where the

daughter is sandwiched between tradition and modernity. Herein lies the conflict between the culture of the colonizer, the western and that of the colonized, the eastern; the conflict between Saru and her mother thus represents the clash between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern.

According to Manu, the law maker of the Indian orthodox culture, a woman can never be a decision maker. "A girl, a young woman, or even an old woman should not do anything independently, even in [her] house." When Saru expresses her desire to study medicine, her mother cannot sanction her desire to go to Mumbai and stay in a hostel. Her argument is that Saru is a girl," (The Dark Holds No Terrors, p.143) Saru resolves to be a doctor, hoping that a professional career could be "the key that would unlock the door out of this life." (The Dark Holds No Terror p.120) This, indeed, is the impact of the colonizer's culture. With a deep seated hurt feeling, she tells her mother: "you don't want me to have anything. You don't want me to do anything. You don't even want me to live." (The Dark Holds No Terrors p. 142) Her final decision to join the Medical College is an act of rebellion, a step towards liberation from a traditional stereotyped existence.

As a typical product of the eastern culture, the Indian girl- child is confused and bewildered at the physical changes taking place within her body at the time of puberty. She feels abhorrent but helpless. With the growth of her body, she is painfully aware of her stepping into that onerous and mortifying state of woman hood. "I can remember closing my eyes and praying . . . Oh, God, let it not happen to me. Let there be a miracle and let me be the one female to whom it doesn't happen." (The Dark Holds No Terrors p. 62) With the physical growth, she becomes vulnerable to the monstrous and rapacious tentacles of the society.

As Saru studies Anatomy and Physiology, the education introduced into the colonized country by the colonizer, the shame of being a woman falls from her for the first time. It is to her like a sudden release from a prison of fears. The hostel life is a kind of "rebirth" into a totally different world where she does not have to stay outside for " those three days," she is no longer an 'untouchable,'

she can even talk about it, “oh, damn. I must change again. It’s like a tap, that’s what it is.” (The Dark Holds No Terror p. 96) For the first time she feels proud of her female ‘identity’ and learns to hold her body straight, to dress and walk gracefully. She can remember “walking as stiffly as possible, holding my pelvis rigid, willing it not to move, so that I would be as unlike her [her mother] as possible.” (The Dark Holds No Terror p. 05)

Saru’s next rebellion is her love for Manu. Manu is the saviour, the ideal romantic hero who rescues her from insecure wooden existence in the maternal home. She finds him recognizing her worth as an individual, and admiring the qualities she possesses. Now Saru’s desire to escape femininity disappears and she sees herself “humbly adoring, worshipping and being given the father-lover kind of love that was protective, condescending and yet all-encompassing and satisfying. There was no then, not as yet, craving for recognition, satisfaction.” (The Dark Holds No Terror p. 53)

She feels like the fisherman’s daughter who was asked by the king Shantanu to marry him. Saru gives herself fully and unconditionally to Manu to love him and to be loved.

When Kamala comes to know that her daughter is going to marry a man of her choice, the first question that comes out from her is: “what caste is he? Is he a Brahmin?” A characteristic question from a woman rooted in the orthodox culture of the colonized. An Indian traditional marriages one of the essential conditions is that the bride and the groom are of the Sarue caste. Kamala is shocked to hear her daughter’s decision to marry a Non-Brahmin. The departure of Saru from her mother is the first step towards autonomy; ‘for, the mother is the first pedagogue of the dos on the woman. Saru, however, fights back parental pressure, breaks the societal shackles and marries the man of her choice.

In the next phase of Saru’s life, one finds her a successful career woman enjoying the recognition of her individual identity.’ She becomes the object of admiring attention of her neighbors who

come to her regularly for advice and help. She feels exhilarated with the dignity and importance that her status as a doctor seems to have given her. She could no longer admit the idea of being “a small boat towed by a large ship” but is happy to be the larger ship itself. This is the woman’s heritage of the colonizer’s culture. Shashi Deshpande meanwhile shows how emancipation and success for a woman in the patriarchal Indian society can cause subversion of roles in the family and destroy happiness. The social acceptance and recognition she gains as a doctor and the demands on her time cleave a wedge in her relationship with Manu. Manu cannot tolerate people greeting her and ignoring him: “when we walked out of the 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 And so the esteem with which I was surrounded made me inches taller. But perhaps, the Saru thing that made me inches taller, made him inches shorter.” (The Dark Holds No Terror p. 36) Saru feels a gradual disappearance of love and attachment which she had once developed. She is assailed by feelings of guilt. She once persuaded Manu to give up writing poetry. He has now abandoned the plan of starting a journal, and has taken the job of a lecturer in a local college. Gone are the days when Manu repeated the most beautiful lines ever said by a lover to Saru: “I long to believe in immortality, if I am destined to be happy with you” and Manu, in turn, ceases “to wake up in thoughts of Saru.” (The Dark Holds No Terror p. 65)

Saru’s gradual change in attitude towards Manu and their marriage corresponds with her change in attitude towards sex. She finds “the aggressive, virile masculinity” a mere facade and the recent beard a mask to hide something to assert the thing he lacked. Though she has known and loved Manu, she is quite unnerved at the thought of marriage. It is perhaps the fear of sex, the unknown. Then, with marriage, she takes a different stand. “I was hungry for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love, of my being loved, of my being wanted.” In due course, she feels utterly humiliated at the thought of being used and reduced to “a dark, damp, smelly hole.” She sees sex as a dirty word and the experience, a terror, an inhuman insult to her personality. “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.”

As for Manu, his inflated ego bursts as he is forced to accept his wife as his equal. He does not come up to the societal expectation that a male should have a job and high income. He is far behind the ‘husband’ about whom Saru elaborates in her speech. A traditional woman walks a few feet behind her husband. The male is her superior in educational qualification as well. “If he is an M. A., she should be a B. A. Her stature should be less than that of her husband and her salary must not exceed his They will tell about economic independence and an independent identity. Forget the words. If Draupadi had been economically independent, if Sita had independent identity, you think their stories would have been different? No, there are things that have been voluntarily surrendered, consciously abandoned, because that is the only way to survive.”

In the Indian culture, a woman’s identity is defined by others, in terms of her relationship with men, i.e. as daughter, as wife, as mother, for she does not have an identity of her own. Saru has absolutely no respect for the abject acceptance of this dictum religiously practised by the Indian wives. The wife of one of Manu’s friends accepts total effacement of her very presence and position by remaining as a silent, unobtrusive “nameless waiter in a hotel” till the end of the dinner, unintroduced to the friends. This lady obviously remains a shadow whereas Saru wants to be the substance itself casting a shadow. “If I cast no shadow I do not exist.” (The Dark Holds No Terror p. 159) Saru has utter contempt for her friend Smita who is happy to even change her name to “Gitanjali” just to please her husband.

The last phase of Sarita’s life brings her face to face with her own self. In feminist terms, Saru’s return to her parental home could be interpreted as what Kristeva calls . . . the refusal of the temporal order and the search for a landscape that would accommodate their need.” The homecoming helps her to sort out her problems, to analyze her life, to review and re-examine

her crisis. Standing in front of her parent's house, Saru feels like "ragged Sudama standing at the palace gates." She is only vaguely aware of what she has come to ask for: "It was not to comfort her father that she held come. It Was for herself. What she had hoped to find."

The escape from all the demanding roles gives her a sense of relief and an opportunity to reflect on her life. She realises how in her quest for freedom to be her-self, she has merely exchanged one role for another and in the process has become "just a ventriloquist's dummy." She knows that somewhere on the way she has lost contact with her real self which now lies obscured if not completely lost. She must peel away the multiple roles in which she has swaddled herself before she can arrive at the truth about herself. Saru leaves home twice in the novel, once to establish her independence from her mother's suppression and next to establish her indispensability to her husband and children. When victimised by Manu, she starts on a quest for home. "Home is the place where, when you have to go there. They have to take you in." Saru is taken in but she finds herself still a homeless refugee," a fleeting interruption." This feeling of homelessness drives her occasionally to a longing to be released from existence itself: Even Saru the realist who sees the ultimate human reality in the human body and in its process of decay, finds aloneness as a painful but inescapable human condition. She realises that the suffering of multitudes does not mitigate one's own suffering in any way. The alienated soul cries out in despair: "would it always be a failure, any attempt to reach out to another human being? Had she been chasing a chimera all her life; hoping for some one? Perhaps the only truth is that man is born to be cold, lonely and alone." (The Dark Holds No Terror p. 219)

However, this awareness does not leave Sarita in despair. Shashi Deshpande brings in a note of positive affirmation by offering her protagonist the realisation that if life is an illusion it is the only reality that we know. "Therefore the only thing is to go on as if it is real knowing all the while it is only an illusion." (The Dark Holds No Terror p. 220)

The brief stay away from Manu and children provides Saru with a chance to review her past, her own psychology, her own place in relation to others in the family and the society around. With the self-realisation comes the decision to confront the problems. She must open the door to her husband and confront him fearlessly. Premā Nandakumar writes: “ Sarita cannot forget her children or the sick needing of her expert attention; and so she decides to face her home again.” The darkness of the shadow, of the light, of the fear leaves her. Saru resolves to face her life like Sudama who steps out into the world calmly and courageously. Deshpande and Saru seem to think that a woman’s life is her own and the time has come when a woman must think as an individual.

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