

Silence in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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Abstract

With the emergence of Indian Women Novelists on the scene the image of woman as a silent sufferer and as the main source of sustenance of Indian family life and culture at the expense of her autonomy and happiness gave way to an independent, self-willed, free-thinking individual--claiming her life to be her own. Idealized, self-abnegating and self-effacing traditional woman has become a passé. The present paper makes an attempt to analyze the facets of feminism in the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* of Shashi Deshpande because the novel readily encompasses most of the factors of the above-mentioned Act which voices the woman's victimization in the name of culture and tradition. The novel is not only a fine example of male domination in the form of sexual violence but is also an incisive analysis of human psyche as it interacts with the people around, male and female alike.

Key words- emergence, sustenance, autonomy, vilence

Introduction

V.T. Girdhari (79) says that the nature of themes has changed from social to individual. And he goes on to make a sweeping generalization that with the big trio (Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K Narayan) it was a novel with a purpose, a sense of cause unlike the contemporary novelists whose sole concern has shifted to the complexities of man-woman relationships and the subtleties of feminine consciousness. He seems to be unaware of the fact that whatever the degree of relative focus on the individual characters vis-à-vis the social back drop the writer brings to his work a perspective and a world view. Writers invariably include enough social reality to ground their characters in the fictional world. The fact that the thematic focus is on man-woman relationships does not in any way diminish the quality of the new writing. In fact Shashi Deshpande maintains that it is difficult "to control the flow

of creative writing within the narrow banks of political and social reform, or of any message at all” (Naik 26). She seems to agree with Saul Bellow that the messages are for Western Union to give. What the writer does is to try and make sense of life for herself and incidentally for the reader, as she puts it “That, as a writer, I am interested above all in an individual human being, that her understanding of herself is, to me, the real goal is never understood” “To her the writer’s integrity is far more important than any avowed purpose”(Naik 28). She further says “In our country, the idea that the writer should adhere to a cause is actually a pointer both to the importance of the writer and the need for social reform. Certainly, no one, least of all a writer, who is supposed to have a greater sensitivity, can ignore the social and political realities of our lives. And most writers, good writers that is, do not ignore them. But once again I have to emphasize that it is the effect to these things on a person that interests the writer” (Naik 28). In the hands of women novelists like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Namita Gokhale, Arundhati Roy and others woman is allowed to be her own gravitational force beyond the pull of patriarchy.

Feminism

Feminism in Indian English Literature is influenced by the Western Feminist Movement. The freedom struggle under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Raja Ram Mohan Roy who worked for the abolition of Sati and child marriage, which were evil practices prevalent in India, paved the way to fight for women’s rights. Social reformers also encouraged widow remarriages. The status of women improved with the spread of education, employment opportunities and laws for women’s rights. The government has been passing various Acts for the empowerment of women like reservation in education and employment sectors. Consider the recent Act which came into force since October 6, 2006 against Domestic Violence:

The protection of women from Domestic Violence Act, 2006 comes into effect from Thursday, according to a notification issued by the Ministry of Women and Child Development.

Primarily meant to provide protection to the wife or a female live-in partner from violence at the hands of the husband or the male live-in partner or his relatives to mother, sisters and windows.

The Act covers abuse or threat of abuse, whether physical, sexual, verbal, emotional or economic. Harassment, by way of unlawful dowry demands to a woman or here relatives also come under this definition.

(The Hindu October 26, 2006)

Discussion

The Dark Holds No Terrors (1980) is the first published novels of Deshpande. On being asked about her favourite work by Vanamala Viswanatha she replied, “[...] the most satisfactory has been, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. It has been a simple theme and fewer characters.” (Pathak 234). The novel incorporates most of the themes which recur in her later novels. Her writing career reflects an unending process of problematizing life’s conflicts and compromises, resolutions and irresolutions, ironies and affirmations, triumphs and tragedies. Major themes of her fiction have man-woman relationship, human desire, longing body, gender discrimination, marginlization, rebellion and protest. She has never identified herself with any particular group of writers whether of India or aboard. Her love for Somerset Maugham was “just a passing phase.” while Jane Austen had a more lasting influence on her. She told Vanamala Viswanatha, “I still read her regularly. But I don’t think there have been any conscious influences on my writing as.” (Pathak 223) She also enjoyed reading Dickens and Tolstoy. And a careful analysis of her fiction shows some influence of the Bronte Sisters, Jane Austen, Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing and Erica Jong. Her writings were stimulated at the same time by Germain Greer Simon de Beauvior and Deshpande told her interviewer, “When I read them, they stimulated me.” She says that it happened quite late. “Quite late much after I started writing.” (Pathak 233). Deshpande does not believe in the theories propounded by Western Feminist theoreticians like Kate Millet, Simon de Beauvoir and others nor does she approve of the solution they propose for women’s problems. She

told Lakshmi Holmstrom in an interview. “But to me feminism isn’t a matter of theory: it is difficult to apply Kate Millet or Simon de Beauvoir whoever to the reality of our daily lives”. (Pathak 248). Critics like Premila Paul, K.M.Pandey, P.Venugopalan, P. Ramamoorthi, Sarabjit Sandhu and V.T. Girdhari considered *The Dark Holds No Terrors* as a feminist novel. Deshpande’s maiden novel probes such themes as women’s oppression, rape, male dominance, victimization, search for identity, gender discrimination, bonding and bondage.

Sarita, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, represents the journey of modern woman towards financial independence, emotional balance and social recognition. According to K.R.Srinivas Iyengar, Sarita is a lady who “defies her own mother to become a doctor, defies her caste to marry outside, and defies social conventions by using Boozie to advance her career.”(758). P.Venugopalan observes: “Sarita’s growth occurs in three phases, namely the female and the feminine, occurring concurrently, and the feminists” (18). *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is the story of Sarita who is a two-in-one women, a successful doctor in the day time and at night “a terrified trapped animal” (Deshpande195) in the hands of her husband, Manohar a teacher of English at a third-rate college. The novel opens with Sarita returning after fifteen years to her father’s house -- a place she once decided not to return to --under the pretext of consoling her widower father. She finds it an opportunity to flee from the nightly torments inflicted on her by Manohar. She returns home “to sleep peacefully the night through (Deshpande 27). She reviews her relationships with her husband, her dead mother, dead brother Dhruva and her children Renu and Abhi. Sarita, born in a conservative Brahmin family, spends her childhood repeatedly reminded of her femaleness by her mother. Her mother shows sexist/gender difference in her treatment of her son Dhruva and daughter Sarita:

“Don’t go out in the sun. You will get 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 is different. He’s a boy” (Deshpande 45)

Such bitter experiences of Sarita’s childhood breed sibling jealousy and a tendency to hate her mother. Talking about the complexion Shalmalee Palekar states, “there is still an obsession with fair complexion in Indian society, especially as applied to marriageable women” (Naik 51). Sarita views her mother as a rival in the game of power, who perpetuates patriarchy. The mother is a symbol of authority and restricts Sarita’s freedom in every aspect constantly reminding her that she is a girl. Deshpande goes to the roots of the malady of women perpetrating tyranny over women and relates it to the fact that these victimizer women have internalized the patriarchal tradition. There is another reference in the novel to a woman who, ill treated by her in-laws drowns herself in a well. There is a reference to yet another woman victim who is tied to a peg by the in-laws in the cattle shed and fed. Sarita detests the merciless judgment of her mother who casually dismisses the topic saying. “She perhaps deserves it.” Deshpande’s thrust here is not on man’s cruelty to women but woman’s cruelty to woman.

The childhood experience of watching her brother drown in water and die gives her a sense of guilt that she is somehow responsible for the death of her brother. Her mother screams at her “you killed him. Why didn’t you die? why are you alive when he is dead?”. (Deshpande 197) In her mother’s presence she feels an excessive need to prove herself to the family. She carries this childhood obsession to prove her worth into adulthood and is convinced that she is no less than a male child. She hates the idea of being a traditional woman “to get married and end up doing just what your mother did, seemed to me not only terrible, but also damnable” (Deshpande 141) As a child Sarita had seen the plight of the grandmother disowned by her inhuman husband and considered “an unwanted burden by her own people. This prompts Sarita to put great premium on economic independence which she thinks would be a safeguard against suppression. Against the wish of her mother, Sarita goes to Bombay to study medicine. The hostel life is a kind of rebirth for her because it provides

an escape from the rituals imposed by tradition. Sarita thinks she does not have to stay outside like a pariah for “those three days you are no longer an ‘untouchable’, you can even talk about it” Deshpande (87). The rejection of rituals as the vestiges of past marks the beginning of an assertion of self. The innate urge for autonomy and a compelling desire to live a life independent of her mother/past/ritual find a free play when she joins the hostel to study medicine. She becomes acutely conscious of her femaleness when her menstruation starts. The phase of her growth as a girl in her orthodox home is marked by a claustrophobic atmosphere. Later on Sarita falls in love with Manohar and defies the authority of the mother by marrying him. She takes a vow, “I’ll show her (mother) I’ll make her realize” (Deshpande 60). This is a step towards autonomy. Sarita seeks freedom through marriage. Marriage is viewed as an alternative to the sense of bondage experienced at the parental family. Resenting the role of a daughter, Sarita looks forward to the role of a wife with the hope that her new role will help her in winning her freedom. However Sarita recollects. “I had come away from my parents in a fever of excitement after the last die was cast, the decisions taken, my boats burnt. There could be no turning back. Then, this ridiculous anticlimax” (Deshpande 31-32).

Educated, well read, well informed and professionally competent Sarita continues to gain reputation as a doctor in society. The initial phase of her married life is marked by peace and harmony. They meet in marriage as equals. Manu is as a future “Shelley” gives him the necessary confidence and his unreserved appreciation of her in turn pleases her ego leaving no scope for clash of wills. In those early years of marriage despite the unclean atmosphere of their small dingy room, sex seemed a clean act. “I became in an instant a physically aroused woman, with an infinite capacity for loving and giving, with a 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” (Deshpande 34-35). The very economic independence, on the strength of which she had become independent, now becomes her bane. “Success and humiliation (are) inextricably linked together” (Deshpande 110).

Marriage proves to be a dark room where only terror awaits her. It does not take long for her to realize that “she had exchanged one pair of pinching, torturing shoes for another” (Deshpande 74). “The chalked lines drawn by others” refuse to leave even in marriage. Only the power centers wear different masks. There are two instances which shatter the peace at home. The first is when Sarita suddenly becomes the favorite doctor of the slum dwellers while attending to the wounded in a factory explosion. Sarita’s overnight success in her profession leaves “nothing” for Manu who feels “totally ignored” (Deshpande 42). The second incident which makes Manu to get “rough and abrupt is Sarita’s interview for a special issue on career woman brought out by a woman’s magazine. The interview’s casual query put forth to Manu, “How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?” (Deshpande 200) These words of the interviewer triggers sadism in Manu’s sexual relationship with Sarita. It is at this juncture that the terrors of the night begin. He turns out an animal at night and attacks Sarita, thus becoming the rapist of his own wife. “This (is) not to be death by strangulation, it (is) a monstrous invasion of my body” (Deshpande 11-12). Unable to come to terms with his failure in life, Manu lets his wounded male pride manifest itself in the form of sexual sadism. “The hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar body” (Deshpande 102). become an eternal nightmare. As Adrienne Rich puts it, rape does not deal with the rape of the body alone but with the rape of the mind as well. Sarita feels demeaned at the thought of being used and reduced to “a dark, damp, smelly hole.” ‘Sex’ becomes a dirty word, an inhuman assault on her personality; sexual experience a terror. Premila Paul argues that “to outshine others and be a resounding success is the be all and end all of Saru’s life, and that end seems to justify the means” (Dhawan 62).

Her socializing with Boozie, the extra marital relationship is a calculated move in that direction. She is elevated from an ordinary, general practitioner to the Assistant Honorary at the suburban hospital and then goes on to have private consulting rooms of her own. She is driven by power. “If I cast no shadow, I do not exist”(Deshpande 144). Her rapid academic and social climb evokes inferiority complex in Manu. The unhealthy male ego poisons his mind. The lover in him dies. He is metamorphosed into a mean, loathsome individual.

Shashi Deshpande in depicting Manu, seems to show how the stronghold of tradition makes scapegoats of men and turns them into victimizers. Shashi Deshpande maintains remarkable objectivity and avoids generalizations. In fact the novel explores questions like, “Who is the victim and who is the predator? Are the roles so distinct, so separate? Or are we each of us, both? (Deshpande 144) Sarita analyzes and introspects:

There is something in the male..... that is whittled down and ultimately destroyed by female domination is not so with a female. She can be dominated, she can submit, and yet hold something in herself in reserve. As if there is something in her that prevents erosion and self-destruction (If not, she would have been destroyed too easily. But then have I not been destroyed?) Does the sword of domination become lethal only when a woman holds it over a man?(Deshpande 77)

Sarita in such passages questions the double standards inherent in traditional perception of man and woman. However there comes a stage in Sarita’s life when she is prepared to give up her job, if that forms the source of their marital discord. She even offers to resign her position as a doctor. It is in Manu’s response to this suggestion of Sarita that Shashi Deshpande reveals the intimate knowledge of the neurotic world of the likes of Manu. He shudders at the suggestion of her giving up the job and tries cajoling her to dissuade her from resigning her position. Premila Paul observes: “He cannot think of going back to the ‘the shabby middle-class way of life’ with cheap clothes and third rate schools for the children. He lets pass her relationship with Boozie with half-shut eyes.” (Dhawan: 64). Manu displays least human dignity in such instances.

Recollecting her husband’s tyranny, Sarita expects sympathy from her father but to no avail. Rather he, after listening to all the failures in her life in adjusting with her husband, turns his back on her, pretending to put rice on the stove. Sarita feels that if it had been an arranged marriage, she would have got the support from her parents. Despite the daily nightly torture she is put to, she continues to cling “to the tenuous shadow of a marriage

whose substance has long since disintegrated, because I have been afraid of proving my mother right”(Deshpande 201). The mother had already predicated failure of her marriage even before it was held. “I know all these ‘love marriages.’ It’s love for a few days, and then quarrels all the time. Don’t come crying to us then” (Deshpande 62). Finally Sarita realizes that she is her own refuge. This is what the epigraph of the novel emphasizes:

You are your own refuge:
There is no other refuge,
This refuge is hard to achieve.

(The Dharmapada)

Arindam Chaterji observes the state at this juncture as “caught in a web of false relationships, she chooses to step out into a temporary abyss. In other words she decides not to please anyone in her present world--either her husband or children or parents or friends.” He also observes, “most critics-- Nalinabh Tripathi (1998) Premila Paul (1998), Muktha Atrey and Viney Kirpal (1998), K.M. Pandey (1998) Sunita Reddy (2001) Domini Savio (2001) and Jasbir Jain (2003) read this adult working life of Sarita as an act of rebellion against her mother’s socio-cultural codes, or in other words, as a refusal of the gender role that her mother tries to enforce on her (Naik 98)”.

However successful Sarita might be as a doctor she is not spared the dilemma of self-evolution in that she starts wondering and even has apprehensions that even as a doctor she was just a “well trained animal..... capable of making the right noises, the right gestures automatically” (Deshpande 19) and that the world might perceive “the white coat containing nothing” While professional success creates doubts of unworthiness in a woman it would have been certainly the converse in case of a man. However she had to admit to herself that she might be a ventriloquist’s dummy but profession is a “vital crutch” without which she could not hold herself up together. Finally at the moment of utter despair it is the profession that balances her and gives her the much needed courage to face reality.

The stay at her parental house paves way for her better understanding of her relationship with her husband, her dead mother and brother Dhruva, and her children Renu and Abhi. She develops enormous courage to confront reality. The dark no longer holds any terror to her. She realizes, “my life is my own” (Deshpande 270). Her failures as a daughter, sister, wife and mother are because of her childhood anxiety. She learns from Madav’s words to her father, “I can’t spoil my life because of that boy. It’s my life after all”(Deshpande 208). And it is this assertion by the boy who gives Sarita the confidence to tell her father, “Baba, if Manu comes tell him to wait. I’ll be back as soon as I can” (Deshpande 221). She is now convinced that Indian women especially career women, have to learn to reconcile to their womanhood, to make peace with oneself in the full awareness of the rights and duties of an awakened individual. Shashi Deshpande does not stop short of feminist concerns but raises issues like man’s essential loneliness and others which are essentially human problems.

Shalmalee Palekar views reconciliation in Deshpande’s novels as “It is never easy for women in societies like in India to break away from traditional notions of womanhood, especially as there is no wide spread system of support available, such as women’s support groups”(Naik 64). Shashi Deshpande does not merely voice female resistance to patriarchal ideologies but also focuses on the strategies of reconciliation and re-adjustment. It has become a Hamlet’s problem for the critics to judge whether Deshpande is a feminist writer or not because she insisted over a long period of time on being called simply “a writer” and not “a woman writer” much less “a feminist writer.” Annoyed at the feminist label Shashi Deshpande retorted, “When a man writes of the particular problems a man is facing he is writing a male propaganda. Nobody says that why is it said only about woman writers? (*The Literary Criterion* 33) The novelist scales new heights in portraying women in her novels with a natural style of her own. She does not idealize or sentimentalize them. She told an interviewer, “My characters take their own ways. I’ve heard people saying we should have strong women characters. But my writing has to do with women as they are. “(Literature Alive12). Irked by the delimiting feminist label, she maintained that; that she should not be evaluated by her gender and that her authorial position stays beyond male/female dichotomy. She refuses to adopt it because ‘I’ functions as both male and female authorial

position and it's neutral to gender classification. When asked whether she would like to call herself a feminist, she replied to Geeta Gangadharan, "Yes, I would, I am a feminist in the sense, I think, we need to have a world which we should recognize as a place for all of us human beings. There is no superior of one species" (Pathak 254). Lately however she has slightly revised her position in the essay, "Why I am a Feminist" (2003). She says, "It took me years to say even to myself, I am a feminist (Pathak 83). Her feminist concerns do not correspond to that of the feminist writers of the West. Her concerns deeply belong to social, cultural economic spaces and paradigms of India. However she is categorical in stating that by Social-political and economic reality she does not have in mind the events per se, but it's what events do to people that really interests the writer. She further says that people misinterpret feminism even after so much has been written about it. In her own words, "people still equate it with hating men, abandoning families, lesbianism etc. The idea of feminism wants women to be accepted as responsible human beings, has not still got across" (32). Critics such as Usha Tambe, Adele King and P. Rama Moorthi have considered her works as a staple material for Indian feminist writing. As King maintains, "She is well versed in Hindu and Buddhist thought..... Her feminism combines an awareness of classical Indian values derived from Sanskrit and Pali works with contemporary women's needs" (Pathak 159-160).

Conclusion

It is unjust to drag Deshpande's fiction into the category militant of Western variety. Unlike hard core feminists she does not agree that being a wife or mother is some thing that is unnecessarily imposed on woman. One can understand that it is a constructive concept of feminism to assist contemporary woman in establishing her identity not only as a role-defined social function but also as an individual social function but also as an individual functioning creatively and productively within and without. Shashi Deshpande aptly says: "The writer explores the gaps, the silences, the ambiguities, the complexities, the contradictions-and this not to get to any kind of conclusion, because often there is no conclusion. What matters for the writer is understanding and possibly reconciliation; this is what human life is all about." (Naik 29). Accordingly Shashi Deshpande chooses a female protagonist with a double vision;

one who can also look into herself, question, see her own lapses as well as strong points and feel accountable to the others around her, reconcile a bit and make life possible.

Shashi Deshpande presents a study of life with all its intricacies in this novel. Her conviction is that a writer should try and find out the answers to the question “How do we live?” Her first novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is the first step she took in this direction. She says that she is enormously heartened by knowing that centuries ago, a writer named Kalidasa who declared that drama was not a method of preaching, but it presented a study of life, not the moral of life.

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