

The Dark Holds No Terrors: A Postcolonial Reading

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Even in this postcolonial period when women are said to have equal rights and opportunities with men, marriage and motherhood remain the main goals of the girl's life, however liberated she may be. Her personal achievement, however great, pales down before her marital status implying her dependence on man. Marriage is the most powerful means that society uses to ensure female subjugation and the institution of marriage, is cleverly camouflaged by sanctity only to ensure male domination and to prevent any questioning by women. The image of woman in Indo-English novel is based on the traditional ancient literature of India, which showed woman as a devoted wife or a devoted mother. The post colonial writers of Indo-English novels equipped with a new education and sociability have different perspective of the images of woman. In the post colonial period liberal thought was brought in to our country and it was also propagated by western education. The woman novelists were responsible for the new image of woman struggling against the oppressive social norms of the male dominated society. The image of the woman in the postcolonial fiction is a crystallized form of the two different cultures. The image of woman as a custodian of extraordinary moral virtues incorporated with devotion and sacrifice has become an archetype. The image of woman in quest of her identity has emerged from the archetype.

In this respect there occurred changes in theme, emphasis and design in the literature of the twentieth century. The imaginative and creative responses of the writers are related to the changing world view and the questioning attitude thereby developed by it. Let us restrict our view to the section of novels alone with the list of great novelists like Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Markandeya, Anita Desai, Manohar Malgonkar, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kushwant Singh, Nayanthara Sahgal, Anitha Kumar and Shashi Deshpande besides the unmentioned numerous others.

These Indian novelists deal with the society in its rich and varied customs and view the predicament of women in different dimensions. The attitude to women has changed in recent times. Their writings are based not only on observations of external behaviour but also on the internal journey in the psychological realm of the feminine sensibilities. A few women novelists like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande make straight journey into the psyche of their women characters that are torn on account of the tensions generated by the discord between the individual and the surroundings. They have started trying to understand Indian women and portray her in their novels.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the living dynamic women writers in Indian English literature and she published many novels and collections of short stories. Some of them are, *That Long Silence*(1988), *If I Die Today*(1982), *Come up and Be Dead*(1983), *Roots and Shadows*(1983), *The Dark Holds No Terrors*(1981), *The Binding Vine*(1992), *The Intrusion and Other Stories*(1993), *A Matter of Time and The Narayanpur Incident*(1982). The project is a brief study of the selected novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. It deals with the problems of a career woman and her marital constraints. Deshpande shows marriage as a patriarchal institution enslaving women to a lifetime of male domination. While revealing the travails of the educated married woman in the contemporary Indian society, Deshpande wants to expose the educated

men who are snobs and chauvinistic. Jayant in *Roots and Shadows*, Manu in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, and Mohan in *That Long Silence* are all examples to cite. They cannot see their wives as equals and expect them to be always docile, obliging and submissive.

Submission of the wife is ensured with the help of socialization that begins in early childhood and extends well into adolescence and adulthood. Girl children are trained to think, speak, dress and behave in such a way as to give preference to the males around them and stereotypes of mythical figures like Sita, Savitri, Draupadi and Gandhari are given to them to emulate. But, when they grow and get educated, their new sense of identity and equality clash with the internalized sense of submission and docility and consequently, when they get married later, their marriages threaten to fall asunder. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes in her article “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*”:

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Between patriarchy and imperialism subject constitution and object formation the figure of woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘Third-World Woman’ caught between tradition and modernization. (65)

It is this tension between tradition and modernity that Deshpande deals with in her novels. As Simone De Beauvoir observes “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature which is described as feminine” (146). Deshpande’s novels show this socialization and the stultifying effects of culturally determined ideas of marriage and wifehood on Indian women. “Indu, Saru and Jaya all desperately try to fit themselves to the prescribed image before they learn to question the image itself” (Roy 50). Our society visualizes “Women as mothers, daughters, sisters and wives who care for others, never as individuals” (Adhikari 114). The woman accepts this because the models given her to emulate are mythological women like Sita, Draupadi and Gandhari who never framed a question regarding their individuality.

Shashi Deshpande’s novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* lends itself to multiple critical positions. It presents, in an important way, a critique of the postcolonial assumptions that are embedded in contemporary texts. This particular novel addresses a fundamental question: “Does a politico-cultural movement like postcolonialism liberate meanings out of a text or does it actually just restrict meanings within a code” (Azim 30). A grammar of postcolonialism relies on a few unavoidable verbal constructs: “the centre and the periphery; the dominant and the silenced; the notion of shifting centres; the attempt at decolonizing, and the need to return to a purer past” (Emily 299). This novel by Shashi Deshpande is a metaphorical critique of these demands of a postcolonial grammar of thought and it makes an implicit statement about the anachronistic position of Third World women in an influentially male reading of postcolonial theories.

Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is her first published novel and as in the case of her other novels, the protagonist is a woman. Saru, the daughter with whom the mother never reconciled, especially after the death of her younger brother, defies her mother, goes to a city, studies to become a doctor and marries the man she chooses herself. It is a story of introspection. Saru, a successful doctor, finds that her husband, an English lecturer who once aspired to be a poet, is as split as Dr.Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. A loving father and a caring husband during the day

who, with evident pride shows off his doctor-wife to his colleagues, turns into a monster in bed, abusing her and bruising her, creating such terror in her that she finds no voice to scream for help. During the day, there is no evidence in his behavior to suggest anything that should be a cause for anxiety. There are only bruises which show that the night has been real. Her inability to protest, to find out what was actually wrong, prevents her from doing anything about this problem till she finds out that her mother who had spurned her all these days had died of cancer.

Saru goes back to her father's house after many years because her marriage had alienated her from her mother all these years. It is here, living with her father and Madhav, the young student who stays with her father that she tries to come to terms with the various events in her life. It is here that all the tortuous introspection goes on. What is interesting, however, is that this introspection cannot be compared to a journey which reaches a goal, which gives the sense of something that has been fulfilled. Saru, the protagonist, who is looking for someone with whom she could share her fears, finally tells her father everything, in a manner that reminds one of the ancient mariners in Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner*, who compels the wedding guest to listen to his story. It is true that in this novel, the figure of mother-more than that of the mother-in-law, who is conventionally seen by the women writers as a dominating figure-takes an ambivalent shape. There is very often a sense of frustration, of non-comprehension, of resistance in the daughter when she thinks of the mother. "However, this complex relationship between the mother and the daughter cannot be simplified as hatred or can it be claimed that her heroines are anti-matriarchal" (Swain 34). The ambiguity of Saru's relationship with her mother is not taken into consideration by many of the critics who have taken up this novel for interpretation. Most of the readings of this novel seem to be driven by the compelling desire to make woman an autonomous being. The protagonist of one novel is sufficient reason for generalizing about the category woman:

The woman in order to achieve her freedom seeks marriage as an alternative to the bondage created by the parental family. The simple need to be independent eventually becomes a demand of the inflated ego and takes shape as the love for power over others. She resents the role of a wife with the hope that her new role will help her in winning her freedom.
(Prasanna 17)

This kind of criticism, on the one hand, holds such tradition-bound notions as 'one should be good to the mother' and on the other, the western individualistic notion of freedom. The insensitivity to the questions of difference, the notion that the Indian woman can be easily defined and identified is in accordance with the dominant nationalistic search for the essential Indian subject.

It is not that certain statements that are applicable in general to the Indian women cannot be made. The presence of a dominant cultural mode does enable one to use certain generalizations. This is perhaps one of the many overarching generalizations which could be made in a patriarchal society like India. But the problem with these overarching generalizations is that they can be used everywhere; that the specific case of one novel, one woman character is made to stand for the generality of a real world of women. This is clearly seen not only in the comments regarding marriage as being a door leading to freedom from parental bondage but also in those interpretations where the protagonist is made to stand for all the women presented in the novel. This, in spite of such extreme notions as that protagonist is 'anti-matriarchal'.

It is not possible to accept such easy classifications if we remind ourselves of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's warning regarding the recovery of the voice of woman through autobiography – "the woman in culture may be the site of internalized phallocracy" (188). Deshpande's protagonist Saru herself, does not give the reader the feeling that she is anti-mother. Saru, while trying to sort out her own reaction to her husband's split-personality, also tries to come to terms with the unrelenting nature of the mother. Her mother had refused to see her daughter till she died. A feeling that her daughter's irresponsibility was the cause of her son's drowning strengthened her dislike for Saru. Yet it is Saru's decision to go to a different place, and study medicine, and a little later, Saru's decision to marry Manohar a man whom she herself chose, which act as a turning point in Saru's mother's relationship with her daughter. When the daughter was mentioned, she says, "What daughter? I have no daughter" (109). Saru herself believes at one point that it is because her mother cursed her that she is unhappy in her marriage, and is irreconcilable with her childhood. Yet her search does not end with simple answers like a mother hating her daughter, or a daughter hating the mother.

However, easy resolutions are what some of the interpretations are looking for. "Many of the critics who have written about the protagonists of Shashi Deshpande's novels, do so, while eliminating all traces of the other women who are present in the novels" (Madhu Jain 220). This generalizing tendency is reflected in their analyses too:

The woman's emancipation is not in repudiating the claims of her family, but in drawing upon untapped inner reserves of strength. The wife, in the end is therefore not a rebel but a redeemed wife – one who has broken the long silence, one who is no longer afraid of the dark. She is a wife reconceptualised as woman and an individual – a marked contrast to the older generation of woman around her with their uncomplaining, unresisting fatalistic attitude. Hers is the dilemma of the new woman that could be resolved when the claims of selfhood are reconciled with the claims made upon her by the family and society. (Rajeshwari 204)

Reading the novel contrapuntally, where the postcolonial arguments are juxtaposed with these interpretations, one gains a different perspective into the novel. One can read Saru, not as a rebellious daughter who is searching for her self-identity, for her freedom, not as an egoist who cannot understand the inferiority complex of her husband, not as the guilty sister who was responsible for the death of her brother, not as a daughter who was never forgiven by the mother, not as a traveller who goes on to a spiritual quest that ends in no resolution, but as a woman who possesses "white, soft and clean hands in the beginning of the narration" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 36), "and roughened palms towards its conclusion" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 165).

Simons De Beauvoir expresses his own views on man-woman nexus in his famous book *The Second Sex*:

Man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general, whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria without reciprocity.... Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees.....she

appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex....absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to man and he with reference to her, she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. (534)

The male body, which doesn't need a name, entraps a female body for the social norm and laws have empowered him to take the possession of a female body. This very act is disastrous, as the woman has been silenced. Hence, silence becomes the existence reality for her words are strangled and her body subjugated. The sweet sensations, even if felt, are consigned to the silence of torture and pain. Right from the beginning, Deshpande has clearly stated the fact that the female body is a site of forced occupation or colonization in which the master has the will and freedom to use and abuse it. The ultimate reality to Deshpande is the female body. The other experiences of the body such as the thrill and disgust of menstruation, the changing anatomy and its attraction are important, for these changes make a woman what she is and prepare her for her awareness of other bodies, in particular, of male bodies. This results in marriage and physical relation. The awareness of one's own body as an object speaks for itself when others get attracted. During her youth, Sarita is aware of the growing changes in her body and its demands,

Man and woman, male and female, how exciting that game had seemed! And, that she could play that game as well had seemed even more incredibly exciting 'you're a woman now', they had told her when she began menstruating... I am a woman... Had come to her when she had first felt a man look at her, when she had fact unwilling response within her to that look. (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 123)

The emotions of love and the recognition of the demands of sexuality should be always within the social institution of marriage. Hence, a woman should and must occupy some social space to be identified as a wife, mother, daughter and a sister. She has to be in the guardian of her father, husband and son. Hence, the woman in India is simply been trapped in the Brahminic worldview that she cannot have an independent existence. Sarita has been fed with all these norms; her mother accused her of her brother's Dhruva's death "Why didn't you die? Why are you alive and he is dead" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 34-35). To a mother, a boy is all the more important, but not a girl. Her father, too, takes least interest in her studies or development; he shows no love, anger nor dislike towards Sarita. His indifference can be analysed as an indirect expression of patriarchy that is emotionally injurious. Physically and socially there are different measures that patriarchy employs in placing woman and marking their space. Shashi Deshpande writes:

Have you noticed that the wife always walks a few steps behind her husband? That's important very important, balance it's symbolic of the truth. 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 is 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...women's magazines will tell you that a married should be an equal partnership. That's non-sense. Rubbish. No partnership can be over equal. It will always be unequal, but take care that it's unequal in favor of your husband. If the scales tilt in your favor, God help you, both of you. (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 137)

Neither God nor even her parents can help Sarita, she had married, the one-time promising and charismatic young poet against her parents wish. In her many acts of violation of societal norms, Sarita defies her parents in studying medicine and becoming a doctor, defies them to marry Manohar, and then breaks them to marry Manohar, and then breaks away from domesticity, as she cannot talk his sadism any more. She escapes from his nightmarish brutality man other in on her every night when he feels that his wife has overtaken him professionally and financially. In all these acts of deviation she finds herself lonely and left alone. And finally, she goes to her father's home, without love and beyond a life of fulfilling domesticity, and wants the old self again.

Sarita is not a traditional one to disapprove of sex, but to her sex is in fact an expression of love.

I was insatiable, not for sex, but for love; each act of love was a triumphant assertion of our love. Of my being loved. Of my being wanted. If I ever had any doubts, I had only turn to him and ask him to prove his love for me. And he would...again and again and again" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 40).

In the beginning love and sex was fulfillment of life to Sarita, but now "sex is a dirty world" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 133). It had become dirty because of Manohar's ego. All her inner sentiments, sensitivities and her self-identity had been trampled and crushed by his ego. Union with Manohar had turned to slavery as if "Everything in a girl's life, it seemed, was shaped to that simple purpose of pleasing a male, endless nights of torture make her put in crudely: "my husband is a sadist" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 199). Sarita's superior economic position of a reputed lady doctor in the society is not accepted by Manohar. Earlier whenever Manohar was rough and abrupt with her she thought it was only due to her long tired day in the hospital that made her shrink from his love making. But, when the egoistic nature of Manohar continues in hurting her the more, She becomes like a patient having Carcinomas dying inch-by-inch, bit-by-bit, and at last waiting for death.

The pain and shame, she undergoes is a deep feeling anguish, kills the very creativity and imagination, in transforming the person into something different. Her pain, her suffering, cannot be uttered in public but she feels her body as a burden, which her husband would not feel even if he had thought that body many pains. The word pain brings a kind of transformation and the physical pain becomes a form of internalization of social guilt. Sarita feels that she is raped not only physically but also psychologically. To be a woman, thus, is to embrace forced sickness, both physically and mentally. Sarita is renamed as Geetanjali after marriage, preparing her symbolically to go through the pain of life, infected violently by the sickness of patriarchy:

The hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar body. And above me, a face I could not recognize. Total noncomprehension, completely; bewilderment, paralyzed me for a while. Then I began to struggle. But my body, hurt and painful, could do nothing against the fearful strength which over whelmed me. (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 112)

The brutal possession of the body is reduced in the multiplication of various forms of pain. Pain of loss, pain of physical suffering, and pain of mental traumas. It is not only the cruelty of her husband that fills her with grief, but her brother death, and her dejected life, pain and suffering of her mother and herself. The circles of pain that surround a woman may not possibly redeem her. But pain ultimately becomes a means of self-discovery that enables Sarita to take the decisive step of leaving her house, children and husband. In order to become free individual and to have an identity and with a purpose in life, she quits her house. On hearing through a friend about her mother's death a month ago, Saru wants to visit her father's house from where she had left as a young woman. She returns back after a gap of fifteen years. She returns as a well-established doctor and a mother of two children more out of an urge to escape from the hell of life she is passing through. She is confused, hopeless, dull almost thoughtless as a recluse.

She comes to her parental house to see her sense of belonging to the world but the same eludes her. Sarita is waiting outside her old home, like the old friend of lord Krishna Sudama in rags waiting outside the palace gets of lord Krishna and his queen Rukmini. But Sarita, unlike Sudama has a suitcase full of cloths, full of humility. She gets a cold reception at her father's house; at times Saru regrets her visit. "Why had it second so important to come here, and, at once?"(*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 17). Thus, back in her old home, and with the gradually realized comforting presences of Madhav and her father around her, whose first significant nurturing act for Sarita is to ensure a hastily made cradle for her to sleep in the old Puja room. She expects a loss of sympathy from her father after having become a hapless victim of her senseless choice of a love marriage, she moans, "It's my fault again. If mine had been an arranged marriage, if I had left it to them to arrange my life, would he have left me like this?" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 218).

Winnie Cott writes about the importance of mother's role in reflecting back to her child, the child's own self. "When the child looks at its mother, it sees itself. The child has to be seen in a way that makes it feel that it exists. Poor Sarita gets back from her mother a picture of ugliness" (78). As Sarita says, "I was an ugly girl, At least, my mother told' me so" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 61). It is clear that the mother had bounced back the own ugliness and Saru spontaneity had been marred to the life negation.

A particular woman who dances madly as if possessed by the divine spirit very symbolically represents this life-negation or false self-organization. Both the positive aptitude and athletes of one's life tells in her physics:

In her child's knowledge, Sarita coned know heart what she witnessed were her divided Sarita, as deeply violated and sprit by her malevolent

mother and has temple women was by the frightful Devi. But in an adult state she now knows, and that's the reason she is back in the old home to try and integrate her horrifically split personality. (Mohan 40)

Once, when Sarita's family is in Ooty, she is suddenly rocked by another traumatic scene of her early childhood when she was only four or five years old. Her mother had caught her firmly to comb her hair and young Sarita facing the window was happy seeing the Pony dancing on the green ground near their house.

The pony was jumping, running, with all the awkward energy of over enthusiasm, clumsy awkward though it seemed are its movement and the gentle slopping a green ground harmonized into a beautiful whole that somehow enchanted me. (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 113)

Sarita as a young girl is enchanted by this sight because the pony is free dancing and jumping. Though her mother turns her away from this sight cruelly and hurtfully, she cannot prevent her daughter from seeing and understand. Sarita had never been allowed to be free and spontaneous. But the only positive aspect her is that strength of memory to recalls these crucial losses her in her younger days. This helps her to restore thought a psychoanalytical process of regression, had already started in her father's house. She yearns for security, and emotional attachments, she wants has father to support her against Manu's brutality. She memorizes these thoughts, words and sentence to tell her father but when the real moment comes she blurts out and very crudely says, "My husband is a sadist" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 199).

Her father, a simple man fails to understand the words like-sadism, Love, cruelty, etc. Saru takes every possible step's to explain her problems and says that she wants to talk to him, not as a daughter, but as a woman to man. Her father expects that they should talk like matured persons, because, he says that this kind of relation- (a woman man) of intimacy or sharing of feelings, or communicating with each other had never taken place between him and his wife, He says "Silence has become a habit for us" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 199). As he starts enquiring Saru about the events, very slowly his unnatural composure and indifference disappear. Saru pours her heart out with all details about Manu's brutality and expresses her helplessness she says: "I couldn't fight back; I couldn't shout or cry...I could do nothing. I can never do anything. I just endure" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 201). She whole-heartedly expects moral support from her father, and very frantically requests him "But you have got to help me, you have got to. You did it once. And because you did I went to Bombay, met him an married him" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 204).

Sarita's father, without any response leaves her and goes away, she feels quite isolated and becomes sad. She wants to tells her father, that "Baba, I'm unhappy, Help me Baba, I'm in trouble. Tell me what to do" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 44). Her feelings never get articulated, at times she regrets for having come to her parents house, for she remembers her children, her practice and her patients. Actually, her visit to her father's house is a kind of escape from the sadist husband and loveless marriage. It is again a kind of solace from her hectic routine to her live with her father and Madhav is a relief, for no demands are made to her. The whole day in her parent's house is spent to analyze her own desires and comforts. She recapitulates the kind of

life. She had lived as a child. To Saru the idea of men going to work, children going to school, and women staying at home to work, clean, scrub and sweep appealed as she finds a supreme harmony in these tasks done by whom who stay at home-this is a kind of contentment in her new routine life, makes her feel that she has a totally new life, and now as she calls herself as a totally changed person and nothing old Saru is left. At her father's place, slowly she loses, the awareness of her femininity, she stops thinking about herself as a women. The aspect in doctor in her is more often seen than that of the wife, and the mother in her. Her neighborhood woman now visits her for their physical health. Mostly there simple woman keep more of their ailments everything as a secret. Sarita thinks that - "Their very womanhood a source of deep shame to their- she calls them stupid, silly, martyrs—I idiotic heroines. Going on with their task and destroying. Themselves in the bargain, for nothing, but a meaningless modesty" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 107).

To the maximum extent Sarita's problems are her own creations. She is a self made person and her ego, and innate love for power create a number of problems. Right from her early days we find her opposing traditional codes and marry outside her community. She even defies social conventions by using Boozie to advance her career, economic independence became a goal and every move of her life is towards the realization of that goal. Sarita becomes a reputed and family doctor, she becomes proud of her social status and her husband becomes insecure. She wants to outshine other, not through dedicated service but through, available means including economic criteria; and thinks that it the real achievement. When material prospects get more value, Manohar's place in her life becomes diminished. Sarita's love for power is the undercurrent of her life. Her relation with her mother, husband can be analyzed as a rival in the game of power, as an authority which had posed a threat to her individuality and self will. Similarly, she sees in her husband the element of domination. Though she can be dominated yet hold something of her in reserve. The novelist, Shashi Deshpande deals with the universally relevant problems, which encounter in man-woman relationships. Sarita realizes that everyone in life encounters problems and under gives suffering at one stage or another. To an extent-this novel is a postcolonialistic affirmation of woman's strength; it is also suggestive of the mother's last word-all of us have to face at the end, 'That we are alone'. We have to be alone. Her feeling of loneliness is her inner disintegration. This disintegration is due to her ego and will to dominate others. Economic freedom and Education based on money power and social status have set in a new set of values in her life. Her disintegration has to become integration in order to have a family life. She has to accept her life as it is along with her children, her husband and her duties. The real solution to the darkness in her life is not escapism or cursing the darkness. Sarita has to light a candle and declare for herself that *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. The real darkness is in her mind, and when this darkness lifts from her mind, she will see the reality clearly.

The crisis of identity, which is the root of all problems in human life, is due to the darkness of one's mind. Finally Saru's decision to go with her husband shows her confidence and courage in this direction. Thus the novel's title itself holds an assessment of the near impossibility of decolonizing a once-colonized mind: "The dark holds no terrors...The terrors are inside us all the time. We carry them within us, and like traitors they spring out, when we least expect them, to scratch and maul" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 85).

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