
A Study of the Dynamics of Power within the various Relational Equations: Analyzing Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980).

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Abstract:

The article aims to analyze the assertion of womanhood by the central character Sarita in the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), through her exercise of feminine agency. By shedding light on the various traumatic experiences of Saru, the paper would highlight how power structures function within various relational equations—whether it is between the mother and the daughter, the mother and the father, or the wife and the husband. This is equivalent to the power structures that frame the patriarchal societal order at large against which the woman is posited as a mere object of assault. The idea of darkness plays a key motif to highlight the constraints against which the central female character fights to achieve her agency. Furthermore, the role of the various other characters that function either as catalysts or inhibitors towards the exercise of the agency of the central character will be explored.

Keywords: Womanhood, Agency, Power, Patriarchal.

Introduction:

Shashi Deshpande, born in 1938, is one of the leading Indian English writers of the contemporary period. She has received Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *That Long Silence* (1988) in 1990, and Padma Shri Award in 2009. She is widely known in the Indian Literary landscape for her dexterous treatment of the woman's cause. The novel in discussion in the present paper, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), is another striking exemplar of the treatment of the feminine issues of the central character Saru or Sarita, in an Indian middle class setup. In the "Note From the Author" section of the novel, Deshpande herself accredits the novel to be "the one dearest to me" among all her novels, for "it is the one that came closest to the vision I had of it when I conceived it" (Deshpande 6). The scrupulous handling of the theme of an independent woman's struggles in a patriarchal societal setup and her quest for her identity marks the novel's place as a true classic in the Indian English Literary scene. Along with the various other female writers who occupy a significant place in

the contemporary fictional backdrop, Deshpande reinstates her position through her prowess in handling the psychological moorings of the various characters in the novel. Furthermore, the central female characters in her novel range from various professional and non-professional backgrounds from the Indian middle class system. These characters are somehow crushed under the burden of a dominant, restrictive, patriarchal society and the context of the novel encompasses a journey of emancipation through self revelation. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is no exception. The central character Saru, trampled by the power structures within the household setting, struggles against various traumatic experiences to attain her 'refuge'. The idea of the 'refuge' could be traced back to the quote from *The Dhammapada* that the author adds in the initial pages of the novel: "You are your own refuge; there is no other refuge; This refuge is hard to achieve" (Deshpande 7).

A brief summary of the novel:

Born in a patriarchal society, Saru, had been the subject of discrimination right from her childhood, for her parents, especially her mother, had shown a distinct favouritism towards her brother who was three years younger to her. Her father, who is portrayed as a meek character, is basically dominated by his wife and therefore, throughout the novel, he had been basically ignorant towards the prejudices of his wife that were inflicted as psychological onslaughts towards their daughter. Outraged by this, Saru grows up to be a defiant child whose sole motif in her life was to inflict the same emotional trauma to the harbinger of her pain, that is, her mother: "I'll show her, I'll make her realize" (Deshpande 60).

In the course of her life as a medical student in Mumbai, Saru comes across the charming identity of Manohar, who was then an attractive and famous student: "...he was the only person I saw that day. It was as if the sight of him had been so overwhelming that I could not take all of it...Straight dark thick eyebrows. A firm chin. Full lips, almost as full as a woman's. And that mannerism of his, of pushing the hair back from his forehead with one hand, showing off his slim and long fingers. Yes, they stayed with me, these things" (Deshpande 51). She ultimately falls in love with him, and ends up marrying him. His love towards the otherwise presumably unattractive personnel of Saru, becomes her destination of solace or refuge from being "the redundant, the unwanted, an appendage one could do without" (Deshpande 66), that she has thought of herself. However, the harrowing blows of marital rape that follows in their relationship as a result of Manohar's wounded male ego, shattered the dream world Saru had framed for herself and her husband. It is Saru's quest for psychological and physical 'refuge' that forms the narrative of the novel.

Discussion:

Dialectics of Power:

Michel Foucault has discussed about the theory of power in the various volumes of his work *The History of Sexuality*. He has opined that individuals cannot be simply examined as "recipients of power" (Mills 35), they also enact as sites of resistance of the same. This

consideration of the individual as both the site of implementation of power as well as the site of opposition towards the same power, gives genesis to the role of individuals in various power relations. If the novel is interpreted keeping the dialectics of power in mind, a thorough analysis of the various dimensions of functioning of power within the different relationships ensue. To serve this purpose, the different characters need to be studied in contrast to each other keeping their relationships at the core of the analysis. In doing so, a contrast can be drawn between the various agents of authority and that of resistance, who either work as agents to accentuate feminine agency or function as restrictive forces towards hindering agency of the central character Saru.

Relational Dialectics between the Mother and the Daughter:

As has been specified in the brief summary of the novel, a tension perpetuates throughout the novel regarding the relationship between the mother and the daughter. The patriarchal notion of preferring the male child over the female has been so firmly inscribed in the mother's psyche that she herself becomes an agent for accelerating the troubled conscience of the child Saru. Throughout the narrative, a fondness for the male child Dhruva has been evident, while in contrast Saru has been treated as a liability who should be married off according to the societal dictates. She is often reminded of her lack of physical prowess according to societal beauty standards by the mother: "I was an ugly girl. At least, my mother told me so. I can remember her eyeing me dispassionately, saying...You will never be good looking. You are too dark for that" (Deshpande 61). As a child, Saru synthesized the ideal "...hope of a miracle. That one day I would grow up and be beautiful" (Deshpande 61). The constant reminder from her mother regarding her behavior as Saru was transforming from a girl to a woman, "You're growing up" (Deshpande 62), instilled that growing up was something very unpleasant and Saru resisted against such an attitude through the words in her mind: "If you're a woman, I don't want to be one" (Deshpande 63). The final blow in the otherwise tampered mother-daughter relationship came when the son Dhruva was accidentally drowned to death in a playful excavation of the siblings. The mother constantly reminded Saru that because it is in her presence that her son has been drowned, Saru should be labeled as a 'murderer'. Her words pierced Saru's consciousness with their sword-like intensity: "Why didn't you die? Why are you alive and he dead?" (Deshpande 34).

However Saru takes her revenge when she goes against the wishes of her parents and marries Manohar, a boy from a different caste, thereby abandoning the mother to suffer childless. In the course of her traumatic marital relationship Saru analyses how she might have not married to Manohar in the first place had her mother not disapproved of him so vehemently. She blames the mother for her existence as a "trapped animal" in her marriage. Thus the mother not only inflicts sufferings upon her daughter through her words and actions, but also aggravates Saru's psychological condition by making her take decisions so as to avenge the mother. The guilt of killing the brother, or that of not being able to rescue him—the constant doubt of whether she has pushed him or not, troubles Saru's psyche. The mother again becomes an agent of oppression

when she forces Saru to take up B.Sc. instead of medical science, solely for the sake of her unwillingness to spare money for her daughter's education rather than to use the same money for her dowry. These psychological traumas persist in Saru throughout her life. In spite of suffering from marital rape over the years, she could not seek 'refuge' from her parents as the mother had cursed her to be unhappy: "She cursed me, Baba...Even her silence at the end was a curse" (Deshpande 197). The quest for emancipation of Saru could be witnessed in the final chapters of the novel when she confronts the father regarding her sufferings. The father acts as an agent of emancipation when he sheds his garb of ineffectuality and convinces Saru of her mother's inefficiency as a human being and a mother. A resistance is generated against the onslaughts inflicted by the mother who is now dead.

Role of the Father as a Vehicle of Agency v/s the role of the Mother as an Inhibitor:

The father, who had been submissive while the mother was alive, ultimately turns out to be calm, rational and an assertive figure in the last few pages of the novel. He witnesses the miseries of his daughter, calmly listens to her complaints against his dead wife and wisely advises her to confront her husband. It is here that the father figure emerges as a harbinger of light against the darkness of the psychological traumas that revolve around Saru's existence. When Saru confronts him about her nightmares regarding her brother's drowning saying: "You think I killed him" (Deshpande 181), he tried to calm her down by assuring her: "Who's accusing you, Saru? No One...You haven't done any wrong" (Deshpande 181).

He had once again functioned as a vehicle accentuating the emancipation of his daughter out of the patriarchal shackles of the home by allowing her to pursue a career in medical science, against the wishes of his wife. The final instance of the character of the father flourishing as an abode of assurance and safe-belonging to the troubled daughter comes along when the confrontation between the two takes place. Saru lets her father know about the physical torments that Manohar inflicts upon her night after night: "He attacked me like an animal that night. I was sleeping and I woke up and there was this.. this man hurting me. With his hands, his teeth, his whole body" (Deshpande 201). Here, 'that night' refers to the one when an interviewer casually puts a question to Manohar that wounded his male ego: "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?" (Deshpande 200). The father, shocked and outraged at such animal instincts of the husband of her daughter, composes himself and prepares her not to escape from the reality but confront the beast that is her husband: "...you can't go on like this Saru" (Deshpande 203).

Relational Dialectics between Manohar and Sarita:

To understand the power structures between the husband and the wife, the sexual sadism of Manohar needs to be focused upon. Manohar, who had once been her abode for reassurance of love and comfort– the one human to whom she was not an 'appendage'– transformed to a beast as a result of blows given by others towards his male ego. He was an underpaid professor at a

third-grade college, on the other hand she was a well-established medical practitioner. The patriarchal institute of marriage conceptualizes the woman to be subordinate to the man. The same society terms Manohar as weaker compared to Saru's financial prosperity and this gives rise to the aspect of sadism in him. He retorts to the rebukes inflicted by society by inflicting pain towards his wife on their bed: "...nightmare of hands. Questing hands that left a trail of pain. Hurting hands that brought me[Saru] out of a cocoon of a blessed unreality...the nightmare was compounded of lips and teeth as well. Hands and teeth? No, hammers and pincers. I could taste blood on my lips. The hands became a body. Thrusting itself upon me" (Deshpande 11). "The familiarity of the sensation"(Deshpande 11) reinforces the repetitive aspect of the cruelty, "leaving behind a fear that invaded even my waking hours"(Deshpande 11).

The Attainment of Emancipation through the Exercise of Agency:

The idea of achieving feminine agency lies at the core of ensuring women empowerment. Jo Rowlands discusses the idea of agency in his work "Empowerment Exercised" (1980). To discuss the issue he talks about power– he very naively discusses power as the authority of one person or group over another: "Such power is located in decision making processes, conflict and force, and could be described as 'zero-sum': the more power one person has, the less the other has" (Rowlands 86). He further asserts that although there is "no mention of how power is actually distributed within the society" (Rowlands 86) in the various definitions put forward regarding 'what is power'. Feminist theorists have however tried to shed light on such an absence through their conception of power in "relation to obedience, or 'power over', since some people are seen to have control or influence over others"(Rowlands 86). Furthermore, this 'power over' the other is generally possessed by men to control and subjugate over other men, or the women, or over a marginalized social group: "It is thus an instrument of domination, whose use can be seen in people's personal lives, their close relationships, their communities and beyond" (Rowlands 86). This assertion of power of one dominant sect over another, leads to an 'internalization of oppression'.

The term 'internalize' suggests the adoption of the oppression by the oppressed as a rational reality. As an exemplar, Rowlands highlights the idea of a "woman who is subject to violent abuse when she expresses her own opinions may start to withhold them, and eventually come to believe that she has no opinion of her own" (Rowlands 86-87). The same idea is penetrated by Deshpande through the character of Saru who internalizes the oppression of her mother's psychological assaults towards her looks, or towards her involvement in the drowning of her son Dhruva. The same can be asserted in Saru's silence towards her husband's sadism– "I tried to call out, to scream. Nothing issued out of me but silence. Panic and terror mounted in me as the hands, deliberately, with a kind of casual cruelty, gradually tightened round my throat" (Deshpande 11).

Rowlands plainly describes empowerment as the act of "bringing people who are outside the decision making process into it" (Rowlands 87). The oppressed

individual achieves empowerment by acting against the constraints set by the State or society at large. To reinstate his point, Rowlands provides the readers with three dimensions of empowerment, namely: personal, close relationships and collective. The functioning of the first two dimensions can be evidently analyzed within the novel. Personal form of practicing empowerment aims at “developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity and undoing the effects of internalized oppression” (Rowlands 87). As Saru gains her ability to confront Manohar by asking her father to tell him to wait once he reaches home, she not only opens the prospects of taming her traumatic fears of the dark nights that are witness to the marital rape, she also sheds her own self off the dark accusations of her mother: “...Baba, if Manu comes, tell him to wait. I’ll be back as soon as I can” (Deshpande 221). On the other hand, the dimension of ‘close relationships’ focuses on developing empowerment within individuals by advancing “the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of the relationship and decisions made within it” (Rowlands 87). The confrontation of the father by the daughter can be seen as an exemplar of the same. Saru came with a hope to seek refuge against all odds to her father’s house, and the man steps up to her expectations. Hence the author aims at a careful development of the characters and their bonds with the progress of the narrative.

Conclusion:

Although the novel opens with an exemplar of the traumatic scene of marital rape that Saru had been subject to many years of her life, the novel ends with ‘possibilities’. For Saru, the dark no more holds any terrors for she gains her agency to fight against all kinds of psychological and physical darkness. She finally sets out to flourish like the hollyhocks planted in her garden. The flowers are symbolic of the freshness, or new prospects of life regenerating from the broken ties within the household. As the characters of the mother and husband act as perpetrators of her sufferings, the character of Baba emerges as a harbinger of light, away from the darkness and its accompanying terrors. Deshpande’s character Saru makes it evident that in a patriarchal setup, women do not exercise agency or attain empowerment only through economic independence, it sometimes act as the cause of oppression as well.

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