

# Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* A unique Case of Misguided Feminism

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**Abstract**— Shashi Deshpande is a realistic writer who addresses feministic issues in her novels but she does not want to be branded as a hardcore feminist. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is her first major novel before she got recognition with *That Long Silence* for which she received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990. The novelist focuses on issues like individual human rights, marital rape, sexual discrimination etc in a rational manner. The female protagonist Sarita in this novel reflects the customary traditional values that an Indian woman really lives by in the society. In due course of her story, she describes her feelings of anguish, frustration, despair as well as complacent, hope and ecstasy in various stages of life. With time she has become more mature in her views. She has craved for a humane treatment of the female sex. Her narration of her childhood in comparison with her brother Dhruva shows how there exists a discrimination in treatment of a girl child and a boy in our families. She recalls her displeasure at the treatment of her estranged husband but she also talks about her sexual gratification that she gets from him. In this way, Shashi Deshpande always possesses a balanced view of the man-woman relationship.

**Index Terms**— Feminism, marital rape, sexual sovereignty, discrimination, human rights.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Feminism believes that gender differences are a result of historically created social conditions and not the result of natural, biological differences. This argument is very much in consonance with what Simone de Beauvoir in the essay "Woman and the Other" writes:

Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. . . . And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called 'the sex', by which is meant that 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 her, she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute-she is the Other (282).

As a woman-centered approach feminism demonstrates how women have traditionally been subjected to a double standard in both their treatment and in the evaluation of their worth. Hence in this context Susan Hartmann writes in her essay "Feminism and Women's Movements", it can conveniently be defined as "a recognition and critique of male supremacy combined with efforts to change it"(41). A female writer, taking up cudgels for the deprived sections of her species, in her zeal to portray all aspects of the problem that haunts women often turns bitter and says certain things which may be termed as fundamentalist. Such is the case with Shashi Deshpande's novel,

*The Dark Holds No Terrors*. In this context it may be pointed out here that while one group of feminists choose individualist feminism which emphasizes abstract concepts of individual human rights and celebrates the quest for personal liberty, the group at the other end chooses relational feminism which features the primacy of companionate, non-hierarchical male-female couple as the basic unit of society. Even in a country like France while the saner elements among the feminists choose a paradoxical doctrine of "equality in difference" (difference mostly with regard to biological functions), a school of feminists claiming for uncompromising self-realisation invite resistance to their movement from women who have chosen marriage and motherhood.

## II. AMBIGUITY IN MARITAL RELATIONSHIP

As an Indian writer Deshpande, who belongs to the saner group often hesitates to be branded as a feminist. S. Prasanna Sree in her book *Women In The Novels of Shashi Deshpande* has presented the views of the novelist under the title "In Conversation with Shashi Deshpande":

. . . . That's very clear. . . . I am a feminist, I'm a very staunch feminist in my personal life. . . . I am not telling you what to do nor am I spelling out the message of feminism. I am not a feminist writer. If you call me a feminist writer, you are wronging me, because I see people as human beings. In my novels you will not see bad men, good women. All of us have both the qualities in ourselves, some good and some bad and you know it is all there in my novels and in my characters (155).

But the tenacity with which she makes remarks against the creature called the husband and uses these remarks as some sort of a "Prologue" to *The Dark Holds No Terrors* brand her as a feminist of the top order which she is not. It reads:

. . . . Now there was no waking. The dream, the nightmare, whatever it was, continued. Changing now, like some protean monster, into the horror of rape. This was not to be death by strangulation; it was a monstrous invasion of my body. . . . Now the horror of what was happening to me was lost in a fierce desire to end it. I could not, would not, bear it. I began to fight back, helplessly, savagely.

. . . . And then the two came together. I knew where I was and what had happened. Panic and sensation came back simultaneously. I turned my head slightly, fearfully, and saw him beside me, snoring softly. No more a stranger, but my husband (11-12).

How different is this picture of the husband from the husband of Deshpande's other book, *A Matter of Time*. The overwhelming presence of the husband in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* yields place to Gopal, the husband for whom Sumi pines so much. A few lines from *A Matter of Time* reflects this:

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Is it enough to have a husband, and never mind the fact that he has not looked at your face for years, never mind the fact that he has not spoken to you for decades? Does this wifehood make up for everything, for the deprivation of a man's love, for the feel of the body against yours, the warmth of his breath on your face, the touch of his lips on yours, his hands on your breasts? . . . (167)

The abhorrence of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* has few parallels. The contempt for the creature called the husband has come a full circle, it is complete. Here the feminist author is engaged in a struggle to claim for women the right to sexual sovereignty. Gone is the prudery associated with sex. An woman who demands the right to pleasure is no longer an object of scorn and contempt. We need only to remember Rituporno Ghosh's film, *Antarmahal* or Jag Mundhra's *Provoked* to realize that purveyors of modern Indian culture do not shy away from depicting the hideousness of marital rape and female protests to such grave injustice. But a cool analysis of the whole episode makes the behavior of the wife a little absurd. Why should a sensible woman (in her prime) between 15 and 45 resist the amorous advances of a man legally united with her as her husband ! True, the novel laments the lack of pleasure or ecstasy in sex relation after the initial period of euphoria is over. Certainly it was not like that as at the beginning of the novel, Saru says:

But when we got married it was like nothing I had ever imagined. . . 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 never ends of pleasure had sprung up all over my body.

'Who said about some place . . . "If there is a heaven on earth it is this" . . . or something like that?' (40)

Saru loses herself in the ecstasy of physical pleasure even though it stays for a short period. As her own statement suggests she always tried to cling to her faith and confidence by retreating to Manu for a bout of sexual pleasure. In her words:

I was insatiable, not for sex, but for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love. Of my being wanted. If I ever have 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 (40).

On the face of it, this relationship smacks of selfishness on the part of the wife. Saru the wife who used to quench her thirst for sex on demand should not be so selfish so as to repulse and abhor the physical advances of Manu. A husband as compassionate as Manu, if becomes a little bit aggressive in his love act, may be due to pressure of circumstances, should not be cold-shouldered at all. True, it is not Shringara Rasa, because there is no ecstasy involved in it. But to complain about this love in society and above all, in wedlock is sheer madness. An incisive look at the language makes it amply clear: "The beginning was abrupt. There had been no preparation for it. There were no preliminaries, either. At first it was a nightmare of hands . . . . And then, the nightmare was

compounded of lips and teeth as well. Hands and teeth? . . . "(11)

### III. MALE SUPREMACY: GENETICAL PRE-ORDAINED

A wife of a decade who in her initial years has loved her man as per her terms should not gradually disappear. True, a woman's values grudge, this physical invasion of her body. But the husband may have his compulsions. Look as to what the psychologist Sudhir Kakar has to say on the subject in his novel *The Ascetic of Desire*:

The combative nature of sexual intercourse is clearly seen in many animal species. . . . Sexual contest is subtler in human beings. Its battlefield is less the bed than the imagination of lovers engaged in intercourse. Many of these fantasies are of a violent nature. Without brutality, however minimal, attenuated and distant from awareness, a man will not be gripped by powerful sexual excitement. It is his wish to dominate and subjugate a woman, as much as his wish for pleasure, which gives him an erection and makes penetration possible. Aggressiveness towards the woman is as much a factor in his potency as his loving feelings. One of man's major fantasies is of taking by force that which is not easily given. . . . (122-123).

Besides, sexual arousal for a man is quick and it needs immediate gratification. So to pay due attention to the feelings of the woman in the form of foreplay and slowly lead her into an orgasm is a demand of the tall order. A man may be able to meet such a demand for some time but not for entire lifetime. Here, it is perhaps relevant to point out that a new study shows that genes may come between you and sexual gratification. A team of researchers in Netherlands has discovered a gene which is linked to ejaculation in men. The scientists led by neuropsychiatric Marcel Waldinger at the Utrecht University have found that man who has two long variants of a particular gene may climax so soon that it may leave him and his partner sexually unsatisfied. And to blame the man for an offence for which he is not responsible can perhaps never be entertained. Added to this is the ego of Sarita, which is a late development. When an interviewer in a lighter vein mentions bread and butter, she makes it known that she as a doctor earns not only the bread but also butter for the family. This unpalatable question of the reporter aroused the beast in Manu and he thinks that he must show her that he is more powerful than Sarita in bed. That is why the opinion of T.M.J. Indra Mohan seems to be correct to a great extent as he has expressed it in the essay, "The Dark Holds No Terrors: A Feminist Concept":

Sarita's problems are rather her own making to an extent. She is a self-willed person and her problems are due to her outsized ego and innate love for power over others. When we look at her early days we (see) her defying traditional codes and marrying outside her community. Defies social conventions by using Boojie to advance the career, economic independence became a goal and every move of her life is towards the realization of that goal (104).

#### IV. RECOGNITION OF WOMAN AS A SEPARATE ENTITY

True, Indian women have come across umpteen number of hurdles to attain economic independence. Chaman Nahal in his essay "Feminism in English Fiction: Forms and Variations" writes:

I define feminism as a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is a dependence syndrome: whether it is the husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious group, ethnic group. When women free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materializes (01).

Very appropriately Deshpande has described the theme of the rise of the status of the wife in the society. The sheer anguish with which she views the intolerance of the society toward women is a pointer in that direction.

Listen, girls, she would say, whatever you do, you won't be happy, not really, until you get married and have children. That's what they tell us. And we have to believe them because no one has proved it wrong till now. But if you want to be happily married, there's one thing you have to remember. Have you girls seen an old-fashioned couple walking together? Have you noticed the wife always walks a few steps behind her husband? That's important, very important, because it's symbolic of the truth. A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he is an MA, you should be a BA. If he's 5'4" tall, you should not be more than 5'3" tall. If he's earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety rupees. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage. Don't ever try to reverse the doctor-nurse, executive-secretary, principal-teacher role. It can be traumatic, disastrous. And I assure you, it is not worth it. He'll suffer, you'll suffer and so will the children. Women's magazines will tell you that a marriage should be an equal partnership. That's nonsense. Rubbish. No partnership can ever be equal. It will always be unequal, but take care that it's unequal in favour of your husband. If the scales tilt in your favour, god help you, both of you (137).

Saru was a successful doctor and the scales did tilt in her favour. But considered from the right perspective, there was nothing unusual about it. Not only this economic dependence is absent among modern educated women but also in pre-historic Hindu societies the problem was duly solved by the concept of Stridhan. Prabhati Mukherjee discusses about this in her book, *Hindu Women: Normative Models*:

That the right to hold this bunch of property by a woman was not a formal matter in the Arthashastra is also apparent from other indirect sources. . . . The property of women thus assumed the character of a separate estate to be owned and enjoyed by them alone. The separate economic entity of a woman was respected by Kautilya and that entirely appears to have had a role to play in society. This aspect of woman's status, namely, her right to separate property was considered by Maine to be a unique feature of Hindu Jurisprudence.

#### V. SEXUAL DISCRIMINATION: A SOCIAL INHERITANCE

Dependence or no dependence, the relationship of an average male with his wife is that of the boss and bossed. This kind of an undesirable attitude is an extension of Saru's childhood accusations against her mother, who was the product of an outdated society, totally callous towards the rights of the girl child:

Don't go out in the sun. You will get even 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 Dhruvas?

He is different. He's a boy (45).

Waging a war against this kind of discrimination, Saru holds her head high against all sorts of odds. But that certainly does not give her the license to repulse all physical advances of Manu or brand it as undesirable. As Saru says: "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" (201). Compare this with the attitude of Saru when she was badly in need of love even after child birth:

The hands that had probed her body while she was in labour had been utterly distasteful. But this suckling had set up an intensely erotic response within her. So that she had, unable to control herself, forced Manu to make love to her as soon as possible after she went home. There had been a kind of withholding in Manu then . . . may be he had been shocked by her urge, may be he had been afraid of hurting her. But it had not worried her. Her desire had been so strong, so purely physical that he could not prevent her from having satisfaction. . . (162-163).

The glaring disparity in the attitude of the female protagonist here stands out. Love making at the behest of the male is hurting the female; it is a monstrous invasion of her body. But at some other time the female partner, at her sweet will, may turn so purely physical that the male cannot prevent her from having satisfaction. In this case the traditional boss i.e. the husband becomes the bossed and dances to the tunes of his female partner. So to say that females of the species are the oppressed lot is a misnomer. Rather as modern research has amply shown, man-woman relationship has mostly turned sour because females like Saru who should make their partners' lives livable fall short of our expectations. The traditional demand to behave like a Rambha in bed has its connotations. Biologically speaking, only intelligent women are capable of deriving satisfaction from a physical relationship. That is why ordinarily in nine cases out of ten, women fail to give the desired pleasure to their men and consequently, fail to receive any pleasure from the relationship. Hence, the marriage fails and becomes the

subject of discussion by a section of disgruntled and misguided feminists.

## **VI. CONCLUSION: A REALISTIC APPROACH TO FEMINISM**

As a whole the novel very effectively portrays the concerns of the author about gender discrimination. And most of the times this concern is genuine. But the moment she turns a little bit fundamentalist in her attitude, starts blaming the husband for the invasion of Saru's body, she loses her perspective and desires for the moon which certainly is not to be fulfilled because of its inherent selfishness.

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