

Anguish Arising from Claims of Existence: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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Abstract: *The journey of Feminism which set out with the depiction of torments and tortures faced by a woman has transformed its course at many echelons as some of the contemporary Indian women writers have shifted their focus from feminine sensibility to existential predicament of an individual. Shashi Deshpande is also one of such writers who tries to explore 'journey within an individual' besides 'journey within a woman'. The present paper tries to demonstrate how Deshpande takes a comprehensive view of life by projecting the existential predicament of her characters irrespective of their gender. It also probes to examine the different stages of absurdity and anxiety where an individual finds himself a victim of his own conflict and claims for his existence. It attempts to identify the deeper recesses of human psyche as explored by Deshpande to bring out the more challenging aspects of her characters than the feminist ones. It also tries to show how Deshpande presents the image of a suffering human being both male and female who seems to be preoccupied with his inner world, sulking on frustration and a storm within.*

Keywords: *Feminism, feminine sensibilities, existential absurdity, anxiety, conflicts, quest.*

Introduction

Ever since the dawn of civilization, there has been a struggle to liberate women from male oppression. Feminism is an expression of resentment at the unjust treatment meted out to any woman. It is the advocacy of women's rights to remove the restrictions that discriminate against women. It relates to the notions that women should have the same social, economic and political rights as men possess. Emanating from the West, it is no longer a new concept for Indian writers. The literary world of the Indian English fiction has spread a red carpet for women writers also. Consequently more and more women writers are articulating their anxieties and concerns focusing on woman's issues and creating a body of literature of their own. Transcending through all the limits of nationality, caste, creed and culture, feminist issues are banging at the door of writer's hearts compelling them to express their turmoil against the purely masculine world. One of the major concerns of the contemporary literature all over the world has been to highlight the plight of women, their increasing problems, their physical, financial and emotional exploitation and their mental anguish. The women writers with the main focus to bring

into light the oppression faced by women argue for the existence of a female as a human being with an individuality, honor and dignity. Many women writers and even a few male writers such as in their writings have analyzed the female psyche, the inner turmoil of the women. But now there is a shift in feminist psyche as some of the women writers along with their counterpart feel not the male but the human existence and its absurdity as the root cause. An intensive reading of some of the Indian novelists shows that there are much more complex issues of human predicament than feministic ones that are confronted by the characters portrayed by them. The advancement of science and technology of the modern world has awakened the Indian mind but has made asleep his heart where a human being stands alone even in the multitude of people in an incomprehensive world. The dilemmas and the quests of the modern man bring out his worst instincts and cut him off from his traditional, moral and spiritual peace and contentment. Man's existential anguish finds compelling expression in many Indian novels by depicting a sensitive individual pitted against the ontological realities however,

The existential underpinnings in Indian English novels are due to the specific Indian situation that these novelists encounter- an alienation occurring due to a Western education coming in conflict with native ideas.¹ (Kaushik, 1)

The modern feminist writers are beginning to realize that all human beings exist in a spiritual void and vacuum and are subject to the importunities and anxieties of a fragile universe. Therefore, the anguish felt by a female is not different than the anguish of a male in the society. As Dr. Sanjay Kumar has also stated in his article:

Observed closely it appears that female writers writing in a spiritual squalor today believe that human being stands alone in an incomprehensive world and confront meaninglessness in all human endeavors as the universe they inhabit, snubs them with its indifference.² (Kumar, 44)

Discussion

Shashi Deshpande is also one of the noted Indian feminist writers who has shown her serious concern with the depiction of women in literature and expressed restlessness with the traditional positioning of women. But besides this, she is much concerned with the inner weather of her characters and tries to capture the inner turmoil of human psyche irrespective of their gender. The present paper is a study to probe into the various shades of the existential hue which enable a human being to confront much more complex questions of his own existence than feministic kind.

Shashi Deshpande, a Sahitya Academy Award winner insists in a public meeting on 'Gender and Censorship' *i am not a feminist, i am a human being and i write about other human beings who happen to be women.*³ (TOI, 2001) Major part of the research on Shashi Deshpande

appears to be heavily preoccupied with feministic thoughts and confine her in the walls of a 'feminist writer' which she does not like as she states:

The way I see the world is colored by the fact of my being a woman, but the historical and social circumstances of a woman's life. My themes, therefore, my characters and possibly, to a certain extent, even my language may differ from a man's...Nevertheless, when I sit down to write I am just a writer---my gender ceases to matter to me. I am concerned with the same problems of language, narrative structure and continuity.⁴ (Deshpande, 14)

Her gender may have restricted the approach of her readers but has in no way acted as a constraint on her choice of subject matter, selection of characters or milieu. Her novels show the all possible shades of human life irrespective of gender, age, class and creed. Each of her novels offers sufficient food for thought especially in the context of human relationships and emotions as Anita Myles points out:

Her characters are so realistically portrayed that there is a tendency to recognize oneself in them it would not be an exaggeration to say that their experience extend a soothing and healing touch for the readers.⁵ (Myles, 64)

She explores the intricate facts of human experience bearing upon the central experience of psychic tensions of her characters. In order to set up their identity as an individual a female as well as a male finds himself struggling against the more complexities which he faces as a human being. As Shashi Deshpande says in *The Binding Vine*:

The contradictions that exist within one lead to a divide within oneself that is the hardest to bridge; the hardest to accept, to live with.⁶ (Deshpande, 201)

One such example is in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* where besides the depiction of feminine sensibility, the author takes a comprehensive view of life by projecting the existential predicament of an individual through the incompatible couple of Manohar and Saru who are the victims of their own conflicting claims of existence. Their conflicting claim makes it very apparent and the oppressed and oppressor appear equally out of sorts. Though the feministic reaction of the author is clearly visible when she depicts Manohar as sadist who rapes his wife and imposes his superiority by torturing her in bed yet the unexpressed vulnerability of him is also discernible. The physical union of Saru and Manohar is physical assault rather. Besides the brutal animal like shade of Manohar who looks powerful when he is making Sarita his prey on the bed, the author minutely perceives the nervous wreck that lurks behind the obviously vehement person. Despite *the monstrous invader* (11) who makes his wife *a terrible trapped animal* (12) the author concentrates on his vulnerability and loneliness in doing so. The mood of isolation, violence and a fragmented individuality looms large in Manohar's brutal and berserk psyche *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 (11) whereas another part of the same instance makes itself visible suggestively when the author paints the color in the character of Saru showing her as a victim of Manohar's tyranny. Her helplessness becomes pathetic when she is captured by the nightmare:

The hurting hands, the savaged teeth, the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar body, And above me, a face I could not recognize. Total non comprehension, completely: bewilderment, paralyzed me fearful strength which overwhelmed me...It is like a monstrous invasion...wriggling under the weight pinned it down...she has no respite from her nocturnal tortures. (11-12)

Her pitiable condition reminds of the existential problem giving her no relief and no rest. But in the deeper levels it can be observed that Saru is not alone in her struggle to find herself in her futile physical union but Manohar is also terribly trapped in it. The brutal possession of Saru's body by Manohar shows the multiplication of his pain: pain of loss of identity and superiority, pain of wounded male ego, pain of physical suffering and pain of mental anguish. The claim for the assertion of his own existence tears apart him totally and distorts him from a lovable poet to a hideous being. His frustration leads to aggression. The author presents the image of a suffering human being both male and female who is preoccupied with his inner world, sulking frustration and the storm within.

Another instance of a similar sort makes itself visible when the reporter asks about Manohar's position in the family whether as a bread winner or as a bread eater. The basic question about his position in the family creates havoc to his relation with his wife as for Manohar the position of his wife as bread winner and himself as a bread eater is more torturous and it leads him to suffer from internal problems. The alienation and the fragmentation of a dejected person searching for the sense in his life is beautifully explored by the author. Their married life is disintegrated which makes him more cruel and brutal towards his wife as well as towards his life. Besides the feminist colors the author deftly captures the mood of apathy and the matrimonial boredom. A loving father and doting husband during the day *...he had been sitting with his foot upon a stool,...soft, white, unmarked and flabby "like his hands. And almost his laugh...it was rather silly... a kind of bray almost"* (135) but what makes him to become so cruel and so repulsive during the dark hours of the night *"it was like seeing a man she had never seen, never seen, never known...now that she knew him, she rather despised"* (135) It is an acute sense of realization of failure in his life.

The above instances of their shattered married life bruises of a terrible physical relation clearly show how Shashi Deshpande probes into the landscape of human psyche to describe they are victimized by their own preposterousness. She seems to be sympathetic to her characters that have made their tragic wastes due their own anxiety to fulfill the roles of wives and mothers or husbands and fathers. The helplessness and the fallibility of Saru and Manohar encompass the

varied strains of their life. This is the existential dilemma of the self of Saru and Manohar in the society and in their mind. Owing to an unbridgeable gulf between herself and Manohar after fifteen years of their married life Saru's self remains clouded with terrors sparked off by various reasons as she realizes *it is a strange new fear of disintegration, terrified consciousness of not existing.* (22)

Shashi Deshpande explores the deeper recesses of human subjects and tries to bring out the grimmer and more challenging aspects of their lives. Saru's futile quest for finding meaning in a hopeless life leaves her struggling against more complicated questions of her existence. The author studies the alienation and the existential angst of both the characters and their search for meaning in their life which leave them battling against each other. Through the dark hours of night, the novelist tries to capture the dark layers of their minds. The question asked by the reporter about Manohar's position in the family compel him to ask himself the question of the purpose of his life which divides him into two different person's altogether-a loving husband as well as a brutal rapist of his wife. The realization of ridiculous human existence imprisons him in the chaotic and choking trap where he finds no answer for his existential questions.

The conflicting claim in Saru starts early in her childhood when she is rejected by her mother who always prefers Dhruv, her younger son. As a child her gender gives her a fault for life that she is responsible for the death of her brother. Her mother's preference to her younger brother makes it impossible for her to understand her younger brother. When he is drowned to death accidentally, Sarita is hurt by her mother's words: "*Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead?*"(191) she has to bear the guilty conscience throughout her life so she hates her mother. The taunting punches of her mother's tongue left her wounded and bruised. The loneliness and the rejection compels her to ponder about the meaning and purpose of her own existence which split her more and she tries to find out solace in secret place of mango grove.

I stood there and sniffed like a dog, trying to orient myself. There was only one mango orchard in that area and that not far from home...The strange place, the darkness that unfolded...unusual solitude.(191)

Growing up in this environment hatred and hostility, she nurtures the seed of rebellion within her. Saru's decision to marry Manohar and to study MBBS is the representation of her feeling of revolt and rebellion. As Sandhu states:

As she always feels insecure in her parent's home, her marriage to Manu is a means of that love and security which she had always lacked in her life. He is the ideal romantic hero who has come to rescue her from insecure, loveless existence.⁷ (Sandhu, 20)

Saru's association with Manu begins in her college days when Manu was very popular and very handsome. Manu has had *an aura of distinction* (50) about him as a promising poet, an orator and a director of many plays. He has been *one of the known names* (50) in his college days. *As a macho figure he used to take the girls by storms* (50) she considers herself privileged because he makes her his companion. In the starting years of marriage Manu seems to rescue her from her insecure existence in her maternal home but as her social and financial status as a doctor grows far beyond him who is an under paid lecturer in a college, the rift between them broadens day by day. He feels jealous of Saru but cannot ask her to leave job also because he knows that they cannot lead a luxurious life if she stops earning, but at the same time, it is a big blow to his male ego. Her profession satisfies her ego but does not bring happiness at home. Ultimately both of them bear the abuse of mental assault. She analyzes and finds:

My brother died because I heedlessly turned my back on him, my mother died alone because I deserted her. My husband is a failure because I destroyed his manhood. (217)

The novelist beautifully explores the existential pathos afflicting the lives of her characters. Manohar whose own experience stands as a stark reminder of brutality and futility of human existence is also haunted by the recollection of his past happy married life. The anguished cry at the heart of Manohar in the search of something missing is inevitable and indispensable. The loneliness and the rejection in the character of Saru is truly representative of the existential theme of quest. As Premila Paul states in her writing:

The guilt had come to stay and she is destined to be in the dock perennially. Her husband, dead brother, dead mother and even her children are the accusers and she the accused.⁸ (Paul, 67)

It can be noted that Saru's increasing popularity declines the happiness of family which makes her a subject to a series of conflicting existential claims. The tortures that she bears every night are the way she punishes herself. The guilt borrowed from the past combined with the tortures of present drag her to question the love for Manu as well as of Manu and let her even ashamed of it. She already has deep rooted complex being of an unwanted child and added to this the physical trauma of sexual harassment that she tragically suffers, leaves an impact on her psyche.

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. (85)

Initially she camouflages her identity as a doctor but the exterior conversion does not give her relief instead it arguments her existential predicaments that have their impact upon her children Renu and Abhi also. The drawing of a dark and frightful picture by Renu clearly shows

her loneliness, an uncaring child attitude, longing for mother's love: *What about that guarded watchful look in Renu's eyes as she looks at us? What about Abhi's hostility to me recently?* (78)

The different levels awareness and attachments indicate the different types of vacuum existing in the family relationships. The inner conflicts emanating from each of the relationships brings for the essential nature of man's inner life that everything and everyone is in the state of flux. This can be noticed by a deep surge into Saru's inner realms to know what could have triggered her to take the extreme step of leaving in her husband home and going back to her parental home after fifteen years of marriage. Saru faces the same situation as Jaya faces in *The Long Silence*. Redefining her existential situation in her own terms Jaya is seen feeling a sense of nothingness and mechanization:

It was not the conundrum of what we were to do with our lives that confronted us, it was a simple puzzle- What are we to do with ourselves this moment, this day, the next moment, the next day...⁹ (Deshpande, 24)

These questions are similar to those of neurotic women seen in T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

What shall I do now? What shall I do?

.....

.....What shall we do tomorrow?

What shall we ever do?¹⁰ (Eliot, 34)

She even tries to find happiness in extra marital relationship with Padmakar Rao and Bozzie but she abruptly withdraws from them and ends the relationship and finds no comfort. She says: *Now, I knew it was not just the consequences I feared and hated. What I had imagined? Love? Romance? Both, I know too well were illusions, and not relevant to my life any way.* (133)

The true substance of the novel lies in the mental processes through which Saru undergoes during her apparently eventless existence at her father's home. She thinks and analyses all the dark corners of her soul. Her long hours of introspection change her attitude towards her life and she decides to be a more confident person. The attachment and the detachment results in the creation of inner conflicts for existence. In her own search for the self she meets many moments of futility, meaninglessness and purposelessness of life. She realizes that entangled in the absurdity of life, Manohar's is no less victim than her who also undergoes the problems of loneliness and the controversies and estrangement. Atleast Saru recognizes that their realization of loneliness has complicated their inter-personal relationships which aggravate

their ennui and heighten the chaos existing between them. Shocked and chocked to face the existential queries and quandaries they realize the human conflicts for existence.

Shashi Deshpande seems to be asserting Albert Camus here. According to him the realization of the absurdity of human existence is a necessary condition for accomplishing anything in life. The unbearable pain and terror of the darkness give Saru the knowledge of truth that she is caught like an animal in the world trap and that everyone in the world is alone facing the same crisis a little bit more or a little bit less. She realizes that we come into this world alone and go out of it alone. The period in between is short *and all those ties we cherish as eternal and long lasting are more ephemeral than a dewdrop.* (208)

After this realization she cuts herself off from the past conflicting claims of her existence. Her fears are faded out and she realized the fact that she is a human being, an individual and she has an urge for life. This realization of the urge, its expression and its fulfillment can be called the purpose of her existence. She overcomes her conflicting claims and is prepared to fight her own battle firstly as a doctor and then as a mother and as a wife.

You are your own refuge

There is no other refuge

This refuge is hard to achieve. (6)

Her conflicting claims of existence have led her to conclude that human life is basically a lonely struggle against the odds of life where she takes charge of her mind and body, exhibits her will and volition. According to Dr. Srinivasa:

Sarita Strips herself of self-deceptions, guilt complexes and emotive illusions, and Shashi Deshpande's language itself flickers like a candle and blobs of remembrance melt and form icicles of furrowing thought. Sarita cannot forget her children or the sick needing her expert attention and so she decides to face her home again. In this unpredictable world, even total despair can open up a new spring of elemental self-confidence.¹¹ (Srinivasa, 758)

Saru's decision to go back to her husband's home shows her final control over herself because from this action onwards, she is able to handle not only her life but also the lives of her husband and children. Her self-introspection leads Saru to conclude that dark holds no terrors for her now. In the same way Jaya in *That Long Silence* realizes that it is not "two bullocks yoked together but in life itself there are so many cross-overs so many choice."¹² (Deshpande,192) She realizes that Manohar's sense of inferiority changes him into a sadist who gets pleasure in insulting his wife, harassing and hurting her sexually. On the surface it can be seen as a male

dominating his wife by making her his prey but a deep understanding unravels the facts that it is a part of the series of insult, harassment and hurt which he has suffered because of the absurdity of his own existence. The bread-winning position of Saru has disrupted the bread-eating position of her husband and shrinks the inner human psyche of him which compels him to claim for his own existence and he tries to achieve it by torturing Saru. Ultimately this darkness changes into the light and enlightens her. With the dawn coming on Saru she is determined to spread rays in the life of her husband, Manohar as well as her kids. The darkness holds no terrors now by Saru's confidence in her existence and identity. This kind of awareness can be noticed only when the life of an individual undergoes various changes transformation, metamorphoses through various stages of slavery of mind and body. As Pallan states: "Confrontation of opposites compels human beings to renew themselves in order to evolve to the higher degrees of consciousness"¹³ (Pallan, 11)

It is clear that the purpose of Deshpande is not only to show the female quest for her identity rather it is a struggle which both husband and wife go through to find out the meaning and purpose of their lives. Both of them are trapped in the vicious circle of human predicament with no way left out. Shashi Deshpande being very well aware about the human faults and errors deftly displays that it is not only Manohar who is responsible for the boredom of their married life rather Saru is also equally responsible for it. As she also realizes, *If I have been a puppet it is because I make myself one* (220) Towards the end of the novel Saru tells his father *If Manu comes tell him to wait. I'll be back as soon as I can.* (221) From the above line it is clear that if Saru has changed her mind and decided to go with Manu then there is a change in Manu also as he is also coming to take Saru with him. Maybe he has also decided to face the conflicts of his existence along with Saru.

Conclusion

It can be observed that Shashi Deshpande's characters reach to a state where there is hardly any battle for equality rather they seem equal in their journey of life. They are equally victims of human existence and its absurdity. The novel proposes the pitch for the postmodern dilemma of an educated woman who refuses to internalize the generally accepted norms attacking her female individuality and it also brings forth the conflicts of a man who finds himself helpless in the trap of modernity where he gives all freedom to his wife in the day time projecting his modernity but also at the same time finds his male dominating image threatened by the superior position of his wife. Her tone, imagery and language are all interwoven together to give meaning to the existential absurdity. The novel is replete with existential watch words such as 'absurdity' 'nothingness' 'death' 'frustration' 'lonely' 'loneliness' 'anxiety' 'terrors' 'darkness' 'silence'. Deshpande is aware of the plight of her characters and projects their inner climate. She delineates the changes, the conflicts and the divisions arise from the existential questions, spiritual confusions and psychological battles at multiple level of human

consciousness. Conflicts become troublesome even to the subconscious and unconscious mind of a human being and he questions the very foundation of his own life, whether his life has any meaning, purpose or value. The trauma of human existence and the travails to exist as separate human being torment him and result in a loss of identity, rootlessness, alienation, the agonistic ambivalence increases an acute sense of isolation where the person is more victimized by his own nagging doubts, dilemmas, endless enquiries as to the purpose of his own existence as well as his own life. By her meticulous introspection and psychological probing of subconscious and unconscious selves of her characters she explores the deeper layers of the disturbed human psyche. Although she beautifully depicts the female sensibility of her protagonist but her strength lies more in the rich portrayal of human existence and its predicament. On the basis of findings it can be asserted that Deshpande is a gifted writer and her canvas cannot be restricted to a particular category. More than being a feminist she is a humanist as she expresses her desire to be a humanist in an interview

I want to reach a stage where I can write about human being and not about women in relation to men. I don't believe in having a propagandist or sexist purpose to my writing. If it presents such perspective, it is only a coincidence.¹⁴ (Viswanatha, 237)

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