

Shashi Deshpande's Dark Holds No Terror: A Feminist Reading

Rahul Shinde

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Dalit Mitra Kadam Guruji Vidnyan Mahavidyalaya Mangalwedha

Email: rahulshinde7213@gmail.com

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Assistant Professor, Department of English

Dalit Mitra Kadam Guruji Vidnyan Mahavidyalaya Mangalwedha

Email: rahulshinde7213@gmail.com

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Address for correspondence:
Rahul Shinde
Assistant Professor, Department of English
Dalit Mitra Kadam Guruji Vidnyan Mahavidyalaya Mangalwedha
Email: rahulshinde7213@gmail.com

Abstract

As Elaine Showalter posits three phases in the growth of feminist tradition, "Limitation, Protest, and self-discovery", Shashi Deshpande's novels are directly related to all these phases. It encapsulates her artistic vision of femininity as alienating. In her novel, she explores and exposes the long-suppressed wail for the woman imprisoned within the four walls of domesticity. Shashi Deshpande has dealt graphically with the problems that confront a middle-class educated woman in the patriarchal Hindu Society. The women portrayed by Shashi Deshpande in her novel can be classified into three groups or types who recur with subtle changes. The first type belongs to the heroine's mother or mother figure. The second type of suffering woman is the converse of the traditional type. Here, the woman is bolder, more self-reliant, and more rebellious. The third type of woman characterizes the woman in between. Most of Deshpande's heroines belong to this category. This woman is neither traditional nor radical in her ideas and practices

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most accomplished contemporary Indian woman writers in English. Her novels are concerned with a woman's quest for self; an exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life and the protagonist's place in it. Roots and Shadows (1983), her first novel, but published after The Dark Holds No Terror (1980) and If I Die Today (1982), marks the beginning of the quest of a woman for herself. The theme is continued in her later novel That Long Silence (1988) and Deshpande's concern is the woman and her external quest. Her contribution lies in the heightened sensitivity and the fresh insights that she brings to bear on the good types and situations.

Keywords: Shashi Deshpande, Feminism, Indian English Fiction, Patriarchy, Women's Identity, Female Consciousness, Middle-Class Women, Tradition and Modernity, Gender Discrimination, Self-Discovery

Introduction

As Elaine Showalter posits three phases in the growth of feminist tradition, "Limitation, Protest, and self-discovery", Shashi Deshpande's novels are directly related to all these phases. It encapsulates her artistic vision of femininity as alienating. In her novel, she explores and exposes the long-suppressed wail for the woman imprisoned within the four walls of domesticity. Shashi Deshpande has dealt graphically with the problems that confront a middle-class educated woman in the patriarchal Hindu Society.

The present paper is an honest attempt to study the various images of the woman portrayed by Shashi Deshpande in her novel Dark Hold No Terror. The women portrayed by Shashi Deshpande in her novel can be classified into three groups or types who recur with subtle changes. The first type belongs to the heroine's mother or mother figure. Saru's mother (Dark Hold No Terror) as well as Jaya's mother (That Long Silence), Indu's mother (Roots and Shadows) are the representative of this class. They represent the traditional, religious ethos and confirm to the Manu code that the woman should be under the control of the father in maidenhood, the husband in her youth, and sons during her old age.

In the present novel Kamalatai, Saru's mother is a representative of this class. She is an old-fashioned woman who observes the fast and does pooja every day. She is very rigid about her brahminical rites and rituals. She follows Sita's and Savitri's roles. She often hates her daughter, Saru just for she is a daughter. When Saru was growing up her mother used to warn her that, she should be careful now about how she behaves, she would tell her, don't come out in her petticoat like that, she had to be ashamed of herself even in the presence of her father. When Saru is playing in the sun her mother said;

“Don’t go out in the sun. you will get even dark.
Who cares?
We have to care if you don’t. We have to get you married.
I don’t want to get married
Will you live with us all your life?
Why not?
You can’t
And Dhruva?
He is different. He is a boy.
(Dark Holds No Terror P-45)

When Saru achieved 1st class in XIIth and wanted to do medicine, her father asked her what subjects will she take for B.Sc? And she declares that she will not go to B.Sc. She wanted to do medicine. It was an unexpected response to her traditional mother, who replied that

“And don’t forget, medicine or no medicine,
doctor or no doctor,
You still have to get married,
spend money on her wedding” She adds
“Let her go for a B.Sc. can get her married in two years and
our responsibility will be over” (P44)

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Saru's marriage is a burden for them. But for Saru, to get married and end up doing just what her mother did. It seemed her not only terrible but damnable. When Saru's mother is planning her marriage. She falls in love with a young writer called Manohar of the other caste. Her mother asks her,

what caste is he?
I don’t know.
A Brahmin?
Of course not.
Then, cruelty.

His father keeps a cycle shop
Oh, so they low caste people, are they? (P-96)

When Saru decides to marry Manu, the other castes young poet, mother comments that she knows all these love marriages. According to her, it is love for a few days and quarrels all the time. She warns Saru that don't come back to them tell them anything. She did forgive Saru till her death. Even when she was suffering from cancer and was suggested to go to her daughter. She replied that "Daughter? I don't have any daughter. I had a son and he died. Now I am Childless."

Mavashi (Sudhir's Mother) Mai-kaki calls her a brave woman, a woman of courage as she never complained and told anyone what was happening to her like her mother who was a deserted woman by her husband only a few years after marriage, who never complained who would accept as "It is my luck, my fate. It was written on my forehead (p 70). Saru ironically says that it was so much easy for women in those days to accept, not to struggle because they knew there was nothing else for them and they would call, it was their fate.

The second type of suffering woman is the converse of the traditional type. Here, the woman is bolder, more self-reliant, and more rebellious. She cannot conform to Sita's version of womanhood and consciously indented toward what could be designated as radical feminist ideology. Like Ibson's Nora (Doll's House) kind of woman is very rare in Shashi Deshpande's Novel. In the present novel, Saru's friend and classmate Nalu hold a feminist ideology of life for the sake of which she chooses to lead an independent life as a spinster. She accepts the job of a school teacher. Saru likes Nalu because she never talks about family, children, and family problems.

The third type of woman characterizes the woman in between. Most of Deshpande's heroines belong to this category. This woman is neither traditional nor radical in her ideas and practices. She might walk out of her home in protest against her suffering. But gradually realizes that walking over agonies even after she escapes her marital home. Indu in Roots and Shadows leaves her husband to seek refuge in her ancestral home, but she is unable to accept her fate as an ordinary woman might do. This heroine suffers more because they are aware of the escape routes of two other types of women the traditional and the radical but hesitate to choose those options.

The novel is written in flashback technique. Years on Sarita still remembers her mother's words uttered when as a little girl she was unable to save her younger brother from drowning. Now her mother is dead and Sarita returns to the family home, ostensibly to take care of her father. Now she recollects her memories in cinematic technique. From childhood itself Saru is rebellious. She does not like her mother's rites and rituals and traditions of belief. Saru says "If you are a woman. I don't want to be one (P-63). She thinks that she had to study hard to be successful and answer their question "Why was I alive?" When Sarita and Manu were talking about marriage and separation from her family. Manu remarks that it must be suffering and painful to you. She tells him that she is already detached from her family. It is quite easy to cut the umbilical cord and separate the baby from the mother. It's as if nature knows the child must be detached from the parent. So there will be no trauma, no bleeding for her.

Thus, Saru the protagonist of the novel, who is a medical student, is not representing the traditional Sita Image. In her day-to-day life also Saru tries to be modern in her thought and action. When she listens to Madhav's comment on her mother She is a very old-fashioned woman. She imagines that Will Abhi think "My mother is old fashioned?" but she says ;

I am not old-fashioned.

I take great care not to be left behind.

My legs are weary, my heart is numb, my mind is blank, but I keep marching on.

I have even cut my hair...

However, at the end of the novel, Saru realizes herself and learns to live up to the challenges. Saru decides to face her husband and not run away. Indu and Jaya also decide to confront their husband and talk the matter out to arrive at a solution. Thus, Saru wish wishes not to be like her mother. She always tries to be not only a wife and mother but also a successful lady doctor. The darkness of the past and tradition holds no terror for her.

Conclusion

While concluding, we can say that Shashi Deshpande has portrayed images of the woman from the middle-class Indian Woman. Her writing is deeply rooted in the culture where she lives and it remains sensitive to the common everyday events and experiences. The woman characters in her novel are placed between contradictory identities of tradition and modernity, family and profession, and culture and nature.

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Conflicts of interest

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