

A Microcosm of Third World Feminism in Shashi Deshpande's Novel *The Dark Holds no Terrors*

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Abstract

In the beginning feminism was a monolithic movement. It was based on the belief that the problems of all the women living in different countries of the world are same. Now because feminism in the beginning was dominated by Anglophone and Francophone feminists so it was believed that the problems of the women around the world resemble the problems of these women. However, soon it was realised that the problems of the women around the world cannot be universalised. In fact, the problems of an Indian woman are totally different from the problems of a European woman and the same thing applies to the woman living in the Middle East and Africa. Soon feminism changed into feminisms and one universal theoretical model gave way to many theoretical models and these models discussed the problems that were localised. Literary writers have also played their role in accentuating these theoretical issues. The current paper is a study of Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds no Terrors* as a significant contribution in enhancing the problems of women living in the Third world countries in general and India in particular.

Keywords: feminism, third world, patriarchy, education, marriage.

Lois Tyson, in her famous book *Critical Theory Today*, starts the chapter on feminist criticism with these three statements:

I'm not a Feminist- I like men!

I'm not a feminist I think women should be able to stay at home and raise children if they want to!

I'm not a feminist – I wear a bra!. (83)

These statements capture the differences that exist among the feminists on various issues regarding women. Early second wave feminism had a tendency to downplay differences of “class, race, sexuality and location between women” (Weedon 283). Feminists in the later stages of second-wave understood that no universal theory of oppression of women can be formulated. In fact, it was realized that the problems that plague women around the world are so localised that it is impossible to develop a panacea.

Feminists around the world realised that the local issues of women around the world are different and those differences have to be respected; and thus started a third world feminist movement. This was an addition to already existing Anglophone and Francophone feminist models. In 1984, American feminist Barbara Smith remarked:

And not only am I talking about my sisters here in the United States- American Indian, Latina, Asian American, Arab American. I am also talking about women all over the globe.... Third world Feminism has enriched not just the women it applies to, but also the political practice in general. (Smith, 27)

In fact, recognition of a third world feminism added richness to already strong movement. It also made the feminists of the first world countries aware about their less privileged sisters. The major concern of the movement remained the same, that is, oppression of females, but the various strategies adopted by patriarchy in different cultures came to light:

Although the emphasising of shared oppression remained an important political strategy in within feminism, the history of contemporary feminism has made clear how crucial it is to pay attention to difference and location in understanding and contesting patriarchy. This is a key theme in postcolonial feminist writing that both challenge the Eurocentric gaze and urge the value of third world feminist perspectives to a global feminism. (Weedon 283)

The problems of women in India, for instance are totally different from the problems of women in Europe or the United States. The dowry deaths so common in India are unheard of in Europe or America. Similarly, female foeticide is not known in the world except for the Indians, Pakistanis and some other Asian communities. With the growing influence of feminists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, the problems of Indian women are also brought into focus. These postcolonial theorists have paved the way for increased discussion about the role of feminism in different cultural spheres. In this, the role of writers like Shashi Deshpande, Amrita Pritam and Krishna Sobti is also important. Though there are some issues that plague women through the length and breadth of India yet there are some issues which are confined to a few communities or a particular geographical area. Among the women writers writing in India, Shashi Deshpande, has already earned a reputation for raising issues regarding women in her creative writing. The current paper is a study of her novel *The Dark Holds no Terrors*.

The novel is an important document in the sense that it discusses almost all the problems faced by Indian women in their life. The novel clearly shows that the women in Indian society have to suffer only because they are women. If she is intellectually superior to her husband and earns more; then she has to pay the price for hurting his ego. The novel tells the story of Sarita who is a doctor by profession and the torture she has to undergo because she is more successful and earns more than her husband. She had to undergo horrible sexual torture by her husband. The theme is accentuated by the fact that she had married her husband Manohar against the wishes of her family.

It is important to note that sex which was a vehicle for their union in the beginning of their marriage becomes a cause of rift in their married life. In the beginning it was enjoyable and passionate:

But when we got married it was nothing like I had ever imagined. After the first moment of apprehension ... a pure physical response or lack of it rather there was never any withholding in me. I became in an instant a physically aroused women with an infinite capacity for loving and giving, with the passionate desire to be absorbed by the man I loved. All 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 nerve ends of pleasure had sprung up all over my body. (40)

After marriage, Sarita discovers her true sensual nature. She indulges in sex not for bodily hungers, but for love:

I was insatiable, not for sex, but for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love. Of my being loved, of my being wanted. If I ever had any doubts, I had only to turn to him and ask him to prove his love for me and he wouldAgain and again and again. (40)

So many feminists have taken "body's as the central object through which power relations are both formulated and resisted" (Carson, Fiona 94). Most of the feminists have treated phallus as the symbol of power for the males: "While men lay claim to the supposedly superior category of mind, the biological processes- menstruation and gestation- are writ large open the surface of female body" (Carson 94). The female body is objectified "for male consumption and sexual delectation" (Carson 94). In fact, the sexual act that is important for physical and psychological wellbeing of both the partners becomes an exercise to exert control over the women. Leading feminists like Simone de Beauvoir have also stressed on the equality in sexual act:

We have seen that it is possible to avoid the temptation of sadism and masochism when the two partners recognize each other as equal; if both the man and the woman has a little modesty and same generosity the ideas of victory and defeat are abolished; the act of love becomes a free exchange. (Beauvoir 701)

But the bitter truth is that the relationship never becomes equal. Sarita also realises the truth:

a + b they told us in mathematics is equal to b+a. But here a+b was not definitely equal to b+a. It became a monstrously unbalanced equation, lopsided, unequal, impossible. But is that the only reason or would it have happened in any case, what happened to us later, he being what he is and I being what I am?

The "equal and unbearably sweet" relationship of Sarita and Manohar ends when he realizes that he is inferior to her in social status and his income is less than hers. The things go on as usual till he is made to realize this by the people around them.

Manohar is ignored by the society, while Sarita enjoys attention. Manohar, the man, the supreme creation of patriarchy who could not be inferior to his wife fails miserably in taking the literary world by storm (65). While Sarita advances in her life by dint of her hard work and intellect. Manohar's male ego is hurt when he is asked by an interviewer: "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?" (200). Manohar is helpless in the front of society so he chooses the most private place to even the score, to torture his wife:

He attacked me like an animal that night. I was sleeping and up and there was this man hurting me. With his hands, his teeth, his whole body. (201)

So the sexual act which was a vehicle of union in the beginning of their marriage becomes a torture. But in this torture Sarita has an epiphanic moment in which she realizes that this was not the first instance of his changed behaviour. She realises that things began to change after marriage when she was given more respect in the locality compared to her husband:

And now, when we walked out of our room, there were nods and smiles, murmured greeting and Namaste's. But they were all for me only for me. There was nothing for him. He was almost totally ignored. (42)

Manohar develops “an affected indifference” to this newly found importance given to his wife and forces her to change their home (42).

Sarita ignores all there “indifference (s)” till the things go out of hand. The second assault occurs when she is made to realize that he enjoys so many privileges due to his wife’s income. He attacks Sarita brutally:

I woke up to darkness and an awareness of fear. Panic. Then pain. There it was for the second time what I had just lulled myself into believing was just a nightmare. The hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar body. And above me, a face, I could not recognise. Total non-comprehension, complete bewilderment paralysed me, for a while. Then I began to struggle. But my body, hurt and painful, could do nothing against the fearful strength which overwhelmed me. (112)

It is important to note that Sarita’s education has helped her gain an important position in the society. Education has been recognised as an important tool in rescuing women from being trapped within a sense of passivity and fatalism (Kurian 63). The novel also discusses the role of education in liberating women. Reaching puberty is something shameful according to tradition (in Northern India). Menstruation is treated like a punishment for a female:

It was torture. Not just the three days when I couldn’t enter the kitchen or the puja room. Not just the sleeping on a straw mat covered with a thin sheet. Not just the feeling of being a pariah, with my special cup and plate by my side in which I was served from a distance for my touch was, it seemed pollution. (62)

This kind of the treatment has a psychologically debilitating effect on women. Sarita also undergoes the feeling of guilt and shame because of the way she is treated by society during these three days, but education liberates her:

It was only when I began to study anatomy and physiology in my first year of medicine, that I was suddenly released from a prison of fears and shame. Things fell, with a miraculous exactness into place. I was a female. I was born that way, that was the way my body had to be, those were the things that had to happen to me. And that was that. (63)

Sarita is a highly educated women and economically independent, but even then she takes a long time to take a decision. This is what differentiates her from a European or American women. She is educated, but deeply rooted in tradition. For her, marriage is sacred and to save her marriage she also turns to God:

At one time she had feverishly clutched the thought of god to herself. She had gone in for pujas, fasts, rituals and mumbled prayers. But there was no comfort in it at all. Just the feeling of being a fraud, an actress acting out a role she didn’t believe in. (43)

Manohar represents on ugly face of patriarchy, who knows the mindset of his wife Sarita. That is why he chooses bedroom to unleash terror on his wife. He chooses bedroom to torture her because it is away from the eyes of society and their children:

Bed, the one she shared with her husband, was to her an intensely private place. She could not, would not draw aside the curtain that hid it from the world. Renu and Abhi if they come to know And they will eventually, I cannot hide it from them forever... I will never be able to look them in the face again. (97)

The ‘wife’ Sarita bows down before ‘mother’ Sarita and chooses to bear torture for sake of her children.

In the course of the novel, Deshpande makes it clear that Manohar is acutely aware of the fact that his luxurious life is entirely dependent on his wife's income. That is why when Sarita offers to leave her job (79) his reaction is instant.

Can you bear to send the children to a third rate school? To buy them the cheapest clothes, the cheapest of everything. To save and scrape and still have nothing after the first few days of the month? No Saru, there can be no going back. We have to go on. (81)

Manohar shows how patriarchy works. Patriarchy not only reprimands, but also cajoles, pats and praises women to sacrifice their lives for the man. Manohar is aware of the fact that his nocturnal torture is responsible for the decision taken by Sarita. That is why he behaves differently on that particular night:

That night he behaved like a young man with a girl he loves. He was tender, teasing and infinitely protective and when his hands began to caress me gently and I said no, not today I'm tired were there no other words in the world? He ceased at once not importuning me further. He tucked me into bed instead, like I did Abhi, and saying "good night Saru" went off to sleep. (81-2)

Manohar is an effete individual who is totally dependent on his wife. He makes an interesting psychological study of a hollow personality who clings to his huge ego. He does not have any quality. He is a social and professional failure who had married Sarita for a comfortable living but his ego is hurt when the truth he knows in heart of his hearts is acknowledged by others. He is a man who remains silent when he sees other man making advances towards his wife but cannot digest when other people tell him that his wife is more successful than him.

The novel makes it clear that economic independence does not necessarily mean emancipation for women. Even an economically independent woman has to remain subservient to please her husband. Woman must show herself to be inferior to her husband if she has to remain happy in her marriage. Sarita was under an impression that her relationship is different because they have entered a love marriage. But her trust, her confidence proves too fragile in front of false ego nurtured for thousands of years by patriarchy. At last, she understands that patriarchal mindset is almost impossible to change.

Have you girls ever seen an old fashioned couple walking together? Have you noticed that the wife almost walks a few steps behind her husband? That is important, very important, because it is 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 is 5' 4" tall you shouldn't be more than 5' 3" tall. If he is earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage don't ever try to reverse the doctor- nurse, executive- secretary, and principal-teacher's role. It can be traumatic, disastrous. (137)

Thus, Deshpande in the novel deals with the problems faced by women in day to day life. The stories of such abuse remain hidden with him the walls of bedrooms and houses. She rejects the validity of marriage as "an equal partnership" (137) in Indian context. She tells in unambiguous terms that women can "nag complain, henpeck, whine, moan" (137) but she can never be strong.

The novel is deeply rooted in Indian context. Sarita is tortured by her husband but unlike her American or European counterparts she does not reject the institution of marriage. She realises that her friends Nalu is "bitter because she never married, never bore a child" (121). She

also realises that the problem of her marriage is not intractable and it can be solved through dialogue. She knows that separation will ruin the future of their children.

Thus the novel *The Dark Holds no Terrors* is a novel that discusses the problem of Indian women in Indian context. The response to the problem is also typically Indian. Sarita, the protagonist in the novel represents the highly educated women but at the same time she is also a traditional woman who represents millions of women of India. The novel underscores that the problem of males and female should be solved through mutual understanding.

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