

The changing face of the Indian woman with special reference to *the dark holds no terrors*

Isha Tyagi¹, Ravindra Kumar²

¹⁻² Department of English, Ch Charan Singh University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

History shows that this world has always been dominated by male figures. Right from the dawn of different civilizations, all the kings, emperors, historians, thinkers, philosophers, doctors and legislators have been males and they have moulded the ideas from the view point of male mentality. Women, in all the ages, have been subjugated and marginalized. Either they have been worshipped like a goddess or they have been treated like objects. What they demand is equality, which has never been given to them. The twentieth century witnessed a deluge of women activists who raised voice against this inequality. Due to their tremendous efforts, the things have started changing gradually. Today, women are coming out of their attic and they are aggressively vocal for their social, political and educational rights; they have started resisting the male assumptions. The status of woman is changing now and this is well reflected in literature too across the globe. If we try to have a look at Indian English Literature, we find that most of the Indian writers today reflect not merely the position and status of woman in India but also the new awareness that is arousing woman from her static state. The paper aims to show the changing face of woman in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*.

Keywords: international phenomenon, punishable offence, continual transmigration, patriarchal society, meticulous probing, emasculation, traditional constraints, militant feminism

1. Introduction

It is only theoretically that a woman is extolled an angel. What we see in actual practice does not accord with this romantic exaltation. Most of the human societies are male dominated and a woman is grudgingly given a secondary status.

The definition of woman is made with reference to man and hence all the qualities that he desires and which complement him, are ascribed to her. It is a well-known fact that men often entertain stereotyped notions regarding women in their minds. Simon de Beauvoir, referring to such notion writes: She is an idol, a servant, the source of life, a power of darkness, she is the elemental silence of truth, she is artifice, gossip and falsehood, she is healing power and sorceress. She is man's prey, his downfall. She is everything that he is not and that he longs for^[1].

It is said that man's cruelty towards man is exceeded by man's cruelty towards woman. And this cruelty towards woman is an international phenomenon. Women are not only treated cruelly, they are cornered socially and morally too. The holiest of the holy books of Christianity, the Bible, holds that the original sin in the Garden of Eden was a woman's. She tasted the forbidden fruit, tempted Adam and has been paying for it ever since. In Genesis, the first book of the Bible, the lord says: "I will multiply thy sorrow, thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee". Woman is held responsible for having led man to his downfall.

The same attitude is shown by Adi Shankaracharya who held woman and woman alone responsible for the downfall of man. Under such cultural configuration Manu, the law giver, laid down laws that denied women their right to independence and individuality be they of any status. He indulged in the most generous sentiment that where ever women are not honoured there religious worship is fruitless.

But while offering all this vague and insincere adulation and flattery, he deprived woman of all her influence, spiritual and material, by asserting that she must on no account act on her own but should always take orders from her male relatives – in childhood from her father, in youth from her husband and in old age from her son.

In India the position of women is much worse. Here the birth of a baby girl is a harbinger of sorrow, so much so that in quite a few parts of India female infanticide is prevalent even today. Scientific techniques have made it possible to determine the gender of the unborn child and the female child is murdered even before she sees the light of the day. This became so common that laws had to be passed to make it illegal and a punishable offence.

The birth of a son is celebrated because he is the hope of the family, he lives with his parents, continues the family life, supports his parents in their old age and helplessness and adds lustre and glory to the name of the family by his noble and brilliant achievements. Only a son can perform the funeral rites of his parents so that the soul of the deceased avoids the awkwardness of continual transmigration and quickly soars to heaven. These things cannot be done by a daughter. She is more of a liability than an asset. From the moment she is born, the only concern of the parents is to find a husband and hand over the responsibilities to him. Costly jewellery, expensive clothes and cash is the price paid to the bridegroom and once the marriage takes place one heaves a sigh of relief. After that whatever the husband or his people do, the girl has to put up with it as a good wife and daughter-in-law. If things become unendurable it is just her fate. She must not expect her parents to interfere and rescue her. Marriage is the destiny usually and finally offered to a woman by society, a society which forces a woman to play a subservient role where the superiority of man is taken for granted. Indian woman is aware of her own

helplessness. She knows that her daily bread, her happiness and her honour depends on her husband and she takes infinite pains to see that she gives him no cause for complaint.

Man has dominated woman from ages past so much so that even woman has developed an inferiority complex. She has started believing that she is inferior to man. As Amrit Kaur feels it is woman who has consented to be called the weaker sex as she thinks that she cannot stand without a man's protection.

But seers among men have recognised the equal status of man and woman. They know that woman is the true companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minute details of the activities of man and has the same right of freedom and liberty as he. M. K. Gandhi believes that man and woman are equal in status, but are not identical. They are a peerless pair being complementary to each other. Each helps the other so that without one the existence of the other cannot be conceived and therefore it follows as a natural corollary from these facts that anything that impairs the status of either of them will involve the equal ruin of both.

Now the area of the work that a woman does has widened. Education coupled with economic independence has set a woman free. She has realized that must come out of the four walls of the house even though some objections are still raised against it. Desire for money is making families and society accept working women but still the running of the house is still considered to be the primary duty of a woman. She is considered solely responsible for providing food, clean clothes and a clean house to all the members of the family

The mood of the society is always reflected in literature. Literature and society act and interact upon each other. Literature depicts the society and society too is moulded by literature. Novel is one form which portrays the multi-faceted problems of life and presents the reactions of ordinary men and women. The novel has a special way of seeking and showing the significant aspects of the specific cultural and social patterns. Similarly the position of woman may be regarded as an index to the quality of its culture and character of its civilization.

Most of the Indian writers today reflect not merely the position and status of woman in India but also the new awareness that is arousing woman from her static state. The paper aims to show the changing face of woman in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*.

In this novel Shashi Deshpande portrays two different types of women. One the mother who represents the traditional woman who has imbibed the values of the male dominated patriarchal society and the other the protagonist Saru or Sarita, the modern woman who stands for the modern, educated, professional woman.

Shashi Deshpande needs no introduction. Gifted with a rare literary bent of mind, she has carved for herself a niche for herself among the Indian English novelists. Beginning her career at the time when the Indian Woman, specially the middle class educated woman who was financially independent, was struggling for liberation and an equal status with man she is well aware of her plight. This awareness is beautifully revealed in her novels by the meticulous probing of the subconscious and unconscious of her woman characters.

Saru portrays the dilemma of a post-modern woman who

refuses to internalise the generally accepted norms of the society which attack the female individuality and identity. The origin of the conflict is Saru's own mother who represents the values and canons of a patriarchal society. The irony lies in the fact that a woman has been made the agency for promoting the male point of view and to such an extent that she tries to thwart the desires of her daughter even more than her husband does. It is she who belittles Saru in comparison to her son Dhruva. When Dhruva is alive it is he who is the darling of his mother and Saru is of no consequence. When Dhruva drowns in the dark waters of the pool while Saru escapes the mother holds her daughter responsible for his death and very often says: "why didn't you die? Why are you alive when he is dead?" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*, p. 29-30). When Saru wishes to become a doctor and wants to take admission in a medical college, it is her mother who strongly opposes her. When contrary to expectations her father comes forward to support Saru her mother tries her best to dissuade him from sending her to study medicine, saying to him:

You don't belong to that class; and don't forget, medicine or no medicine, doctor or no doctor, you will have to get her married, spend money on her wedding.....Let her go for a B.Sc.....you can get her married in two years and our responsibility will be over."(pp. 130-131).

There exists a struggle of power and authority between the mother and the daughter, where the daughter is the representative of modernity and the mother is the mouthpiece of the male-dominated society. In leaving her home to study medicine Saru breaks her umbilical cord and gives her first war-cry to her mother and all that she stands for. Later she marries the man of her choice against the wishes of her mother to prove her power and independence in an orthodox society.

Shashi Deshpande portrays modern, educated, career-oriented middle class married women who are sensitive to the changing times and situations. Revealing a remarkable insight into the nature of a woman's mind she depicts woman in myriad roles – daughter, wife, mother and an individual in her own right. She endeavours to establish woman as an individual, who breaks loose from the traditional constraints and defines her identity in tune with the changed social ambience of the modern times.

But it is not that easy to change society and the age old values and beliefs. Saru is very happy in the early years of her married life with the man she has chosen as her husband. His economic and social status does not matter to them at that time. But the problems enter her life when Saru becomes a popular and well-known doctor. Her husband Manu's job of a teacher in a college is considered to be trivial in importance to her job as a doctor. Saru's financial growth and social rise leads to Manu's emasculation. Things come to a head when an interviewer talks to Manu of his status in the family: "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?"(p.163). Manu feels that his masculinity is being challenged and to assert his superiority he starts sexual aggression upon Saru. This creates a dual personality in Manu – a rapist at night and a loving and cheerful husband during the day. Saru's speech in a woman's college reveals her plight and the reason behind it:

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 that the wife

always walks a few steps behind her husband? That's important, very important, because it is symbolic of the truth that wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he is an M.A., you should be a B.A. if he is 5'4" tall, you shouldn't be more than 5'3" tall. If he's earning Rs. 500 you should never earn more than Rs. 499. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage. Don't even try to reverse the doctor-nurse, executive-secretary, principal-teacher role. It can be traumatic, disastrous." (p.124)

Shashi Deshpande does not believe in militant feminism, she has full faith in the inner strength and power of a woman. She feels that a woman has an innate wisdom that such power is to be used not to destroy but to create and nurture. Faced with a problem in her life Saru comes to her father's house at the beginning of the novel. She studies the problem objectively and reevaluates the whole of her past life. The novel is written in the flash-back technique. Towards the end of the novel, Saru remembers the words of Madhav: "I cannot spoil my life because of that boy (his brother); it is my life after all." (p.189) This is enough to make her realize her inner strength which she had forgotten for so long. The guilt of her brother's death vanishes and with it her fear of the darkness goes away. She decides to go back to her husband, Manu, and we come across a new and more energetic Saru who can solve the problem in her life with sympathy plus determination. She knows that now the nights would no longer terrify her as now the darks holds no terrors for her. Saru's return to her husband's house is symbolic of her coming back to her real 'inner space'. Her return does not indicate a submission to the patriarchal edifice that she finds constructed around her, it is an attempt to find peace and happiness in it or in spite of it by using her intelligence and womanly sympathy. She comes back to reconstruct her emotional role without deconstructing her gender identity.

References

1. Deshpande Shashi. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd. All textual references are from this edition, 1980.
2. Dhawan RK. *Indian Women Novelists*. New Delhi, Creative, Publications, 1993.
3. Dodhiya, Jaydeep. *Contemporary Indian Writings in English*. New Delhi, Creative Publications, 1997.
4. Kane PV. *History of Dharam Shastra*. Poona, Bhandarkar Research Institute, 1941.
5. Naik MK. *A History of Indian English Literature*. New Delhi, Sahitya Academy, 1989.
6. Pathak RS. *Recent Indian Fiction*. New Delhi, Prestige Books, 1994.
7. Parmeshwaran, Uma. *A Study of Representative Indo English Novelists*. New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, 1996.
8. *The Bible (Revised Standard Version)*. New York, American Bible Society, 1980.
9. Waugh, Patricia. *Practicing Postmodernism Reading Modernism*. London, Edward Arnold, 1992.