

Myth and Reality in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*: A critical appraisal of the woman-question

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As per sayings none is more furious than a woman scorned and the history of feminism is the story of women being scorned. Inevitably, the question that arises here is how much of this fury influences the writers who pen these stories? Obviously, they are furious and both the authors and their characters behave like iconoclasts. Hence, the dreams (read myths) they chase are many times mirages, far away from the mundane reality of ours.

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 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 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 un-compromising self-realization invite resistance to their movement from women who have chosen marriage and motherhood. Obviously, the myth that a modern woman can fulfil all her dreams by insisting on her rights and privileges has few takers. In the zeal to offset the overwhelming influence of the males, she may become little fussy over such issues but many times the reality is something otherwise. In fact, without a little compromise by the females of the species the life of both the partners invariably suffer and this brings untold miseries to both the sides.

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 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 the following remarks as some sort of "Prologue" to *The Dark Holds No Terrors* brands her as a feminist of the top order which she is not. It reads:

The beginning was abrupt. There had been no preparation for it. There were no preliminaries, either. At first it was a nightmare of hands. Questing hands that left a trail of pain. Hurting hands that brought me out of a cocoon of a blessed unreality... I'm-dreaming-this-is-not-real... into the savage reality of a monstrous onslaught. And then, the nightmare was compounded of lips and teeth as well. Hands and teeth? No, hammers and pincers. I could taste blood on my lips.

The hands became a body. Thrusting itself upon me. The familiarity of the sensation suddenly broke the shell of silent terror that had enclosed me. I emerged into the familiar world of rejection. My rejection that had become so drearily routine. I struggled to utter the usual words of protest, to say ... No, not now, stop it. But the words were strangled in my throat. The face above mine was the face of a stranger. Blank, set and rigid, it was a face I had never seen. A man I did not know. Strangely, this brought an odd relief. The experience became the known instead of the unknown. It was my nightmare again, the nightmare that had, for sometime, haunted me with fearful regularity. This was him, the stranger who had come into my dreams for a few nights, leaving behind a fear that invaded even my waking hours. The stranger with the brown scarf whom discovered standing that night at the head of my bed. And I, so frozen with terror that I could not move. Not even when his hands moved slowly, like some macabre slow motion sequence, towards my throat. I tried to call out, to scream. Nothing issued out of me but silence. Panic and terror mounted in me as the hands, deliberately, with a kind of casual cruelty, gradually tightened round my throat. Oh god, I was going to die!

And then he spoke. A voice that came from somewhere deep in his throat. Words carrying with them their own echo as if they had been flung into an enormous, empty cave. What was he saying? I never found that out, because it was at that moment that I always woke up.

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. I tried to move, twisting my body, wriggling under the weight that pinned it down. It was impossible. I was pinioned to a position of an abject surrender of my self. I began, in sheer helplessness, to make small whimpering sounds, piteous cries. The small pains merged all at once into one large one. And still the body above mine, hard and tense, went on with its rhythmic movements. The hands continued their quest for new areas of pain. 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, hopelessly, savagely.

And suddenly, when I thought I could bear it no longer, the body that was not mine relaxed. The release was so abrupt it shocked me into an unfamiliar faintness. When the syncope wore off, I realized I was free. There was no weight pinning me down now. But I could not move. It was not just exhaustion, though there was that too. It was more as if mind had deserted my shamefully bruised body, disowning it, making it insensate.

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:

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 wifeness 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? ... (Deshpande 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. A 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 grievous injustice. But a cool analysis of the whole episode makes the behaviour 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 text. 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 nerve ends on 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 the physical pleasure even though it stays for a short period. As her own statement suggests she always tried to hold back her faith and confidence by retreating to Manu for an act of sexual pleasure.

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 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* with 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)

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 grudges, 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 neuropsychiatrist 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 very 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 life from 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).

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 that 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's 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-nine 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 isn't 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*. Prabhathi 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...(78).

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 the present scholar feels, 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 Dhruva?
He's 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 can not prevent her from having satisfaction. In this case the traditional boss i.e. the husband becomes the bossed and dances to the tune of his female partner. So to say that females of the spices 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.

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.

Works Cited

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