

The Binding Of Mother And Daughter Relationship In Shashi Deshpande's The Dark Holds No Terrors

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ABSTRACT

The psychic imbalance and emotional bindings of Shashi Deshpande's mother and daughter characters in her novel *The Dark Hold No Terrors* are the focus of this paper. An important aspect in Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is the lack of cordial relations between a mother and a daughter: In this novel, the mother-daughter relationship occupies the centre stage. Her novel is mainly concerned with the self-assertion and loneliness of a woman. Her chief concern is human relations, not the rationalization but felt, perceived and real, not the traditional but redefined human relations, especially the relationship between mother and daughter. In all these, the central figure, either mother or daughter, is a woman.

Keywords: *Relationship Mother, Family, Daughter, Loneliness, Woman, Self-Assertion*

Shashi Deshpande is one of the leading novelists today who is known for the same creed. She holds great worth as an Indian English female novelist. She has made bold attempts at giving a voice to the disappointments and frustrations of a woman. In her later novels, she has portrayed her protagonists as actually aware of their smothered and fettered existence in a male-dominated society. The realistic delineation of woman as wife, mother and daughter and their search for identity and sexuality as well is revealed. Deshpande stories can be categorized as those which mirror reality, examining the subjugated position of woman in Indian society and the stories that

mend the situation depicting the woman's positive reaffirmation of herself. But in all these stories, she hardly allows her women to move away from the traditional norms of society. Her stories generally centre on family relationships-the relationship between mother and daughter. The conflicts faced by a woman as a wife, a mother and a daughter are given importance.

Of all the familial relationships, the mother-daughter relationship is the strongest and the most natural one because the mother nurtures the child with her blood and milk. It is out of the earliest loving bonds with the mother that the infant develops the beginning of a being for itself. So, the impact of a mother's nature and behaviour on the psyche of the child is the strongest one in his or her formative years. In a patriarchal set-up like the one depicted by Deshpande, the role of mother becomes all the more crucial and pivotal in shaping the personality of a child, especially the girl child. In the Indian social set-up, a baby-boy is sought after by the mother far more than a baby girl. According to Anandlakshmi, "The Female Child in a Family Setting," the reason behind this tendency is that the "birth of a son gives a woman status and she invests herself in her son's fixture, creating a deep symbiotic bond" (31). A mother, who gives a child to the family, gets respect and honour as opposed to the mother of a girl's child who gets sympathy or scorn from society. Giving birth to a girl's child fills the mother with a sense of shame which she unconsciously transfers to her daughter. As a result, the girl is deprived of the maternal affection which disrupts the harmony so essential for her healthy growth. She grows up with a distorted view of her own self which is presented to her by her mother's disliking. Such a pernicious home environment becomes the cause of psychological distortion and a girl faces many problems in establishing relationships and in adjusting to societal norms. Deshpande has very artistically depicted these realities of the life of a girl child in Indian society and has shown how discrimination against girls, particularly found in mother's behavior, causes serious damage to her psyche, influencing her life not only as a daughter but also as a wife and a mother.

Deshpande's second novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, is about Saru an educated, economically independent, middle-class wife-who is made conscious of her gender as a child and whose loveless relationship with her parents and strained relations with her husband lead to her agonizing search for herself. The novel opens with Saru's return to her parents' house fifteen years after she left home with a vow never to return. Her relations with her husband become unbearably strained and she returns home for some solace. Here she gets a chance to think over her relationships with her husband, her children, her parents and her dead brother, Dhruva.

Saru's mother, born and brought up in such a society, carries forward this ideology of discrimination against her girl child in the novel. She blatantly discriminates between her son, Dhruva, and daughter, Saru. Through her behaviour, gestures and actions, she clearly conveys the idea that a son is preferable to her. It is because of this thinking of her mother's that a painful consciousness is forced upon Saru's psyche in her very childhood that she is the daughter and not the son. Time and again, she is made conscious of the fact that there is something which she lacks. She is resented and snubbed at every step by her own mother. Preference for Dhruva, her younger

brother and neglect of Saru belittles her status in the family. Dhruva's birthday is celebrated with great fanfare, whereas hers is barely acknowledged. This type of rejection on her mother's part breeds in her a feeling of being unwanted. Recalling her mother's words, she realizes that it was not the rain her mother complained about at the time of her birth but the fact of her being a girl: "But of my birth, my mother had said to me once... 'It was terrible.' And somehow, it seemed to me that it was my birth that was terrible for her, not the rain "(169). This is how the element of love, so essential for the growth of self-esteem of a child, is denied to her by her own mother. Thus, love helps a girl to grow into a confident individual and enables her to negotiate life and its pressures in a balanced manner. Without this, a girl finds it difficult to integrate herself into relationships with others in family and society.

It's not only that Saru is deprived of love by her mother, but her father too fails to offer this succor of love and proves to be nonchalant. Both of her parents failed to present a role model to the child which she could depend upon and emulate in her relationships. Usually, mothers serve as role models for their daughters. They provide examples of how to be an individual, a mother and a wife. Generally, fathers, however, instill in their daughters the sense of how to regard themselves, what to look for in a partner and what to expect of men in co-parenting relationships. The role of a father becomes all the more crucial if the mother is non-responsive. In such a situation, it is the father who has to play the role of a mentor, ensuring the child's psychological and emotional development. For this, healthy communication between father and daughter is a must. But it requires sensitivity and understanding to share emotions, pains and anxieties on the part of the father. Only then can he offer her a comforting shoulder when she is in distress. This caring and loving father figure gives the daughter assurance of being loved and wanted. But this very emotional solace is conspicuous by its absence from Saru's life even as a child.

In early childhood, communication is an effective medium through which an emotional bond is established between parents and children. Saru, as a child, was deprived of communication with her father through which she could develop a lasting emotional bond with him. This is evident from the fact that the reader hardly hears her in conversation with her father while Dhruva has long conversations with him. Like any other child, she too makes every effort to draw the attention of her father towards her, but to no avail. Every time it is her brother, Dhruva, who becomes the focus of love and attention of her father instead of herself. That's clear from the way her father used to take Dhruva out for a ride, leaving her at home. He would make Dhruva sit on the bar of the cycle, conveying her message that "daughters are their mother's business" (105). These forces into her tender mind the painful feeling that she is unloved and unacknowledged. It throws her into a tizzy about her very identity. A feeling of worthlessness comes to possess her psyche, which nips the budding sense of self, breeding a deep feeling of alienation.

The strained relationship between Saru and her parents and the stifling home environment has its own detrimental effects on the tender psyche of Saru. Being a young girl, she yearns for recognition, but all the means of proper channelization of energy are repressed. This repression

finds an outlet in violent moods. This pernicious home environment of hatred, hostility and lovelessness sows the seeds of rebellion within her. This rebellion manifests itself when she, even as a child of tender age, begins to harbour thoughts of Dhruva's death and, because of this unconscious desire, she is held back from going to his rescue and he dies by drowning in the pond. This state of Saru's mind is aptly summed up by Premila Paulin "The Dark Holds No Terrors: A Call for Confrontation," when she says, "Dhruva's demise has always been her subconscious desire and there is a very thin demarcation between her wish and its fulfilment" (35).

The psychological turmoil is graphically and convincingly brought out by the novelist in her depiction of Saru in this phase of life. This begins with the frequent reminders to her by her mother that she is ugly, unwanted and undesirable. This causes so much alienation from her body that she often longs for a miracle: "That one day I will grow up and be beautiful" (61). When the physiological changes occur, she feels ashamed of her body because it places her in the same class as her mother: "A kind of shame that engulfed me, making me want to rage, to scream against the fact that it put me, in the same class as my mother." "If you're a woman, I don't want to be one" (62). This is a classic example of how the negative image and role of mother can push the daughter into an abyss of rejection and contempt for herself. This is made worse by various kinds of inhibitions imposed on girls and children in patriarchal societies.

All these inhibitions crowd on her with the advent of womanhood. One of its inevitable consequences is manifested in the form of intensification of resentment against womanhood. It comes to possess her mind so strongly that she begins to feel estranged even from normal relationships and experiences. Saru feels very embarrassed and agonised when she is advised by her mother to not to come out in her petticoat because she is growing up. This acute self-consciousness of her femininity created by her mother and exacerbated by the patriarchal milieu around her causes feelings of disgust for her womanhood: "And it became something shameful, this growing up, so that you had to be ashamed of yourself, even in the presence of your father" (62). Without the reassuring presence of a mother in adolescence, the consciousness of physical change and the flood of new urges unsettle the growing girl. The monthly cycle comes as a trauma to her as she is treated like a pariah for three days. During this period, even her entry into the kitchen and puja-room is forbidden. Instead of developing a sense of love for her young and blossoming body, her treatment like an untouchable makes her shudder at the natural biological function of her body.

This hatred for her female identity is aggravated further when she learns that she is nothing but a burden, a liability to be dispensed with by her parents. This tends to further undermine her sense of self as a human being, reducing her to a mere object to be given away to someone else without her consent. An effort is made to instil feminine virtues and graces in her so that she could be an attractive commodity in the marriage market.

Don't go out in the sun. You'll get even darker.

Who cares?

We have to care even 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? (45)

This conversation between mother and daughter shows that she is denied even the right to have a will and choice of her own about her future. This dispossession of self creates in her a feeling of being merely something meant for the use of someone else. Marriage, thus, comes to be seen by Saru as a challenge, a threat to her longings, dignity and freedom as a human being. These feelings of rejection, resentment and protest against her womanly destiny are typical of all patriarchal societies like the one in India and described by Sudhir Kakkar, in "Feminine Identity in India," when he says, "A daughter is an unmitigated expense, someone who will never contribute to the family income and who will take away her family's fortune as her dowry" (47). Such patriarchal attitudes are often responsible for creating in women the feeling of utter helplessness and of being misappropriated. As a result, Saru begins to express her feelings through acts of defiance which spring from her resentment against her mother.

Saru is conscious that her mother is highly orthodox and wants to cast her life in the mould of her own rigidly conventional attitudes charged with prejudice against the daughter. Moreover, as a traditional Hindu woman, her mother believes in the caste system and cannot bear the marriage of her daughter with a man of any other caste. This proved to be one of the crucial factors which pushed Saru towards Manohar. Saru's decision to marry Manu, a low caste boy, seems to have received from critics' rather simplistic treatment. While critics like Premila Paul, K.M. Pandey and NalinabhTripathi have not said even a single word about this central event of her life. G.D. Barche, "The Dark Holds No Terrors: Assertion of the Feminine Psyche," has taken note of it without trying to peep into the causes at work in the deep recesses of her psyche. According to him, "Against her parents' wishes, Saru married a boy from a lower caste. Her marriage to Manu is a sign of her turning away from the traditional ways and values her mother adhered to. She married to attain the autonomy of self and to the secure love lost in the parental home "(87).

Her strong preference for Dhruva, her son, drives Saru to nurse a sense of nothingness and complete nullity. And when her brother dies accidentally by drowning in the pond, the mother is haunted by the thought that Saru is responsible for his death. Thus, her mother considers her guilty and blames her, saying, "You did it, you did this. You killed him. Why didn't you die? "How come you're still alive when he's dead, ad?"(62). One could see Saru's painful predicament through the thought process that she had gone through after Dhruva's death. Her mother has not been able to comprehend her daughter's bewilderment and sense of estrangement. Her mother's love for her

son frightens Saru and stunts her growth and her emotional life is disturbed, which is very important for the development of her familial ties.

Saru's mother, thus, reduces her daughter to an object position, putting the whole blame for the death of her son on Saru. Deshpande's fiction exposes the attitude of orthodox mothers in Indian middle-class families who blame the death or non-birth of their son/sons on their daughters. It is in this sense that Deshpande's fiction can be better appreciated, that she has written what she has lived and observed others living in the Indian patriarchal set-up in which the birth of a female child is seen as a burden, nay as a curse. This exactly has happened with Saru since her birth. She is given less importance than her brother Dhruva. She remembers her fifteenth birthday when her friend Smita presented her with a pair of earrings which she keeps secretly only to wear when she is away from home. Her mother constantly reminds her that she should not go out in the sun, as it will worsen her already dark complexion. She recollects her conversation with her mother:

Don't go out in the sun, you'll get 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. (40)

These are various manifestations which lead her to discover her sense of inferiority in herself as a fixed and pre-ordained essence. As we have seen, Saru is haunted by feelings of anguish, anxiety and nothingness.

Deshpande would admit that Saru's relationship with Manohar reveals other aspects of her life. She marries to secure the lost love and her identity as an individual. She considers herself a full and complete being as the initial years of her marriage appear to be sheer bliss. After her marriage, she became a physically responsive woman with an infinite capacity for loving and giving. After the first moment of apprehension, there is nothing to fear, she feels. Manu and Saru's marital life became quite smooth and balanced. As Manu himself says, "When we're together, it's heaven." (38). One day, Manu asks Saru if wrenching her away from her parents is painful for her. Saru replies that they are "already the past and meant nothing" (39). It must be noted that marriage

opens the sesame of all enjoyment for Saru. Her dingy one-room apartment with the corridors smelling of urine, the room with their dark sealed odours is "a heaven on earth" (40) for her. Soon, she realizes that happiness is illusionary and unreal. Saru, as being-in-itself, initially feels complete and full in her marital life, but in the contingent world, the catastrophe occurs in her marital life, when a factory explodes. She assumes the role of an expert lady doctor. The social acceptance and recognition and the demands on her time create a wedge in her relationship with Manu. It becomes unbearable for Manu as Saru attains greater social status.

Everything now becomes transparent and translucent behind the marital phenomenon. The rift gets wider between Saru and Manu each day, as it shows itself in Manu's sulking within himself. Deshpande finds Saru constantly assailed by feelings of guilt and anguish. She further wishes to show that there exists a specific consciousness of freedom, and this consciousness is anguish. Saru has become conscious of her fixed and solid self, an object of Manu's sadism. Deshpande seems to ask how these feelings of nothingness and anguish will provide a foundation for her freedom. She hints at this state by saying that this nothingness is made to be by human beings in their relationship with themselves and others. Manu, that she will no longer be his wife, but his mistress. This is now her turn to objectify him as he has been objectifying her; hence, as Deshpande finds, human relationship is a matter not of mutual harmony, but of mutual objectification, and sexuality is no guarantee of mutual respect. She rebels against him when he turns into a feeling less monster inflicting inhuman torture upon her. Thus, Saru wants to detach herself from Manu and she desires to be being-for-itself.

The phenomenon of mother-daughter relationship also shows itself so clearly in Indian families, it is not to keep any nuance of it hidden. Like most mothers, her mother had always appeared as an authoritative figure and posed a threat to her individuality and selfhood.

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