



INTERROGATING THE CULTURAL ARTIFACT OF FEMINISM IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF AMMA DARKO, TEHMINA DURRANI AND SHASHI DESHPANDE

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Abstract

Cross-Cultural feminism is a platform for insightful international dialogues. Feminism is a multidimensional concept and it differs from culture to culture and from people to people. Yet strategic cross-connections can be made to prevent the movement of feminism from fading. Since, societies do not evolve at the same level simultaneously, by juxtaposing gynocritics from different cultures and analyzing their standpoints, this research article will endeavor to bring a broader –based representation of feminisms across cultures. Thus, Feminism can avoid narrowness by ensuring the inclusion of multitude of points of view. An analysis of the selected texts and the juxtaposition of writers from different cultural context will allow a display of mechanics of different patriarchies in different locations keeping the intricacies of interaction of class, race political and historical background in mind. This research will enable to acquire an expanded perspective on the lives of women in different locations and on foregrounding of issues related to women in diverse cultures.

Keywords: Feminism, Cross-cultural Connections, Patriarchy

Feminism takes on the monumental challenge of interrogating the relationship between systems of domination. It is a kind of cultural reconditioning through a positive transformation of women's identity and that too on their own constitutive terms. Feminism as a movement started when the personal became the political. However, now the thrust of feminism seems to be in the opposite direction: personal and individual has taken precedence over political. Plural, individualistic voices are

shaking the internal cohesion of a movement which started as a universal revolution with a common agenda. Contemporary Feminism is a diverse and pluralistic enterprise. Feminism is viewed as the recognition of the systematic discrimination against women on the grounds of gender and the commitment to work towards a change. Within this definition, one needs to find a place for different kinds of feminism that have emerged: liberal, radical, Socialist, Marxist, Black or African feminism and so on. Feminist

Theory in literature, according to Elaine Showalter has three phases: "the Feminine, the Feminist and the female" which may start with imitation and the internalization of the established tradition but they move to responses of protest and demands for autonomy and then to a phase of self-discovery that breaks free from both acquiescence to and rebellion from the social norms.

Although oppression of women and secondary status of women are universal phenomena, the causes underlying them and the justification put forth may differ from culture to culture. "Cultural difference has been a focal point of contention when women debate on identity politics, the politics of 'difference' and solidarity among women across racial, cultural and religious boundaries" (Pui-Lan 23).

It is therefore, necessary to concentrate on the culture specific aspects associated with feminism. In order to truly fathom the plethora of critical positions available within feminism it becomes necessary to study a variety of feminist positions across cultures. Women writing over the time have evolved through several evolutionary phases of subjugation, exploitation, protest and autonomy in relation to the literary mainstream and across cultures and Nationality through recurring metaphors, themes and images from women's social, psychic and literary experiences. The impenetrable layer of prejudices and gender discrimination, which has been shrouding the sensibilities of female experiences for centuries, is evaporating away. The worldwide recognition to their merits in the form of numerous awards is the testimony to the fact that with the confident moves, they are making great strides in the literary scene. In spite of all the promises of equal opportunities and status to the women in the hierarchy, there still are many conservative societies in various parts of the world, esp. South Asia and African countries where the act of speaking out against the norms and traditions is considered rebellious.

The paper is an attempt to analyse the three novels from different geographical and diverse cultural contexts: The three novels taken here for study are: *Amma Darko's novel Beyond the Horizon*, *My Feudal Lord* by Tehmina Durrani and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* by Shashi Deshpande.

Amma Darko's novel, *Beyond the Horizon* helps feminists to know about the core issues that need to be addressed to transform the deplorable state of affairs of black women. Amma Darko's novels and the characters that populate them are real to the degree that she observes society and records her observations in order to create awareness for certain social problems and to effect change. How the vulnerable uneducated women are lured into a trap and have to lead an eternal life of servility and humiliation has been depicted through the story of the main protagonist Mara. *Beyond the Horizon* the story of Mara is also the story of women from Ghana including Amma Darko. The novel depicts the sordid realities of neo-classical, postcolonial, globalised lives on the women from Ghana. The narrator of the story Mara is a third world woman in the west. The story begins with Mara recounting the transformative journey of a naïve Ghanaian village girl to a defiant, financially independent but drugged out prostitute in Munich, Germany.

In the beginning of the novel, Mara is sitting in front of a mirror in her chamber at the German brothel where she is employed. She takes the reader on a journey that begins in a remote village of Ghana, Naka. Mara is disposed and transferred like a commodity right from her birth. She experiences that patriarchal patterns replicate themselves from one situation to another. The married life of Mara turns hell due to shocking reasons of domestic violence. Akobi is so addicted for violence that most of the times he resorts to such conduct are shocking. As Mara narrates:

"When I didn't bring him the bowl of water in time for washing his hands and after eating, I received a nasty kick in the knee. When I forgot the chewing stick for his teeth, which he always demanded be placed neatly beside his bowl of serve food, I got a slap in the face. And when the napkin was not at hand when he howled for it, I received a knuckle on my forehead."(Darko 19)

In all, Akobi is presented as a man without edifying human emotion, least of all love. He performs his sexual duties in a primitive, perfunctory manner, without any sensual attachment, congeal bonding or expression of love; a man who would "wordlessly" and authoritatively "strip" off his wife's clothes, have sex with her in a hurry and then order her "off the mattress"...because he wanted to sleep alone."(Darko 22)

"The drama of female existence centers on the effort to achieve and maintain marriage as an index of social status" and marriage measures a woman's success" (116). Mara makes all effort to save her marriage which defined her social status according to the patriarchal standards. Darko presents two contrasting pictures of these partners as oppressor and the female partner as victim. According to Mara, she had grown used to Akobi [...] to his bullying, to the strength he possessed over me. I didn't like what he meted out to me with that strength and yet, at the same time, that strength made me acknowledge him as my husband" (Darko 44). Her rationalization that male violence against women is what has come to define the image and conduct of the average marital union leaves a lasting impression on the reader.

In the second half of the story, set in Germany, Akobi moves from wife beater to wife exploiter. Mara feels shattered and faces a crisis in life when she faces the ultimate betrayal by her husband. Akobi had married a German woman Gitte to get legal citizenship. Mara is

introduced as Akobi's sister in Germany. He supports his doing so by giving examples of other black people who indulged in marriage with legal German citizens in exchange for a legal citizenship. She nurses the betrayal and continues to suffer indignities at the hands of her husband. Later together with his friend, Osey, and other men, he inducts the initially unsuspecting and vulnerable Mara into prostitution and lives on Mara's earnings. Mara is reduced to a virtual slave, trapped in an alien country and a vocation which is both designed and run by unscrupulous men. Mara's Fantasy turns into a nightmare. Trans-cultural background accentuates her sense of alienation. Mara faces triple alienation on account of the colour of her skin, her gender and her illegal status in a foreign land. The novel predominantly highlights the sexist exploitation of Mara.

The principal male characters are irresponsible fathers and husbands, drunkard's rapists, exploiters, predators and monsters. Once Darko begins to develop the relationship between Mara and her supposed husband, Akobi, Akobi himself, his father and Mara's father become the quintessential defining archetypes of the male species. Akobi's father's wealth is derived from his job as an undertaker whose constant prayer is for the outbreak of cholera so he can profit from it. About Mara's father, we know nothing except his zeal to marry off his underage daughters, taking more into consideration "the number of cows coming as the bride price than the character of the man"(Darko 4).Some critics have even blamed Amma Darko for showing men in an extremely unkind light in her novels.

In an Interview with Raymond Ayinne (2004), Amma Darko says: "We have started writing from our point of view because, for a while, you were writing for us... So... if we are writing, probably there is some pain that has to come out. And I think rather than take it as male-bashing; you must take it as a means to better understand the women folk of Africa... You

were always portraying us as all enduring, all giving mothers and that is the attitude we find in males... but I don't want to be all giving all the time, I don't want to be all enduring, I want to ventilate pent up feelings about the experiences of women.

The second novel taken here for analyses is the autobiographical novel *My Feudal Lord* by Tehmina Durrani, a Pakistani novelist, who while living in this crushing and numbing tradition of '*chadar and char deewari*' dares to raise her voice against the sadistic and inhuman violence of her feudal husband.

A significant turning point in the history of Pakistani literature and art ironically came with the Islamic Sharia laws, implemented by the military dictatorship of Zia-ul-Haq in 1979. "A Move to Quranic laws, supported by a fundamentalist party called Jamaat-e-Islami, turned out to be mostly anti-women, the Majlis-e-Shoora, the Federal Council ... proposed "Chadar and Chardivari" for women, saying that women should be confined to their homes and exist just for the pleasure of the male." (Grewal 24) At this time when Pakistan was suffering at the hands of military dictatorship, Tehmina Durrani was suffering at the hands of her feudal husband Mustafa Khar.

In the beginning of the novel we meet 22 year old Tehmina Durrani; a sophisticated young woman belonging to the high social circle, clad in green sari with her long braided plait seems to be leading a happy and comfortable life at the surface level. She is married to Anees by her parents, but boredom looms over her as she finds her marriage lacking in romance, excitement and love. At this juncture, she meets her feudal lord, love of her life, Mustafa Khar with whom she falls in love secretly but madly. Owing to her culturally conditioned mindset, she found her relationship with Khar illegitimate and her desires to leave a loving husband and a daughter blasphemous.

Cultural and religious conditioning plays such an important part in the life of multitudes

of women like Tehmina that even their own conscience and power to distinguish between the real and warped fails them. They usually find themselves standing at such a place, which is surrounded by numerous abysses of morality and obligations. Her parents try their best to discourage her from taking such a drastic step as it was against the social cultural obligations and expectations regarding women. Telling us about the education that women used to get from the prevalent social institutions of her time in this matter, Durrani says:

We were taught that marriage is a sacred institution and that we must on no account break our vows. If the man turned out to be a brute, it was our duty to preserve and attempt to change his character. A broken marriage was a reflection of our weakness as women. (145)

After a long period of infidel courtship when Tehmina trespasses all the boundaries of morality and legitimacy actually steps into the castle of her charismatic husband Mustafa Khar, she starts getting the true glimpses of the actual face of her charming husband, in his brutal treatment of his former wife Sherry. After the divorce of Sherry all the wrath and monstrous treatment that used to be the share of Sherry now became her possession. Remembering her life with Khar at that time Tehmina tells us:

There was not a day in our marriage when Mustafa would not hit me for some reason. Delayed food, faulty water geyser, creased clothes, anything at all ... The tragedy was that I had stopped questioning ... I knew I couldn't leave him. I had made a controversial marriage and I had to strive to keep it ... it was rooted in unmitigated fear. (137)

This treatment of Tehmina at the hands of her husband may seem inhuman and atrocious to many but it is not new to women living in Muslim countries and many conservative countries and societies. Women who endure the

wrath of their husbands are considered to be pure and faithful. The awareness and impetus in the psyche of Tehmina to stand and protest against her passive and subjugated role started creeping in, when she got a chance to witness the woman living their lives on their own principles in London. Thus in spite of all the denials and rejections from her family, her sister who refuses to give up her liaison with Khar, she finds herself bold enough to go against the pseudo norms of conservative Muslim world, makes her reject Khar's abusive behavior and her position as a subordinate and subservient animal. Durrani's new found confidence and defiance leads her to legal separation from Mustafa Khar for a while. Though once again Mustafa Khar through his political manipulations succeeds in winning her back into his life and return with her to his motherland, but deep within his heart he seems intimidated by this newfound individuality of his ever accepting, ever docile wife.

If we try to trace the roots of Tehmina's metamorphoses, we find them buried deep down the monstrous and treacherous behavior of Mustafa Khar. When he found himself crippled in the prison, it was Durrani's fervent political campaigning for his release that in reality initiated her own subsequent political career and identity. It is ironic that the very man who tried to crush Durrani's spirit and growth through violent and deceitful means of control became the catalyst for her coming into her own and her subsequent emergence as a political, social and feminist activist in her own right.

Durrani thus rebels against warped Islamic doctrines which designate women as silent and inhuman bearers of children and caretakers of the men in their lives. Reflecting upon her decision to break her silence and let the world see the actual face of her feudal husband, Tehmina says:

For a woman to reveal her intimate secrets, in our close society, will be considered obscene by many. But silence

is a greater crime. It condones injustice. It breeds in us subservience and fosters a malignant hypocrisy. Mustafa Khar and other Feudal thrive on our silence. (160)

Every society creates its own particular attitudinal patterns. In the wake of Feminist movements in India, themes like woman's search of identity, relocating the self and awareness to seek a balance between tradition and modernity became popular in the works of male as well as female writers of the post-colonial Indian English fiction. Many writers like Nayantara Sehgal, Nergis Dalal, Shashi Deshpande, Mahasweta Devi, Shobha De, and Arundhati Roy portray many faces of the new women who gradually learnt to fight for their rights and lived not only as a wife, mother or daughter but also as an individual. The novel chosen here for study is *The Dark Holds No Terror* by Shashi Deshpande in which the main subject of discussion is adjustment problems and conflicts of educated middle-class women who have to reconcile to the traditions in spite of their desire to prove their individual identity in the society. Shashi Deshpande's fiction is primarily an exploration of the problems of woman who suffer due to tradition-oriented institutions, asserting thereby that inequality of the sexes is neither a biological given nor a divine mandate but a cultural construct.

The novel, *Dark Holds No Terror* is based on the problems faced by a Career woman, a refreshingly new phenomenon in Indian English Fiction. Saru, the protagonist hails from a tradition bound family which leaves scars on her psyche. As a child with lot of curiosity which is reflected in her playfulness, visiting friends and outdoor games but treated as a second-rate citizen in her own home owing to sexual discrimination she develops a deep and severe hatred towards her mother. The sibling rivalry between herself and her Brother Dharuva verges almost on the unnatural. "He is different. He is boy" these words establish the tradition-bound Indian mother against whom Saru has to rebel all her life... her impotent anger makes her

rage against her mother : "If you are a woman , I don't want to be one"(55). Saru's mother held her responsible for her brother Dharuva's death so she selects the avenue of medicine to come out of such situation and assert her. She defiles her mother at every step out of anger and finally in defiance married an outcast boy Manu without her parents' consent. Saru in her marriage had looked forward to a life of love and affection but it was not so. For sometime Manu shows off her wife – a lady doctor – as a prized possession. As soon as Manohar 's career goes nowhere , he starts suffering from insecurity and inferiority complex and the dream of happy married life starts shattering . Manu turns a sadist beast and start torturing Saru mentally and physically shattering the dreams of happy married life. The real cause of marital disharmony is the interview of Manu by a lady reporter. She asked him whether she is bread-winner or bread eater. She is prepared to sacrifice her profession to save her marriage and satisfy Manu's ego and spirit but then the kitchen is to be run and the children have to be sent to a decent school .Saru comes forward to take up cudgels for uplifting her 'self' .She cannot ignore the needs of her children nor the sick needing her attention. She therefore decides to swim against the tide and find independent identity and self –emancipation. She did not want to be "Two -in -one woman, who in the day time wore a white coat and an air of confidenceat night became a terrified trapped animal."

Ultimately, Saru mustered up the courage to uphold what is right for her and adhered to it with firm determination, resilience and tenacity. Women in Shashi Deshpande inevitably suffer from psychological betrayal which makes them undertake a self- exploratory journey, which finally culminates in compromise and conformity. Saru presents herself as the woman who wants to go in self quest and in the process frees herself from the inhibitions and her own conflicting emotions.

Saru got a break to escape such situation with her mother's death. Change of place and circumstances gave her time enough to review her relationship with Manu. After a long struggle with her husband and above all with her mind –she understands the basic truth of life that it is all "question of adjustment really". She starts understanding the state of mind of Manu for "he is groping in the dark as much as I am- Was what she felt! My husband is a failure because I destroyed his manhood" (198) .She turns cathartic now. For her now *Dark Holds No Terrors*. She starts realizing that these different identities that she has adopted at different times as per the demand of her roles do not make her real "Saru". She has to bring all these roles together to make her one complete whole.

This quest for self helps her to face the conflict as a doctor and as a wife. She learns – nothing can be achieved without compromises. Saru is introspective and self aware but tradition bound. She represents the new woman who while remaining confined to the familial bonds asserts her identity, struggles for her rights and eventually reaches to self – actualization. Saru as a wife finds refuge in the doctor in her. It is the doctor who is going to help wife in he to cure her husband with the power of doctor. She is bold enough to go back to her husband and cures him of his depression and inferiority complex. In this way she not only attains power, self esteem, comfort and happiness in her personal as well as in the life of others.

Shashi Deshpande means that without looking upon man as their enemies, they should realize the truth that they are not only masters but companions in life who cannot exist without each other for a complete and accomplished life. Her protagonists reject to look back but move on and make a place of their own in the male dominated society, abiding by the norms of our culture and society; she does not deny the necessity of the existence of man in a woman's life but at the same time denies subjugation of woman before man. Shashi Deshpande protagonists are progressive women who strive

to achieve fulfillment. They stridently fight to live a full life on the earth. She holds marriage as the social infrastructure of a healthy society, what is painful is the persona of the wife and not the institution of marriage.

Narratives across cultures represent deprivation, disillusionment and then a movement towards gradual awakening and finally a confrontation with the reality. All the protagonists live a fragmented existence. Works written by these women authors are open ended because the quest for female identity and its full realization in a multi-faceted, oppressive society seems to be endless but always advancing. They eventually return to the mainstream to renew their links with the world.

Darko charts the journey of Mara's exploitation at the hands of patriarchal forces and how eventually it leads to Mara's claim over her body, her decision to be commodified on her own terms. Her narrative is a warning to all women not to be deluded by men whom they trust to be their husbands and place their blind faith in. Amma Darko has tried to fulfill her social obligation as a writer by illuminating the plight of young woman who are allured by the life beyond the horizon and western ways of life. Though Mara is a victim of lust and suffers numerous attempts on her modesty, but with great contemplation emerges as an empowered being and avenges her humiliation by reporting about her tormentors to the authorities....Akobi is in jail... Gitte, has divorced him.' (Darko 138-9). Mara defies cultural practices that bind her emotionally and physically to an abusive husband and leaves her marriage to embark on fictional journey of self-discovery.

Darko attempts to explain the racial dynamics by addressing some of the existential dilemmas that women have to confront in an alien land. Besides she has voiced the sexual exploitation that black women have to undergo both at the hands of black and white males. The illegal trafficking of women from developing

countries to the developed countries has also been taken up by Darko in the novel.

Durrani by writing the story of her ill fitted marriage to a feudal patriarch, dismantles the socio-cultural and religious traps which cripple the psyche of Muslim women, leaving them mute. In this unconventional journey, she also goes on to shatter the feudal notion of women as a man's asset and honour, and establishes her own identity as a self sufficient dignified human being. Durrani thus rebels against warped Islamic doctrines which designate women as silent and inhuman bearers of children and caretakers of the men in their lives.

Voicing strongly the need to unite and fight against these inhuman oppressions, especially in the Muslim world, Egyptian activist and writer Nawal El Saadawi says:

Freedom for women will never be achieved unless they unite into an organized political force powerful enough and conscious enough and dynamic to truly represent half of society. (Saadawi XV)

All the Protagonists of Shashi Deshpande come out to be decided and determined woman who know how to strike a balance between their family and their selfhood. Both Husband and wife should supplement and not supplant each other.

This trans-continental comparative study attempted to reveal the diverse social processes and recurring motifs in order to find out what constantly reappears in various guises in women's narratives. All the narratives indicate alternatives for a different living as against the life of repression and subjugation. The selected texts unveil the victimization, various manifestation of male control mediated through religion and other social institutions and the different resistant strategies. The narratives depict the condition of women in diverse social settings highlighting issues that concern a

particular group of women at a particular time and yet, there is a sameness of concerns. It was quite compelling to find cross connections and similarities in experiences of women despite these differences. In both Africa and 'third world' contexts women's issues and interests have been historically subsumed by and treated secondary to issues of national liberation, racism, and other movements of social change. These women writers display a certain and formal coherence in their writings. Marriage, motherhood, emotional and economic independence, and their political and economic marginalization their resistance to oppression is among the recurring motifs witnessed. Reform was a key issue for feminism in every form in the feminist writings. "Women writings focus attention on both the manifestation of female sensibility a feminist reality and on its significance as a means of bringing about an awareness of this reality" (Jain,1996:2).

This comparative study of feminist theory and literature makes it clear that research in feminism cannot benefit from retreating into regional particularism and separatism. With the potential for difference and differentiation within feminisms in mind we need to explore the possibilities for a unifying definition of feminism which does not assume a fixed frame.

The gains from various cultural locations could be used for furthering the cause of women all over the world. Against influential strands of feminist theory it is argued that there is nothing essentialist or homogenizing about the category 'woman'. Contrary to many contemporary feminist theorists, it is contended that, although the category 'woman' does not reflect the whole reality of concrete and particular woman, it nevertheless refers to something real, namely the structural position as woman, and this structural position is of marginality. The common factor that delineates the struggle of women in different cultures is on account of their position of marginality. According to bell hooks "Feminist willingness to change direction when needed has been a major source of

strength and vitality in feminist struggle" (xiii). That internal critique is essential to any politics of transformation and feminism should embrace this with open arms. So far feminism has been sufficiently large, undogmatic and flexible to have accommodated many theoretical revisions and criticisms and it has been enormously productive.

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