

RESEARCH ARTICLE



MOTHER – DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS*

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande is a renowned Indian Woman novelist, who has established a permanent place for herself in the field of Indian fiction writing. In the recent decades the condition of women, in India, has been rapidly undergoing changes. There is an ongoing quest for identity and individuality. The women are questioning the traditional gender-specific roles assigned to them by the patriarchal institution. Women are trying to assign themselves a new and fresh identity devoid of any prejudices. Deshpande's novels revolve around all these themes and highlight the crisis that women have to suffer in a traditional Indian society. Moreover the way they are trying to establish a balance between the traditional set-up and the modern outlook is very beautifully synthesised by Deshpande in her novels. However there are still many women who are products of the social conditioning by the patriarchal society. The present paper makes a study of one of the dominant themes in Deshpande's first novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) – the mother-daughter relationship. This paper highlights the sensitive and vulnerable relationship of the protagonist Sarita with her mother Kamala. The way the patriarchal ideology affects the most affectionate bond of a mother and daughter and creates a clash between them is the focus of study in this paper.

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In the history of the Indian English novel, women novelists exhibit an independent thought and literary career, unhindered by any culture or tradition. They have been continuously attempting to express their ideas, ideals, emotion, and feelings through their valuable writings. The multi-faceted experience of Indian women novelists is very succinctly expressed in their short-stories and novels. Women novelists are born story-tellers possessing the inherent quality to grasp experiences around them and weaving these experiences in enchanting folds. K.R.S. Iyengar very aptly puts it, "women are natural storytellers even when they don't write or publish" (435). Indian

English writing is full of women novelists who write about the plight of women in India, or the experiences of 'being a woman' in India. Some famous writers who become a part of this tradition are Ruth Pravar Jhabhwala, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Gita Hariharan, Manju Kapur, and many more. All these novelists have clustered their novels with women's experiences and the problems faced by them to make a survival in the Indian society. One among these famous novelists, who gained a prominent place in the Indian writing in English with her study of domesticity in her novels, is the dynamic Shashi Deshpande. Her literary career began when she

was thirty years old. But now being in the literary field for three decades, Shashi Deshpande excels in the sensitive portrayal of women conditions through her stories and novels.

Shashi Deshpande has so far written nine novels, five collections of short stories, four children's books and a few articles in different magazines and journals. Her major novels are *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988), *Binding Vine* (1993), and *Small Remedies* (2000). She is also an acclaimed winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *That Long Silence*. However, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is Deshpande's favourite as well as first published one. Deshpande herself writes it in the 'Note From The Author', in the starting page of the novel :

All authors, like most parents, have their favourite children: but, unlike parents, authors can, without any compunction, declare their partiality. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is, of all my novels, the one dearest to me. (Deshpande)

The Dark Holds No Terrors belongs to the first phase of Deshpande's writing career. The novel mainly deals with the theme of the discord and disillusionment that educated women suffer in a tradition-bound Indian society. However, there are many other themes also, that colour the atmosphere of the novel. This novel can be called a psychological, as well as philosophical novel. The protagonist, Sarita or Saru's, quest for identity, probing of the self, loneliness, silence are some other aspects of the novel too. But there's one more theme that rules as the driving factor in the novel. This is familial bonding or family relationships. Among these the most effectively portrayed is the mother-daughter relationship of Saru and her mother Kamala. A mother-daughter relationship is considered to be one of the most emotional as well as psychological bonding between two women. This bond seems to be a source of energy for women or for a girl child because they both can empathise with each other :

For any daughter, the relationship with her mother is the first relationship in her life, and may also be the most important

she will ever have. (Hammer 1)

Thus, they psychologically unite at the centre. However the fundamental problem arises when a mother, who herself is a patriarchal construct, tries to impose her patriarchal principles and values on her daughter. The result is that either the daughter yields to the patriarchal system or revolts against it. In both the cases the result is hazardous for the girl child. If she yields she is never able to carve out her own individual identity. And if she revolts, she is, somehow, distanced from her closest emotional bonding – her mother.

The Dark Holds No Terrors is also the story of a mother-daughter relationship that mainly suffers due to the patriarchal system of life. Saru is a successful doctor living in Bombay. Though she belongs to the middle class, she has a modern outlook towards life. She is married to Manohar, a lecturer, in a college. Saru has two children Renu and Abhi. The surface reality is that Saru has a complete family, with a loving husband and two children. Professionally, she is well settled and everything is fine. But the hidden reality is that Saru is a tortured soul who is trying to seek refuge. Her successful professional career is contrasted with her husband's unsuccessful and degrading career. This, somehow, hurts the male ego and Manu turns into a sadist. Saru has no one close to let out her feelings and anguish. At this moment of crisis, she thinks of returning to her father's house which she had left fifteen years ago. Her mother is already dead. And this is actually the reason that she thinks of going back. The mother-daughter had a very strained relationship right from Saru's childhood. Their relationship is based on gender-biasness. Saru's mother is a part of the androcentric set-up which gives preference to a male child over a girl. Hence Dhruv, Saru's younger brother, was always the focus of care, concern and motherly love. Saru was deprived of all these emotions and was ignored and neglected. Kamala tai, a mother from traditional Brahmin family, represents the orthodox and meaningless traditions of the Hindu society. Such ladies never let their daughter's break this mould and come out as developed personalities. Rather, they try to curb their growth and suppress their dreams and desires. And when the daughters by force, does rebel, they somehow are

psychologically weakened. Because the revolt estranged them from their mothers. Kamala tai always tries to instil in Saru the gender based role. She continuously attempts to make Saru understand that she is a girl and she is inferior to her brother, in every possible way. Being a traditional mother, she is very much concerned with her daughter's complexion and her looks, which would someday lure a man to marry her. Saru is treated as a pawned object, which must be taken good care of, as someday it would be asked to return. She is an obligation to her family and they would be relieved only when she gets married. When Saru was playing with her brother and friends in the sun, her mother scolded her. She warned :

Don't go out in the sun. You'll 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 Dhruv?

He's different. He's a boy. (Deshpande 45)

When Saru was growing up, her mother used to warn her that she should be careful about how she behaves. She should not come out in her petticoats. Not even when her father was around. When she reached the puberty age her mother made her too conscious and ashamed of herself. She was treated as an untouchable. She was given a straw mat to sleep on and was served meals from a distance. Saru felt such resentment at her mother's behaviour that she decided, "I would be as unlike her as possible. *If you're a woman, I don't want to be one*" (Deshpande 63). But it was only when Saru went to medical college and read anatomy that she started accepting things as simple biological facts. Earlier due to her mother she felt diffident, but later due to her studies and self knowledge she gained confidence and consequently achieved success in life. This self knowledge was a great factor in Saru's revolt against her mother. Kamala tai always tried to find faults with Saru and filled

her with self doubts. She always reflected Saru's negative image. Saru painfully remembers:

I was an ugly girl. At least, my mother told me so. I can remember her eyeing me dispassionately, saying . . . You will never be good looking. You are too dark for that. (Deshpande 61)

Another instance, that affected Saru deeply and caused a tiff between the mother-daughter relationship was Dhruv's accidental death. As Saru was present with Dhruv at that time and as she was elder than him, she was considered the main culprit by her mother. Saru was made to feel guilty of what she hadn't done consciously or unconsciously. Her mother enraged with anger blurted:

You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead? (Deshpande 191)

These words of her mother kept haunting Saru throughout her life. Time and again, these words kept buzzing in her ears. She had the same repetitive dreams related to Dhruv and his death. Charu Chandra Mishra points out:

Throughout the novel this guilt consciousness seems to act like a fatal flaw at times driving her to a mental state bordering on schizophrenia. This is the turning point in the novel that brings the mother daughter conflict to the forefront. (97)

The last fatal blow to the strained relationship of the mother and daughter was delivered by Saru's choice to marry Manohar (Manu). Saru, a neglected child in the family was given full attention, love, and concern from a college friend Manu. Saru was a deprived child at home. This deprivation affected Saru so much that she was easily lured by the attention that she was given outside. That's the cause behind her easy yielding to Manu. When she tells her family of her wish to marry Manu, a boy from a low caste, her mother reacts very angrily. When she asks Saru about Manu's caste, Saru, very unbotheringly, replies that she doesn't know, but his (Manu's) father keeps a cycle shop. Her mother retorts, "Oh, so they are low caste people, are they? (98). Such sarcastic and orthodox words of her mother

enraged Saru so much that she becomes adamant to marry this man only. Unfortunately, this impulsive decision of Saru, later, becomes a reason for her unhappy married life. However, this decision brought a final breach between the mother and daughter. Saru's mother also became disenchanted with this decision of Saru's. She was so much full of resentment and enmity that when she was dying of cancer, some relative suggested her to meet her daughter at least once before dying. They thought this would bring relief to both. But Kamala tai replied:

. . . Daughter? I don't have any daughter. I had a son and he died. Now I am childless. (196)

When Saru comes back after fifteen years to live in her father's house, she goes into a period self-introspection; she realised that throughout her life each and every action and decision of her's, was directly or indirectly, motivated by her mother's approval and disapproval. Saru realises that she had done everything just to "show her" and "make her realise" (60) how wrong her mother had been in judging her. But when her mother died, without forgiving her she felt defeated.

All her postures now crumbled into dust, into nothingness. She had been posing, making gestures of defiance at a person who wasn't there at all. She felt foolish and ridiculous. (60)

Her obstinacy for marrying Manu was, ironically, more influenced by her mother's disapproval for the marriage, than her love for Manu. She remembers:

If you hadn't fought me so bitterly, if you hadn't be so against him, perhaps I would never have married him. (96)

Constant neglect and rejection of Saru by her mother had affected Saru's psyche very badly. She developed an inferiority complex within her. She could never imagine that "any male would take that kind of an interest in me" (91). She always suffered from insecurity and uncertainties which made her self-conscious. What was more pitiable about Saru was that she starts judging herself from her mother's parameters. The daughter who "wanted to hurt her, wound her, make her suffer"

is herself hurt, wounded and suffering from her mother's curse (142). Saru tells her father, "she cursed me, Baba Can't you understand, Baba, that it's because she cursed me that I am like this? (197).

Though Saru and her mother Kamala's relationship occupy a greater space in the novel, still there is the relationship of Saru and her daughter Renu also that needs to be mentioned. Saru's insecurity, fears, uncertainties, and trauma are not only confined to her mother; they somehow are reflected in her relationship with her daughter too. Saru finds Renu's behaviour somewhat odd and introvert. Saru feels that her own failures in life as a daughter are somehow affecting her role as a mother too. Saru states about Renu that:

She does not talk much. She reminds me of a room whose doors are closed. Nothing emerges, neither joys, nor her sorrows. And I sense a lack of feeling, of sensitivity in her. (33)

Renu's paintings, too, portray a negative aspect of life – dark thick forests, darkness, isolation and complete silence. Noticing all this, Saru decides that she'll try that at least she doesn't fail as a mother.

However, to blame Kamala tai alone, for her unexpected behaviour with her daughter would be wrong. Kamala was herself a trap in the male-dominated society. When she was young her father left her mother, and so she along with her sister was brought up by their maternal grandfather. But there always persisted a feeling of unwantedness and dependency. They were taken as responsibilities which needed to be shed off as soon as possible. The only way out was early marriage. Thus, Kamala tai herself internalises these feelings of rejection and negligence. She herself becomes a product of the social conditioning of girls by a patriarchal institution. Nalinabh Tripathi thus observes:

Ironically, a female can be made an agency for the effective promotion of a male point of view as in the case of Saru's mother. (Tripathi 43)

Therefore, as in the other novels of Shashi Deshpande, it becomes apparent that the patriarchal ideology hinders the proper growth of a

woman. Women, unknowingly, themselves help in deteriorating their condition thereby making their survival difficult. The influence of the ideology is so strong that it creates a breach even in the closest emotional bonding of a mother and daughter.

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