

AMOGHVARTA

ISSN : 2583-3189



Social Issues of Women in The Dark Holds No Terrors and That Long Silence

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Author

Dr. Prafulkumar Prakash Vaidhya
Associate Professor of English
Sardar Patel Mahavidyalaya
Ganj Ward, Chandrapur, Maharashtra, INDIA

Abstract

Shashi Deshpande (1938) is known to the literary circle of the world as a feminist writer. She mainly deals with the issues of women in Indian society. The research paper focuses on two novels of Deshpande namely The Dark Holds No Terrors (1983) and That Long Silence (1988). It contemplates on the social issues related and impacted the life of women characters in the novels. The numerous and varied social issues include gender discrimination, gender based violence, gender inequality, economic empowerment, stereotyping, wife battering, widowhood, etc. The research article is quite helpful to understand the concept of social issue and women protagonists' and some other minor characters' situation discernible in the novels. There is a possibility without doubt that social problems may change in the due course of time. A social problem which is not considered in the past

may be called so in present situation. On the other hand any social issue which was prevalent in the past may not be so in the present. Deshpande, through her writings, points to the need of creating awareness regarding social issues in general and women's issues in particular.

Key Words

Shashi Deshpande, The Dark Holds No Terrors, That Long Silence, Women, Feminism, Social Issues.

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande (1938) has been hailed as a powerful voice of the educated and employed women in Indian society. She along with other Indian women writers shifts her critical attention to the issues of women. Her concern for women is equated with the universal concerns of feminism. She writes of the system (patriarchal) that is responsible for women's marginal situation in the society. Her novels speak of mostly educated, employed women in urban area.

Deshpande seems very much concerned in her writings about the social issues of Indian society in general and issues of women in particular. Her two novels which have been taken for this study are concerned with the issues of Indian women. Her women characters include traditional and modern women. Both have had their own problems in Indian patriarchal set-up society. Women's issues exist in *The Dark Holds No*

Terrors which are discussed one by one as follows:

Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination is one of issues which are focused prominently by Saru (Sarita). This issue has made a house in her memory and deeply impacts her life throughout. This has played a vital role in shaping and moulding her overall personality.

The earliest memories of her childhood are of discriminations shown by her mother in favour of her brother, Dhruva. Her mother pays much attention to Dhruva whereas she is ignored and neglected by her. Dhruva gets love and affection from his mother but Saru doesn't get that. Dhruva being the male heir of the family is given much significance and his birthdays and other religious rituals are performed with pomp and show. On the other hand Saru's birthdays are hardly acknowledged. Saru even feels that her birth was a horrible experience for her mother, as she later recalls her mother telling her that it had rained heavily the day she was born and it was terrible for her mother. "It seemed to me that it was my birth that was terrible for her and not the rains" (Deshpande "TDHNT" 169).

Saru further says that Dhruva's naming ceremony is performed with joyous excitement and every year there is puja held in the evening on his birthday. On her birthday no puja is held nor religious ceremony carried out. This memory deeply itched in her mind. It hurts her. Her mother's preference for a boy shows gender discrimination. "He is different. He's boy" (Deshpande, "TDHNT" 45) are the words of her mother that haunts her mind and generate hatred for her mother.

P. Spratt expresses his opinion in connection with the preference for boy in most of the Indian families. He observes: "The uncommonly intense desire for a son among Hindus is well recognized. It is traditionally attributed to the doctrine that unless his son performs the obsequies, a man's soul cannot go to heaven" (Spratt 193). A son must be there to maintain the continuity of the family and to lit the funeral pyre of his parents is deeply rooted in Indian culture. Hence there is a hankering to have a male child. In such a cultural scenario being born a boy is itself privilege. Boys are brought up with care and love and are given advantages. A boy is considered as an asset while a girl is looked upon as a liability. It is common picture in India that the birth of a son is celebrated with singing and merry-making and it leads to a sense of joy and satisfaction and a feeling of blessed. Therefore, a woman desires for a son. In the same context Uma Alladi remarks:

"In her anxiety to please, in her yearning to be recognized, in her desire to gain a prominent position in the family hierarchy, the woman longs for a son- her social redeemer, thus perpetuating male dominance and patriarchy. The son becomes a symbol for her power, a contorted or lopsided symbol nevertheless" (Alladi 5).

Saru, being uncared and unloved by her parents, develops a sense of a deep rooted sense of fear and insecurity. Her self esteem is lowered and she develops an uncertainty about her worth and her place in the society. One more incident of marked differences in the treatment of the male and female child can be cited here from the novel. The following conversation between Saru and her mother highlights the fact that from the very beginning, instead of stressing common humanity, there is the contrast between the male and female.

"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 cant.

And Dhruva?

He is different. He is a boy" (Deshpande, "TDHNT" 45).

These words of her mother haunt Saru's mind and she generate hatred for her mother. In Indian society the preference for boys is inextricably linked to the Indian psyche.

Education

Education plays a vital role in the life of every individual. The modern and new education has made women conscious of meaninglessness and emptiness of various long-preserved notions and taboos. Due to access to education, women have started opposing and breaking such taboos and wrong notions of society. Recalling her parents' indifference and lack of interest in her, after Dhruva's death, Saru says:

"He (Her father) never took interest in my school or college. He left it all to her (Her mother). And she never really cared. Not after Dhruva's death. I just didn't exist for her. I died long before I left home" (Deshpande, "TDHNT" 32).

Saru has an ambition of becoming a doctor. She feels that being a doctor will make her superior to others. But when she expresses her desire to become a doctor, after securing the first class in her inter examination, her mother objects it. Her mother tells her husband "... Medicine! Five, six, seven God knows how many years. Let her go for B.Sc.... You can get her married in two years and our responsibility will be over" (Deshpande, "TDHNT" 144). Veena Das in this context says "Daughters are comparable to something kept in trust for another (Amanat). You have to care for them, love them and you will be held responsible for them but you are destined to lose them. Once a daughter is properly married and goes to her own house it is like a debt that has been paid.

Caste Discrimination

The social issue of caste also comes in this novel, though it is not discussed in length in the novel. The protagonist's (Saru) mother is a traditional woman. She adheres to the norms of caste. When Saru decides to marry a man of her choice, Saru's confrontation over the issue of caste with her mother reaches its peak. Saru's choice of a husband from a lower caste is considered by her orthodox mother as a sign of rejecting the traditional way and values she sticks to. The conversation between Saru and her mother reads:

"What caste is he?"

I don't know

A Brahmin?

Of course not.

Then, cruelly...his father keeps a cycle shop

Oh, so they are low caste people, are they?" (Deshpande "TDHNT" 96)

This shows the prejudice of higher caste towards the lower caste people and her mother's hatred and disgust for low caste people as she is from higher caste. As her mother had used the word, with hatred and disgust, that enraged her and she replied "I hope so". However no other remarks are here in the novels which may show some caste disparity in characters. This issue comes in the way of Saru's marriage only.

Marital Rape

This is one of the issues of concern of women. It has not been given much importance in Indian society till date but it needs to be heeded in present time. Marital rape is the act of establishing sexual relation with one's wife without her consent. It is considered a form of sexual abuse and domestic violence. Marital rape is recognized as a rape by many organizations and societies. It is considered wrong and a crime by law. Marital rape is a chronic form of violence for the victim. It takes place within abusive relations. In India, however, marital rape has not been criminalized. By doing this heinous act, male shows the strength of brute force. This is more inappropriate in marriage. That is marital rape. Adrienne Rich is of the opinion that "Rape doesn't deal with the rape of the body alone but with the rape of the mind as well." It is the ultimate violation of the self that denies the woman the right to her body (Sunalini 71).

Saru is the victim of marital rape in the novel. Manu takes advantage of being husband. As his ego is hurt by her success, he feels inferior and his sense of inferiority makes him brutal in his behavior. Though he is normal by the day, he turns treacherous rapist at night and tries to assert his masculinity through sexual assaults upon Saru. Manu gives vent to his feelings by physically abusing Saru like a wild animal in the privacy of their room. Manu appears normal in every way feigning total ignorance of his own acts of the previous night. Saru undergoes unbearable tortures but her desire to save marriage she keeps silence over this matter like average Indian women.

In such a situation she desires for emotional attachment and security. She wants her father to support her and her feeling raised against her husband's brutality. She tells her father, "My husband is a sadist". Her father couldn't make out her feelings. Saru makes every possible effort to explain her tortures in this regard to her father and when she narrates to him not as a daughter but as a woman to man. She tells her father everything about her husband's brutality and her helplessness in the same case. She says, "I couldn't fight back, I couldn't shout or cry, ... I could do nothing. I can never do anything. I just endure" (Deshpande, "TDHNT" 201). Saru expects moral support from her father which she doesn't get. Justice far away! Sarabjeet Sandhu comments upon Manu's abnormal behavior:

"The financial ascendance of Sarita, at the same time, renders Manu impotent. The only way he can regain that potency and masculinity, is through sexual assault upon Sarita, which, for him, becomes an assertion of his manhood leading to a sort of abnormality at night, as he is cheerful normal human being, a loving husband during day, turning into a rapist at night" (Sandhu 22).

Manu is a vengeful rapist at night. He has committed a crime against his wife. But in our country there is no such law which can punish husband in such matters hence by and large women seal their lips on this issue.

Extra-Marital Affair

This is quite delicate and dangerous issue. It may create some problems in happy married life or it may completely destroy married life. It is being seen that generally male protagonist has many affairs in any piece of writing. But in the novel the female protagonist has extra-marital affairs though it is for short while. And it doesn't affect any relationship between husband and wife.

From feminist perspective it can be argued that why men should have all the fun of life. If they (men) believe that their marriage life is either boring or unhappy, they can have an extra-marital affair. It may bring them happiness. Same can be had for women. Deshpande doesn't support this type of feminism. Rather Deshpande carefully avoids the western feminist concept for emancipation.

Saru has an extra-marital relation with Padmakar Rao (called Padma). He is her former classmate in medical college. She meets him after many years. He is now general practitioner in the same city. She finds that Padma an unassuming person who is keenly interested in forming a deeper relationship with her. However, after few meetings, she abruptly ends this relationship. She finds no comfort in it. Saru withdraws from Padma not because she afraid of the consequences but because neither love nor romance seems to have any relevance to her life now. Her brief stint of adultery with Padma reflects the fall of her character from Indian patriarchal system. But that also shows her freedom from all social bondage and escape from personal obligation.

It can be observed that marital incompatibility and emancipation force Deshpande's heroines to have extra-marital relationship. Suzanne La Follette says that the emancipation of women has another significant effect namely an increase in frankness concerning extra legal sexual relations. They suffer no guilt and they begin to evolve a new code of sexual ethics. They experience a sense of sexual autonomy freeing themselves from sexual politics. Saru's socializing with Boozy is a calculated risk in that direction. She has no qualms about allowing herself to be the raw material in the hands of a Pygmalion to be shaped into perfection, a Galatea (Savio 64).

That Long Silence contains some burning issues of women which are enumerated as follows.

Gender Discrimination

In the novel the protagonist, Jaya, and her female counterparts face the same gender discrimination like other women characters in Deshpande's novel. Jaya, in her childhood, was terribly neglected by her mother. The treatment of discrimination by her mother imprints in her memory for ever. When Jaya was in need of love from her mother, she recalls, her mother has shown love to her son (Jaya's elder brother). But the mother has shown no love for her daughter.

When Jaya got married, her mother remained unperturbed. She shed no tears when Jaya left home. Jaya wanted and "longed for soft, motherly breast to cry on. "And I had to smile Ai- I had never gone to her for comfort" (Deshpande, "TLS" 139). Jaya consoles herself even after getting such treatment from her mother by considering that her mother also has been discriminated by her (Jaya's) maternal grandmother. Jaya's granny had left nothing for her daughter. She had given everything to her son (Chandumama) who had no children. But he was the son.

Jaya was born into a well to do family but in her household she developed the fear of speech in her childhood for fear of ridicule from the males of the family. Jaya remembers one incident in which her father snobbishly criticize her poor taste in music, saying "what poor taste you have, Jaya. Jaya was not able to erase reprimand for 'poor tastes' and lapsed into silence. It seems to readers that Jaya has no freedom of choice.

It is well known fact that there are gross inequalities prevalent in Indian society against women. This is observed in the novel by Jaya when family tree is drawn by her Kaka. It is drawn to trace the line of their ancestors. When Jaya inquires about this, she is answered by Kaka: "How can you be here? You don't belong to this family! You are married; you are now part of Mohan's family. You have no place here?" (Deshpande, "TLS" 143). This reply by Ramukaka makes Jaya feel not only inconsequential but totally blotted out. She also notices the absence of all female characters in the family tree. In the family tree, there is no reference to her mother, her aunts and her grandmother too. She wants to ask about it to Ramukaka. She says:

"... if I don't belong to this family, what about the Kakis and Ai? They married into this family, didn't they, why are they not here? And what about Ajji, who single-handedly kept the family together, why isn't she here?" (Deshpande, "TLS" 143).

Thus the secondary status of women is highlighted in Indian patriarchal set up.

One more incident of gender discrimination is observed in the novel. Jaya's maid servant Nayana, had four children. She had two girls. Two boys died soon after birth. When Nayana is pregnant for fifth time, her husband warns her to throw her out from the house if she gives birth to another girl. This shows the utter discrimination in favour of a boy. Nayana is hopeful in fifth time to have a boy. She says: "Behnji, ... it is going to be a boy". This incident shocks Jaya. Nayana always cursed men which include her husband, her brothers and her father who were wasters and good for nothing people but she desires for son still. When again Jaya asks about her strong for son, she replies, "Why give birth to a girl, behnji, who will only suffer because of men all her life? Better to have a son" (Deshpande "TLS" 28).

Widowhood

It is known to all that all the phases of woman's life are full up with sorrows and pains. Widowhood is the frightening state of her life. Jaya's paternal grandmother has been portrayed in the novel as undergoing the hardships of widowhood. Her grandmother, Ajji, a shaven widow has denuded herself of all those things that make up a woman's life. She has no possessions, absolutely nothing, apart from the two sarees that she wears. Her is bare, except for ... a bed which is ever since I know it, is unburdened by a mattress. Jaya's Ajji sit on the bare ground and sleep on a straw mat at night. The bed is a memorial to grandfather. This self

mortification for widows is enshrined in our religious scriptures and Manu's law which are blindly followed by them. This self mortification is not good for any human being but women especially Indian women are bound to follow. This creates their good image in traditional orthodox society.

Jaya's neighbor at Dadar flat, Mukta, is another character in the novel who is also a widow. Jaya has a fanciful image of her as a dancer. Jaya has seen her with the accompanying singer phrases out the sing which she has to transform into dance. For Jaya, Mukta is a dancer who holds in her still, mute body all those ideas emotions and feelings contained in the song. She even thinks that once singers stop singing, then it will all flow out of her. But to her dismay, something unexpected happens in Mukta's life. Jaya says, "Did the song come to an end for her when Arun, her husband, fell out of the train and died?" (Deshpande, "TLS" 67). This incident changes the course of Mukta's life. Mukta lives a life which angers Jaya. Mukta keeps fast on Saturday, Monday and Thursday. Mukta has more days of fast than days on which she can have a normal meal. To Jaya, Mukta's self mortification seems to be most positive thing about her. Even after the death of her husband she continues this fasting. This is meaningless as she has already forfeited the purpose of it, the purpose of all Hindu women's fasts- the avoidance of widowhood.

Corruption

Corruption is a complex social problem. It affects all societies and India is not exceptional to this. Corruption may be defined as misuse of authority for personal gain or an act of bribery. It may be use of public power for private gain which results into the breach of law or deviation from the norms of the society. In the novel, *That Long Silence* the issue of corruption is given a small space as it may not be the concern of the novelist. The researcher picks up this issue in his research as it affects the protagonist, Jaya.

Mohan, Jaya's husband, is an engineer. He desires for money, status and luxuries of life. He works in the purchase section of office and prospers well. Unfortunately he is caught taking commission and an enquiry is on. His act of corruption compels him to leave his Churchgate bungalow to Jaya's humble flat in Dadar. He takes her so much granted that she is not consulted about shifting. In her new residence she finds her normal routine is disrupted. Though she tries to adjust and compromise with her lot, every compromise shatters her individuality.

Until this incident, the relations between the two move on smoothly. But this incident unmasks the two- Jaya and Mohan. Jaya follows him blindly before this crisis like mythological character, Gandhari follows her husband. She remains stuck to her husband and children. But after this incident she is not willing to go into hiding with her husband. She is ashamed of the incident. But Mohan defends himself by saying, "I did it for you, for you and the children." (Deshpande "TLS" 10). She has been blamed for his own malpractice. Mohan trouble his own making but he puts blame on her. Indira Bhatt in this context says "Mohan wants to use his wife as buffer, an opiate to soften the impact of the forces he has set into motion against himself."

Wife Battering

Violence against women in the context of marriage becomes noteworthy when a husband who is supposed to love and protect his wife beats her. This violence can range from slaps and kicks to broken bones, attempt of murder, torture or murder itself. A woman experience tortures being battered by a man whom she trusted a lot. This violence, most of the time, may be related to drunkenness of a husband. But a wife rarely reports a case of battering to the police. Born and brought up in Indian culture, she suffers humiliation in silence and takes it as her destiny.

Sociologists have pointed out some important characteristics of wife battering. Wives younger to their husband and more than five years run a greater risk of being victim of wife battering. It is found that views under 25 years of age have greater victimization. Women of low income are highly victimized. Some other reasons include: sexual maladjustment, emotional disturbances, husband's inflated ego or inferiority complex, husband's alcoholism, jealousy and passive timidity, etc.

There are two minor women characters in *That Long Silence* who suffers from wife battering. This is also a tale of victimization of woman in patriarchal system who died in silence. The first character is Mohan's mother. Mohan describes the tragic tale of his mother to Jaya. Mohan's mother worked as a cook in other's houses and social gatherings. She was regularly beaten by her husband after day's slogging. Her husband came home late, drunk and always created tantrums. She used to serve kids first and then again cook fresh rice for her husband. Mohan's father refused to heat "your children's disgusting leavings" (Deshpande "TLS" 35). He wanted fresh and hot rice and that is from untouched vessel. One incident needs to be mentioned here. One day he came home and created fuss over not making fresh chutney. He thrashed her with heavy brass plate. Mohan's mother didn't report this incident to police and rather kept mum over this matter like other women of the country who are properly mold into the patriarchal system.

Jeeja is, another character in the novel who is victim of wife battering, Jaya's help-maid. She has her own story of oppression. Her husband is also a drunkard who frequently beats her. She silently suffers his beating thinking this is into her lot. She doesn't protest her husband when he takes up another woman as a wife. She thinks that she has failed him by not bearing a child to him and so he had every right to remarry. She feels like 'husband can never do wrong'. She silently suffers his beating. Madhu Kishwar makes remark on the sacrificial aspect of Indian women that wife is treated not as an individual who controls her own life and assets but as herself an asset who must perform several functions.

Number of feminists advocates revolutionary means of examining the issues of women. Let the issues of women be of historical, sociological, economical or psychological type in society, feminists believe in eradicating these problems. For that matter, they also believe that women must be very active in all fields. They must become aware of, through consciousness-raising process, their individual and collective power. The awareness of their power may help them to overturn any institution and system that oppresses them and repudiate their existence. Hilary Lips is of the opinion that institutions in society must be transformed fundamentally rather than simply made more open to women's participation. She believes that most of the institutions are fundamentally opposed to stress equality between men and women.

Conclusion

The various issues of women are depicted in the novels. Issues like gender discrimination, domestic violence and wife battering are related to family. Caste discrimination is related to group or community. She discusses the effects of social problems on an individual. It is found that in the discourse of social issues, gender discrimination, a burning issue, appears in both novels. The family related problems can be solved easily than the problems related to community or group. Traditional gender roles cast men as "rational, strong, protective and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing and submissive" (Tyson 85). These assigned roles to men and women by the society are responsible for the rise of various social issues concerning women. The novelist doesn't mean only to highlight the issues of women, but pointing to the need for creating awareness about these issues and bring change in the society. The novelist pilots the trend of making women as well as society conscious regarding the innumerable man-made cancers by which women are being thrust into drab and drudgery of exploitation.

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