

## Gender Identity and Inner Space in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

**Dr.P.Mohana**

Assistant Professor of English  
Sona College of Arts and Science, Salem  
Mail Id - [mohaninishanth1975@gmail.com](mailto:mohaninishanth1975@gmail.com)  
&

**Mrs R. Shanthini**

Assistant Professor of English  
Sona College of Arts and Science, Salem  
Mail Id - [shanthinipoovendan@gmail.com](mailto:shanthinipoovendan@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Anglo-Indian novel has played a very important role in the development of Indo-Anglian literature, Anglo-Indian novel has played a very important role. Meena Shirwadkar in her novel, *Image of Woman* observes, "Indo-Anglian fiction was the inevitable outcome of the Indian exposure to western culture and art forms like the novel. Murlidas Malwani regards Indo-Anglian literature as, "An excellent new literature born of the marriage between an Indian sensibility and a world language. Unlike American and Canadian literature, which comes from English-speaking people, Indo-Anglian literature is an expression of those people whose mother tongue is not English. The Indo-Anglian writers wrote primarily for the Indian readers"(23). The basic themes portrayed in the novels are poverty, hunger, disease and the East-West conflicts. The Indo-Anglian novelist recognises man in relation to society, and as such his preoccupations are the portrayal of poverty, hunger and disease: the sufferings of the innumerable poor, tradition and modernity, social evils and tensions inter-racial relations, changing values of modern civilization, character analysis, East-West encounter, cultural contact and a few like them.

Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* ambivalently projects deconstruction as well as reconstruction of gender roles as the female protagonist of the novel is constantly, and often unconsciously, in search of an inner space which is instrumental in the reconstruction of gender identity in the wake of its being deconstructed. In this paper the concept of male-female polarity is treated as a natural and inherent factor in a social, psychological and biological framework. Central to the novel is the motif of home and family relationships which establishes the ambivalent aspect of female gender construction. The novel projects the post-modern dilemma of a woman who strongly resents the onslaught on her individuality and identity.

**Key Words:** Deconstruction, Tradition and Modernity, Gender Identity, East-West conflicts.

The antagonism is faced mainly from two persons-Sarita's (the female protagonist's) mother and Manohar, Sarita's husband. Both of them represent the values and norms established by a patriarchal society. Ironically, a female can be made an agency for the effective promotion of a male point of view as in the case of Sarita's mother. The mother-daughter relationship is marked with mutual hatred. Sarita says to her mother: "If you are a woman, I don't want to be one. Again, Sarita finds herself in a kind of shame that engulfed me, making me want to rage, to scream against the fact that put me in the same class as my mother..." (55). The mother is the arch-rival in the filial power structure.

In relation to her brother, Dhruva, Sarita's status is belittled in the family. When he is alive, he is the mother's disapproval and Sarita is neglected what is worse Sarita is later held responsible for Dhruva's death. So indelibly is the guilt stamped on her mind that even after yours of the episode she stated:

"But there can never be any forgiveness. Never any atonement My brother died because I heedlessly turned my back on him. My mother died alone because I deserted her. My husband is a failure because destroyed his manhood. If Sarita is attacked on the plane of filial relationships, she is also offended by the mother again for her body. The mother once again torments her by projecting the values of a male-dominated society. "You're growing up they would say and there was something unpleasant in the way the looked at me...you will be added by me" (25).

This is not generation gap it is a power-struggle where the mother, as said above, is the spokesperson of a male point of view. Sarita breaks the umbilical cord leaves home. This is her first public defiance of the patriarchal power-system. Sarita's mother condemns her "Daughter? I don't have any daughter. I had a son and he died. Now, I am childless... I will pray to God for her unhappiness. Let her know more sorrow than she has given me" (18). Sarita's defiance is further expressed when she becomes economically independent and marries of her own choice. The institution of home, which is supposed to foster the growth of a child, robs the woman of her right of respectability and individuality. The rejection of home and family at this juncture in the novel is Sarita's first foot forward towards independence. She leaves the inner space", the home. The novel may be viewed as Sarita's journey into inner space(s) one after the other.

From the first inner space' Sarita moves to another by marrying Manohar and raising a family and having a home-once again. And once again the home disappoints her. The very economic independence, on the strength of which she had become independent, now becomes her bane "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?" (82). These words of the girl who came to interview Sarita, triggered a sadism in Manohar's sexual relationship with Sarita-thus, once again, hurting her, disenchanting her. Home has let her down-the second time What was once beautiful-sex as well as her married life-has now become ugly. Once again Sarita defies-this time her husband. She leaves home the second time-moves out of the inner space' again. From this inner space Sarita moves to

another inner space that is her father's home. If the inner space' with her husband was marked by his sexual sadism, then the one is marked by psychological trauma. Her emotional upturn breaks all barriers and she bares her sexual life to her father. All barriers and pretences are broken here but to no avail. "It has been a fiasco, an exercise in futility, her coming here at all. Her quest for 'home', the 'inner space', has been disappointing. Now she couldn't call it home and how odd to live for so long and discover that you have no home at all!" (19). Her father discourages her resentment towards Manohar and wishes her to go back to her home in Bombay. Summarily, Sarita travels from one 'inner space' to another, but defies one after another. At the end of the novel, however, by implications she goes back to her home in Bombay.

Sarita, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, depicts the journey of modern woman towards financial independence, emotional balance and social recognition. She is a modern perfectionist who "defies her own mother to become a doctor, defies her caste to marry outside, defies social conventions by using Boozie to advance her career". A sharp contrast to Jaya, she is confident, competent and amazingly conscious of her own career and place in society. She refuses to succumb to the pressure of a male-dominated culture and paves her own way after a long struggle.

When Sarita was only a child, her younger brother Manu, loved and pampered by all, was the centre of attraction in the family, while she was a neglected child. Her mother always reminded her that being a girl she was inferior to her brother. Consequently, she felt an intense desire to rise above the common women and to become superior to them despite being a dark-complexioned, average-looking girl. Any need is the deficit state that motivated the person to replenish the deficit. It's like a hole that demands to be filled in. This replenishment or fulfilment of a need is what is meant by self-actualization or self-realization.

Sarita craves for love, admiration and social recognition and wants to prove to society and to her mother that she is no less than a male child. Like Jaya, she hates the idea of being a traditional woman: "to get married and end up doing just what your mother did, seemed to me not only terrible, but also damnable" (41). But she will not give her acquiescence on every decision imposed on her by the society and the members of her family, and this is what makes her different from Jaya. By accepting challenges and making every possible attempt to achieve her goal, she becomes a self-actualized person. Such self-actualized persons are "committed to their vision, they use their intelligence, they are realistic about their options and they take risk to achieve their goals" (48). Sarita possesses all these qualities in herself. Sarita had decided her goal in early childhood when she attended a party hosted by one of her relations in which she had come across a lady doctor, whose impact on Sarita was so acute that immediately she decided to become a doctor in future. She recalls the encounter vividly:

I remember her looks with an astonishing clarity, but even more distinct is the memory of her being detached, set apart in some way from the other women.... And I, who had always thought it some kind of disgrace to be alone and silent in a crowd, envied her detachment that day. I knew instinctively that she was somehow

superior to all other women there.... It was because she was a doctor that was like that.... Strangely the ambition stayed with me through the years (41).

After overcoming all impediments, Sarita achieved her goal to become a doctor. But despite success and positive spirit to fight for her cause, she nurtures guilt and remorse in herself. The memories of her haunted childhood were nightmarish and used to often terrify her. Once she was returning home with her younger brother Manu, but he remained behind playing near a ditch, which ultimately proved to be his grave. Her mother blamed her for Manu's death, "You killed him, why are you alive when he is dead" (91), and she could not forget the incident. Deshpande associate's darkness with Sarita's painful memories of her brother Manu who used to come to his elder sister's bed in the night as he was afraid of the dark. Now every night reminds her of her guilt.

Later, when she was still on apprenticeship she was enticed by a handsome poet and actor and got married to him despite her mother's disapproval. Then she never visited her mother, who died without casting an eye on her. Her marriage became dissatisfactory and burdensome to her. Deshpande shows how wounded male ego can ruin and embitter married life. Sarita was living happily with her husband until a journalist came to interview both of them and startled them by asking the bold question to him: "How do you feel when you realize that your wife is earning not only the butter but most of the bread for the family" (74). That was the beginning of his inferiority complex. Since then, he started finding a pretext to torture Sarita. When the situation became unbearable, she returned to her father's place. Being an over-sensitive girl, Sarita often feels that she is suffering due to the curse of her mother. Then her inter-caste marriage made things worse she reveals her mind to her father: "It's because I wronged her [her mother] that I am suffering now. And the more I suffer, the greater the chance perhaps of my expiating that wrong" (75).

Dismissing the idea, her father reassured her by asking: "Why do you torture yourself with others? Are you not sufficient for yourself? It's your life, isn't it?" (76). The scorching guilt of hers was relieved and she realizes that "If I have been a puppet, it is because I made myself one" (77). For her emancipation she will have to disentangle herself from the dark shadow of her past. After the realization that her life is her own and she has to "accept these selves to become a whole again" (78), she has every right to take any decision about herself. She sheds all her misconceptions by accepting all her selves of guilty sister, an undutiful daughter and a loving wife- and a new dawn begins in her life.

It can thus, be held that Shashi Deshpande has covered a long distance in the direction of projecting female characters. Sarita's rebellion is not 'belated' like Jaya's and is a positive move in the right direction at the right time. The titles of both these novels are appropriately symbolic. *That Long Silence* implies the necessity to break the silence, to revolt and to establish self-identity while *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a shift towards self-realization after getting rid of the feeling of guilt and terror. The realization that she can have her own way gives a new confidence to Jaya. This is her emancipation. Sarita achieves freedom from despondency after casting off her life-long guilt and coming out of the painful memories of

her past through new enlightenment, now her nights would no longer terrify as *The Dark Holds No Terrors* to her.

Shashi Deshpande voices her protest over the practice of changing names of brides by their in-laws. This change or distortion seems to her heroines a cruelty. Rape victims abound in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *The Binding Vine*. Sarita considers herself to be a victim of "legalised" rape. There is another incident of rape by a father of his three daughters. That provokes Sarita to avenge this kind of injustice by committing adultery with Madhav (though she spares him from her designs). In *The Binding Vine* Mira is also a rape victim and so is Kalpana. Deshpande's heroines are indignant towards marriage in all the three novels. "Silence" is such an obsession that it acquires pivotal significance in the fourth novel, *That Long Silence*. Jaya writes:

Deshpande raises a number of questions about childbirth, rape, dowry, Sati and so on, but she refuses to give readymade solutions or quack prescriptions, for she avers: "The Invitation is to Discover". All the three novels end abruptly with an open-endedness. The post-modern stance is maintained throughout with echoes, mirror images, spaces, and circles. As an artist she demonstrates her ability to weave a web and handle it with dexterity. There are layers and layers of meanings and interpretations possible. There are also subtle philosophical conclusions which none can ignore for "we travel, not in straight lines, but in circles" (78).

*The Dark Holds No Terrors*, by contrast, restricts itself to a Maharashtrian locale with the narrative moving between an unspecified small town where the protagonist's parents live, and Bombay. The author creates the ambience through terms of address. There is also an instance when Sarita, the protagonist, says: Nobody likes me. Nobody cares for me... I had written the words, not in English, which scarcely knew then, but in Marathi (83). Thus, affirming the Maharashtrian milieu of the novel. One of the most challenging tasks before the Indian English novelist is to write in the English language in a manner that conveys the essence of the Indian socio-cultural ethos without distorting the language. It is a singularly difficult feat to achieve, especially if one considers the vast differences between the Indian and the English cultures, and the problems that these differences might pose to the writer. Yet, it has not inhibited Shashi Deshpande from using English as the medium of her fiction. She writes:

To those of us who write in English, it is neither a foreign language, nor the language of the colonizer, but the language of creativity. Whether the writing is rootless, alienated or elitist, should be judged from the writing, not from the language. My writing comes out of myself, the society I live in, it is shaped, as I am, by my family, my ancestry, the place I was born in, the place I live in, the culture I am steeped in. The fact that the writing is in English changes none of these things (10).

The ethos and milieu of Deshpande's fiction is that of Karnataka and Maharashtra, the customs and practices often over-lapping as is the case in real life. Deshpande herself comes from a middle class, Marathi-Kannadiga background and was educated in English at a local school in Dharwar, Karnataka. These influences have played an important role in shaping her writing and use of the English language. Deshpande's language has often been called "simple", "realistic" and "transparent". It neither draws attention to itself nor does it hinder the reader in any way. It subtly lends itself to all situations. Deshpande's primary stress is upon the middle-class ethos and her language reflects this concern. She uses English the way an average, middle-class individual educated in both the vernacular and English would use it that is, unaffectedly, a little "incorrectly" at times, by the standards of British English. This "middle-classness", in fact, proves to be a characteristic quality of Deshpande's work. Like, for instance, the protagonists themselves who are no heroines with extraordinary qualities, but recognizable as the women-next-door. Their lives are without adventure, punctuated and relieved by births, weddings and deaths. Their problems are those of any real-life woman - a marriage that has become dull and monotonous, an unwanted pregnancy or, at the most, an extramarital relationship. Deshpande's middle-class families are Maharashtrians or Kannadigas. However, as the customs and rituals of these two communities often overlap, it is difficult for the average reader to identify the locale in which they have been placed. Deshpande does provide a few clues but so subtle as to escape the notice of a reader unfamiliar with the region.

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