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Mother as a Matriarch: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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Abstract:

There is no denying the fact that from the point of view of female development, the mother daughter relationship is one of the most important relationships for women. And this relationship has always occupied an important place in Shashi Deshpande's fiction. No doubt she has portrayed the inner turmoil of a woman who is always fighting within herself and her surroundings. But at the same time she portrays the other side of womanhood too where as a matriarch, she is playing the role of an oppressor. This paper is an attempt to study how in this novel by Shashi Deshpande, mother is the matriarch who cannot be glorified; rather she is an authoritative figure to be scorned.

Keywords: Matriarch, patriarchy, socialization, dominance, internalize.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, "Matriarchy is a form of social organization in which the mother or the oldest female is head of the family, and descent and relationship are reckoned through the female line; government or rule by a woman or women." Evidences from history confirm that during the early Vedic period Indian society was by and large matriarchal. In this period, women enjoyed considerable freedom and they played a significant role in decision making. They enjoyed great respect in the society and had the equal opportunities with men. However with the coming of the Aryans, matriarchal way of life was affected. Women were pushed to the background and men came to the forefront. Gradually their status deteriorated. Later in Manu Smriti, Manu also stated that woman must be kept as dependent on males throughout her life. With the advent of Moghuls, the status of woman further declined. She became a victim of many social evils like 'sati', 'child marriage', 'purdah', restrictions on widow marriage and girl education and so on. She was no longer considered to be the useful member of the society. During the British Period social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayanand Saraswati and Ambedkar etc. stood strictly against the prevailing social evils and supported the female education strongly. In the post independent India though the constitution and law gave equal status to women but in practice, their condition was even worse because they were torn between the traditional and modern values. Despite their being aware about their rights and other privileges, women were the worst exploited class of persons in the developing countries like India.

Like in most other cultures, in India too, family is an important unit where relationships are organized and socialization of the different members of the unit take place. Woman plays a significant role in the family as a mother, wife, sister and daughter. But the hierarchy of patriarchal ideology in Indian society does not allow the matriarchal values and thus offers woman a secondary status. Through the images of Sita, Savitri and so on, the ancient Indian literature and mythology also internalize the concept of the sacrificing mother committed, tolerating and surrendering wife. Patriarchal ideology brings into focus the man-made concept of gender. As Simone de Beauvoir observes, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature....which is described as feminine."(295) Under conditions of patriarchy, motherhood becomes a means to perpetuate the dominance of men. It becomes synonymous with surrender, service and perpetual effacement. This concept of motherhood restricts woman's quest for fulfillment. She sacrifices her ambitions, liberty and identity to ensure the protection and happiness of the family. Reasons like sex discrimination, traditional customs, and economic dependence and so on are responsible for woman's subsidiary role in the Indian society. When she herself accepts this subordinate role, she also becomes the cause of the subordination and subjugation of her own class. This product of the patriarchal male dominated society then passes the same tradition to the next generation. Hence it can be said that matriarchal forces are found to be working as a sub system within the existing patriarchal system and don't stand as opposition to patriarchy. It may be noticed that women can become matriarchs only after they have completed successfully and played their roles of wife and mother as per social norms. Thus a matriarch is a very powerful participant in social and family situations in an Indian society. To maintain the traditional power structures, woman as a matriarch uses her authority. Primarily this rule is viewed in relation to mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. But how the matriarchal forces play the role in mother-daughter bond, is not very well explored. Though feminism explores the issues regarding women's subordinate status in relation to men but few studies have tried to deal with women's relation to other women in their natal homes and their marital homes.

It is important to notice that mother-daughter bond is crucial to the healthy development of female identity in patriarchal settings. Experiences of mother's own suffering and her identification with the future plight of her daughter strengthen the mother-daughter bond. Indian folk songs generally portray this bond as very warm and affectionate. Yearning for the maternal love and the natal home is very common in these songs. But in the context of Indian Women's Fiction in English in the nineties, some of the novelists like Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapoor and Arundhati Roy have depicted this relationship as a relationship full of conflicts. This bond is often complex and beset with antagonism. The interpretation of this relationship is significantly different from the one which we find in the other related genres of women's writings such as Dalit women's autobiographies and the Black Women's writings where this bond is experienced as a very empowering one and motherhood provides a base for self-actualization. Mothers often play an important role in the education of the daughters in Dalit life narratives which ultimately lead to their empowerment. Shanta Bai Dhanaji recalls in her memoir (*For Us-These Nights And*

Days) how the enthusiasm of the mother for daughter's education reveals the powerful presence of the mother. Carole Boyce Davies calls black mothers 'mother healers' because despite their problematic early years in life, they attach an extremely high value to motherhood. Novels by Toni Morrison, Angela Johnson and Jacqueline Woodson offer rich, poignant depictions of mother-daughter bonds which lead to the empowerment of the daughters.

Shashi Deshpande in her novels does not talk about matriarchy as reversal of the patriarchal form of the society but a system with its own rules. She most consistently deals with mothers and daughters in her works. Her novels deal with the life of middle class urban professional women who find themselves torn between tradition and modernity. They are torn between the inner life that questions and the outward existence that conforms. Jaya in *That Long Silence*, Indu in *Roots and Shadows* and Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* exemplify this type of psyche. While tracing the conflicts of her female characters she also explores that sometimes a woman herself is responsible for creating conflicts in the life of another woman. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* Shashi Deshpande has portrayed the inner conflict of Sarita (Saru) who is fighting within herself and her surroundings. For her psychic imbalance, to a great extent the unresolved love- hate relationship between mother and daughter is responsible. The novelist has not glorified the image of mother; rather she has tried to attach more human qualities to her. In the essay "*Telling Our Own Stories*" she writes about womanhood:

Even today, our ideas about motherhood are so set in images of loving and cooing mothers, that I am often asked, Why are the mothers in your novels so unloving? Unloving? No, it's because we have this stereotypical image of what a loving mother is like, that we find any variation to be lacking in 'motherly' feeling. It seems to me that we need to get rid of these images to release ourselves from guilt. (Deshpande 96-97)

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, the mother plays a vital role in prolonging Sarita's (Saru's) neurosis. She plays the role of a matriarch who instead of making the daughter economically and emotionally self-sufficient, wants to push her on the traditional route of marriage and motherhood. In Indian society gender discrimination is very strong and Saru's mother is not an exception. She represents the values and norms of a patriarchal society. Conversation between the mother and daughter substantiates the point:

"Don't go out in the sun, you will 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 Dhruva?”

“He is different. He's a boy.” (P.45)

For the mother, Dhruva is the fundamental factor of her existence because he is a son and Saru is a responsibility. There was always a puja on his birthday but none on her birthdays. Her birthday was passed over in silence, both at home and at school. Saru recalls that after Dhruva's death, there were no celebrations at home. Saru as a daughter is deprived of parental care and affection. From her mother's actions her preference for the son Dhruva and hatred for the daughter Saru is clearly evident. When Dhruva drowns while playing, it is Saru who is held responsible for his death. Her mother's words “Why didn't you die? Why are you alive and he dead?” (P.34-35) always haunt her and alienate her from her mother. She becomes a non entity in her own home. She remembers: “I just did not exist for her. I died long before I left home.”(P.32) K. M. Pande in *Tearing the Veil* remarks:

In fact, male- oriented societies structure females in such a way that they work against even those of their own gender. Through this and other examples in the novel, Shashi Deshpande conveys an important message that suppression, subjugation and exploitation are not confined to male-female relationship but exist between a female-female relationship as well.(43)

From critics' perspective Saru is highly self- willed, having outsized ego and love for power over others. With every relationship her love for power is evident. But it can be argued that she inherited this natural love for power from her mother whom she views as a rival in the game of power. The mother has always been an authoritative figure and poses a threat to her individuality and self-will. Saru repels the power, mother exercises over her. She is always seen as a burden to be eased. The mutual hatred and rejection of the mother is very deep rooted. When she reflects about her mother, “If you are a woman, I don't want to be one---,”(P.62) shows her hateful attitude towards her mother. Saru intentionally indulges all her life into those acts which are not liked by the mother at all and in moving against the flow drains herself physically and emotionally. She becomes rebellious, joins a medical college and marries against the wishes of her mother. Just to prove her mother wrong, she marries Manu in haste. She does not give a rational thought to this relationship and its future. Her marriage becomes a failure but she does not talk about it only because she does not want to prove her mother right. So she keeps on clinging to the shadow of marriage. While struggling in her life she maintains no links with her mother. She holds her mother responsible for her sufferings and unhappy married life. She thinks:

If you hadn't fought me so bitterly, if you hadn't been so against him, perhaps I would never have married him. And I would not have been here, cringing from the sight of letters,

fighting with terrors at the sight of his handwriting, hating him and yet pitying him too. For he is groping in the dark as much as I am. (P. 96)

On the other hand the mother disowns her and dies unforgiving. She is not less condemning in her attitude towards Saru when she says, “Daughter? I don’t have a 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.” (P.196-197) The mother and daughter go on hurting each other. Saru remembers how her mother had been against her studies in medical college and tried to persuade her father not to send her to study. “You don’t belong to that (moneyed) class. And don’t forget, medicine or no medicine, doctor or no doctor, you still have to get married, spend money on her wedding--- let her go for a B. Sc.--- you can get her married in two years and our responsibility is over. (P. 144) Hence mother in this novel represents the women who are the spokespersons of a male point of view. They see the girls to be belonging to another family and in their view their (girls’) future role as wives is the main thrust of their socialization. It is noticeable here that Saru’s mother has internalized the concept of Indian society where girls always occupy a marginal position in their natal home and sons are considered to be the ones who carry forward the name of the family. Girls are given the status of a guest in their own family where they are not going to stay permanently. Veena Das quotes regarding this:

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.(93)

In the novel we come across other references also where we find not the man’s cruelty to woman but woman’s cruelty to woman. We find the internalization of the patriarchal cruelty by woman. There is a reference to this woman in the novel who is ill-treated and victimized when she is tied to a peg by the in-laws and fed in the cattle shed. Saru condemns the indifferent and merciless judgment given by her mother when she dismisses the issue by saying, “But how do we know what she had done to be treated that way? Maybe, she deserved what she got!” (P. 87)

Deepshikha Kotwal comments: “Curiously Deshpande’s women not only rebel against male domination but ferociously satirize their mothers and grandmothers who had not taught them to articulate their desires and needs.” (40) It is not only Saru who suffers in this male dominating society. She recalls the sufferings of her grandmother who had been deserted by her husband but had never complained about it. She always said that it was written on her forehead. Saru’s mother never had a room of her own. As told by her father silence had become a habit for her parents which symbolized distance between the husband and wife. Saru, being educated and

awakened fails to conform to the conflicting views of the older generation; who has been a victim of the gender oppression and tries to oppress the younger generation later. This reminds us of Akka in *Roots And Shadows* who victimizes the other women in the family because she herself has been a victim of gender oppression. This leads to the strained relationship between the mothers and the daughters.

Conclusion:

It thus follows that in order to gain power within the patriarchal culture, woman sometimes plays her role in perpetuating the male dominance. Saru's mother as a matriarch has no benign presence in the novel. Saru's identity crisis arises due to this fact only. She suffers surrenders and becomes a weak character who is incapable of taking firm decisions. Mothers can be strong supporters for their daughters. They can positively influence the daughters towards strength and empowerment. A strong bond between Saru and her mother could definitely lead to a better life for Saru. No doubt through self-analysis, she realizes her true self and becomes the new woman of contemporary India. She affirms, "My life is my own." (P.220) But that is only after the death of her mother.

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