

Emasculation of Man in Shashi Deshpande's The Dark Holds no Terrors

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For as long as Adam and Eve were created, the notion of gender hierarchy between men and women positioned the latter unfavourably. The pervasiveness of such subordination is designated throughout the decades, from the book of genesis blaming Eve for Adam's fall from paradise, to the Greek ecclesiast John Chrysostom who emphasized that women are

characteristically evil, to John Keats who conceives women as naïve as children and thus unworthy of his time (Dobie, 2009). This demeaning ideology shaped virtually every aspect of society, whether Western or Eastern, to the point that it still pervades to the present day. Consequently, for the purpose of unshackling themselves from their debilitating state, feminism was

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formulated. Feminism, according to Molony (Molony,2008: p.513), is perceived as “the quest for rights and improved status and conditions of women”. This movement, which advocates the rights of women in society, is ever-evolving from its origins that stem back to the 19th century.

It is fundamental, however, to emphasize the notion that the conception of feminism and the rights it advocates are different in diverse cultures. Therefore, Western feminism is well known for its promotion of equality between men and women, nevertheless, feminism from the Third World perspective does not only “focus on patriarchy as a source of oppression, but that also examines how social inequalities are inscribed within a historical, political, social, cultural, and economic context” (Racine, 2011: p.18). This notion is also accentuated by Narayan (1997) who stresses that “Third-World feminism

is not mindless mimicking of “Western agendas”” (p.13) and, therefore, it reflects the dilemmas that are intrinsic to the problems faced by women in that particular society. Hence, Lauretis (1999) provided a general revised definition of feminism which can be used to decipher the over-all promise of this movement regardless of location:

(Feminism) is a developing theory of the female-sexed or female-embodied social subject, whose constitution and whose modes of social and subjective existence include most obviously sex and gender, but also race, class, and any other significant socio-cultural divisions and representations (p.319)

This is crucial to conceive when analysing Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds no Terrors*, a novel that revolves around Saritha who demolished the norms that are forced by the patriarchal society of India with devastating

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consequences. The main objective of this research is to analyse Deshpande's novel from a feminist perspective.

Saritha's interrelationship with her husband Manohar will form the crux of this essay. Furthermore, the notions of patriarchy, gender, sex and sexuality, will be employed to achieve better understanding of the novel.

One of the main obstacles that hinder feminism from achieving its goals in any society is the system of patriarchy which is conceived to be "a social system that is headed and directed" by males (Dobie, 2009: p.125). The internalization of such biased system is "multi-layered and generated by social, occupational, economic, and legal policies that inherently support patriarchy" (Travis et al., 2000: p.241). Therefore, what constitutes a woman in a society is essentially constructed based on the ideology of patriarchy. This, in turn, designates the notion

of essentialism which is a "person's true identity" that is "composed of fixed and unchanging properties"(Dobie, 2009: p.124). Essentialism is inevitably unfavourable to females as it "is used to justify women's current social roles and, thus, provides political justification for the subordination of women as well as "naturalizing" the sexual division of labour" (Abbott, 2000: p.615).

Therefore, feminism tends to reject the conception of essentialism because it facilitates the roles of women in society which are ideologically constituted to accentuate their subordinate position in the social order. Moreover, it is because of essentialism that females are deemed to be mentally inferior to males, natural caregivers, good for home oriented tasks, and so on (Fulfer, 2008). Essentialism is a vital notion to consider when analysing Deshpande's *The Dark Holds no Terrors* because the main

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reason why Saritha hated the typical association of women's role in society is because of her traditionalist mother who abides by the patriarchal rendering of women. Gender, sex and sexuality, two of the crucial aspects that feminism advocated persistently are the notions of gender and sex. Both of these notions differ in their perception and ramification on females in society. The subsequent sections will elucidate the conceptions of these phenomena. Basically, the notion of gender interrelates to the perception that it is "not an innate feature (as sex may be) but a sociocultural construction (and precisely for that reason it is oppressive to women)" (Lauretis, 1999: p.309). Femininity, therefore, is "culturally defined characteristics" (Moi, 1989: p.177). Thus, what constitutes a man and a woman is not naturally oriented, rather it is constructed by society. Such constructions are ideologically

bifurcated to distinguish the strong, independent, and smart beings that men are conceived to be in the patriarchal society, from the feeble, dependent, and imprudent beings that women are perceived to be in such male-dominated social order. The notion of gender as socially constructed is interrelated to the above-mentioned idea of essentialism. Consequently, it is through the characteristics that are attributed via essentialism, men and women roles in society are ascribed.

However, gender construction is a notion that is perceived erroneous by many feminists, including Judith Butler (1999). According to Butler (1999), it would be illogical "to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category" and "gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex" (p.346). Therefore, gender and sex are two

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interconnected conceptions which cannot be distinguished in an extreme binary way. Nevertheless, gender construction in Deshpande's *The Dark Holds no Terrors* is manifestly portrayed. This notion is emphasized to the point that what constitutes a male and a female is depicted in a set of abstract attributes and undertakings that should be adhered to in the social context of the novel.

To talk specifically about sex and sexuality, the conception of sex is interrelated to the "natural, anatomical, chromosomal" and "hormonal" (Butler, 1999: p. 346) features that distinguish males and females. Sex, to feminist, is to some extent an obstacle because "the objectification of women in discourse and practice through the naturalization of sex has operated as a mechanism for the constitution of (more) subordinated subjects" (Amigot and Pujal, 2009: p.654).

The notion of sex, in Deshpande's novel is perceived as an unwavering enigma that constitutes Saritha's terrible subjugation imposed upon her by Manohar (her husband).

This, in turn, designates another concept that is interconnected to sex, which is sexuality. Sex and Sexuality, according to Sedgwick (1999: p.327), characteristically represent "the full spectrum of positions between the most intimate and the most social, the most predetermined and the most aleatory... the most innate and the most learned". Sexuality is not a static thing, like sex is, it is constantly fluctuating and it can be conceived diversely across cultures. This notion is depicted subsequently by Travis and White (2000: p.5) who emphasized the notion that "sexuality is actively constructed and emergent within contexts". In other words, sexuality is repeatedly negotiated and redefined; sexuality changes developmentally over the

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life span ... it has various meanings and manifestations ... and it can be used in a larger sense to reinforce violence against women

As different as they are, sex and sexuality are interrelated and it is because of these two concepts, as mentioned in the above quote, violence is directed against women, a notion that is most evident in Deshpande's novel whereby Saritha is tormented by her devastating state in which she is abused sexually by her husband. The subsequent section will utilise the main hypothesis behind the concepts of patriarchy, gender, sex and sexuality to decipher the motives and the circumstances that substantiated Saritha's deteriorating relationship with Manohar and the main motives behind his cruelty to his wife.

Throughout the novel *The Dark Holds no Terrors*, one of the stark characteristics that signify the protagonist Saritha is her detestation

of her mother. The main deriving reason that supported and intensified Saritha's hatred of her mother is engendered from the traditional patriarchal approach that her mother adhered to in raising her. This, in turn, entailed the inevitable utilization of patriarchal ideology that stimulated her mother to treat her exceptionally harsh and, occasionally, offensive. Saritha's feeling toward her mother is depicted via stating "I hate her, sapping me of happiness, of everything. She's always done it to me...taken happiness away from me. She does it even now when she is dead" (p.109).

This abhorrence intensified when Dhruva (Saritha's brother) died because her mother accused Saritha of intentionally killing him. Consequently, it is via these phenomena, Saritha's resolve to never become like her mother is entrenched within her, a notion that is depicted in saying "I'll show her.

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I'll make her realize." (p.60). Therefore, the only way she can 'show' her mother is by going against the repressive patriarchal ideology that her mother accentuated throughout her life by becoming a doctor, a profession that entails respect and appreciation from all members of the society. Little she did know that her quest to be prominent will eventually result in her ultimate distress that is caused by her husband, feeling the pressure of his wife's superiority.

Patriarchy is presented in the novel to be a deep-rooted ideology that is ubiquitously present in the context of the novel. This is most evidently presented when Saritha, in her youth years, constantly dreamt of "being adored and chosen of a superior, superhuman male" (p.53). This is a main objective of patriarchal edification which only prepares females to be salvaged by the superior males via marriage, rather than supporting them to

elevate their position. To this oppressive system, happiness can only be achieved when Husbands (superior) and wives (inferior) reside in their typical positions that are endowed to them by society. Consequently, a wife in a patriarchal society is rendered to be substandard, not for the sake of it. Rather, it is because of certain essential characteristics, which are intrinsic to patriarchal ideology, that bestow the husband his superiority. These characteristics are designated in the novel by the following statement:

A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he is an MA, you should be a BA. If he's 5'4", you shouldn't be more than 5'3" tall. If he's earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety-nine rupees. (p.137)

In her quest for triumph and success, Saritha became oblivious to such distinguishing features. This

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is depicted in Saritha's realization of her superiority which compelled her to sense that she is "inches taller", thus, making her husband "inches shorter" (p.42). The inferiority of Manohar is accentuated in the way the public perceives Saritha whereby "nods and smiles, murmured greetings and namastes" (p.42) were entirely uttered for her. Consequently, Manohar was virtually disregarded to the point that when seen with his wife "there was nothing (greetings) for him. He was almost totally ignored." (p.42). Furthermore, to his great astonishment, his wife's dominance in their marriage even reached the point that she is now able to call the shots on when to intercourse. This is depicted when she was breast feeding her daughter Renu, which made her "unable to control herself" and "forced Manu to make love to her as soon as possible after she went home" (p.162). Although Saritha assumed that it was

harmless, it was a revelation for Manohar as he was "shocked by her urge" (p.162). The knockout punch that rendered Manohar unable to continue this submissive state as a passive husband and, at the same time, the incident that really ruined Saritha's marriage, is when a reporter interviewing Saritha in her home asked Manohar "how does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?". Saritha only apprehended the disastrous error of her judgment, that everything is fine in her marriage, toward the end of the novel when she stressed that "no partnership can ever be equal. It will always be unequal, but take care that it's unequal in favour of your husband" (p.137). However, if the partnership is in the wife's favour it will only result in mayhem. In the context of Saritha, her husband is now a sadist, a resolution via which Manohar's psychological state is endeavouring to impose his

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supremacy via making her feel like a “terrified animal” compared to his “maniac strength” (p.99).

Society is in a continuous state of shifting whereby women are now doctors, lawyers, and professors instead of being unfairly situated in their homes in which they are dedicated to cooking and cleaning. This notion which is the embodiment of Saritha's character, consequently, leads to one of the main arguments of this essay which is the gender emasculation of Manohar. Gender, as mentioned in the previous section, is culturally constructed by a number of essential characteristics that signify men and women. Accordingly, a continuum is created and employed by society to judge what establishes a man and a woman. In the relationship between Saritha and Manohar, judging from Saritha's superior position, she will be deemed, from a gender point of view, a man. The main deriving reason for saying that is because

Saritha is more influential than her husband, possesses higher status in society, more acknowledged than her husband, earns more than him, provides most of the house income, and so forth. All these characteristics are what a patriarchal society conceives as part and parcel of a man's gender. Thus, Manohar is suffering from gender emasculation. Emasculation, in a metaphoric sense, “signify a practice that diminishes the potency of men in family or in society more generally: “to deprive of masculine strength or vigor; to weaken; to make effeminate”” (Gardiner, 2002: p.311). This debilitating state of Manohar resulted in his resolve to abuse his wife, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Morokff (2000: p.309) emphasized the notion that a considerable number of “societies generally condone violence and are characterized by male dominance; that is, in a society where women

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do not have power and authority". This phenomenon, in turn, denotes a crucial notion that this essay will endeavour to examine which is sex subjugation. The entrenched feeling of emasculation that Manohar is experiencing is all transferred in his sadism. The only approach he can use to reconcile his emasculated self is by sexually abusing his wife just to show that he is after all a strong man that can do what he wants to Saritha. Marital abuse is emphasized by Travis and White (2000), mentioned in section 3.2, whereby sex and sexuality are two tools that can be employed by males in "a larger sense to reinforce violence against women" (p.5). This shocking realization of her husband's abuse for the sake of emphasizing his lost masculinity, left an ambivalent Saritha that could not believe what is happening to her, whether it is a nightmare or not, to the point that bruises were her only proof. This state of mind is denoted

in the following statement uttered by Saritha in response to her experience:

A shame, a farce, a ghastly pretence? Or, was it I who was dreaming, going through a terrible nightmare that left behind this horrible aftertaste of fear? But what about my bruises then?

(p.112)

Manohar's sadistic behaviour is not a random phenomenon that reflects a person who is depraved. Rather, it is a systematic occurrence that only takes place when his emasculation is accentuated and typically caused by his wife's achievements. This is denoted in the novel evidently whenever he abuses Saritha. For instance, when Saritha told Manohar that they don't need the loan because she got the money, at night his sadism kicked in. Furthermore, his abusive behaviour reoccurred when they met Manohar's colleague and his wife, the wife said to her husband while conversing about

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Saritha and Manohar's taking a holiday, "if you had married a doctor... you'd have gone to Ooty too" (p.111). Therefore, his inadequacy to provide to the house and his inability to match his wife's success are some of the evident factors that are driving him to depend on his masculinity, literally, to prove his supremacy over his wife. However, it is crucial to note that Manohar's gender emasculation did not only devastate him in an abstract psychological sense, rather it is also in a physical sense. Manohar's manhood is not active, a notion that is reoccurred significantly when he is in his sadistic self. This is designated in Saritha's emphasis that she "was still groping in the dark, hands outstretched, fingers held out to touch, to feel. But once again ... nothing" (p.112) and "when she felt him against her, she knew there was nothing. It was a shame. And something about it sickened her" (p.86).

Saritha, consequently, is left with either becoming the dedicated wife that society wanted her to be while sacrificing her profession or to leave her husband and devote herself to her profession and achievements which entails salvaging herself from her husband's cruelty. To accentuate the outcomes of such choices, the writer of the novel provided an array of characters around which certain phenomena take place, in the midst of all these characters are Smita, Nalu and Padma. Via the characters of Smita and Nalu, the writer provides the reader with the two extremes, the devoted housewife and the professional spinster. Smita, on one hand, is married and, therefore, everything about her is virtually changed, even her name. This drastic divergence that Smita undergone is all achieved by her husband who is now conquering the head of the family role bequeathed to him by society. Consequently,

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Smita is depicted to take the role of the submissive “other”. Smita’s passive position is further accentuated when she borrowed money from Sarith because her parsimonious husband did not give her enough money and did not allow her to buy her sister in law the right gift. However, she is not complaining, Smita is pleased with her passive position to the point that her dialogue with Saritha and Nalu is filled with “he’s’ ... her own ‘he’” and, thus, her husband is “distinguished from the others by a scarcely noticeable something ... a kind of a coy emphasis” (p.117–118).

Nalu, on the other hand, is an independent character with profession and no restraints. Nalu was conscience of the dilemma’s that are part and parcel of being a woman in a patriarchal society which is depicted in her criticism of Smita who succumbed to her inferior position as a wife that gave

up even her identity to her husband. This is represented when Nalu stated that “it was marriage and men that had degraded Smita” (p.119). These two contrasting characters, Saritha believed, “seemed like the two opposing ends of the stick” (p.118). Saritha, unlike her two friends Smita and Nalue, is endeavouring to strike a balance between taking care of her family while maintaining her profession.

The main issue that is presented to Saritha is that even when a wife devotes herself to her husband, contentment will not be gained. This is most evidently presented in the character of Padma. His wife is the Smita-like type that accepted her inferior position to her husband’s superiority. Nonetheless, Padma is taking advantage of his wife’s subordination by pursuing Saritha. Although Saritha is to blame for giving him a leeway to do so, but the point is that even when wives are assuming their position

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that is dictated by society, husbands recognize their spouses' weakness which further encourages them to pursue their desires. Thus, patriarchy is a biased system that dictates wives' devotion while allots men to do whatever they want.

According to Dobie (2009: p.117), the Holy Grail of feminism is to bring about a shift in society order by raising the "conciseness of those who are oppressed; and to bring about radical change in the power balance between the oppressors and the oppressed". In Saritha's condition, although she was able to tilt the power difference between herself and her husband, she was unable to unshackle herself from the weakness bestowed on her by her sex. That is to say, Saritha from a gendered point of view of the society is a man when compared to her husband, nonetheless, from a sex and sexuality point of view she is still feeble compared to her husband's masculine strength. The

only resolve that she can employ to extricate herself from the two extremes (gender empowerment and sex subjugation) between which her life is situated is by compromising. Rather than forever abandoning her home and kids, she is adopting and orienting herself to the society's view regarding the negative connotations of divorce. Thus, she is willing to confront her husband about his cruelty. This solution is depicted in her statement that human beings are "going to fail you. But because there's just us, because there's no one else, we have to go on trying. If we can't believe in ourselves, we're sunk." (p.220). However influential her acceptance to the society's standpoint is, she is still acknowledging the role bequeathed to her by her profession and thus accepting her superior position in the social order. This notion is most evident in the ending of the story when she obviated her thoughts

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“except those of the child she was going to help” (p.221).

Finally, the main objectives of this essay was to provide a feminist reading of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds no Terrors* while integrating the conceptions of patriarchy, gender, sex and sexuality. The results of the text analysis indicated that patriarchy is deemed to be ubiquitous in the Indian society that is presented in the novel. The boundaries that this repressive male-dominated system, however, were shattered by Saritha via her profession as a valued doctor. Little she did know that her quest for prominence in society will create a dilemma for her because of her husband's inadequacy in the social order of India. Saritha is more influential than her husband, possesses higher status in society, more acknowledged than her husband, earns more than him, provides most of the house income, and so on. Therefore, from a gender

point of view, assuming that gender is culturally formed, Saritha is the man of the house because from almost every aspect she is more prominent than her husband, thus, causing his gender emasculation. However, her only obstacles are the notions of sex and sexuality which are transferred in her husband sexual abuse of her. Her feebleness overwhelms her whenever she is confronted with her husband's sadistic self. Consequently, Saritha is left with two choices, she can either devote herself to her profession or she dedicates herself to her husband and family while abandoning her vocation. The predictable outcomes of these choices are presented in the characters of Smita (the housewife) and Nalu (The independent professional). The only resolution she decided was to create a balance between her profession and home by confronting her husband and thus ending his diabolic

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behaviour that is caused by his inferiority and, therefore, saving her family from being ruined, while

accepting her position in the society as a doctor.

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ملخص البحث

تناولت الكثير من الاعمال الادبية قضية الانثى و الدعوة الى مساواتها مع الذكر لضمان حمايتها من السطوة الذكورية المتفشية في الكثير من المجتمعات لا سيما الشرقية و دول العالم الثالث التي تنظر الى المرأة كأداة للجنس فقط. شاشي ديشباندي و غيرها من الكُتاب من كلا الجنسين تناولوا موضوع السطوة الذكورية اذ تعتمد هذه السطوة على المقومات الذكورية الجنسية التي تجعل من الذكر قائم على الانثى. في نهاية المطاف و وفقاً لاستطاع الكُتاب و علماء النفس و التجارب الحياتية بأن الذكر من الممكن ان يخسر سطوته بسبب خسارته لرجولته حتى لو امتلك السلطة و القوة.

مُنذ نزول ادم و حواء على الارض و الخلق تكون و اعتمد و استمر بالذكر و الانثى فلا ديمومة لحياة بدون هذان العنصران. فكل كائن و لديه ما يعاكسه في الخصائص البدنية الدقيقة و يشابهه في حق الوجود. تكاثرت المجتمعات حتى اصبحت شعوب و قبائل كما في ذكره عز وجل. لكل مجتمع خصائصه في التعامل مع الذكر و الانثى وفقاً لقوانينه الدينية و التقاليد التي بُنيت على اساسه. كما الحال منذ بدء الخلق، الذكر لديه المقومات التي تجعله ذو سطوة و سيطرة في كل المجالات الحياتية و تكون الانثى هي الكائن الاضعف في المجتمع.