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A Study of Alienation in Shashi Despande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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Abstract

In Greek there are two words for alienation - 'anomie' and 'anomia'. While 'anomia' stands for self-alienation, 'anomie' refers to alienation from society. In fact, self-alienation and alienation from society are the two basic forms of alienation. If a person's spontaneous individual self has been stunted or stifled that person is said to be in a condition of alienation from himself or herself. The female characters of Shashi Deshpande suffer from both anomie and anomia. The reason in both the cases is patriarchal codes governing the society. Since ages they have deprived women of the right to live according to their own will. Deshpande's treatment of alienation in her women characters has a different dimension. Her protagonists, unlike the protagonists of Anita Desai, neither commit suicide nor go into self-exile because of an oppressive sense of alienation.

Keywords: Anomie, alienation, patriarchal, consciousness, protagonists.

The marginalization of women in a patriarchal society has resulted in their alienation. Encyclopaedia Britannica defines 'alienation' as "A term used with various meanings in philosophy, theology, psychology and the social sciences, usually with emphasis on personal powerlessness, meaninglessness, cultural estrangement, social isolation or self-estrangement."Alienation implies an individual's feeling or state of dissociation from self, from others and from the world at large. In Greek there are two words for alienation - 'anomic' and 'anomia'. While 'anomia' stands for self-alienation, 'anomie' refers to alienation from society. In fact, self-alienation and alienation from society are the two basic forms of alienation. If a person's spontaneous individual self has been stunted or stifled that person is said to be in a condition of alienation from himself or

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herself. An alienated person is a stranger to himself as his fellow man is stranger to him. Thus alienation from self leads to alienation from society.

The female characters of Shashi Deshpande suffer from both anomie and anomia. The reason in both the cases is patriarchal codes governing the society. Since ages they have deprived women of the right to live according to their own will. Women have been forced to live a dependent life under the control of men. Even education, though it has brought some changes in their lives, has not changed it fundamentally. Whether they are earning women or housewives, they are not leading a life of their own choice. This has alienated them from themselves. With changing times they have also not remained, at least in the case of the educated urban women, the mere puppets in the hands of their men. This has alienated them from society. This is the case with the protagonists of Shashi Deshpande. Highly sensitive, intelligent and educated protagonists of Deshpende represent modem Indian women. They suffer from alienation because if they listen to the voice of their heart and mind they are called undutiful daughter, sister and wife and find themselves alienated from society and other members of their family, and if they conform to the male concept of the traditional woman, they become alienated from themselves. Therefore, Deshpande's heroines try to adopt a middle path where they can perform their domestic or social duties without compromising much with their individual desires and values. Thus Deshpande's treatment of alienation in her women characters has a different dimension. Her protagonists, unlike the protagonists of Anita Desai, neither commit suicide nor go into self-exile because of an oppressive sense of alienation.

Alienation can be an essential condition for man's awareness of himself as an individual. It gives him an opportunity to address to such questions as to who he is in essence and what he should do or not do in the broader sense of the term. This is true in the context of the 'heroines of Shashi Deshpande. Put under certain circumstances they are set on the path of self-discovery. The process begins with their sense of alienation both from themselves and those around them. They all try to know who they are besides a secondary sex. Deshpande's women of the younger generation refuse to tread the beaten path of staying at home, looking after the children and their husband and meekly accepting whatever is given to them. They prefer to make their own decisions. They are not always happy about it and have to make compromises but ultimately they reach a better understanding of themselves and their lives. This is what makes them so individual.

With the change in the social and cultural milieu of India in the post- Independence period, Indian urban women with education find themselves at crossroads. Women have adopted professional careers but they are not free from the roles assigned traditionally to them by the patriarchal society. This has created a divided mentality in them. Shashi Deshpande's female protagonists also face this crisis and undergo a sustained period of self-doubt and mental agony but they finally succeed in overcoming them and gaining a sort of mental equilibrium. They neither break completely free from the traditional fold nor do they lose their individuality. Charu Chandra agrees with Deshpande's concept of feminism where achievement of individual identity and

female autonomy is not the only goal but is balanced against life in the family and career:

> After having accorded that autonomy to her, she should accept the basic human values like motherhood and responsibility of the family, thereby of society, at least on her own terms. There is need to harmonise the man-woman relationship as equal partners. Victory is there, not in the subjugation and destruction of the male, rather in bringing him to see the indispensability of each other's space. (86)

All the protagonists of Shashi Deshpande suffer from alienation. This begins with her very first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors.* Sarita or Saru nourishes a sense of alienation since her childhood as she became a victim of gender bias after the birth of her brother, Dhruva. Like the typical Indian parents, her parents had also wanted a male child. So her birth had disappointed them and when a male child was born to them, they were ecstatic over it. She is therefore unwanted at birth and neglected during childhood and adolescence. Dhruva is showered with special affection and pampering because he is a male child who will propagate family lineage. In contrast, Saru is neglected and ignored, perhaps because she is viewed, as daughters usually were, as a burden who is to be married off at the expense of family's fortunes. She is not paid much attention even on her birthdays. In contrast, Dhruva's birthdays are celebrated with great enthusiasm, fanfare and religious rituals. This creates a sense of jealousy in her for her brother. When her father takes Dhruva in his lap and talks to him, she desperately wants to have her father's affection and attention:

> I must show Baba something, anything to take his attention away from Dhruva sitting on his lap. I must make him listen to me not Dhruva. I must make him ignore Dhruva. (32)

Dhruva's death by drowning proved a turning point in her life. She could never get over the hysterical words of her mother, "You killed him, why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead?" (191) These words load Saru with a sense of guilt and reduce her sense of self-worth. This leads to self-criticism and terminates her childhood prematurely. For long she pondered over these screeching words "that followed for days, months, years all her life." (191) She was extremely hurt and felt insecure and tried to devise ways to end her sense of alienation. Saru is a victim of cultural conditioning where a male child is favoured. A girl has to strive hard to make her presence felt. Growing in an atmosphere of hatred, hostility and lovelessness, Saru nurtures a seed of rebellion within herself. She considers her mother to be her greatest enemy. More than her father, it is her mother who tries to make her conform to the traditional concept of woman in the Indian society. When Saru declares her intention to study medicine, her mother reminds her father:

> You don't belong to that class. And don't forget, medicine or no medicine, doctor or no doctor, you still have to get her married, spend money on her wedding ... Let her go for a B.Sc .... You can get her married in two years and our responsibility will be over. (130)

This further alienates Saru from her mother. Her father, however, comes to her support and sends her to Bombay to study medicine. On other issues also Saru has differences with her mother. Her mother belongs to that generation of Indian women for whom the choices were very limited and their whole life was centred on marriage - first to acquire the eligibility to get married and then conform to the concept of' an ideal housewife to continue successfully in the household and the society. Women from this point of view were supposed to look after their beauty and make themselves attractive. The conversation between Saru and her mother shows this:

> '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 can't.'
> And Dhruva?'
> 'He is different. He is a boy.' (45)

The sense that they don't belong to the family where they are born creates a sense of alienation in girls since their childhood. Saru's mother repeatedly tells her 'You are growing up' and 'You are a woman now' (62) and she admonishes her and restricts her movement. These words remind Saru constantly that she is not a boy and that discriminates her from her brother. Sex discrimination begins at home and also brings out forcefully the attitude of a traditional woman towards her daughter. These words turn a mother into a symbolic figure carrying within herself the patriarchal culture. She is the instrument through which the patriarchal culture is kept alive. It becomes the duty of the mother to remind the girl child again and again that her parents' home is not her home. Saru resents all this, all the more so because Dhruva as a male child is supposed to belong to the family. Though their birthdays were celebrated almost in the same way, but the difference marked the difference in the attitude towards both the child:

> There was always a Puja on Dhruva's birthday. A festive lunch in the afternoon and an aarati in the evening, during which Dhruva, as an infant, sat solemnly on Baba's lap, and as a child, by his side ... while I helped my mother to do the aarti. My birthdays were almost the same ... a festive lunch, with whatever I asked for ... an aarti in the evening, but there was no Puja. (168-69)

Dhruva was also taken to the studio for a photograph; but Saru was not. This difference in attitude obviously hurt little Saru so deeply that she could not forget them all her life. She is filled with the grief of not being wanted. In reaction she turns into a rebel. For example when she wants to attend the marriage of her friend's sister, her mother refuses to let her go. Saru begins to fight and has ultimately her way. Though she does not enjoy the function as much as she had imagined, she has a feeling of triumph for having succeeded in her demand.

The worst incident in Saru's life takes place when her brother, Dhruva gets drowned in a pond. She had a love-hate relationship with her brother which is not uncommon among children. Once when she wanted to escape to a lonely place she had found by chance, Dhruva insists upon accompanying her. Their father is away in the bank where he serves and their mother is asleep. So they come out of the house stealthily. On their way Saru keeps scolding Dhruva and keeps instructing him not to do this or that. Dhruva, being a pampered child, is not so obedient. Saru starts sulking and ignoring him. When they come to the pond, which is deceptive as the watery part is concealed at places, she asks him not to go ahead, Dhruva, however, does not heed to her and goes forward. Saru feigns indifference and does not listen to him when he cries for help. Dhruva is ultimately drowned and a bewildered Saru fails to realize what exactly happened. She is blamed for her brother's death. In anger, her mother accuses her of having killed him. She lashes out at her, "Why didn't you die? Why are you alive and he dead? (34) These words haunt Saru throughout her life and alienate her both from herself and her family.

Saru's love marriage with Manohar or Manu is also an act of rebellion. Her parents, particularly her mother, oppose this marriage as Manu is not a Brahmin but a low caste person. She also did not have what the middle class considers to be a respectable job. Her mother says, "You won't be happy with him. I know you won't. A man of a different caste, different community ... what will you two have in common?" (98) Saru does not listen to her. Her marriage alienates her finally from her family.

In the beginning, Saru's marriage with Manohar makes her very happy. She bears all physical inconveniences without remorse as her love for him makes her forget everything. Her alienation with herself seems to have come to an end. But this happiness does not last for very long. Manohar does not prove to be what he promised earlier. He at last becomes a lecturer in a private college. Things go on well for quite some time. She becomes the mother of two children, a daughter and a son. But things begin to change when Saru acquires professional success. She becomes the object of admiring attention of her neighbours who come to her regularly for advice and help. She fuels exhilarated with a dignity and importance that her status as a doctor seems to have given her. But she soon realizes that success for a woman in the patriarchal Indian society can cause subversion of roles in the family and destroy happiness. The social acceptance and recognition she gains as a doctor and demands on her time alienates her from her husband. As a typical male, Manu cannot tolerate his wife's higher stature in society:

> When we walked out of the room, there were nods and smiles, murmured greeting and *namastes*. But they were all for me, only for me. There was nothing for him. He was almost totally ignored . . . and so the esteem with which I was surrounded made me inches taller. But perhaps the same thing that made me inches taller made me inches shorter. He had been the young man and I his bride. But now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband. (36-37)

Manohar does not exhibit any resentment outwardly. Nonetheless, the responses of the people and the talks he has to listen to often do affect him mentally. This results in a dichotomy in his personality. In the day he is a normal husband, but at night he suddenly turns into a sadist whose sexual behaviour amounts almost to rape. The first time that it happens, it is nightmarish for Saru:

> The beginning was abrupt. There had been no preparation for it. There were no preliminaries either. At first it was a nightmare of hands. Questing hands that left a trail of pain. Hurting hands that brought me out of a cocoon of a blessed unreality ... I'm dreaming this - is not -real ... into the savage reality of a monstrous onslaught. And then, the nightmare was compounded of lips and teeth as well. . . . The dream, the nightmare, whatever it was, continued. Changing now, like some protean monster, into the horror of rape ... It was more as if my mind had deserted my shamefully bruised body, disowning it, making it insensate. And then the two came together. I knew where I was and what had happened. Panic and sensation came back simultaneously. I turned my head slightly, fearfully, and saw him. No more a stranger, but my husband. (11-12)

This pattern is repeated night after night. Saru feels entrapped. She thinks of discussing it with her husband, but his behaviour in the morning is so normal that she is at a loss what to say. This alienates her from her husband: "And each time it happens and I don't speak, I put another brick on the wall of silence between us. May be one day I will be walled alive within it and die a slow, painful death." (96) Saru hears from a patient that her mother is no more. So she decides to go to her father. She goes there apparently to see her father but in fact she is running away from her marriage which has become painful for her.

There after a few days she opens her mind to her father. For the first time she is able to establish a relationship and communication with her father in the absence of her mother. Her father advises her to get rid of her past and' asks her to talk to her husband as the solution of her present crisis. Saru realizes that her alienation has be accepted and overcome by herself: "All right, so I am alone. But so is everyone else. Human beings ... they're going to fail you. But because there is just us, because there is no one else, we have to go on trying. If we can't believe in ourselves, we are sunk." (220) It is with this realization that Saru's alienation ends.

Thus alienation is a recurring feature in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. Her characters, mainly the leading female characters suffer from alienation. For women the most prominent reason is the patriarchal system of society. Discrimination against the girl child by parents, mainly by mother, makes them alienated from the family. Arranged marriage brings upon a woman certain stereotyped roles in each of which she is supposed to sacrifice her own self for somebody else, most of all for her husband. Even if she marries for love very soon her lover turns into a conventional male who cannot bear his wife walking ahead of him. All this alienates the woman from herself. Shashi Deshpande has very beautifully brought this tragedy of an Indian

woman in her novels. But her female protagonists, all of them educated middle class women with a strong personality do not surrender before the tragic odds in their lives. They overcome their alienation and finally redefine their selves.

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