



Effacing The Past: Trauma And Its Amelioration In Shashi Deshpande's The Dark Holds No Terrors

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Abstract: Generally, trauma is a wound on the psyche. Psychological trauma remains latent in the mind of the traumatised subject, until it finds, another similar catastrophic event, to manifest itself repeatedly in the form of nightmares, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviour. In Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita has suffered an agonizing childhood. Accidental death of her brother and her mother's unloving behaviour have created trauma on her mind. This trauma along with her husband's sadistic sexual acts make her life miserable. She fleets to her father to finds remedies. At the end, she finds refuge within herself, with the help of her father. This paper attempts to present Sarita's agonizing childhood, her lifelong trauma and transition she archives at the end.

Index Terms—Psychological Trauma, Agonizing Childhood, Gender Biasness , Abusive Parenting, Inferior Complex, Nightmares, Sadism, Identity Formation

Etymologically the word 'trauma' is originated from Greek, which stands for English word 'wound' or injury caused by external catastrophic phenomena (Merriam). But in medical and psychiatric literature and most centrally Sigmund Freud's text the term 'trauma' is "understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 3). Schönfelder has suggested that, on the context of psychiatric and clinical language, the term trauma denotes the experience of highly distressing, painful and shocking event, and the complex and lasting aftereffect of the event on an individual; and the post traumatic symptoms are called

PTSD (in terms of diagnostic category) (pp. 63-64). In the introduction of *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Cathy Caruth calls trauma ‘double wound,’ and an event which is “not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. ...The way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to hunt the survivor later on. ...It cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions our language (pp. 3-4). What Cathy Caruth wants to present here that traumatic experience does not manifest its presence from the very beginning but it remains latent in the very unconscious. It manifests itself through repetitive uncontrollable actions and nightmares of the survivor. Caruth stresses the repetitive nature of trauma in her text.

In *Trauma: Exploration in Memory*, Cathy Caruth explains the way trauma is generated: “A response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviour steaming from the events along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (an avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event” (p. 4).

Caruth affirms that in the case of trauma, the catastrophic event is not experienced entirely at the time of its occurrence, but it occurs and haunts the traumatized person or subject through its repeated possession, later. Shashi Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terrors* presents some elements of such traumatic perceptions. In this paper, I will try to explore the traumatic situations, Sarita, the protagonist of the novel, has experienced as a child and as an adult, and their impact on her psychic functions, and the transformation the character reaches at the end of the novel.

Set in metropolitan city in India, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* depicts the life and living of Indian women and their relations with their male counterparts. Like the novelist’s other literary texts the novel continues the concern for Deshpande’s common theme of woman’s pathetic condition in patriarchal dominance. Shashi Deshpande’s novel narrates the story of Sarita, a professional independent woman with a husband and two children, who at the very beginning of the story has returned to her parental home in order to get an answer. Through third-person omniscient narration and Sarita’s stream of consciousness we come to know the turmoils of the protagonist Sarita’s life from childhood to more mature professional woman. Presenting through flashback, the story tells the distressed and bitter childhood experiences of Sarita.

Sarita was a neglected and tortured child. In her childhood days she did not get the amount of love, care attention she deserved as a child. Her mother's rebuking words has created a scare on her childish innocent psyche. She was blamed for her brother's death:

You did it. You did this. You killed him. (Deshpande 191)

She has developed a feeling of guilty for the thing she did not incite. Her mother's negligence and bitter words keep her away from forming an identity as an individual. These bitter words become a terror. It has been rooted in her mind and has become the cause of lifelong suffering: "And then it began. The hysteria, the screaming the words that followed me for days, months, years, all my life. You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead?" (p. 191)

In "A Traumatic Journey of Sarita: The Dark Holds No Terror" Sunita Sengwar argues, in traditional Hindu family in India, a girl child is treated as subordinate to a male child. Girl children are made to feel inferior, weak and vulnerable by their parents. They are treated as burden. She tries to elaborate, how does this type of parenting cause psychological problem such as alienation, loneliness, anxiety in Sarita (p. 55). As Sarita's is a traditional Hindu family, like other traditional Hindus, her mother thought that her son will lit her pyre and consequently she would get salvation. Her mother did not care much about the rights of girl child, she remained indifferent towards Sarita's comfort:

Don't go out in the sun. You'll 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 (Deshpande 45).

Her mother's chief concern is to get her married and get rid of that unwanted burden, and nothing more than that. Her words make her feel that she is a burden over her head. She became a victim of gender biasness. Deshpande has presented how does a woman treats another woman unequal on basis of sex.

In "Woman Verses Womanliness: An Essay in Culture and Political Psychology" Ashis Nandy argues on the woman's hostility towards woman. He argues that for an Indian mother, the son is a vehicle for her self expression (p. 36). In Nandy's words, "The woman's self respect in the traditional system is protected not through her father or husband, but through her son. It is also through the son—and for that matter on the son—that she traditionally exercises her authority" (pp. 36-37). Thus Sarita's mother's love, care and dependences are shifted towards her brother Dhruva. Sarita has been neglected as she is a girl. She becomes victim of the gender biasness. Dhruva got all the things of affection and compassion only because he is a boy. Sarita felt unwanted, unloved and inferior to her brother. These feelings created a sense of insecurity and alienation. She was always made to feel ugly, neglected, unloved and undesirable by her mother. Sarita thought, "I was an ugly girl, at least my mother told me so" (Deshpande 61).

As Cathy Caruth argues, it is the intrinsic quality of trauma that the distressed event was neither experienced fully or confront it consciously at the time of its occurrence that returns to haunts the host (*Trauma* 3-11). Her brother Dhruva, for whom she was being jealous, was accidentally died by drawing in muddy water. Sarita blamed herself for his such death of her brother, who loved her dearly, used to seek refuge in her. Dolores Herrero in "Plight versus Right: Trauma and the Process of Recovering and Moving Beyond the Past in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*" presents the causes of trauma in Marion Campbell. Tokkie's death and Marion's unloving mother have become the cause of her trauma (pp. 105).

In a similar way, Dhruva's death in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is going to be one of the traumas which, along with having a mother who did not love Sarita, did not give her enough attention, did not support her as a woman, will haunt Sarita for years even after she becomes a mother herself. This will make Sarita incompetent to carry any kind of healthy relationships, She will fear to enjoy life: "I never had that pure joy of childhood ever again. I became all at once a sombre girl, frightened of many things, most of all of joy" (Deshpande 188). Her mother's bitter words, coldness towards her, her brother's accidental death and her mother's blaming it on her do not let her live peacefully. The feelings of fear, terror of being misjudged occur repeatedly as nightmares

and in her action i.e. her desperate attempt to be financially independent at any cost. I would like to argue that it creates pressure on her conscious that she must prove her innocence that she did not killed her younger.

Monika Agrawal in her Article “The Theme of Agonized Childhood in God of Small Things and The White Tiger” attempts to present how the childhood abuse results in mismanaged adulthood. She has tried to present the psychological and mental torture a child from dysfunctional family bears throughout their lives (p. 353). In Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, Estha and Rahel and in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, Balram experience the consequences of the devoid of parental love and affection, “they are deserted and dismissed by merciless adults, and their awful youth encounters stunt their passionate improvement as adults and lead to abnormal and deviant behaviours” (p. 353). From here the fear, self doubt, anxiety, terror starts and the children get psychologically traumatised. Similarly, Sarita lived a childhood devoid of parental love, got ill-treatment from her mother. A defenceless, emotionally and mentally abused child had been subjected to psychological trauma which would be the cause of wound in her psyche for lives. When Sarita’s mother used to abuse her, her father remained silent. Her father was also dominated by her mother’s wrath. Sarita’s father was a cowardly person who could not stand against his wife’s wrath towards his own daughter. If he had supported Sarita, she would not have suffered loneliness and trauma during and after her childhood. Therefore, Sarita could not get affection from her father also. In “Gender Discrimination in Shashi Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terrors: A Brief Study*” Shyla L aptly observes that in Indian society woman have to live like a maid servant. They live with out any revolt. Without any other way they have to enjoy a submissive position (p. 62). In that sense, Sarita’s mother as well as Sarita had nothing to hold as her own in her parental home. Even she does not have a room of her own. Sarita learned, “And I have so much my mother lacked. But neither she nor I have that thing ‘a room of her own’” (Deshpande 136). She realised that she must form an identity of her own. So she decided to be a doctor. But in this case also her mother opposed. Her mother did not want her to be a doctor instead of a house wife. Sarita knew what would be her mother’s opinion, “No, forever a ‘no’ to anything I want. You don’t want me to have anything, you don’t want me to do anything. You don’t even want me to live” (p. 142). Sarita’s mother tried to persuade her father, not to send her to medical. She reminded him about their ‘responsibility’ to get their daughter married which was a burden for them:

“And don’t forget, medicine or no medicine, doctor or no doctor, you still have to get her married, spend money on her wedding” (p. 144).

But this time, Sarita’s father did not hear from Sarita’s mother, instead he let Sarita choose what to pursue: “Look, she knows how it is. I can pay either for her marriage or her studies. She chooses to be educated. Let her. Its her choice” (p. 144).

Sarita has become doctor and married Manohar, a person from outside of her community, irrespective of her mother’s disapproval. Her mother did not want her to marry Manu:

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? (p. 96).

You won’t be happy with him. I know you won’t. A man of a different caste, different community...what will you too have in common?(p. 98)

I suppose, that it could be an symbolic act of revolt and an act of defying the tradition, the tradition which subjugated her, subjected her to be oppressed for whole of her life.

In *Wounds and Words: Childhood and Family Trauma in Romantic and Postmodern Fiction*, Christa Schönfelder argues that the re-experiencing of trauma might manifest itself in repetitive intrusive memories, flashbacks of the event and nightmares, physical as well as emotional reaction to familiar distressed phenomenon (p. 64).

However, Dolores Herrero aptly says that it is frequent in trauma that another traumatic event suddenly connect with the previous or original events which remain repressed in the unconscious for a long time (p. 107). In the case of Sarita also, the catastrophic events of her childhood; her brother’s accidental death and her unloving mother’s bitter words, have been repressed in the very unconscious. Only after her husbands attacked

her on bed, she realised that her childhood grief did not leave her, the pain and the grief has been waiting silently and it has been returned, after getting triggered by another catastrophic event:

“And there was the end of that grief!

...

Now it came back, as if it had been waiting patiently all these years for the right moment to return to me. To my horror I began to sob” (p. 113).

The new phenomenon has prompted her returning to her parental home after fifteen years. She has realised unconsciously, if she wants to erase her pain from the past and to be free from present abnormal relations, she must start from the root, from where it all started, in her parental home.

In “Men’s Pathetic Condition on Women’s Rigid Decisions Portrayed in the Novel The Dark Holds No Terror” J Revathy and Dr. P. Suresh suggest that Sarita’s husband’s inferiority complex, which is catalysed by Sarita’s upliftment on social ladder, forces him to become sexually sadist, and it causes the reawakening of Sarita’s trauma. And later Sarita’s father’s supports and soothing words free Sarita from the traumatic past (pp. 2413-2414).

At the beginning of their marriage, as usual, everything was going well. Sarita is a reputed doctor and her husband teaches literature in a college. They were feeling the ecstasy of love and physical intimacy. Though there were many difficulties, they were living their life happily. The outside world was blurred for them. In Sarita’s word, “It was heaven, in spite of the corridors smelling of urine the rooms with their dark sealed-in odours, women with inquisitive, unfriendly eyes, men with lascivious stares. And we were happy” (Deshpande 40). But the problem started when Sarita became famous among the neighbour. People started coming to Sarita, only to Sarita, for help. Every time Manohar opened the gate for someone, s/he was for Saru. Their privacy got affected. Gradually, Manohar was developing the feeling of inferiority and weak to Sarita. He did not reveal any of his insecurities. But he started being aggressive while making love. Sarita realised, “The same thing that made me inches taller, made him inches shorter. He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband” (p. 42).

It all started in an interview, where the girl asked Manu, “How does it feel when wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?” (p. 35) As if it is a patriarchal concept that man must earn more than his wife, a man must be the bread winner for his family. Manohar was mocked in front of Sarita. He was teased for his lower income than her wife’s income. The girl’s words hurt Manohar’s ego. Manohar had become an privileged victim of this androcentric social system. Moreover, Sarita’s relation with her old teacher Boozie, who gave her money to help into her progression, makes Manohar more insecure, silent, ravishing. He never revealed his insecurities, publicly he remained static but became sexually a sadist person. He started assaulting Sarita on Bed:

“He attacked me like an animal that night, I was sleeping and I woke up and there was this...this man hurting me. With his hands, his teeth, his whole body” (p. 201).

Her husband’s sadistic activities become a nightmare for her. The numbness of the situation makes Sarita’s life miserable. Sarita identified the nightmare with the previous nightmare implanted by her mother. Her childhood traumas started to reoccur. She was so devastated with what happened to her that it subdued her to take a quest to her parental home to her father, if there she could find a solution of all these.

At the beginning, Sarita’s father did not show much concerns about Sarita’s return, but we come to know from Sarita that her father always had a loving corner for Sarita in his heart. Her father could not tolerate seeing his daughter in distress. He unveiled himself:

“I never blamed you” (p. 193)

Saru’s father remained silent during the early ages, repressed by his wife’s dominion but now he confirmed that he does not blame Sarita for her brother’s death. He believed in her innocence. These words from a parent gives encourage to the distressed daughter exhausted fighting alone with all the odds of life. He tried his best to console his daughter. Then he asked politely that if there were any problem with his husband: “Saru, he asked her. ‘what’s wrong? Is it your husband?’” (p. 197) Sarita has come to her father, knowing she is all alone, to seek father’s refuge. Now her father declares that he is on her side, hence She finds courage to confront what happens to her. She opened up, “My husband is a sadist” (p. 199) She told her father all the miseries, suffocations she endured from his childhood to present days. She shared her emotionally crippled life with her father. His father

has become his charioteer and enlightened her to confront the darkness, the silence. He persuades her that there is no terror in the dark, the confrontation might bring the way open for a new beginning. He told her:

“Have never asks him? Haven’t you asked hum why he does it?” (p. 201)

“That’s all past and done with. I’m speaking of now. I’m asking you, pleading with you. Have I ever said to you...do this or don’t do that?... I am appealing to you. Don’t go without meeting your husband. Talk to him. Tell him what’s wrong” (p. 217).

“I told you once Saru...your mother is dead, so is your brother can’t you let the dead go?”(p. 217)

After hearing her father soothing words, Sarita felt the need to let go the deadly silence between She and her husband. Her father’s caring behaviour helps her coming out of the trauma:

“She was overcome by a queer sensation, as if everything was unreal...and with this sense of unreality came the thought...none of this matters, not really” (p. 219).

Now she was ready to talk to her husband, she was willing to give a chance to the relation with her husband. The ending of the novel gives us hints that, by effacing the past, Sarita is moving towards the life waiting for her:

“And, oh yes, Baba, if Manu comes, tell him to wait. I’ll be back as soon as I can” (p. 221).

As has been argued, emotional and physical abuse of parents casts scars on the psyche of a child. Consequently, it gets quite difficult for them to deal with distressful reality. It can make a child traumatised. Shashi Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terrors* presents such a story of Sarita, the protagonist of the novel has been faced the consequences of her agonizing childhood. After a long hardship at the end she has found the remedies life long trauma by ameliorate the past wounds and embracing the new, fresh beginning.

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