

Role of father in Shashi Deshpande's "Darkness holds no terrors"

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Abstract

The article is about the father character in Darkness holds no terrors. His love and affection towards his daughter is explored. Due to personal issues he was always unaffectionate and distract.

Fathers play a vital role in an Indian family life and mostly they are deemed to be very close with their daughters than the mothers. Throughout the novels of Shashi Deshpande's novels, fathers are generally termed as "Baba" and their engagement with their daughter varies from novel to novel. Though Shashi Deshpande is highly biographical in her characterization, nevertheless some amount of imagination is always there. The novel "Darkness holds no terrors" is a peculiar work that was written in the year 1980 and it was significantly the first novel of the author. The novel caught the attention of the readers of that era, as it was partially feministic and some sort of dullness always prevailed throughout the work. It is a different work as the protagonist seems to experience a unique type of emptiness due to a bitter childhood experience she had with her parents. Her parents are detached with her as they blame her for the death of their younger son Dhruv. More than their grief, their hatred for Saru, the protagonist increases year to year until she gets married. Her married life is also

disappointing and she is unable to get emotionally attached to anyone in her life. This results in abject emptiness and it prevails in her mind without any pause. Baba, her father is in a way responsible for the emptiness and unhappiness of her daughter. His detached isolation and thin affection makes her mentally deformed though professionally she remains successful as a doctor. This article is all about the so called “Baba’s” contribution and behavior with his daughter and other characters of the novel. Though the title appears to be a simple one, the article would analyse the “Baba’s” character a bit deeply.

The novel begins with the house of Baba to which Saru alias Sarita returns from her marital home. She stands outside pressing the bell and waiting for the door to be open. She views the house which is a bit shabby outside as Baba is a widower with his wife having passed away. Baba opens the door after a long time and he expresses least neither surprise nor joy at seeing his daughter after a long time. The delay probably could be his tiredness with life. Since he is bereft of relatives and friends, he is pretty sure that none but some strange visitor alone can press the bell. He is totally uninterested to meet them and the delay in opening the door is a classic example of the same. Baba lives his life just for living sake as the juice of his life had dried long ago.

In the present article, the focus would be on the relationship between father and daughter, the relationship between Baba and an unrelated boy who stays in his home and above all his loneliness and his approach towards life. The father-daughter relationship could be gauged from the very welcome he gives for her arrival. When he opens the door on hearing the calling bell, he is a bit shocked to see Saru, but manages to return to normality. Instead of

getting excited at the sight of the daughter, the words that he utters are totally unconventional in the Indian context. He says,

“I didn’t except you” (17 DHNT)

It is a strange indifferent statement as it shows his detachment and disaffection towards his daughter. It is to be known that Baba was more affectionate towards his wife than his daughter. His wife had a conviction that Saru was responsible for the death of their younger child Dhruv at a very tender age. When they went to play near a pond, Dhruv got immersed in the pond and the mother had a grudge that as an elder sister she did not take any effort to save the young boy from death. From then on she received only hatred from her mother and as a father Baba too toed the line of his wife. But Baba was not as aggressive as his wife, but still got detached from his daughter. This door opening episode is a reflection of the past detachment he exhibited towards his daughter. Moreover, he and his wife never came to with life and truly speaking they passed their life for living sake instead of experiencing life. At home, he was staying with a college boy Madhav whom Baba saw as a reflection of his dead son. He was more affectionate towards this boy than his own daughter. One instance that showcases his special feeling for the boy is that when Saru enters a room that was used by the boy, Baba sternly asks her to go and sleep in Pooja room instead of that room. It shows the importance he attached to the boy. But at the same time Baba was such a person who never became angry with his daughter. Even when she came to stay with him, he never showed his anger for her insensitivity towards his wife’s and her mother’s death. In short, he never expected anything from Saru and it was vice-versa. The affection between them was not strong and at the same time, as a father he finished his tasks. The only shock she gave was

relating to her marriage as she married a non-Brahmin boy. As a family it was not accepted by Baba and her mother.

As a father, he pacified his wife and enabled her to accept the marriage though at least for a namesake. Amongst the two, Baba was a bit soft towards his daughter than his wife. But questions that could be raised regarding his behavior and silence would be answered by citing that as a person he was an introvert who never over reacted to any situation. Even when his son Dhruva died, he was more poised and never abused his daughter for the death. But next a remarkable distance from her that he did not shower affection nor love towards her. The communication between father and daughter was almost absent. In her own words, she says,

“Silence was an essential part of the life

They lived together now, Baba, Madhav and she

It had come upon the house after Dhruva’s death” (95 DHNT)

Since, the narrator does not deal much about her life before Dhruva’s death, it is unknown if her father behaved in a more intimate manner. The reason for this strangeness is not only the death of Dhruva, but also due to the unhappy marriage of Baba. Saru once scans through a past photograph of Baba and her mother and says that it was like two strangers posing together for a photo just for other’s sake. When the marriage is unhappy, naturally the whole life is set to be doomed. Another photo of Baba which shows him as a teenager, probably in college, is a lively one with her father exhibiting lots of passion and emotion. But after marriage his life became dull and void. saru’s mother was a hardliner who spewed hatred towards her daughter and Baba was the only source for her. He too, maintained his distance,

but showed some consideration towards her. Her perception of her father from her childhood has been the same, as he was a man who was always subservient. She says,

“And Baba Even then ciper,

A man who didn't count because she

So emphatically did.

Even his mistakes and omissions were

Unimportant because they could never

Affect anyone else” (86 DHNT)

He was such a man. He neither helped nor harmed and his submissiveness towards his wife made him keep away from his daughter as well. His inability to become intimate with his own daughter is due to his passivism and lack of ability to counter his wife's fierceness. He always toed his wife's line and this expanded the distance between him and his daughter. It is a wonder for many readers, as the whole family of Baba was full of hatred and emptiness that love never bloomed there. Though an unlovable father, he always lent a passive support to Saru's features. Saru herself was feeling empty because of the hostile environment and she was unable to fulfill even small joys and pleasures of her childhood. Even the decision of joining Medicine had to pass through lots of rigours as her mother was totally opposed to it. When Saru comes to house after her results are published, Baba asks her about the course she is going to opt for. He suggest B.sc, but Saru retorts that she wants to go for medicine. It disturbs the whole situation as each member start roaring and groaning. Baba, the softest one, himself opposes the move as the decision entailed her to go to Bombay. He was more worried

about the cost factor and in some way about her safety as well. Though, he refused to encourage her aim of joining the medical college that day, the next morning he accepted under the condition that she should adjust a simple hostel life instead of any luxury. This support of Baba made her pursuer medicine. In the case of her marriage too, he intervened though unsuccessfully. He was a part of the fury that his wife unleashed when Saru decided to marry a man of another caste.

Thus as a father, he was always silent and unintimate towards his daughter. He was a man who loved loneliness and isolation that he even disallowed his daughter to disturb him. As a father, he neither loved nor conversed with her much, but lent a passive support to her. The passivism is mainly due to his wife's dominance and being a very subservient personality, he was not able to break the shackles quite early to love his daughter. But Baba's relationship towards a college boy Madhav, who stays with him is totally different. He not only treats him like his son but also showers affection. Saru, herself is surprised and at times envies with her father's behavior. For instance, when she tries to enter into Madhav's room, Baba bluntly says that it belongs to the college boy and asks her to stay in the pooja room. This shows the importance he attributes to the boy. In a way, it could be said that the old man is seeing the dead Dhruva in Madhav. Madhav gives a new lease of life and hope to the hopeless Baba. There are few other instances in the novel to show Baba's warmth for the boy. Saru says,

“The smile he offered Madhav carried pure affection with it.

It gave her a jolt. To her, he had always been a

negative man, incapable of strong feelings. But if

he could smile that way....? (30 DHNT)

The warmth witnessed here defies her statement that he lacks strong feelings. He is capable and the death Dhruv actually put his life out of rails and it is Madhav who has made him somewhat normal.

Thus as a father, Baba was insipid and dull. There could be various reasons as seen in the above mentioned pages. The death of his younger son Dhruv, his wife's dominance and his natural mindset. All these could have moulded him as an unaffectionate father towards Saru, but after years of disinterest, he is suddenly passionate towards a young boy Madhav, who stays with him. Thus Baba may not be seen as a successful character, but is one who has contributed dullness to the novel. Saru's failure to enjoy life should be attributed to his presence throughout the novel. He neither moves away nor closes in. He neither cares if his daughter keeps away nor becomes close with him. He is a man who was born with death. He was a name sake father.

References

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