

Tussle between Free Will and Determinism in Shashi Deshpande's *Dark Holds No Terrors and Moving On*

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Abstract

*Shashi Deshpande, one of India's leading novelists, has in thirty plus years of her writing career, and has through them addressed several issues of contemporary India. She crystallizes the world of human emotions and responses through a fine detailing of her relational world, which makes a human being see that we are entrenched into his situations, not necessarily for a lack of options but also because of his own need to be a part of them. The present paper attempts to analyze Deshpande's detailed depiction of the tussle between two major working agencies Free Will and Determinism in the lives of her characters of the novels *Dark Holds No Terrors and Moving On*. It also attempts to show how the idea of an individual to regard himself as a free and autonomous being appears to be in a constant conflict with the determining forces around him. It also ventures to express. Deshpande's concern does not comprise to the world of woman or man alone but it functions through their connection with each other. The present paper is a study to probe into the various forces of determinism acting in the lives of her characters and thus guiding their thoughts and actions on the one hand while working of various agents of free will showing the human strength, belief and reason on the other. It tries to explore how the novelist carefully portrays the shades of pain, love, anger, hate, revenge and frustration while painting her canvas with the unavoidable scuffle between the freedom of choices and the determining agencies in the lives of her characters.*

Key Words: determinism, free will, feminism, inner conflict, individuality.

Influenced by the western wave of feminism Indian women novelists have created their own world, pattern and concept of feminism suiting the Indian set-up and adhering to the Indian context. Some of the leading contemporary writers like Anita Desai, Shobha De, Bharati Mukherjee, Gita Hariharan, Manju Kapur, Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri have offered a fresh wave on the perspective of feminism by shifting their focus from ‘a woman’s world’ to ‘an individual’s world’ and by exploring the numerous existential questions emerging from this journey. Shashi Deshpande is also one of the contemporary writers whose writing is the consciousness of the conflict between her idea as a human being and the idea that society has of her as a woman. Her objectivity therefore runs through the social and relational nuances of the life she experiences rather than through the ideological vision as she makes it clear “Most of my writing comes out of my intense and long suppressed feelings about what it is to be a woman in our society: it comes out of the experience of the difficulty of playing the different roles conjoined upon me by society, out of the knowledge that I am something more and something different from the sum total of these roles. My writing comes out of my consciousness of the conflict between my idea of myself and the idea that the society has of me as a woman.” (Deshpande, 1985: 35)

This statement clearly echoes the voice of a feminist soul in her but unlike the early feminist authors who depicted the suppression and subjugation of women in ordinary life, she has moved to a step further and focused on the world of well-educated woman of today’s era who has to depend on her male counterparts for the choices and decisions of her life. She is the confident voice of her female protagonists and explores the individual and universal female psyche. All the women in her novels “try to assert themselves as independent individuals through confrontations with the traditional constraints in Indian society.” (Halder, 2005: 11) According to her the statement of emancipation is the freedom and responsibility of choice. She does not have the militant kind of feminism which sees male as the cause of all troubles. In Deshpande’s words “More important than knowing what we are not is to know what we are, what is possible for us.” (Deshpande, 2003: 99)

She extends her deep psychological insight and understanding to explore various human relations. Beyond feministic concerns she has also dealt with the theme of determinism and conflict of choices on a considerable scale in her fictional world. The present paper attempts to analyze Deshpande’s detailed depiction of the tussle between two major working agencies of *Free Will and Determinism* in the lives of her characters of the novels *Dark Holds No Terrors* and *Moving On*. It also attempts to show how the idea of an individual to regard himself as a free and autonomous being appears to be in a constant conflict with the determining forces around him. It is also a venture to express that Deshpande’s concern does not comprise to the world of woman or man alone but it functions

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Determinism and free will are two antagonistic concepts which have gained the attention. It is perhaps the oldest and the most philosophical question whether people have free will to take their decisions and make their choices or their actions are pre – determined as David Hume, the great philosopher observes “...to proceed in this reconciling project with regard to the question of liberty and necessity; the most contentious science; it will not require many words to prove that all mankind have ever agreed in the doctrine of liberty as well as in that of necessity, and the whole dispute...hitherto has been merely verbal.” (Hume, 1963: 95) The same confidence of these philosophers is to also found in their adversaries and detractors in another philosophical tradition quite as strong. In 1943, in the period of existentialism, Jean-Paul-Sartre states “It is strange that the philosophers have been able to argue endlessly about determinism and free will ...I am condemned to exist forever beyond my essence, beyond the causes and the motives of my act. I am condemned to be free ...man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being.” (Honderich, 2005: 3)

Even after so much ink has been spilled on paper about the conflict between free will and determinism no theory has been able to provide a satisfactory answer to the tussle and the debate between determinism and free will has been an important area of concern for sociologists, scientists, philosophers and even for religious thinkers. A great part of literature has also been written dealing with these issues. With a shift in the nuances of Indian Feminist writers and their approaches towards life, the conflict finds ample place in their novels as well. ShashiDeshpande's novels seem to provide staple material for the study of these two prominent forces at work in various forms. As a writer she not only writes about woman and her predicament rather her novels present a social world of many complex relationships. Her concerns are universal as many men and women live together and journey across life in different age groups, classes and gender roles “doubt, anxiety and often a feeling of void of values” (Nath, 2001: 144) push her characters to intense self-examination irrespective of their gender. She tries to delineate the social reality and so to present the world of daughters, wives and mothers she has also presented indirectly the world of fathers, husbands and sons. She has presented beautifully “the relation between men and women and between women themselves.” (Nath, 2001: 145) By looking into women's changing perspectives and their search for bonding within family as a mode of strength she has presented clashes and conflicts at various levels of tradition and modernity, of generation gap as well as conflict

between determinism and choice of will. She has shown the powerful clutches of determinism and free will working not only on her female characters but also her male characters. Her characters male or female, minor or major all are prey to the antagonist concepts and sometimes find them submissive and sometimes struggle to assert their free will against the determining forces.

Her heroines seem to reject rituals that are the vestiges of the past. "Her young heroines rebel against the traditional way of life and patriarchal values." (Nath, 2001: 145) In their reaction to their mother they also discard the meaningless rituals like circumambulating the tulsi plant. As in *Dark Holds No Terrors* Saru refuses to undertake such rituals which are meant to increase the life span of her husband. "Wasn't that what all women prayed to the tulsi for? For a moment The memory was as violent as an assault and angrily she rejected it." (15) The rejection is an indication of her autonomy and her capacity to see her life independent of her mother as well as of the past. The first experience of menstruation is also horrible for Saru and her mother is there to frighten her more with the fact that "I would bleed like this for years and years and years." (62) Her mother does not let her enter the kitchen and puja room. She is forced to sleep on a straw mat and a separate plate is provided to her to make her exclusion complete. She is stirred at the thought that she is considered as polluted and untouchable which she considers "something quite different, much worse." (62) She has the instinct to rebel against the whole process through which a lady has to go, be it a physical, mental or emotional "a kind of shame that engulfed me, making me want to rage, to scream against the fact that put me in the same class as my mother." (62) Her helplessness in becoming a victim of the whole bodily process is declared when she says "if you're a woman, I don't want to be one." (63) Her rage and resentment change into acceptance when during her classes of anatomy and physiology she comes to know that. "Things fell, with a miraculous exactness into place. I was a female, I was born that way that was the way my body had to be, those were the things that had to happen. And that was that." (63)

She accepts her way and lays down herself in front of the determining forces of bodily functions though she hates the whole process and finds it limiting her freedom. In addition to her body there are psychical factors which control Saru's action and behavior. The massive baggage of the guilt of killing her brother kills her filial love and affection. Her guilty conscience turns her hostile and rebellious to her parents. She feels trapped when she is confronted with the problems of what her mother stands for and only way out for her is to seek a new environment where her mother can't exercise her will. In order to achieve her freedom she seeks her career "not just relief but a kind of rebirth" (95) as an alternative to the bondage created by the parental family. She openly shows her first public defiance of the system of the society by choosing her profession. "Freedom at last, she has exulted when she

had left home and joined a medical college.”(95) The negligence of her father, the fatal blow of her mother’s words and the burden of the guilt of her brother Dhurv all combine together to become the great psychological determinants and enforce Saru to leave her parental home to seek space for herself. She tries to assert her free will by openly taking the decision of marrying a low caste person Manohar and replies “I hope so” (96) on being asked about the low caste of Manohar. Her dreams of a happy life with Manohar shatters soon. Her arrival to her parental home after a long span of twenty years though in one way shows her free will by leaving her husband’s home and her children but the memories of her past in her parental home again act as a powerful determinant which throws her again and again into the tumultuous, torturous incidents of past. She feels helpless as she cannot free herself from the memories of her dead mother as well as from the burden of her constant rejection and negligence. Even in exercising her free will Saru feels that she is free but that is only on the superficial level, in the deeper levels she is guided by many determinants. Her decision to study MBBS and to marry Manohar are subconsciously taken by her as a revenge to her mother. Her mother’s hostility creates in Saru a sense of dislike so strongly that she develops a habit of doing everything which her mother opposes. Her mother’s words of disgust, hatred and prejudice enrage Saru to such an extent that she becomes adamant to disobey her mother.

The clash between the determining forces on one hand and conflict of choices on the other hand not only gives new insights into Deshpande’s art of characterization but also gives speed and energy to the plot. The contradictory elements pace together in harmony so effortlessly that the plot moves smoothly. The study of these antithetical elements enable the reader to appreciate the writer’s vision of life as a shift can be observed through the long series of Deshpande’s novels. Her understanding of human life and mind seems to broaden in accordance with time whereas in her earlier novels *That Long Silence* and *Dark Holds No Terrors* both the protagonists Jaya and Saru show the will and resolve to transform their lives, in her later novel like *Moving on* Manjari appears to be a much stronger lady who not only shows the resolution to change but is able to transcend the world of abstract to reach a self-fulfilling world of action. This perspective of a deviation from a stage of indecisiveness and doubt to a stage resolution and strong determination opens up new vistas of mature and broader aspect of writer’s ability. Saru is always in constant rebellion against her mother’s ideas and that of society at large whereas Manjari just moves on in her life irrespective of so many controlling forces such as broken marriage, betrayal, widowhood, responsibility as a single parent.

She grows up in a feminist constraint free environment, having been encouraged by her father to take up the role as a provider. She remembers herself as “running out without buttoning up my dress.” (44) With the image of a provider and protector, the confidence in her

in the initial stage of life gives her courage to deal with the biggest problem of rearing up two children single-handedly. She opposes the things which she doesn't like and expresses her desire for freedom. Initially she is a nice girl who "needed everybody's approval for doing anything and was "was willing to do anything to please others" (69) but she turns into a rebel in the later phase of her life. During the struggle against many controlling agents in her life, she brushes aside the necessity of subordinating herself to social roles and by asserting her free will she moves on from being a girl eager to please to a mature woman who lives by her own rules. "It also reflects how this helps her in maintaining control over her life, though her independence needs to be tempered with a restored faith in relationship." (Singh, 2012: 111)

Her attitude is expounded in her response to the driving instructor who uses brakes on behalf of the trainee "it gave the woman too an illusion of safety, which I thought was misleading; it was dangerous in fact, to have this kind of dual control." (83) She demands the driver to keep away "how would I learn if I didn't have to cope with the risks myself?... he let me manage the car and I learnt to control the car." (84) The same attitude of confidence, independence and assertion of free will filters through the every aspect of her life. If she wants to buy a car she buys it in spite of Raja's advice and warning against wastage of money. If she wants to type, she fumbles her way into learning the computers. If she does not want to sell her ancestral home, she does the same despite being threatened, visited and physically assaulted by mafia gang rather she meets the situation boldly "this is what they want, they are trying to reduce me to this shivering cowardly means mass of fear, I won't be sacred." (167) Thus Manjari appears to be delineated by Deshpande as a bold girl fighting against the controlling agents of society which considers and relegates her as 'the other' by different persons in different manners.

Deshpande brings into focus the psychological and moral conditioning of individuals by social norms through the example of Manjari and her physical requirements. Society acts as a controller of woman's sexuality. Both within and outside marriage she is required to adhere to the code of sexual behavior but Deshpande prepares her protagonists to claim their right over their body and sexuality and pave the route to emancipation. Manjari often longs to feel a man's arm around to wish for a crushing grip. Her immature behavior is exposed when she stamps a kiss on Shyam's forehead announcing her declaration of love. Manjari makes the desires of her body open before all "the confusion had vanished. My body is clear about what it wanted: it wanted Shyam It wanted Shyam's love it wanted his body. (187) After the death of her husband torn among the loyalty to her family her husband's betrayal and untimely demise, burdened with many guilt and disappointments, loaded with the double responsibility of her two children, though she ignores her bodily desires and does not allow her childhood friend Raja enter into her life. She fights against her bodily determinants along

with the societal controlling agencies but even the rigid restriction of the society cannot stop her desires of body and she asserts her free will to quench her bodily desires when physical needs lead her into purely sexual relationship with her tenant Raman. Her defensive arguments are subjected to her own sense of right and wrong. “She even questions the practicality of the supposition that she should have lived the life of a chaste widow after losing her husband at twenty one.” (Singh, 2012: 61)

Jiji’s implicit assent to Raja’s proposal towards the end, her forgiveness for her sister and her parents, her retrieval of the trust she shared with Shyam are all indications of the restoration of faith in relationships and institutions. It is this, which helps her to move on towards participation in life, which might never be conclusively perfect, but is the only way to live. In spite of failures on all sides she doesn’t give in. Like a staunch optimist she still believes in the potentiality that life has to spur us to move on and on. In her own words “The search is doomed to failure. Yes, Baba, you are right, we will never find what we are looking for, and we will never get what we are seeking for in other humans. We will continue to be incomplete ampersands all of us. Yet the search is what it’s all about, don’t you see. Baba, the search is the one thing.” (343)

Deshpande’s novels focus on the conflictual situations where she does not paint a male or female character exclusively rather dawns upon on both as trapped in their own self-images which are inherited from the social role models. It is not necessarily a gender difference but several other dimensions of determining agency and free will work together. The need of an individual to discover his identity by displaying free will and preserve himself as against the on slaughter of romance, marriage and family is an ongoing struggle which is perceptible not only in Saru’s defiance of the patterns of society, Manjari’s rebel against the pattern of her life but also through Manu’s vulnerability in being a victim of the patriarchal system, Badri Narayan’s repent on not paying heed to his wife’s inner needs, Raja’s helplessness in breaking the shell of his male image. Significantly, in her portrayal of male response, men are the objects not the subjects. It seems her women are the main characters who determine the change and the redefinition. It is their lived experience which forms the energy for action and change. They have the charge to decide between their defined roles and the perspectives which feminism has given them, on the other hand men are the agents of structure to be transformed. Deshpande portrays her male characters with the skill of a psychologist as what comes in their lives. Manu in *Dark Holds No Terror* tries to assert his fragmented manhood on Saru by physically torturing her. He finds no means to give way to his inferiority complex and to his wounded ego so he becomes a sadist at night and shows his dominance over his wife by becoming a beast in the bed. “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. Manu doing all beastly act, is in the clutches of many determining forces of society as well as destiny.”(11) As in college, he was among those students “who had an aura of distinction about them” (50) being good in academics and extracurricular activities, he was the secretary of his college literary association and was the very “life and soul”(50) of the dramatic society. Everyone in his college thought that he was going to be a great celebrity at a later stage of his life “He was the man who was to take literary world by storm, the man on the brink of doing so (65) but remains just a lecturer in a third rate college. Manu appears to be a victim of his own mind set, psychological problems, inferiority complex, societal set up and destiny. In spite of being victimized by so many determining agencies he exercises his free will by becoming a rapist. He rapes his own wife in the dark hours of night and derives a feeling of superiority and domination. He becomes normal after his abnormal encroachment on his wife during the night time. In *Moving On* Badri Narayan as a doctor has an enormous faith in perfection and flawlessness of human body but when his wife Vasu dies it becomes really hard for him to accept the “miracle of life” can “end into nothingness.”(112) Guided by his male supremacy he feels unable to accept his wife asserting her free will and her individuality in their relationship.

Deshpande’s use of irony of fate acts as a powerful tool in depicting the human confidence in one’s own power and the working of unknown forces. As a doctor, a professor of anatomy, Badri Narayan takes immense pleasure and pride in his knowledge of human body and believes this remains when all is gone, this remains for centuries for millenniums. “It lasts, it survives, and it carries our stories within it.”(24) But the irony that his wife is afflicted with diabetes and dies a low and painful death. It shocks him and he realizes the limitations of human powers and abilities in the face of comprehensible events and situations.

Deshpande provides an overview through her glance across several generations. Perhaps Deshpande’s clarity on the need for relationships and equal surety on the need to change the paradigms in which they operate, can be explained in the terms of an aspiration for relational autonomy. It appears through the autonomy in relation to the social world, involving both connection to and differentiation from it. It accrues to the idea that “persons are socially embedded and the agents’ identities formed within the contexts of social relationships and shaped by a complex of intersecting social determinants.” (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000: 4) There is a reference to Jiji’s grandfather, the privileged son of an affluent Brahmin family, who chooses to forgo the privileges to live his own life, opting the Gandhian way of life and marrying a harijan girl. For all the practical purposes he is abandoned by his family but through all his ways he shows an open defiance against society and its societal determinism. “His father threatened, his mother wept, the family was in turmoil, but my father remained firm. He walked out on them and in a few days he got married. His father then did

the only thing he could do---he disowned his son ritually he disinherited him legally. There was a complete severance between my father and his family; not even his mother could find any excuse for what he had done. My father too excised his past. He not only gave up his family, he even cast off his family name. (6)

Deshpande seems to have a good understanding of the society which determines one's role and his image of self where man along with woman is also made to perform the authoritative role by the codes of patriarchy. From childhood he is encouraged to assert himself, to make decisions and to live on his own terms. It is the society and its setup which gives him a superior position to enjoy inconsiderable of the fact whether he wants to play the assigned role willingly or not. So just like a woman a man too becomes a victim of the controlling agents of the society.

Deshpande's characters also seem to be trapped in the vicious web of various controlling agencies of fate and destiny. "Vasu's chanting of Sanskrit sholka "Karagre vasate Lakshmi" (143) as a part of her daily prayer is a clear expression of her firm faith in the powers of one's will and action. The idea that gods and goddesses reveal themselves through the palm or 'Karma' of an individual shows the primacy of human powers in deciding their own fate. The chanting of these words by Vasu reflects her faith in herself and the capacity of a person to control her life. Later in her life Manjari also comes to understand these words "we can find glory, goodness and wisdom if we look deep into ourselves." (143) which helps her to believe in her own abilities as a human being and also helps her to rise above the fears and anxieties of life.

Deshpande's fiction tries to dramatize the conflict of the individual with the controlling forces and factors. It is conveyed through the kind of struggle, the courage to shun the restrictive authority of controlling forces and give voice to their determinism which is clearly an evidence of the triumph of will and freedom to choose their own existence overcoming the thwarting realities of the world. Free will has many dimensions. Non-acceptance and rebelliousness against the forces of determinism is one of the dimensions of free will. People with self-confidence rise above the overpowering force that is acting over them and stand up to face that controlling power they rebel against the determining forces and in their rebellion they assert their free will. Through the characters of Saru, Manjari and Badri Narayan she shows this aspect of free will.

The uniqueness of Deshpande's landscape of characters lies in the fact that she paints her minor characters also with the same hue and shade as she draws her major characters. The powerful forces of determinism and free will are equally working on Saru's mother, her grandmother and Manohar. Saru's mother tries to display her free will by dictating Saru according to her authority but in reality she is also a tool in the hands of determining agencies

working in society. Her authority and dictatorship clearly presents her as a female embodiment of male image. She imposes the institution of patriarchy on her daughter and feels herself powerful where on the other hand it can be observed that she is a very submissive kind of lady in her own institution of marriage. Some of the characters tend to submit themselves to the controlling forces. They seem to lack the knowledge and strength required to resist and revolt. For instance Kamala, wife of Jiji father's friend is shown as gentle, smiling, never dissenting woman, absorbed in her children, looking after her husband's comfort though she has accepted her subservient role as allotted to a woman throughout her life but ends up as a shrill overbearing woman, who at some point in her life "has given up coping." (92) Even more perturbing is the picture of Hemi, her daughter. Nobody realizes that she is not a normal child, because as Jiji ironically reflects "did they think that to be soft, docile and silent was the right way for the girl to be." (93) The fact that Hemi grows up into an angry, willful, frightening and self-absorbed woman becomes symbolic of what false role –delineation can do to an individual. In the same family is Raja, Jiji childhood friend, the only son of the family with a mentally retarded sister and a nagging mother. He "escaped home early, leaving as soon as he had graduated on the pretext of wanting to work with a firm of architects to Bangalore, to get away." (19) He finds an excuse to leave and further asserts his individuality by marrying against his parent's wishes. The sense of responsibility ingrained in him as the boy of the family, keeps taking him back to the parents but every time he comes back disillusioned. He asks himself "I wonder why I go" and knows he does so only because "it's a duty he cannot get out from, however little pleasure he gets out of it". (91)

In the wide panorama of fictional world of Deshpande there seems a perpetual clash between the various forces of determinism posing a challenging situations to individual's free will. The question that seems important is whether or not the individual's act has any significance, or does everything find an explanation in the overall concept of fate. Deshpande in *The Stone Woman* observes Sita's rejection of this sense of helplessness when she says "fate I knew the word would come. But I will have nothing to do with it. I cannot believe in it. We cannot escape the consequences of our actions, of our wrong, that way. That is the easy way out. It is not fate that shapes our lives, but our wills, our actions." (Deshpande, 2000: 70) Her different characters have different ways of coping up with the different types of situations. Some people get submerged in the milieu and have no urge of free will like Saru's mother, father, grandmother, Hemi and Hemi's mother. Then there is another set of characters who find their free will and want to revolt against the deterministic situations and want to choose their own destiny but they lack knowledge and strength to do it. Manohar, Vasu and Mohan are among them. Then there are numerous instances found in

where a person has enough ability and strength to assert his free will Manjari, Saru, Badrinarayan and Raja are among them.

Through the depiction of free will in her fictional world she has shown her belief in human dignity and reason. Her characters seem to emerge out of the crisis of their personal lives on the strength of their free will and resolve not to yield in front of determinants working over them. The study of Deshpande's novels in the light of these two concepts proves to be interesting as well as illuminating. It showcases that she does not seem to be either wholly deterministic in her views nor does she fully espouse the concept of free will rather she seems to take an in-between path and tends to suggest though a human being's life is in constantly under deterministic controls yet he has some powers to alter it. The study of her novels in the light of these two forces through the analysis of various characters and their lives helps to understand Deshpande's vision of life. It is not an endeavor to solve the clash between these two forces rather it aims to provide a better understanding of the author's mind and thoughts by providing useful insights into her art of characterization and dramatic structure of her novels which gives a holistic view of Deshpande as a novelist.

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