

Appropriation of Difficult memory and Emancipation in Shashi Deshpande's Dark Holds no Terror

Rajlakshmi Dutta

Assistant Professor, Department of English, B.H College, Howly.

Abstract. In Shashi Deshpande's novel, *Dark Holds No Terror* the traumatic memories of childhood haunts Saru, a reputed doctor, to the extent that she fails to come to terms with her present life. Her present life is devastated not only because of the disturbingly past memories with her late mother, which makes her feel 'abandoned', but also because she could perceive the fissures in her marriage. Subject to domestic violence in spite of her strong position in society, she realises that she could counter her present lapses only if she could counter, interrogate and resist the difficult memories of her past, i.e.; 'return to' those memories and grasp them to her comprehension. The paper would make an attempt to analyse how Saru articulates the narratives of her traumatic past memories to counter and resist oppression in all aspects of her life and free herself from the shackles of those traumatic memories. Her narrative reflects the culturally silenced stories, memories and pain of almost every woman, and counter memory gives voice to what has been traditionally silenced. Thus, the paper would traverse this inward journey of Saru from 'return of' difficult memories to 'return to' difficult memories and pave a new way to women's narrative, memories and identities.

Key words: memory, counter-narrative, resistance, 'return to', 'return of'.

Introduction

"I'm working on my own life story. I don't mean I'm putting it together; no, I'm taking it apart. It's mostly a question of editing" (Margaret Atwood, *The Tent*, 4)

The act of remembering or re-collecting assembles, connects and brings together events of past memories, "in order to move forward and transform disabling fictions to enabling fictions, altering our relation to present and future" (Greene, 1991, p.297). This perspective of memory reflects upon the feminist use of memory as a revisionist outlook to understand and analyse how the past can be controlled through memories. Continuous re-telling and re-visiting of stories of past via memory, by repeating the narrative with variations and articulation of memory from one's present position, gives the person authority and control over understanding of one's own life events. By privileging certain repressed accounts of life, or by the act of re-membering or re-telling, (as in case of the protagonist Saru, in the novel *The Dark Holds No Terror*) memories have the capacity to continually re-shape, re-interpret and re-invent the past and render meaning to present crisis of life. Such narratives of personal memory contain power of resistance against traumatisation by events of the past. The idea is to re-narrate those events, bring them to our comprehension and come to terms with the complexities of past. Feminist studies emphasises the recovery of women's lost contributions to the discourse of history and knowledge by appropriating the very act of remembering as a political action to counter the hegemonic narratives which control women's life. Active use of the device of memory by bringing to mind the repressed areas of one's experience and self is to re-assemble our 'lost past and lost parts of ourselves' (Greene, 1991, p. 300). In the words of Alice Walker it is to go back and search for our mothers, re-visit the fragmented memories with fissures and lapses to build an

integrated subjective identity. The individual journey through memory, is a re-description of reality, a new story, which would interrogate the ways “the meanings and values of the world have been constructed and how therefore, they can be challenged or changed” (Waugh cited in Greene, 1991, p.293).

Women’s knowledge of the self is very much determined by socio-cultural contexts and its conditioning effects. Individual memories which are accounts of personal experiences, throws light on the determining structures which shape such memories. As the society itself is phallocentric, it becomes difficult for the subject to relate to the repressed or silenced narratives and hence begins traumatisation of past events. Narratives of memory shape our collective identities, and therefore it becomes vital that we re-collect or re-tell the events of past, by re-visiting them from new dimensions in order to critique and analyse the traditionally silenced or oppressed voices, thereby forming a narrative of self which can control, subvert, counter and resist the otherwise dominant narratives. Memories with lived experience have the capacity to change or adapt with changing times, and this demonstrates the mutability power of memory to affect both present and future, just as present and future can impact memories of past.

Discussion

When the novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* (TDHNT) opens, we encounter the word ‘memory’ in the very first chapter itself, where the protagonist Sarita, a doctor by profession readily tries to evade the memory of her mother, when she returns home to her father after a long period of time. “For a moment she saw her mother standing in front of tulsi, eyes closed, hands folded, lips moving. The memory was as violent as an assault and angrily she rejected it” (TDHNT, 15). Instantly, the reader becomes aware of the traumatic and bitter experiences associated with her mother. Further, we see how every time she is haunted by the bitter experiences of her childhood, but every time she tries to conceal them by deviating her interest to something else. In the words of Sidone Smith, memory is “a story, and thus a discourse on, original experience” and that it couldn’t be “articulated outside the structures of language and story-telling” (45). In case of Saru, we see that initially she is not able to articulate her experiences and narrate them to anybody close to her, like her husband Manohar. She is only disturbed by recurrent dreams and painful return of memories of past:

There was the feeling of small hard knees and elbows prodding me, a small voice saying *Sarutai, Sarutai.*

Oh, go away. I’m sleeping.

Sarutai.

Go away. Don’t trouble me. And don’t call me Sarutai.

But Sarutai, I’m so scared. It’s so dark. Can I stay here?

No you can’t. Go away.

All right, then.

And turning large reproachful eyes on me, he turned away. No, he swam away from me, for we were in some reason, in the water..... and now it was I who was scared... I was fighting against the cloying sticky heaviness that was pulling me down, choking me, drowning me. And Dhruv was swiftly silently going away from me.

And I woke up.

You killed your brother.

I didn’t. Truly I didn’t. It was an accident. I loved him, my little brother. I tried to save him. Truly I tried. But I couldn’t. And I ran away. Yes, I ran away, I admit that. But I didn’t kill him.

How do you know you didn’t kill him? How do you know?

... and I could do nothing with the sorrow but bear it. It was mine and mine alone. I could share it with no one.

... but it returned to me a few days after I got married. I woke up sobbing.... I could not tell him of my dream. I could not speak to him of Dhurv. I could speak to no one of Dhurv. 'I dreamt that you had rejected me,' I lied. (145-46, TDHNT)

Thus, through this dream it is evident that Saru has only hidden her fears, till she comes back to her father after traumatic experiences in her married life. She fails to articulate her fears and pain, hides it beneath her professional life and carries the trauma along with her. 'Return of'ⁱ traumatising memory haunts her and she feels familiar fear of 'abandonment' and rejection; and fails to recount them by re-visiting them. This is the very reason she avoids the memory of her mother in the very first instance.

Saru is subject to all kinds of gender discrimination at home. She was not allowed to go out to play as she would get darker. This worried her mother as she felt that it would pose problems in her marriage. The bitter remarks are known to us, the readers, via Saru's dreams. The trauma of psychological exploitation due to gender biasness in various instances in Saru's life keep visiting Saru's present life too, and we see an internalisation of such fears and rebukes. Hence, her fears of being rejected, abandoned or disinherited. Saru's case turns out to be more crucial and difficult after the accidental death of her brother Dhruv. Her relation with her mother gets ruined who blames her for everything: "...Why didn't you die? Why are you alive and he dead?" (34-35, TDHNT). These bitter words painfully traumatised Saru at all aspects of her life. We as readers, however, get to know it from Saru's perspective and memories. Though, later, we get a different version of the situation from her father. This also depicts that Saru as an individual is very selective regarding her memory of her mother, that she remembers only these words of her mother. She fails to remember, recollect and re-narrate the story from a different perspective, and in the process accuses herself guilty. Capacity of self-negotiation, interrogation and resistive power to dominant structures of society seems to be lacking in Saru initially, mostly due to her inability to recount her past experiences. And this cripples her present life too. She is a victim of marital rape and sexual violence in the hands of her husband, and yet she is not able to speak up for herself, in spite of her educational qualification and profession. This throws light on the idea that economic independence does not guarantee holistic independent liberty, and this very fact unconsciously draws her closer to her mother who lived her life in the confinements of patriarchy. She hesitates to associate herself with her mother, and that her daughter resembles to her mother even disturbs her. A forceful repression of difficult memories pervades her life, and hence there is a 'return of' these traumatic experiences, shattering her life to bits. Moreover, words like, "you will never be good looking, you are too dark for that", as spoken by mother, recurs in her memory and cripples her inner self with sense of inferiority and latent fear of rejection. Traumatic memories made her internalise the bitter comments as true facts, and she felt that the good relationship of adulthood could atone for the bad relationship of her past. Hence, her marriage with Manohar, as a challenge to her unforgiving, pernicious mother. However, this relationship fails too, when her husband turns out to be a sadist out of envy.

Circumventing all the terrible memories at her maternal place, she 'returns to' her father after a gap of fifteen long years, only to confront all those disturbing memories once and for all. We perceive the first instance of step towards self-autonomy, when she avoids domestic abuse by deciding to encounter her past by shifting from her comfort zone—which gives her only temporary solace from difficult memories—her home with Manohar. "I can't, I won't endure this anymore. I would rather die, I can't go on" (98, TDHNT). This initiates her journey towards interrogation of the repressed memory of traumatic past, resistance to the haunting and controlling experiences of past, reconcile with them and attain control over her present as well as future. It would now be re-visiting the past, from an alternative perspective and articulate the narrative her traumatic memories in manner that would make her feel emancipated. It is in this context, that I would like to quote James Olney: "Memory enables and vitalises narrative; in return narrative provides form for memory, supplements it, and sometimes displaces it" (417)

Saru structures her understanding of her memory by communicating and negotiating with her otherwise introvert father, and this process of self-narration of her past events helps her to chart out the gaps and fissures of her past, 'edit' them and develop a better understanding of herself, her life

and her mother too. Saru's re-narration and edition of her story is very crucial, for it has to take place in the context of personal recollection, and a structured socio-historical background, where patriarchy is the dominant ideology. Every time Saru narrates her story, it is repetition with a variation. She repeats different aspects of her repressed memory from different perspectives each time, and gradually comes to term with her difficult past. Here repetition is not a direct replica of the events stored in memory, but infusion and incorporation of one's own subjective feelings, thereby adding a narrative value to it. Now when the same story is retold with variation each time, Saru is able to 'return to'ⁱⁱ her past, and see a new way of looking at her life events. Gradually, we see that she gains autonomy over her past as well as present. She also comes to a realisation, that her mother cursed her because she too had lost her child. Brought up in a strict patriarchal society, it was too difficult for her mother to bear the loss of a son. This makes her mother 'hysteric', with a daughter left, whom she left responsible for the loss. It is human nature, not to take certain unfortunate and inevitable twists in fate when they come to us as a part of our existential crisis, but to put the blame on someone else, and make the person accountable for it. Saru's ignorant mother did the same thing and very indifferently put the blame on her daughter—the trauma of which she carried her entire life, till this phase of fresh negotiations.

'Sometimes I think you took your mother seriously and blamed yourself for Dhurv's death. You know she was not herself when she said that. She was...' he groped for the right word, '....hysterical. But I thought you began to believe it yourself.'

'[...] An old story? And every night he comes and accuses me. Yes, Dhurv. He looks at me as if I killed him. Why are you all against me? Why do you all accuse me of something I never did?' (181, TDHNT)

This session of negotiations and interrogation continues with her father for a longer period, where like a victim, 'a wronged child', Saru relates her unpleasant feelings, disturbing memories and absurd symbols of repressed thought, via process of recalling the incident of Dhurv's death, narrating it and thus transforming her trauma into words of serious contemplation. Narration and the very act of translation of her traumatic memories into language gives her a sense of control over herself gradually. By putting her memory into a form of counter-narrative, she attempts to resist all those aspects of life which have always haunted her. Of course, it is difficult to come out of memories of traumatic experiences, as they 'rush on her with a savage force' (193), but the process of integration of the bits of memories traverses her towards a healing process. These memories of trauma, remain in bits and pieces, and they cannot be incorporated to our narratives of life very easily. It is necessary that the trauma victim understands the experiences themselves from their point of in order to come terms with it, rather than putting the blame on self. By translating the fragments of past memories, and by connecting the fissures to an integrated narrative, it is possible that the victim can counter and resist the past traumatic experiences. The past becomes manageable, " by linguistically encoding information and emotional responses associated with trauma, the voluntary control of linguistic function can be brought to bear to achieve the regulation of previously uncontrollable feelings and memories" (163), as explained by researchers John H. Krystal, Stephen M. Southwick, and Dennis S. Charney.

What Saru did, was re-telling her story and narrate her traumatic memory. This act of narration not only gives the victim an opportunity to resist the controlling past but also overcome present oppression, as the process would instil in her a sense of self-autonomy. Translation of her memory into narration in form of dialogues and anecdotes with her father, helped Saru to understand her life from a new perspective and revise her knowledge of the self. Hence, the fear of feeling abandoned and disinherited stops to engulf her. Just as history is (re)constructed from the present platform by intricate power of narrativity, to serve various purposes of our contemporary times, memory too could be re-constructed to appropriate the distorted aspects of past and bring autonomy over life. In this context, Mark Freeman remarks, "only when memories are appropriated into the fabric of the self—which is to say, when one commences to rewrite the self by incorporating one's memories within the context of a plausible narrative order" that there could be a scope of "psychic healing" (171). This leads to a self-transformation, where the victim can recognise himself or herself not as a victim but

as a survivor. Saru's ability to recognise her sufferings and narrate the un-relatable truths, would enable her to overcome and counter the oppressive relation with her sadist husband. Interchange of dialogues and in-depth negotiation with herself and her father paves her way for therapeutic healing. However, she fails to grapple with the fact that her mother died with talking about her or asking for her and this thwarts her process of healing.

After a series of self-explanation, deep contemplation over the past, followed by repeated narration of the events, but with variations, Saru enquires regarding another relevant trauma: 'Did she say nothing about me when.... Before dying'

'Nothing. She died silently.'(194)

The above aggravates her situation, as her mother after inflicting all kinds of pain in her, died silently, at peace. However, her retaliation was pacified when her father like her therapeutic healer explained that Saru's mother died silently during the night. Her mother, at the end accepted her death and reconciled to her fate, her inevitable death, and hence she was calm when she died. In her father's opinion, Saru's mother even justified for her irritable nature, saying that as she and her sisters were bought up in their grandfather's house. She told "we always had to remember we didn't really belong", and that they were only "tolerated". This depicts how even the mother had to go through painful past events and resign to her fate helplessly. Saru was not able to connect with this universal pain of all women, in some aspect or the other, and that they almost share a solidarity in their silent, fragile and fragmented histories of pain and discrimination. Saru's ability to relate her trauma and painful memories now, to that of her mother, gave her a stronger edge and control over her own life.

Our mothers and grandmothers[...] waited for a day when unknown thing that was in them would be made known; but guessed, somehow in their darkness, that on that day of revelation they would be long dead.[...] For these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not saints, but Artists; driven to numb and bleeding madness by springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. (Walker, 1972: 402)

Saru's mother, towards the end of her life would only prefer to hear the mythical episode of Duryodhona in the battlefield. The episode reminded her mother that finally at the end we are all alone. Each time, we as readers, notice repetition with variance, and there is 'return to' those traumatic experiences by Saru to counter them, from novel perspective each time. Self-therapy initiated by her father, gave her the opportunity helped her articulate narrative pivotal to life issues.

Moreover, healing of an individual from traumatic memories, is possible when there is sense of belongingness to the family, along with inclusion and cooperation from other members of the family. According to Sue Campbell, it is very important to look through the lens of family history, contextual situation and cultural backdrop to come to terms with experience of trauma, especially in case of women. "How family members associate in their attempts to form, maintain, enforce and transmit a shared understanding of past may tell us much about women's experience in the family relevant to understanding such abuse" (191). Saru, by integrating her trauma to the larger narratives of life, by re-connecting to her mother, and by familiarising herself to the other side of her late mother, comprehends her own traumas. She now begins to feel connected to her roots, rather than suffering from a guilt and abandonment. Repetition of Saru's own story many times from different angles thus gives her control over the end, the meaning she could arrive at in her present and future life. This also indicates that Saru has a choice over variegated aspects of her memory, and how she chooses to narrate or re-tell it, determines her autonomy over her life. In this context, I would like to quote Peter Brook, from his essay *Freud's Masterplot* :

If repetition is mastery, movement from the passive to the active; and if mastery is an assertion of control over what man must in fact submit to—choice, we might say, of an imposed end—we have already a suggestive comment on the grammar of plot, where repetition, taking us back again over the same ground, could have to do with the choice of ends.

Re-accounting and re-visiting the past, and articulating it by a counter narrative, enables Saru to encounter the difficult relationship with her husband. She shares about her bitter experiences with

Manohar to her father, though she fails to find voice to narrate her experience of oppression and abuse in marriage. However, on the insistence of her father she articulates her trauma, by translating it to a narrative of oppression from her recent memory. This time too, she confronts her abuse by repeating her story, to herself and her father. As she narrates, she journeys from surrendering to her fate to confrontation. Then, a poignant question is forced on her by her father, "Have you never asked him? Haven't you asked him why he does it?" (201). Manohar exploited and abused her again and again, but she failed to speak up for her cause. After, narrating her trauma, father makes her ponder over the reason of her silence and resignation to exploitation. Her father reminded her that, he decided to help her pursue medical, against the wishes of her mother, because she made up her mind. "You (Saru) knew what you wanted to do" (204). But now if she fails to confront her husband and resist victimisation, it is again due to her latent fear of rejection and isolation. "Don't turn your back on things again. Turn around and look at him. Meet him" (216). Saru's father wants that she questions her husband regarding his abuse, and if things do not go well, she can avail other options. But turning back on the events and avoiding the trauma by repressing it would only worsen her life. Finally her fear is exposed. "I told you once Saru... your mother is dead. So is your brother. Can't you let the dead go. [...] I told you ... they're dead. They can do nothing. Why do you torture yourself with others? *Are you not sufficient for yourself? It's your life, isn't it* (emphasis added)?" (217, TDHNT). This very situation brings her to serious contemplation. The whole incidents of her traumatic past are repeated again, but now with an assertion, that Saru should let go her fear of rejection which she had internalised long back. She is brought to the realisation that we must be sufficient for ourselves as our happiness depends on our state of mind. She further realises that amidst the existential crisis, it is our service to mankind, our work for pleasure, which could liberate us from our pains and anxiety. The past holds no constraints on her, as she traverses a journey of 'carrying the hell within her' to realisation that 'terrors are with us', and that we can control the fears within us. "And, yes Baba, if Manu comes, tell him to wait. I'll be back as soon as I can... She hurried out of the house. The gate swung behind her with its usual protesting squeak. And now, there were no thoughts in her, except those of the child she was going to help" (221).

Conclusion

It is evident from the above discussion that articulation of repressed traumatic memories of past to counter narrative, helps the subject to come to terms with the disturbed past and resist the control of troubled past over the present and future. Counter narratives, shaped by re-visiting and editing the fragmented memories, therefore possess the power to subvert the dominant discourse which control our lives. These counter narratives plays a vital role especially in case of women, whose histories and past are silenced and subdued by power structures of patriarchal control. The personal narratives of recollections are "potent determiners of how we view ourselves and what we do" (Schacter, *Searching*, p.308). As these narratives of memory play a crucial role in shaping our collective identities, it is very important that we understand how they formed and re-formed, specially of those who are oppressed or traumatised. And, it is from this perspective that we can associate the counter narratives of memory to the question of women emancipation. The counter narrative of Saru shows us how we can analyse our past in order to shape and re-shape our present. The fact that Saru gains control over her past, enables her to resist oppression in her present too.

Thus, the use of the concept of memory by women writers writing either about other women characters, or their memoirs or autobiographical account, depicts how the tool of memory could be engaged as a theory to counter, interrogate and subvert the dominant narratives which control women's lives. Narration of memories from the different perspectives, specially from the perspective of women throws light on the contradictions in dominant narratives, and that voice is not equally given to all the speakers. Subjective experiences of women are not universal, and they speak in different voices. They are not fixed but fluid. However, all kinds of narratives of memory could be perceived as powerful social and historical documents. The micro-histories and accounts have archival value, as they highlight the deeply embedded hegemonic structures of social life, mostly based on oppression, domination and subjugation. Subjectivity of women that is produced in terms of subjugation and subjection is re-counted in the anecdotes of recollections of their memories. Narrating those anecdotes, editing them and joining the fragments just as in case of Saru in TDHNT,

or by penning them down as memoirs gives the power of self-assertion and scope to critique patriarchy.

Moreover, we see that narratives of memory also helps to reconstruct erased female identity, and retrieve the same from their silenced histories. As the accounts counter and resist hegemonic structures, the subjective stories become site of struggle for female voice and identity. Toni Morrison calls this aspect ‘rememory’ⁱⁱⁱ—the conscious act of remembering and validating specific traumatic historical or subjective memory, which was otherwise consciously forgotten or ‘disremembered’. It is returning to memories again and again—to explore the repressed and unpack the personal hauntings. The speaking subjects like Saru, with ‘rememory’ connect their repressed stories to shared history of oppression of women and redeem themselves via the new story.

References

1. Atwood, Margaret (2006). *The Tent*. New York: Anchor.
2. Brook, Peter(1977). Freud's Materplot. *Yale French Studies no. 55/56. Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise*,(pp. 280-300). Yale University Press. Retrieved 30 April, 2021 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930440>
3. Campbell, Sue. (2003). Relational Remembering: Rethinking the Memory Wars. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
4. Despande, Shashi.(1990). *The Dark Holds No Terror*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
5. Greene, Gayle (1991). Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory. *Signs*, 16(2) 290-321. The University of Chicago Press. Retrieved 02 May, 2021 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174512>
6. Krystal, John H., Stephen M. Southwick, and Dennis S. Charney (1995). Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.: Psychological Mechanisms of Traumatic Remembrance. In Daniel L. Schacter (Ed.), *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past*. (pp.150-72). Cambridge: Havard UP.
7. Morrison, Toni (2004). *Beloved*. New York: Vintage Books.
8. Olney, James (1998). *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
9. Schacter, Daniel L. (1996) *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past*. New York: Harper Collins.
10. Smith, Sidone (1987). *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Representation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
11. Walker, Alice (1972). In Search of Our Mothers' Garden. In Angelyn Mitchell (Ed.), *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (pp.401-409) Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Endnotes

ⁱ Peter Brooks in his essay *Freud's Masterplot* says; “repetition is return in the text” (288). This return, can either be ‘return to’ or return of’. ‘return of’ is when ‘repressed’ memories come back, while ‘return to’ is the subject going to the past willingly to fulfil a particular purpose.

ⁱⁱ See Peter Brook's *Freud's Masterplot*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Toni Morrison explores the concept of Rememory in *Beloved*