

## **FEMINIST CONCERN IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Women are an integral part of human civilization. They constitute about half of the world's population but their share in all areas has been totally disproportionate to their numerical strength. For centuries, they have been denied full justice – social, economic, political and constitutional. They have been defined as marginalized creatures and viewed as appendages to men. Their status largely depends on the simple fact that they are the bearer of children whose care is their responsibility; thus their sphere is usually restricted to their familial role. In older times the Indian women accepted their roles silently without confronting the reality and without the concept of struggle in mind. If they suffered they merely attributed it to "fate" or "destiny"*

*Adhering to the idea of Shashi Deshpande that her novels are basically about human relationships, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) portrays the protagonist Sarita in relationship to her parents, to her younger brother, to her husband and her children. Hungry for love and affection, the initial years of her married life are like heaven on earth. But gradually it dawns upon her that her freedom was being curtailed.*

*The role of a wife in the present times is nothing less than walking on the razor's edge. Realizing this bitter truth, it was difficult for Sarita, the "New Woman" to accept her plight as the onslaught of "fate". She had to make amends and compromise with life and was compelled to give ironic advice to the future wives.*

**Key Words:** *Women life, identity, Disharmony, Fate, marginalization.*

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Although women are an integral part of human civilization and constitute about half of the world's population but one fact remains common to almost all societies, that, woman has never been considered equal to man and has been treated like a beast of burden and an object of pleasure. Man has always looked down upon her as the weaker sex, as his property, servile to him.

But with the rise of feminism, the ground beneath women's feet has become larger. An increasing awareness of injustice done to them slowly made women raise their voice against inequality and oppression and in the twentieth century this female consciousness against male domination led to the birth of Women's Liberation Movement which is a serious reform movement aiming at an upliftment of women in society.

Literature being the mirror of the society does not remain unaffected but explores the "woman's questions" extensively and vociferously. In feminist literature woman's experience becomes the central concern. This type of literature seeks to demythologize the myth that man is the universal representative of humanity, and woman is the unnamed and the invisible. Hence, there is urgent need for women writers to write their own literature which provides centrality to woman in every way – thematically, structurally and stylistically.

The writings of Shashi Deshpande, nine novels, six collections of short stories, four books for children and a screen play prove that she is one of the most prolific women writers in English in contemporary India. Recipient of string of literary awards including the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990 for her novel *That Long Silence*, her works have been translated into a number of languages: German, Russian, Dutch and Danish. Nevertheless, she prefers to remain an invisible writer not wishing to draw much attention, perhaps the reason being that as a writer Shashi Deshpande is rooted in reality.

Almost all her novels deal with a crisis in the life of the protagonist. So to say, her work is women-oriented, yet it would be unjust to brand her as a feminist for there is nothing "doctrinaire" about her writings.

Generally the heroine in the novels of Shashi Deshpande is the narrator while the author employs a sort of stream-of-consciousness technique making the narrative move back and forth in time, thus enabling the narrator to describe events with the benefit of hindsight. The novelist uses alternating first person/third person voice to present a continuous interplay and overlap. This device occurs in all her novels. Her characters have strong psychological dimensions. She uses interior monologue, flashbacks into the past and dreams to bring out the inherent fear, frustration, anguish and suppressed desires lying in the inner recesses of the mind of the characters. All Deshpande's protagonists are extremely intelligent, introspective and hypersensitive

women who embark on a quest for identity and the true meaning of life. In fact her fictional forte happens to be the exploration of the psyche of her women characters of all age groups.

Adhering to her idea that her novels are basically about human relationships, Shashi Deshpande in her first novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) portrays the protagonist Sarita in relationship to her parents, to her younger brother, to her husband and her children. The novel is a brilliant narration of the writer's distinctive feminism. The novelist renders a clinical analysis of the psyche of the heroine, her trial and tribulations, her chequered experiences of life vis-à-vis social forces. The novelist reveals an existential perspective in the novel. She sought to emphasize on the nexus between social institutions and individual development. She categorically stresses that the institutions of family, marriage, education are far from perfect. They are arbitrarily designed by the male-dominated society as an instrument for the maintenance of the masculine hegemony through the oppression, exploitation and marginalization of women. She was well educated, well informed competent doctor who had married Manohar (Manu), an aspiring poet belonging to a lower caste. It was a runaway marriage leading to a strained relationship with her parents. However, when she gets the news of her mother's death she goes to visit her father. This occasion gives her an excuse to get away from Manu for a while and also to think about her past. Sarita does not have pleasant memories of her childhood recollecting the she was a neglected child more so because she was a girl. She often remembered to show that her younger brother Dhruva was pampered because he was a male child. Unfortunately, when she was twelve years old, Dhruva got drowned in a pond and died; Saru was blamed for this. Her mother's words haunted her throughout life:

You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive when he is dead? (p.191).

Sarita resented the discriminatory treatment meted out to her by her orthodox mother. Time and again her mother, Kamala, referred to her as a burden and a responsibility. Kamala often reminded her that she was dark and ugly to look at. Sarita discovers that her mother had developed this attitude because her childhood had been traumatic. Her father became a Sanyasi and deserted his wife and two daughters who naturally were a burden for the mother. Sarita was determined to escape the claustrophobic atmosphere of home. She takes a vow:

I'll show her (mother). I'll make her realize. (p.60)

It is this intention which guides her to join a medical college and later to marry Manu.

Sarita's profound sense of the failure of marriage in society is what the novelist considers responsible for the sad plight of women. Marriage is no longer a sacrament. It is a convenient arrangement to the disadvantage of woman. Marriage traps woman like animals. The novelist portrays the woman's pain lot vividly.

For want of mutual sharing of love in marriage, happiness remains a mirage-like illusion for both the partners. Their lives turn out to be only an appearance without any reality within. Though she became a self-respecting lady doctor, yet she was always demeaned by her husband. She came to experience the communication gap, the lack of

perfect understanding and respect between partners which make the matrimony lopsided, uneven and even unsuccessful. The novelist illustrates it poignantly:

a + b they told us in mathematics is equal to b + a. But here a + b was not, definitely not equal to b + a. it became a monstrously unbalanced equation, lopsided, unequal, impossible. (p. 42).

Hungry for love and affection, the initial years of her married life are like heaven on earth. But gradually she started feeling that her freedom was being curtailed. Her success as a doctor and her economic independence shatters the peace at home. She observes that Manu asserts his masculinity and male dominance by forcibly having sexual relationship with her each night. It leaves her a terrified and humiliated woman.

Sarita's strong determination also suffers a setback. Now onwards she is a woman fragmented, lonely, rootless, alienated, over powered by anger, despair and a sense of helplessness. Sarita felt irritated and could not help revolting. Boredom of household preoccupations made her life an irony of burdensome existence. She thought that "revolting against the pattern of living in which to live a cup unwashed even for a minute had been a crime. She pondered on getting a divorce but the thought of her two children prevented her from doing so. She had realized that they were quite baffled and were turning hostile towards her.

Sarita started realizing that in the male – dominated society a woman cannot have life of her own. A woman has to surrender herself to "a superior, superhuman male". In fact she epitomized the said plight of the entire women kind that they cannot dream even beyond the male, the husband. They dream but the dream is limited only to the domains of the male-world. She feels: After that day, he was the figure I fantasized about, the person round whom I wove my foolish dreams. No, not dreams' just one dream really. Always the age old feminine dream of a superior conquering male. (p. 53).

Through Saru the novelist portrays the irremediable plight of women / wives in the patriarchal society. He is pained to notice ways of subordinating women by male members of society. Economic deprivation and rape are the main instruments employed to curb the spontaneous growth of a woman. The role of a wife in the present times is nothing less than walking on the razor's edge. Realizing this bitter truth, Saru was compelled to give ironic advice to the future wives:

A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he's an MA, you should be a BA. If he's 5'4" tall you shouldn't be more than 5'3" tall. If he's earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety nine rupees. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage. Don't ever try to reverse the doctor-nurse, executive-secretary, principal teacher role. It can be traumatic disastrous. (p. 137).

Sarita thinks that women have been victims of the masculine society from times immemorial. Alluding to Shakuntala, the heroine of Kalidasa, she shows that the male-dominated society has been unfeeling to women for ancient times. Saru affirms that in the male-dominated society, woman has been on the margin and periphery:

I'm saying is that his is a typical man's view of life—the man at the centre, the woman always on the periphery.

'How do you mean?' someone asked. 'Well, look at the way he made the women always subordinate to the men.' 'But that's how it was, wasn't it?'

'But it's not just their roles. It's the way he made the woman's personality merge into the stronger colours of a man's personality. Look at Hamlet, Lear, Othello. And look at Ophelia, Cordelia, Desdemona. Poor, feeble shadows. And when you come to a conflict or a climax, the woman recedes into the background. Just look at the way he disposed of Laxy Macbeth. And how splendidly she starts off, really! But so much positiveness, so much action is too much for the poor female and so she bows out. (p. 156).

Sarita revolts like a rebel against the societal myths which arbitrarily discriminate among human beings and divide them into man and woman. She seems to agree to the observation of Simone de Beauvoir about the myth of woman:

Few myths have been more advantageous

To the ruling caste than the myth of woman:

It justifies all privileges and even authorizes their abuse.

Men need not bother themselves with alleviating the pains and the burdens that physiologically are women's lot, since these are 'intended by nature', men use as a pretext for increasing the misery of the feminine. Lot still further, so instance by refusing to grant to woman any right to sexual pleasure by making her work like a beast of burden. (p.285).

Sarita always protested against the sex-role socialization. She felt it from the core of her heart that the love of a man for a woman is superficial, ostentatious and selfish. She said:

And still, for long the rear was there' the secret fear that, behind each loving word, behind each kiss, lay the enemy, the snake, the monster of rejection. Some time, some day, I thought the truth will be out and I will know I was never loved. (p. 66).

Trapped by her own guilty feelings, she felt inferior being born a woman as her mother put it and recalled how she felt guilty of Dhruva's death by drowning for which her mother blamed her repeatedly. She was accused of marrying Manu, a low class man, of running away from home, of abandoning her parents. The death of her mother also awakens the guilty conscience within her as she had defied her mother all along while at the same time after the death of her mother she was pained to witness the loneliness of her father. Sarita was also guilty of pursuing her desire to become a physician which was against the wishes of her parents. Ultimately she feels guilty of neglecting her children, of giving them a traumatic, unhappy childhood.



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When Sarita returns to her father's house after the death of her mother she begins to view things in a new light. Away from her family the wounds inflicted upon her begin to heal. The epigraph to the novel taken from The Dhammapada becomes meaningful:

You are your own refuge;

There is no other refuge.

This refuge is hard to achieve.

The words "you are your own refuge" reverberate in her mind. It is obvious she has to heal herself. All of a sudden she experiences great joy for she discovers her true self, her real identity. Her quest is complete; she knows that she has been

.....the guilty sister, the undutiful daughter, the unloving wife. (p. 220)

Now she relied on herself, her independent life. She now decided to celebrate her own life: though her husband tried to reach her heart, yet it seemed impossible for possessive male-mind to give and receive love in equal measure.

The entire novel attempts to unfold the arduous odyssey of the protagonist who is in search of shelter from her various nightmarish experiences realizing eventually that she does not have to flee from the terrors of life but must turn inwards for refuge. She readily accepts the truth:

We come into this world alone and go out of it alone, the period between is short. All those ties we cherish as eternal and long-lasting are more ephemeral than a dew drop. (p. 208)

As times change a woman's role becomes more significant for it is the woman who maintains the relationships within the family keeping in mind the human values of understanding and trust. Man and woman make a complete whole and so with renewed confidence Sarita is ready to go back to Manu and shed the darkness that had terrorized her for so long.

She is still hopeful of possibilities. A woman and a man have to believe in each other to live. The novelist describes the optimistic, the affirmative aspect of women's psyche in the end of the novel:

All right, so I'm alone, but so's everyone else. Human beings-they're going to fail you. But because there are just us, because there's no one else, we have to go on trying. If we can't believe in ourselves, we're sunk. (p. 220).

Sarita's assertion proves that she has developed trust in herself. She had initially told her father not to open the door if Manu comes but now she has a different request:

"And oh yes, Baba, if Manu comes, tell him to wait. I'll be back as soon as I can."

These positive statements smack of assertion of will, confidence and trust in her to confront reality. Sarita recalls how in older times the Indian women accepted their roles silently without confronting the reality, accepted their roles silently without the

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concept of struggle in mind. If they suffered they merely attributed it to "fate" or "destiny". For Sarita, the "New Woman" it was difficult to accept her plight as the onslaught of "fate". She had to make amends and compromise with life.

Deshpande's writings are really the outcome of her consciousness of the conflict between the idea of herself as a human being and the idea that society frames of her as a woman.

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