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A Quest for Self Identity in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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The present paper tries to analyze the sufferings of Indian woman and their search for identity in Shashi Deshpande's novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. This novel explains about the complicated life of sarita and her struggles to attain freedom from the male dominated society. Her economic independence and good image in the society affects her married life completely. She struggles hard to establish herself as an individual, daughter, wife and mother. Her husband's ego and sadism affects her both physically and mentally. Throughout her life she fights for her own identity. At one stage she came to the conclusion that she has to destroy her inner fears in order to attain freedom and she starts to work towards it with confidence.

Introduction:

Shashi Deshpande is one of the famous Indian authors in English. She was born in 1938 in Dharward, Karnataka. She is the daughter of famous Kannada dramatist and writer Sriranga. She also holds degrees in economics and law. She has also worked as a journalist for the magazine 'onlooker'. Her first collection of short stories was published in 1978 and her first novel, '*The Dark Holds No Terrors*' was published in 1980. She received Sahitya Akademi award for the novel '*That Long Silence*' in 1990 and the Padma Shri award in 2009. Her novel *Shadow Play* was shortlisted for the Hindu Literary Prize in 2014. She has written four children's books, a number of short stories, several perceptive essays under a volume entitled '*Writing from the Margin and Other Essays*' and nine novels. Some of her important novels are *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *If I Die Today* (1982), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1989), *A Matter of Time* (1996), *The Binding Vine* (2002), *Shadow Play* (2013).

In her novels, Shashi Deshpande presented the pain and sufferings of Indian women prevailing in the modern Indian society. The Indian woman has suffered a lot throughout their life, which is unknown to the society. The society portrays her as a wife, mother, sister and daughter without giving her own individuality. Her novels particularly deals with the sufferings of the middle class Indian woman, who searched for their identity in the traditional and typical Indian society, where they are dominated by their father, brother and husband. They are struggling hard to liberate themselves. Women are subjected to many different kinds of violence like physical, sociological and psychological violence. Feminism and its liberation against the male dominated society is one of the major themes in Indian context. The author reveals about

the inner world of Indian woman through her novels. She portrays her heroines in a realistic manner by which the readers can understand the change of life and situations in the life of the protagonist.

Each and every woman has the right to choose her own life partner or life goals. This freedom of modern value leads ultimately to woman empowerment. Shashi Deshpande's protagonists fight against the social injustice done to them rather than escaping from the reality. Her heroines strive hard to unite their family together. Through her heroines the author has described about the practical thinking, perseverance and independence of woman.

The post colonial writers of Indian literature in English came out with different perspective and a new education for the images of woman. During the post colonial period liberal thoughts entered into our country and it was also spreaded by the western education. The woman novelists play an important role in bringing out the new image of woman struggling against the male dominated society. Social injustice and ill-treatment of woman by traditional male dominated society can be visualized through the writings of woman novelists. In the post colonial fiction, the image of the woman is represented by entirely two different cultures. The moral virtues, devotion and sacrifice for her family have become an archetype. From this archetype, the new image of woman arises and her quest for identity emerged with a sudden growth and spreaded everywhere. This ultimately leads woman to be empowered.

Traditionally in all societies and cultures, marriage and family is considered the most important and sacred institutions. Family plays a major role in the Indian society. They unite the people living within it to share their happiness and sorrow. The male domination happening within the family throws woman to the secondary position, restricted their rights and freedom and becomes an obstacle for their life. This situation has prompted Indian woman writers to write about the sufferings of woman and their inner self.

The author portrays her heroines in a realistic manner. Her heroins struggle hard to fight against the male dominated society and express their inner feelings. Their quest for identity sows the seeds of freedom against the male dominated society throughout the nation and beyond the nation. It's the inner self of many struggling woman throughout the world.

The novel, '*The Dark Holds No Terrors*' is about a girl finding her inner self. She lost her identity entirely and struggles hard to rebuild her life to start a new life and new beginning. This novel basically expresses the frustration, ill-treatment and disappointments faced by the woman due to the social, cultural problems and the oppression of the male dominated society. The woman in the family is judged and ruled by male dominated and traditional bound society. In Indian society there are a lot of rituals and customs which separated male and female equality and male is considered superior than female. Even during those days woman were not given any importance, they were not allowed to go to school, talk in front of the elder of the family, important decisions were taken without the consultation of the woman in the family. Also stepping out of the house is considered as a punishable offence. The woman in those days were dependent on her father, brother, husband and son. This clearly explains about the regeneration of woman like the phoenix reborn from its ashes and fights against injustice waged on them to attain their hidden identity and freedom.

The protagonist of the novel, '*The Dark Holds No Terrors*' is Sarita. The novel is fully based on Sarita's search for identity. Sarita remembers her mother's coldness towards her when she was unable to save her younger Dhruva from drowning. The gender discrimination begins even when she was a child. Her mother always favored her brother and rejected her because she is a girl. And this gender discrimination during early childhood had broken Sarita into pieces. Sarita had an insecure childhood. She longed for the love of her father and mother, but she was disappointed and discouraged. As she grows, her reasoning power also develops and she starts to think about the favourism of her parents towards her brother Dhruva. She was unable to tolerate the favourism towards her brother and had grown jealous on him. She feels her to be inferior when her brother gets all the love and care from their parents. This jealous nature of Sarita towards her brother soon turned into a deadly heartedness and she was not even willing to help her own brother when he was drowning. She watched him without offering any help.

Sarita's mother believes girl child to be a liability and a boy as an asset. This action of her mother creates a sense of insecurity in Sarita's mind. Sarita's mother wants to fulfill each and every wish of her brother and not even considering Sarita as her child. Her father did the same to Sarita and she lived her life in the sense of restlessness and alienation. This partisan attitude of her parents has serious psychological effect on Sarita. She becomes rude and rebellious in nature. This rebellious nature is explained through her actions. During Sarita's childhood she and her brother Dhruva played near a pond. Accidentally Dhruva fell into the pond and was drowning, Sarita watches all this and was not ready to offer her help and save her brother. So she let his brother to die in front of her own eyes without any regret. She let her brother to die helplessly because she wants to receive all the parental care and affection denied by her parents towards her. She struggles hard to create her own identity even as a small girl. This novel also reveals the hardships and sufferings of the girl child because of her mother. The bullying activities of her mother were unbearable for Sarita. As a girl child she grows up in a gender based society and became a victim of her mother's gender based bias, which creates a lot of struggle in Sarita's later life. Her mother expressed her gender discrimination towards her through the natural element sunlight. Her mother showed her hatredness towards Sarita even after the death of her brother.

She says, "...daughter? I don't have any daughter. I had son and he died. Now, I am childless". (p.196)

In the Indian society, beauty is considered as the most important tool for evaluating people. Dark people are bullied and ill treated by others. Especially for a girl child it is very important to have a fair skin. Fair complexion is considered as beautiful. Girl child with dark complexion faces a lot of struggle at the time of her marriage. Sarita's mother feels sunlight as a barrier for woman's beauty and asked Sarita to be away from sun to attain fair complexion. Right from her childhood Sarita is made to accept that she is inferior to her brother in every way and a girl child should be under the domination of her father, brother, husband and son. Here is an example to prove it-

"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's different. He's a boy" (p.45)

Her mother's heartedness towards her drives her crazy and she leaves her home to study medicine. Her mother was a strong barrier for her higher studies. Sarita's mother wants Sarita to be at home rather than pursuing higher education. But Sarita begs her father and at last she was given permission to pursue her higher studies. Her departure from her family is her first step towards autonomy. Finally she escaped from the cold words of her mother. During her college days Sarita loves Manu and she wants to marry him against the wish of her mother. Sarita finished her degree in medicine and became a doctor. She was socially accepted and recognized as a doctor. Sarita's fight with her mother reaches its peak when she decides to marry Manu against her mother's wishes. Her mother rejected Manu because he was a boy from a lower caste and they belong to the higher caste. The conversation between daughter and mother is as follows:

"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.98)

Sarita had a permanent break in the relationship with her mother, by marrying Manu. Changing of status and social acceptance causes a lot of struggle in Sarita's life. When she was a student, Manu helps to run the house with little income and they have the peace and happiness in their relationship. She led a peaceful life away from the ill treatments of her parents and soon the happiness was broken into pieces. Their married life was peaceful until Sarita was recognized as a doctor. Her economic independence, social acceptance and status created inferiority complex in the mind of Manu. Their relationship soon became weaker and the seeds of jealousy are sowed in his mind. Manu lost his job due to the explosion in the nearby factory. This makes him feel inferior and he turned brutal in nature. Manu cannot tolerate the status of Sarita and her economic independence. Society greets and accepts her and ignores Manu. As her status grows day by day Manu seems to reduce in size. This has terrible results in their life. Manu becomes a sadist. Manu failed in his career and this panic reaction increases when he compares himself with his successful wife. Her financial independence reduced him to ashes. He wants to dominate his wife by showing his potency and masculinity by turning into a rapist at night. His cold actions towards Sarita develop day by day and it's intolerable for her. His brutal actions at night

terrify and humiliate her. This action of Manu affects Sarita psychologically. Manu seems to be a normal and caring husband during daytime and changed altogether in night. It affects her both physically and mentally. She was unable to share her dreadful situation to anyone and stand alone without any hope. She searched for her identity and completely lost her individuality. There is a break in their relationship and soon love and attachment disappeared from their life. She starts hating the relationship which is based on attraction and need, not love.

She starts to imagine the healthy relationship exist between a husband and a wife, and she also thinks about the old fashioned couple, where, the wife always walks a few steps behind her husband. They should keep distance from their husband to show their inferiority and husband's domination towards them.

“That's important, very important, because it's symbolic of the truth. 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 should not 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.”(p.133)

She escaped from her mother and dreamed about happy life with her husband but all her dreams soon shattered. She sacrificed her profession in order to avoid conflict with her husband and to save her married life. In between the critical situations happening in her life she received the death news of her mother through her childhood friend Manda. She rushed to her home town and tries to console her father. She returned home to seek her old fathers company to escape from the barbarianism of her husband. Saritha wants to forget all her sufferings and she remembers her childhood days, her tyrannizing mother, her small town, her marriage to Manu, her children etc. she struggles between her emotions and anxieties. She gradually realized that life is beyond marriage, parents and other such institutions. She tries to use her new found truths for the betterment of her life. After thinking about so many things she realized the importance of one's life and its untraveled path to fulfill the journey of life.

Father plays an important role in the life of their daughter. For a girl, her first male-female relationship starts with her father. And the bond between them is very important for her life. In this novel *'The Dark Holds No Terrors'*, till from the childhood Sarita has no proper communication with her father. There was a complete break in father-daughter relationship. Unable to wear the sexual sadism of her husband she returned to her father. Due to the improper communication between Sarita and her father, she was unable to express her pains and sufferings to her father. Her father was not at all happy about Sarita's arrival. He treated her like an unwelcomed guest. He was not worried about the problem of his family members. He was like a traditional Indian father who was the master of the family and doesn't care about his family.

“He had always been so much a man, the master of the house, not to be bothered by any of the trivial of daily routine.”(p.20)

In Indian society, married woman are not allowed to return to her parental house without her husband. After the marriage she is not allowed to visit her parental house often and she should stay in her husband's house till death. So, when seeing Sarita standing alone with her suitcase, her father looks at her coldly and his anger has no bounds. Sarita also tries to explain her problems to her father, but her father was unable to understand her feelings. He himself was not in a good relationship with his wife. He is the dominating person in the family,

who forgets to listen to the problems of his family members. So, the cause of all these problems also seemed to present in the social attitude and the society in which they are living.

She was broken down into pieces by the attitude of her father. There was no one to console her and she longed for a good companion to share all her feelings. Sarita is a successful lady doctor, a wife and a mother of two children. As a working woman she has to face many problems. She has to take care of her profession, her family and her home. Due to this entire burden, she lost balance between work and family, this burden causes stress and psychological problem to her. As her profession does not give time for her to relax with her family, she feels herself to be detached from the love and affection from her family. She wins professionally but fails to be a caring wife and loving mother. Her family needs her so badly but she is unable to spend time with them. She is much worried about the bad situation of her life.

She was unable to understand the feelings of her children; she also doesn't want to treat her children like her mother. In this novel, Sarita's daughter Renu is often portrayed as cold, silent and unaffectionate. Sarita was unable to understand the feelings of her children and their odd behaviors. Renu was not like the children of her age. Here is an example,

“Renu what is the matter?”

Nothing.

Why don't you talk?

I don't feel like it”. (P.21)

She has also appointed a nanny to look after her children because she was too busy with her professional life. But her children longed for their mothers love and care. This situation causes stress to her children and they start to behave differently towards her. There are many examples in this novel, where we can find the lack of love and care of Sarita towards her children. The children become a prey to the modern city life and they lost their happiness. Misunderstandings between Sarita and Manu affect their children mentally.

“They are used to being without me. I'm out most of the day, anyway. And I told you about my Janaki Bai. As long as she's with them, I didn't have to worry”. (p.71)

She begins to think about the critical situation in her life and blames herself for committing injustice to her mother, husband, children and everybody else. She begins to think sensibly and logically. Escaping from this situation doesn't do any good to her. She understands that she has to accept the relationship as it is. She also understands that no one can solve her problem other than her. She is mentally disturbed and unable to ask what she wants, nor explain her situation to her father. She feels a lot for deserting her parents in order to marry Manu against her parents' wish. Everything looks strange to her at her own house. In this critical situation Sarita feels that her parents would have supported her if she had married a man on their wish. She regrets everything in her life. She also doesn't have support from her parents. She feels that she has changed altogether. To her it seems no past and no future. She is completely helpless and confused. After thinking about the whole situation she came to the conclusion that killing the terrors and ghosts in her own mind will be the only solution to all her problems. Escaping from the reality will not do any good to her. So she accepts her life as it is along with her husband,

children and duties. The real darkness is in the mind of Sarita. She has to light a candle to eradicate the darkness from her life completely. The identity crisis in one's mind is the root of all problems in human life. Finally Sarita decided to go with her husband and her action shows her courage and confidence.

Conclusion:

As a typical Indian girl child, Sarita is confused and bewildered by the changes happening to her. She lights a candle in her dark mind and raises her voice against all the odds, fears and pains to release herself from an imaginary world. The feminism explained by Shashi Deshpande is entirely different from the western counterparts, as it explains the situations happening mostly in the Indian context. At the end of the novel, when Sarita receives a letter about Manu's arrival, she is completely shocked. She was not ready to face her husband, but she tells her father,

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

These words clearly explain about the courage of Sarita to face all the odds in her life. She came out from illusion to reality. She finally decides to face her life and fights for her freedom. This situation happens not only for Sarita, but to all middle class working women in modern India.

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