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Existential Dilemma and Marital Adjustment: Protagonists in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors and Roots and Shadows*

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Abstract:

Shashi Deshpande has written of Indian women, their conflicts and predicaments against the background of contemporary India. In her writings, she has analyzed the socio cultural modes and values that have given Indian women their image and role towards themselves and the society. Her chief contribution consists of her exploring the moral and psychic dilemmas and repercussions of her women characters along with their efforts to cope with the challenges and to achieve a new harmony of relationship with themselves and their surroundings. In this research article, an attempt is made to deconstruct the numerous levels of patriarchal and sexist bias employed toward women in Indian middle class society, particularly in marriage or in domestic situation. Deshpande's two novels – *The Dark Holds No Terrors and Roots and Shadows* have been analyzed. The spotlight is here on the existential perturbation of the protagonists, who despite being educated financially independent, grapple with the problems of marital adjustment. They dare to raise their voice against the straitjacketed role models of wife and refuse to be the objects of cultural oppressions of age old patriarchal society. Indu tries to find measures of freedom within the circle. Saru too realizes the need to take charge of one's life by oneself. They win over their existential dilemma by taking refuge in their profession and by asserting their individuality which will not be cowed down by anyone henceforth.

Keywords: Shashi Deshpande, existential, dilemma, individuality, patriarchal predicaments, straitjacketed, oppressions.

An existential crisis is a moment at which an individual questions the very foundations of their life: whether this life has any meaning, purpose, or value. Most of us find ourselves in this dilemma. This very dilemma is caught up and emphatically described by Shashi Deshpande in her novels. She has made her debut in 1980s. All the protagonist of her novels are middle class, educated, career oriented, married women. Her novels look at the average upper middle class Indian woman who has no pretensions to any earth shattering achievements. In an interview with the Times of India she admits that she is able to empathize better with women and hence her protagonists are necessarily women:

“As writing is born out of personal experience, the fact that I am a woman is bound to surface. Besides, only a woman would write my books – they are written from the inside, as it were. Just

as a woman cannot get deeply under a man's skin, so too a man cannot fully appreciate the feminine experience.”(8)

Having lived a passive life, Deshpande's heroines shake themselves out of their illusion of happiness. Being failed in the married life these women try to move out of their cocooned existence. Sandwiched between tradition and modernity, they endeavor to relocate themselves as individuals viz-a-viz their husband and family. Such crucial issues are delineated by Shashi Deshpande in her novels- *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *Roots and Shadows*.

In *The Dark Hold No Terrors*, Sarita, (called Saru), has escaped to her father's house to avoid the brutal nightmarish sexual assaults, her sadist husband inflicts on her. It is after a long period of fifteen years that she got the opportunity to come back as her mother is dead now. Hers was a love marriage with Manu (Manohar) who is an English teacher in a third rate college. Her trauma is unimaginable, as she is a successful doctor and a happy mother in the daytime, while “a terrified trapped animal” in the hands of her husband at night. She has no one to share with her unspeakable sufferings. The novel opens with her coming back to her father's house. The rest of the novel is remembrance of her past life.

Saru's childhood remains overshadowed by the clouds of grief. Her only fault is that she is a female child. She had an insecure childhood due to gender discrimination prevalent in Indian society. The jubilation over the arrival of her brother Dhruva is seen as a reinforcement of her discrimination. She remembers how her brother was named:

“They had named him Dhruva. I can remember, even now vaguely, faintly a state of joyous excitement that had been his naming day. The smell of flowers, the black grinding stone.” (168)

After Dhruva's death Saru's birthdays were barely acknowledged.

The cruelest blow is struck on her innocent head by merciless fate. The boy is snatched away by death and Saru is held responsible for it. The mother accusingly thunders over her:

“You did it. You did this. You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead? (191)

These scorching words poison her whole life. She considers herself responsible for having remained a mute spectator to her brother's death by drowning. G.Dominic Savio comments:

“Dhruva's demise had always been her sub conscious desire and there is a very thin demarcation between her wish and its fulfillment.”(61)

Saru is always despised by her mother. She instructs Saru:

“Don't go out in the sun. You will get darker...We have to get you married... And Dhruva? He's different. He's a boy” (45)

Saru goes to Bombay for a medical career despite the vehement opposition of her mother.

Rebellious Saru decides to take a daring step of marrying Manu. Just to assert her own self, just to hurt her mother she marries a non-Brahmin and with this exile from parental home she breaks all relations with them. As G.Dominic Savio puts it:

“The departure of Saru from her mother is the first step towards autonomy, for the mother is the first pedagogue of the do’s on the woman. Saru, however, fights back parental pressure, breaks the societal shackles and marries the man of her choice.”(63)

Prettiness dies quickly. The happy episode of life soon ends. As long as she is a medical student and her husband the breadwinner, there is peace at home, even if home is surrounded with filth and stench. The problems arise only when she gains recognition as a doctor.

The reversal of roles apparently is too much for Manu to accept. He gradually undergoes a change from that of a romantic hero quoting Shelley and Keats to his beloved to a morose husband uncomfortable with his wife’s steady rise in status.

The structure of Indian society is such that men cannot stand the success of women. Their attitude as Promila Kapur says is “ambivalent” because while “in their minds the picture of an ideal woman is more or less that of a traditional woman, at the same time they do wish and expect their wives to be smart and illustrated.”(311)

Saru’s respect for Manu wanes when she recognizes him to be a failure. Suffering from an inferiority complex, he becomes a sadist. Throwing light on Manu’s psychological problem Sarabjit Sandhu Says:

“The financial ascendance of Sarita, at the same time, renders Manu impotent. The only way he can regain that potency and masculinity is through sexual assault upon Sarita, which for him, becomes an assertion of his manhood leading to a sort of abnormality at night, as he is a cheerful normal human being, a loving husband during day turning into a rapist at night.”(22)

The success of a woman may prove appalling when it highlights a man’s failure. Having experienced this fact in her life Saru presents a perfect recipe for a successful marriage.

“A wife must be a few feet behind her husband. If he’s an M.A., you should be a B.A., if he is 5’4” tall you shouldn’t be more than 5’3”.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.”(137)

Introspecting over the reason that brought disastrous consequences for her conjugal relationship with Manu, she feels utter lonely. She starts on a quest for home and reaches the home she had earlier rejected.The feeling of homelessness drives Saru occasionally to the longing to be released from existence itself. She wonders:

“To be alone? Never a stretching hand? Never a comforting touch? Is it all a fraud then, the external cry of... my husband, my wife, my children, my parents? Are all human relationships doomed to be a failure.”(194-195)

Saru comes out of the quagmire of fear, confusion and dilemma to give a hopeful turn to her life. Firstly she had denied her father's advice to confront Manu. However later on she is ready to face the reality. Suddenly it was “as if she was vouchsafed a vision” (219) which her mother had just before her death the vision of mythical Duryodhan awaiting his enemies and ready to face them boldly. She determines to gather her divided selves to be whole again.

At the end of the novel the guilty sister, unforgiven daughter and failure wife recede in the background and the older self of Sarita is replaced with a new one who is more confident, determined and courageous woman.

Sarita's father proves to be an important force in her evolution. He makes Sarita realize that the onus to set things right was upon her and that she would have to act in an assertive manner to resolve the conflict. Firstly she had decided to turn her back on Manu but ultimately she discards the idea, as her final words convey:

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

As soon as she regains the courage to resolve her problem herself, the DARKNESS ceases to frighten her. As Premila Paul comments:

“Rather than escaping from the dark or cursing the darkness all that Saru needs to do is to break the self imposed exile, light a candle and declare that the dark holds no terrors.”(40)

The novel's ending with Saru setting out to attend to a patient indicates the assertion of her career. Her role as a doctor is much more important than her role as a wife and mother.

Saru redeems herself of all the guilt feelings, gets rid of the dilemmas and bids farewell to all those ghosts that have tormented her throughout the life. With an optimistic attitude she decides to step in a world where she has to pave her path.

Roots and Shadows sheds light on the emotional crisis of Indu, a middle-class young girl, brought up in an orthodox Brahmin family headed by Akka, the old matriarch of the family. The novel begins with the heroine's return to her ancestral house. This parental home holds a significant role in the novel, as it enables her to understand the meaning of human life.

She has been portrayed as a mature, smart, sophisticated, professional woman. Her education and deftness sharply distinguish her from the other female characters of the novel. But caught in the matrix of age-old custom or tradition, like Deshpande's other women characters she cannot break herself free from the clutches of tradition.

Defying strongly the age-old restrictions held on a girl child, she grows into a bold woman. Revolting against the so called traditions that crush a woman's emotions on the name of honour, Indu dares to argue even with Akka, the matriarch of the family. In order to break free from such orthodox rules she decides to join a college in Bombay and stays in a hostel. She adheres to her decision not to go back to the traditional set up in which she had felt suffocated. At the age of eighteen she turns her back on the family and doesn't come back for eleven years. She broke away from her family out of resentment and married for love in order to assert her freedom. Not bothering about Akka and family's opposition Indu takes her own ways in a rebellious manner by marrying out of her caste.

Elnore Geethmala opines:

“Indu loves freedom and always has a resolute mind. She may be called as the ‘new woman’ who has the desire and freedom to talk about things and to question the seriousness and nature of matters related to her.”(85)

Indu's marriage with Jayant does not prove to be an entirely different from traditional Indian marriage as far as their relationship is concerned. Seemingly modern and sophisticated Jayant is no better than an average Indian husband. His expectations are the same as that of any stereotype Indian male. Though Indu considers herself to be a liberated woman, she too is unassertive without realizing it. Her relationship with Jayant has deteriorated into the same kind of empty traditional relationship between husband and wife that she has always despised. She describes how ‘silence’ has become a part and parcel of her nature.

“That was one thing I had learnt now. One thing my marriage had taught me. The gift of silence.”(33)

In her married life with Jayant, Indu has compromised on several issues, seemingly in the belief that she was making adjustments out of love for him. She has modeled her lifestyle and her values to suit him though he has never directly asked her to do so. She regrets her total submission to her husband, which has reduced her into a nonentity. The bitter realization comes to her that to please Jayant she has lost her individuality. Hence she contemplates:

“When I look in the mirror, I think of Jayant... Have I become fluid, with no shape, no form of my own?”(49)

The emotional aridity of Indu's married life is the root cause of her sufferings. She had married Jayant hopefully, searching an equal companion in him but with the passage of time, the castle of her hopes and aspirations dashes to the ground.

For the family, Indu is an independent, prosperous and contented wife. Moreover, she deliberately pretends to be happy and fulfilled, as she wants to prove herself right and her marriage a success. But she cannot prevent herself from revealing her agony to Naren.

Naren, her cousin is the person with whom she could share her joys and sorrows unhesitatingly. On Naren's insistence she unveils her problematic relationship with Jayant. She is disillusioned with her husband's materialistic attitude to life. He resents any display of passion on her part. He expects his wife to be demure and coy, without shedding her inhibitions even in the privacy of their bedroom. This is evident from what Indu narrates to Naren:

"Jayant, so passionate, so ready, sitting up suddenly and saying, No, not now, when I had taken the initiative... It shocks him to find passion in a woman."(83)

Thus Jayant's views are colored by the age-old traditions, which had defined woman as a means to fulfill man's needs and not as a human being with her own sexual needs. Whereas Indu, a woman who hated such traditions and is passionately in love with her husband is hurt to find her love rejected and suppressed by him. It upsets her that while she adopts passivity and suppresses her emotions for his happiness, he takes her happiness for granted and ignores her sexuality.

This sexual paralysis deepens when she pretends to be passive and unresponsive. R. Mala comments on Indu's plight: "Though she defies tradition to marry him, she remains sexually a conservative, unable to transcend the sexual taboos."(53)

Indu's rational attitude, independent and assertive nature, which had made her rebel against various traditions, now fails to do so. She had been contemptuous for the women of her family categorized them as martyrs, heroines or emotional fools. But she herself starts adopting their ways bit by bit to avoid conflict in her marriage. Analysing her plight G.D.Barche comments:

"Indu a central character in *Roots and Shadows*, shares the fate of Sisyphus. Her crime is long hidden inner world of women in general and Indian women in particular. She is suffering in our world and her suffering is deeper and deadlier than Sisyphus' as he was to roll up only one stone, while she is rolling up many, viz the ideal of independence and completeness, the concepts of self, sin, love the ideal of detachment and freedom, and so on."(111)

Indu gradually, realizes that she doesn't exist for her but for Jayant, the archetypal male, imperialistic and subjugating. She feels in her a sense of existential angst and insecurity. As a lacerated woman she rails at her family and the materialist world where a girl is "never claimed" and is "set apart from the others."

Indu feels suffocated not only as a wife but as a professional woman also. She is disgusted at the abysmal pseudo principles of the so-called civilized people. Besides, her own inability to be true to her conscience troubles her more. She finds herself writing only that which the editor said the public would accept; no matter how many lies she had to write in the bargain.

Through the Character of Indu, Deshpande has portrayed the inner struggle of an artist to express herself; to discover her real self through her inner and instinctive potential for creative writing. Indu wants to bid adieu to her monotonous service but her husband, Jayant, does not approve of this ideal. He is a barrier to her feminine urge for self-expression since he believes that a person like Indu can do nothing against the whole system by wielding her pen.

Jayant betrays her hopes for harmony and integration, for peace and happiness. He fails to be her 'alter ego'. Neither is he 'a sheltering tree' to protect her in weal and woe. Instead she finds that she has relinquished her identity by surrendering before Jayant's masculinity, by becoming his wife. Willingly she yields to the demands of marriage and moulds herself up to the dictates of her husband.

She cannot give up her job, thought it fails to be self-satisfactory. She therefore continues working, albeit hating every moment of it. The uncompromising Indu surrenders at times before Jayant just for show only. Gradually, but surely, she realizes the absurdity of the existence as she has to compromise against her conscience with the values of a hypocrite society, where success is counted sweetest. But all this was not to go for long. Circumstances bring her to the proverbial cross roads where every individual has to do some introspection sooner or later. Had Akka, her old domineering matriarch not called her, she wouldn't have had time enough to think about her identity and selfhood, which she had effaced just to prove that her marriage was a success.

The desperate need to assert her own self combined with the attraction she felt for her cousin, Naren, and the easy compatibility between them makes her take a daring step in surrendering herself to him. P. Ramamoorthy asserts:

"This sheds a brilliant light on Indu's awareness of her autonomy and her realization that she is a being and not a dependent on Jayant the novel gains its feminist stance in Indu's exploration into herself but it also moves beyond the boundaries of feminism into a perception of the very predicament of the human experience."(187)

Akka has chosen Indu the sole beneficiary of all her property. Towards the end of the novel, She meets up to her own expectation of an emancipated woman by the way she puts Akka's wealth to use spending it on Mini's wedding and Vithal's education. She takes this decision at the risk of offending her numerous relatives.

So, in the end she did achieve her freedom. She had not let anyone; neither kaka, nor Atya, nor even Jayant come in the way of doing what she believed was the right thing to do. She has conquered her fears. She, who had earlier been cowed down by Jayant's disapproval of her giving up her job now gathers enough courage to stand by her decision. It is evident from her introspection:

"That I was resigning from my job.

That I would at last do the kind of writing I had always dreamt of doing”(187)

This statement of Indu is the assertion of her will and self. She can no longer cheat herself saying that she will do things for the sake of Jayant. P.Bhatnagar aptly comments: “Thus shashi Deshpande makes her heroine choose security through reconciliation. The ethos in the novel is neither of victory nor of defeat but of harmony and understanding between two opposite ideals and conflicting selves. This is quite representative of the basic Indian attitude.” (128)

Indu has confronted her real self and she knows her roots; she need not be ashamed of her body and sexual needs; she has to decide what her job will be; she is capable of taking decisions not only for herself but for others too, and life does not come to an end with individuals, be it Indu or Jayant.

To conclude, matrimony is not a fulfilling experience for Deshpande's protagonists. They usually seek marriage as an alternative to the restrictions imposed by the parental family. They try to fit into the role model of a wife created by the society. But their education, intelligence, and awareness make them question the kind of life they lead. Both Saru and Indu agree that marriage itself is a difficult enough business.

Though they view marriage as an essential social institution, they have no romantic illusion about it. Marriage fails to provide them with the love or the freedom that the protagonists aspire for. Marriage makes women dependent upon their husbands. Even economic independence does not assist them to get themselves disentangled from the emotional dependence and attachment. Lack of emotions and spiritual oneness between husband and wife is highlighted in the novels. Marriage cannot bring happiness to both the spouses unless they surrender their ego and merge into each other. But here we find that neither of the women protagonists is emotionally united with her husband, as there is a difference in attitude towards life.

Saru and Indu are career women from middle class families who face predicament of fulfilling their duties and have to choose between their professional and personal lives. During the course of their lives, they suffer many trials and tribulations but in the final run they come to terms with themselves by redefining their relationship and emerge as fully developed individuals who are able to do justice to their professional as well as personal lives.

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