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STRUGGLE OF THE FEMALE PROTAGONIST IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS*

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Abstract: Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Darks Holds No Terrors* discusses the feeling of homelessness, the breaks in relationships of the protagonist. It exposes protagonist, Sarita to her inner disintegration which leads her to believe that economical independence cannot always give way to inner peacefulness. She regains her identity and finds new meanings to her relationships. Issues like dilemma of preference between family and profession, quest for self – identity, male ego, and patriarchy in the novel of Deshpande have been elaborately discussed. It is further added that Deshpande's female characters resist the patriarchal ideologies and want to live life on their own terms. Even though they defy social norms, parents, caste etc to fulfil their dreams and aspirations, yet at the end they appear to be responsible. The intention of this paper is to deal with the struggle of the female protagonists in gaining their individuality.

Key words: feminism, struggle, discrimination, masculinity, identity

This research paper has been analyzed and interpreted with the help of postcolonial feminist theory using primary and secondary sources. After a study of the novel and characters in respect of 'identity', the research work will be helpful in women empowerment. This study tries to explain different types of women characters such as feminist women, followers of patriarchy and the victims of patriarchy. This study attempts to identify the women who are helpful in enhancement of women empowerment and those who aim to prevent them in patriarchal society. This study also points out how some male characters happen to be oppressive to women folk and at the same time how some play positive role in women empowerment.

Women writers like Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Manju Kapur and Arundhati Roy have succeeded in great extent in changing the attentions of the readers to the evil practice of patriarchy by describing the life of Indian women. They tell many tales of injustice and oppressions being faced by women within their house and beyond it in the andocentric and patriarchal society of India. They continue their struggle for establishment of their identity and their economic and social freedom.

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Feminism acknowledges the inadequacy of male made ideologies and fights for spiritual, economic, social and racial and gender equality of women who are biologically and sexually oppressed and subjugated. A silent, mute and stifled female voice negates an equal freedom of expression; feminist movement emerges as a protest against the male domination and suppression of women. Sarah Grimke points out that woman has always been subjugated, enslaved and used as objects of physical needs by men. They have never been elevated to the state that they deserved. In this connection she remarks:

Man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means to protest his selfish gratification..... He has all he could do to debase and enslave her mind...
(Grimke 10)

The aim of feminism is to nullify this tilted and distorted image of women. A woman is a woman who should not be a man's shadow, an auxiliary and an unwanted 'other'. A crucial development in feminism has brought a considerable change in the outlook of present man. Though a great deal of awareness about women's problems is created among the general masses by various print and electronic media but the ground reality is not encouraging. The emergence of women in the mainstream is not without politics. The political aspect of purdah has been noted by sociologists like M.N. Srinivas in his book, *The Changing Position of Indian Women* who relates the struggle for supremacy in the classes with the 'privatization' of women (221-38). The reverse process is noticed at the end of nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century with women's education and their entry into some professions even it in a limited way. Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi in *Daughters of Independence* discuss women's move into the social world during the independence movement and feel that the exit of women from seclusion is not part of some inevitable march towards emancipation resulting from 'modernization', nor is it a result of contact of Western culture. It is in their view, more of a part of the logic of the emerging class structure. The new freedom which women of the professional classes enjoy is limited by "the forms of male control which the class system strengthens rather than dismantles" (Liddle and Joshi 51).

The novels of Shashi Deshpande present women as incomplete individuals. They struggle to survive and need someone's shelter, be it mother, wife or daughter. Deshpande's first novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* depicts the turbulent life of the protagonist, Sarita (shortly called Saru) who undergoes trauma and tremor and confronts life and reality and finally understands that the dark does not hold any terrors. Right from her childhood, Saru suffers from gender discrimination and it starts from her own family. As her sense of judgement and reasoning develops, Saru realizes that she cannot tolerate the partiality and preference shown to her brother, Dhruva. She has to struggle to draw the attention of her father but hardly has she succeeded in this mission. Her mother, who thinks daughter to be a burden and liability and a boy to be an asset, creates a sense of insecurity in her mind. Her mother's

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strong favour for her son over her daughter drives Saru to a sense of restlessness and suffering. As Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* mentions:

She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg, if there was a drouht she sat in it- in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish to her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. (Woolf 128)

Thus, the gender discrimination and subjugation of woman has been in practice in patriarchy since ages. The partisan attitude of Saru's parents develops a devastating effect in Saru's mind. The terms "Feminine" and "Masculine" represent social constructs, patters of sexuality and behaviour imposed by cultural and social norms" (Singh 3). In the very concept of deconstruction, Helen Cixous considers feminity as lack, negativity, absence of meaning, irrationality, chaos and darkness. Life turns more pathetic for Saru after the demise of her brother. Her mind is filled with deep and indelible scar as her mother constantly blames her for her dead son. The sense of negation by her mother fills the tender mind of Saru with hatred. Filled with a sense of shame at her monthly period, she rejects the conventional practice in her conservative family when she is treated like an untouchable during those days. Thus rejection by her mother during early impressionable years leads to psychological insecurity in her.

Defying her mother, Saru goes to Bombay to study medicine. Again Saru has to confront her mother when she decides to marry Manohar (shortly called Manu), a boy from lower caste. During the course of time, Saru becomes a successful doctor but Manu remains a lecturer in a third grade private college. Saru's profession keeps her away from Manu for longer period and she reaches home late at night for which he fumes. Manu's self ego is hurt by the rise of his wife and he feels inferiority complex and this complexity turns him brutal in his conduct

Suffering from inferiority complex Manu's subjectivity offers relevant scope for making a study in split personality. As a reversal in the gender game Manu's degeneration starts with his wife's increasing success in her medical profession and the fading of his literary talents to mediocrity. Before discussing in details the intricacies of the schizophrenic implications in Manu's subjectivity, certain observations with regard to the failing traits of Indian masculinity has to be taken into account. Sudhir Kakar's observation on the Sita legend in *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality* locates the flaws of the Hindu imagery of manliness in Rama's character. Rama may have the traits of a "god-like hero, yet he is also fragile, mistrustful and jealous and very much a conformist, both to his parents' wishes and to social opinion" (Kakar 66). Ashis Nandy reinforces a similar view of weakness in Indian masculinity in his essay, "Woman versus Womanliness in India: An essay in Social and political Psychology". Here he states:

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The concept of *adyashakti*, primal or original power, is entirely feminine in India. It is the male principle in the godhead, *purusha*, which is reliable but relatively passive, weak and secondary. (Nandy 72)

In the same essay he goes on to discuss the differences of Indian forms of masculinity in its proximity with the feminine principle in sharp contrast to the Western tradition:

In India, unlike in many western societies, the softer forms of creativity and the more intuitive and introspective styles of intellectual and social function are not strongly identified with femininity. Nor is masculinity that close linked to forceful, potency-driven, 'hard' and 'hard headed' modes of intrusive behaviour. Sex-role specific qualities here are differently distributed. In fact the concept of potency in Indian high culture has always had a private, introversive quality about it. (Nandy 75)

Thus Deshpande's portrayal of male subjects is not outside the cultural realm of her social milieu. The inhibitions and apprehensions regarding the sexual behaviour of Indian couples are depicted in Saru's reaction to Manu's sadistic sexual aggression. Manu's abnormal sexual behaviour is the outcome of a false attempt to exercise power and perpetuate dominance over his spouse who is socially and financially much above him in status. Here marital rape for Manu acts as an instrument to exhibit his lost strength, a convenient façade to falsify the decreasing levels of his potency. Schizophrenic impulses can be registered in Manu's subjectivity because his normal behaviour at day with his wife shows no sign of any repercussions of his monstrous act at night, which is further aggravated by Saru's reticence to the whole issue. Thus the omniscient narrator describes:

It was part of the same pattern that had mystified her from the day it had began.... his cheerfulness the next morning, his air of being his usual, the complete total normality. She had almost given up trying to put the two men together, the fearful stranger of the night, and the rather pathetic Manu of other times. But it never ceased to frighten her, this dichotomy. (96)

Saru was the dual victim- first of Manu's schizophrenia, and secondly of her apprehension in disclosing the matter. Talking about the latent nature of sexual problems in Indian culture, R. Mala in her essay "Sexual predicament and Shashi Deshpande's Women" says:

The problem in the Indian sexual panorama is that sex has been branded as a taboo and the discussion in it in the public is avoided. In spite of the openness of our ancestors, who chose temple walls as excellent repositories of sexual mudras, very few people particularly women, are willing to dilate on their sexual problems if any. The heroines of Deshpande face the same situation in their sexual relationships with their husbands... Saru's silence against her sexual

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predicament only reveals the modern women's dilemma----- of knowing the psychological nature of the problem but hesitant to talk about it. (Mala 53-54)

Saru was silent because she too understood that it was her success which became the yardstick to measure Manu's failure. Manu in his youth was a brilliant student of English literature, and had the potential to be a promising poet and playwright. Manu "aura of distinction" about him as the effective Secretary of the Literary Association, Debating Union and Dramatic society was compared to none other but the romantic poet Shelley. It was this image of a "superior, superhuman male" that Saru adored and got married to before the completion of her graduation. But once Saru moved towards recognition as a lady doctor she overreached her low salaried husband. When the couple comes out from the room and walks on the road, people greet Saru with *namaste*. There is no greetings and exchange of words for Manu. Human being has the general tendency for growth and the esteem that makes Saru towering, same thing makes Manu insecure. Manu's insecurity turns him into a monstrous and cruel person.

Masculinity in India is nourished with the images of suffering and subdued woman who can be easily dominated. The role of women as the mother-protector, the inspirer and the motivating force, as the object of desire, weakling and dependent on men tends to magnify men's stature by contrast. Though the plot concentrates on Saru's perspective keeping her husband in the background, yet his sadism jeopardizes her identity within the enclosures of patriarchy. Patriarchy defines the hierarchical structure of marital roles which in case of Manu is inverted.

Thus, for women love means only giving and bestowing her emotionally and physically, suppressing her own needs wholly; for man it is fulfilment of all his needs, sexual and emotional. When instead of love, self-gratification becomes the basis of marriage for man and when he usually deprives woman of togetherness and warmth she deviates from the norms. Like man, woman too needs love and respect but in a male dominated society, as Betty Friedan observes "Love has customarily been defined, at least for women, as a complete merging of egos and a loss of separateness- 'togetherness', a giving up of individuality rather than a strengthening of it" (Friedan 280). While woman is expected to completely give up her individuality in love as well as in marriage, for man these mean self-gratification on all fronts. Saru's predicament is contrary to the assertion of most feminist that it is easier for women in the past to accept such way of life for they did not have to struggle and hence had no other choice. There was nothing except to resign themselves to their destiny. But in this case, Saru's way of thinking is conditioned by the period she belongs to.

The binary of husband as 'provider and protector' versus wife as 'recipient and protected' is reversed in Manu-Saru relation which makes Manu insecure. Premila Paul in her essay "*The Dark Holds No Terrors: A Woman's Search for Refuge*" rightly suggests that there

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are three problematic incidents that are frequently evoked by Saru from her bitter memory in a fragmentary fashion in the first three sections of the novel. The first one is Saru's interview for a special issue on career woman brought out by a woman's magazine. The interviewer's casual query put to Manu undermines Manu's confidence totally. His sense of insecurity starts with the explosion in the nearby factory. The lover in him dies when the neighbours wake up to the fact that Saru is no ordinary housewife but an important figure in the face of a doctor. Unable to come to terms with the fact that he is a failure in life, Manu turns himself into a sexual exploiter: "the hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar body" (102). Gerda Learner in *'The Creation of Patriarchy'* is of the opinion that men torture women by "ridicule, exclusion or ostracism" (Learner 156) when they try to assert themselves. It has been often witnessed that women are punished when they try to articulate their roles. Saru internalizing Manu's self hatred thus remarked:

What he does to me, he does it not so much because he hates me, but because he hates himself. (08)

Manu's schizophrenic tendencies, as a monster at night and charmer at day, are basically capital driven. His failure to prove his niche in the literary field also led to his stagnancy in a low paid job in a private college. He never hoped to join a salaried job, but he was forced to do so by Saru who was still nascent in her medical profession when their first child Renu was born. Devastated mentally by the sadistic attacks of Manu, Saru even thought of giving up her work to give more time to her husband and children. But Manu rejected the idea because he couldn't imagine a life without the luxuries made possible by Saru's earnings. Making a clear confession of his low financial capability he remarks:

. . .can you bear to send the children to a third-rate school? To buy them the cheapest clothes, the cheapest of everything? To save and scrape and still have nothing after the first few days of the month? No Saru there is no going back. We have to go on. (81)

Showing a complete façade in his actions, that day he behaved with Saru as a doting husband like the early years of their marriage cajoling her with tender words and silly diversions of mind like the offer for a movie. This shows Manu's inherent duality of nature - first, his sluggishness to accept challenges in life and at the same time his inability to accept the Status Quo as an inferior to his wife. The hideousness of Manu's subjectivity is concealed behind a masqueraded self in his groomed outer demeanor - a stylish beard to add a little more to his mask of normalcy as Saru perceived. Even his maniac strength during his sexual attacks was nothing but a sham to manipulate his gradually increasing impotency. Deshpande in the position of an omniscient narrator describes Manu's first sadistic attack in the following words:

And he began what was then for them a peculiar kind of love-making, with something in it that set it apart from all their other times together. It was not just that he was more intense, with nibbling little kisses interspersed with long

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devouring ones that so that she could scarcely breathe. It was the feeling that he was whipping himself on, trying to arouse himself to some piece of excitement that yet remained beyond him. For when she felt him against her, she knew there was nothing. It was a sham. And something about it sickened her.... For the first time in their years together he couldn't go on. At last he gave up and fell back in his place. (86)

It is precisely because of his failure in all aspects of life that led to Saru's hatred for him, and she sought refuge in her father's house as a means of escape from her conjugal hell. Sarita had alienated herself from her parents for many years because of her inter-caste marriage, only to come back after her mother's death. It is here living with her father and Madhav, a distant relative that she comes in terms with the facts of her life and begins her process of self introspection. When the novel opens, unable to solve her marital crisis, Saru seeks a temporary refuge in confrontation with her father after a gap of fifteen years. As a recurrent trope in Deshpande's novel's the father-figures are shown to be more liberal and progressive in relation with their daughters while the mothers fully cooperate in the ideological mechanism of patriarchy. Saru's relation with her mother following the accidental death of her kid brother Dhruva was totally embittered because the latter accused her for Dhruva's death by drowning. Though Saru's father never blamed her directly for Dhruva's death, yet he never tried to intervene in breaking the barrier that separated her from her mother. Returning back after so many years Saru was surprised to see her father fully in control of the household chores in Madhav's company, which had earlier remained in the sole domain of her mother.

Deshpande exhibits no melodramatic reunion between father and daughter. Saru's father had always known about her whereabouts yet he had never attempted any reconciliation with her. Moreover she was not even informed about her mother's death by cancer. Nevertheless he didn't rebuke her in her return. When he showed a kind of indifference in enquiring about her children, she was first angered but soon realized her own position where there was almost no scope for any expectations. Baba in spite of his weak will was the only repose of strength left for Saru.

Though Saru's father didn't take much interest in her studies in her school days, yet he was never a staunch patriarch for he allowed her the freedom to choose a profession for herself. In fact, it was the only instance when he stood firm against his wife in defending Saru's choice for a medical profession rather than forcing her to go for a marriage of their choice. In spite of the feebleness in his subjectivity, her father adopts the role of a confidant in guiding her through her marital crisis. Despite the gender gap between them, Saru could open up to her father about the sadistic attacks of Manu which ruined her marriage. He persuades her to replace a sense of self-blame and grievance with the investment in the present in advising her to face facts rather than running away from them. Baba breaks his overwhelming reticence and

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speaks up his own guilt consciousness of escaping from things which could have been solved through discussion:

Do you know Saru I often feel sorry that we left so many things unsaid, your mother and I. When she lay dying I wanted to ask her.... Would you like to meet Saru. Sometimes I think she might have said “yes”. But I never did, silence had become a habit with us. Now go on, tell me. Tell everything. (199)

His realization of his own guilt in keeping silent helps him in persuading Saru to discuss her problems with him. When Saru decided to go away from her father’s place at the news of Manu’s arrival, Baba made all his efforts in asserting his lost authority in dissuading her from her decision of avoiding her husband. Struggling to be tenacious and persistent he implored her: “Are you scared of him?Give him a chance, Saru” (216). Baba made a desperate attempt to gain control over things which were falling apart in their lives because of his hitherto indifference to his daughter’s problems. Realizing Saru’s emotional entrapment to her painful past, her father tried hard to shake her out of her traumatic nostalgia:

...your mother is dead. So is your brother. Can’t you let the dead go?.... They can do nothing. Why do you torture yourself with others? Are you not sufficient for your own life? It’s your life isn’t it? (217)

Saru’s father was a failure initially in holding his family together, and initiating reconciliation between mother and daughter, however, finally he succeeded in convincing Saru to wait for Manu. The narrative closes with an open ending; nevertheless, there is some hope for the reader that perhaps there is an end to Saru’s struggle, by the aid of her father.

The women in Shashi Deshpande’s novel depict the women’s struggle against all odds. Deshpande’s major concern as a creative writer is her women characters, their pain, their sufferings and their own solutions to the problems created by the world where they flourish their desires and dreams but to face disillusionment makes them bold enough to face the fact. The prominent point about Deshpande’s novels is her delineation of the women’s characters; her inner world. Her protagonists are women struggling to find their own voice and space and are continuously in search to define them. But they become fluid, with no shape, no form of their own. To Shashi Deshpande’s mind, no amount of theorizing will solve women’s problems especially in Indian context. She reflects on the problems and concerns of the middle class Indian women. Her writings are rooted in the culture in which she lives. Deshpande’s feminism is not like other hard-core feminists, her approach is sensible. Deshpande does not believe that the terms mother, sister and wife are illogically thrust upon woman. She has depicted emerging women and her efforts have always been to know them and maintain their space and identity as general human being in oppressive patriarchal set up.

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