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A WOMAN'S FIGHT IS MORE WITH HERSELF: UNMASKING OF SARITA IN "THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS"

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Abstract

The man is always at the centre, the woman always on the periphery. Woman is neither intellectually nor biologically inferior to man. But traditionally, in human civilization, she has been always treated inferior to man. The only Indian woman novelist, Shashi Deshpande has made a centred study of the educated and ambitious women of the middle class and significantly has called attention to the maladies from which they suffer. She sets foot in the inner world of her women and highlights their divided selves – the skeletons from their cupboards. The Dark Holds No Terrors is such a story about a highly educated, ambitious, independent woman who is in search of her own identity. Sarita, the protagonist's struggle for breaking the shackles of patriarchal chains that she faces because of a loveless childhood being an abandoned kid and having an abusive husband. Sarita is seen storming the stereotypical pre-conceived notions of a male-patriarchy as she digsher way to self-exploration satisfying the thirst of quest for self-identity. This paper delves into the issues of the plight of the Indian woman who is always reminded that she is nothing but only a woman. She has neither any right nor any capability to stand up against marital rape, abuse, discrimination in her personal arena. In Shashi Deshpande's 'The dark holds no terrors', Sarita, the protagonist is not so much in fight with the external world framed by patriarchal norms as much as she has a fight with herself. The educated and ambitious middle-class woman is seen cutting through the traditional sense of lack suffered by women with abusive husbands to realize that she has a primary duty towards herself. This paper will reflect on the tools employed by Sarita as she progresses on the journey of self-discovery.

Keywords: Identity, Patriarchal, Women, Stereotypical, Male-domination, Shashi Deshpande.

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Introduction

The name Shashi Deshpande is synonymous with the emergence of new woman in post-independent era of Indian literature. Her stories are attempts of her endeavour to sketch out a contour of this new woman through novels that manifests a voice of protest in a largely male-dominated world.

Shashi Deshpande is an acclaimed Indian novelist. She was born in 1938 in Karnataka. Her publication of the first novel 'The dark holds no terrors' came out in 1980. She has been awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel named 'That long silence'. Deshpande's works present a world of many complex relationships. She, as a writer has very beautifully and thoughtfully dived deep into the female psyche of the emerging Indian women. Her interest aims to centre more and more on women of the upper middle classes, well-educated women who fight for their own space, a place in their family as well as in their social and cultural setting. She creates figures that take her readers through the social strata of urban society. The themes and the contexts of her novel visibly reflect Deshpande's own cultural setting. Women in her context are not simply victims of this male-dominated society rather with time they are seen to have stood out as self-assured and self-empowered personalities. With her first novel the dark holds no terrors; she introduces this very painful topic that had already been there, that is marital rape.

Saru, the protagonist is a victim of various crude situations throughout her life. Beginning with being an unloved child, then accused by her mother for her brother's death to a toxic husband who to satisfy his shallow male ego goes to the extent of torturing her physically and mentally. In a society where a boy child is of utmost importance, Sarita faces the discrimination in her family when she is accused of her brother's death and is kept unaware of motherly love and affection all her childhood. When she finally thinks of confiding in Manu, again she becomes a victim of conventional norms which says that a woman should always stay inferior to her male counterpart. The Dark Holds No Terrors talks about the woman who fights against a male-power structure and comes out setup realizing that she is to be blamed for none.

This phenomenon of identity loss is no new topic for us. Since long back it has been discussed. The very famous work of Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll's House* is an example of such complex situation, the incapability of determining the outcome of their own lives because it is already destined. The character of the novel has to struggle throughout her life attempting to find her own identity. Nora, the female protagonist is given a doll-like existence in her husband's house. She has no identity of her own and lacks a sense of individuality. Just like Sarita, even Nora is traumatised by the expectations of her husband, but towards the end of the novel she understands the need of self-discovery and decides to live her life on her own terms. She

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claims:“I have existed merely to perform tricks for you, Torvald. But you wanted it like that. . . It is your fault that I have made nothing of my life.” (Ibsen, Act-III)

Such realization and confrontation is seen in the case of Sarita when she finally makes peace with the fact that she is not the reason of her husband’s failure. This plight of women has evolved with time, though not completely but it is still prevalent in such male-dominated setup.

Analysis

The almighty never created woman as inferior to man but the male chauvinist in a puerile manner – either out of desperation or out of a sheer survival urge for self-propagation, has tried to subvert woman to a secondary status. This political move, however, finds its arguments hollow in the face of hundreds and odd cases, where women as species have proven it beyond doubt in our times that they are in no way inferior to their male-counterparts. In Indian context a woman is always made to play the second fiddle starting from being a daughter to a wife, to even a mother. The sudden explosion of the volcano of silence and her power of endurance has challenged the ‘New Woman’ not to play the second fiddle.

Shashi Deshpande in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* presents the tale of injustice, guilt, violence, and terror. This very novel aims to analyze the meaning of being a woman in a modern society by running deep into the protagonist’s psyche to discover the reason of her suffering and helping her move towards a journey of self-exploration and self-realization.

The novel begins with Saru returning to her parental house leaving behind her husband and children. She is filled with guilt and terror for various causes which is later revealed as the story progresses. Saru hailed from a typical tradition bound family whose attachment to patriarchal rules has left indelible scars on her psyche. Her mother’s obvious preference to her brother Dhruva deprived Saru from parental affection all her childhood. Treated as a secondary citizen in her own family due to sexual discrimination, she started developing a feeling of isolation and this led to insecurity in her own self. Later, in her life when she finally felt content in her married life, it took not much time to realize that this even is an illusion. The marital bliss lasted no longer and she again became the victim of male-domination.

Throughout she lived a pale and challenging life altogether. Being a woman in such a setup was no easy job. Even though she was educated, independent, sensitive, and intelligent enough, yet she could not break the barriers of the norms that are meant to be followed by a woman. A woman is always reshaped and moulded by man and for man.

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The main theme of the novel is a woman's quest for finding an answer to 'Who am I'. When after fifteen long years she returned to her father's house, she undergoes the process of introspection. The moment of realisation comes when she gradually analyses her relationship with her father, husband, and dead mother.

The wronged child, the unloved daughter:

The novel very swiftly renders another aspect of patriarchal society and that is the discrimination faced by a girl-child. Saru is no less than an unwanted child as soon as her brother, Dhruva arrives into their life. Saru and her mother since the beginning share a sour relationship and this goes deeper after her brother's death. Lack of parental love has made her cold-hearted and crippled in her the sense of hatred. Her mother's words keep on echoing in her mind that she said after Dhruva was found dead.

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

The above statements reflect the detachment they had. Her mother as any typical Indian woman preferred her son more. The biasness of her own mother made her a victim of loveless childhood. She undergoes a phase of alienation and loneliness because her childhood is seen thrown into seas of self-doubt, insecurity, and trauma. These statements of her mother are so deeply rooted and etched that it becomes a nightmare all through her life. Her mother traumatizes Sarita by blaming her for her brother's death. On the dock of life, this guilt keeps hanging as a dagger. She is not supported by her mother when she decides to study medical. Against her mother's wish, she studies of her choice. Gradually, with time Saru becomes more tolerant and she question up the inequality between her and her brother. Living a life almost full of hostility, hatred, loveless and lifelessness, Saru became more resistant and more rebellious than before. This stain that Saru is held accountable of makes her life more miserable. In her stay with her father, she finally decides to confide in. After going into deep introspection, she starts recollecting the memories. The guilt that maybe she killed her brother refrains her from enjoying the present. Saru finally spits out the poison of false accusation and guilt in front of her father. She could not accept the fact that how her mother could die peacefully by brushing away the serenity and happiness of Saru. This is highly prominent when she says to her father: "She felt a bitter envy. It was like hearing that the person you most despised had achieved the one thing, the very thing, you most desired" (Deshpande 194).

The very fact that a woman, may it be a daughter, a wife or a mother is accepted to be the always the giver. They are expected to sacrifice every bit of their desire if it doesn't satisfy the male section of society. When Saru finally confronts with her father to give an end to the

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unending chain of thoughts and nightmares accompanied with it, she speaks the voice of every oppressed girl child who is a victim of gender-discrimination. She says:

He was always allowed to have his way. And I had to give in, go on giving in...All the grievance of an old but monumental injustice was in her words. She was not a wife, not a mother, not a professional woman whom others looked up to. She was the wronged child again, the unloved daughter, the scapegoat (Deshpande 182).

The author, very craftily has dived into the psyche of many such girl child, such women who are victims of such discrimination. She very well has penned down the emotions and intensity of Saru when she confronts what had exactly happened the day Dhruva died. She finally attains serenity when her father declares that she is no one to be blamed for the miserable accident. She comes in peace with herself and assures herself of being free from the past.

My Husband Is a Sadist:

A woman is constricted to the four walls and her primary duty is to serve man. May it be a daughter, a wife or a mother; they never get the chance to play the central character in the play of life. Saru had an alienated and detached childhood owing to this she became more rebellious and decided to study medical. Her mother was never in favour of her studies. Behind her strong determination to become a doctor was her passionate desire to certify her mother wrong and also a quenchless hunger for recognition. It was, in a way, a step towards her unfettering from the stereotypical existence. To Saru becoming a doctor creates an identity for herself. After she became a doctor, she objected the role of a daughter and looked up to the role of wife with the dream that the new character of her will help her in winning her freedom. Saru married Manohar, an ambitious poet who belonged to the lower class. She married beyond her societal status to rebel away from the traditional thoughts and values her orthodox mother adhered to. Manu was her saviour; he was the ideal romantic hero who freed her from her insecure unreal existence in the maternal home.

The darkness of childhood would erode with the light of marital bliss. It was not very late when Saru came out this daydreaming and faced the harsh reality of her marriage. The attitude of an Indian man catches new colour when a woman becomes their wife. Deshpande's heroines are modern yet clutched to traditional norms. The lack of balance between the respect given to man and woman is very well crafted here. When the neighbours came to know about the professional identity of Saru, this is where all the chaos started. Instantly, Saru attracted more attention and respect than Manu. The superiority of Saru breaks the traditional equilibrium that has been there

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since time immemorial, superior husband and inferior wife. Analysing her marital relationship, she recollects:

And so the esteem with which I surrounded made me inches taller. But perhaps, the same thing that made me inches taller made him inches shorter. He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband (Deshpande 42).

Deshpande very accurately have defined the fragile ego of a stereotypical Indian man who gets offended by a tiny piece of success stone of his wife. The initial years of her marriage gave her happiness and bliss but little did she know that this is short living. The problems started to creep in the moment everyone came to know she is a doctor. People now preferred here more and they came to visit her every now and then. “And now when we walked out of the room, there were nods and smiles murmured greetings and namastes. But they were all for me, only for me. There was nothing for him. He was almost totally ignored” (Deshpande 41).

Manu in the beginning encouraged and became her pillar of strength. He then had no issues with Saru working as she was helping in lifting the financial situations of their house. Gradually with time Saru’s economical as well as social status went far beyond of her husband. Manu was an underpaid lecturer in a not-so-well college while in contrast Saru led a busy, successful, and respected professional life. Her being a doctor satisfied her own determination and aim but it let no happiness enter into their house. The steady rise of Saru lessened the charm between her and Manu. The warmth and love came cooling down as ice and life was no bed of roses now. The thorns started pricking both of them. The conflict between them deepened even more the day when the lady reporter asked Manu: “How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?” (Deshpande 200).

A hurt Manu smiled at the moment but later asserted physical domination on Saru on the bed. The financial superiority of Saru had horrible impact on Manu. He could feel his manhood slipping out of his hands like sand and he could not catch hold of it. To make Saru feel the place of ‘husband’ he attacked on her physically and mentally.

“He attacked me like an animal that night. I was sleeping and I woke up and there was this..this man hurting me. With his hands, his teeth, his whole body” (Deshpande 201).

A man to satisfy his ego can go to any extent. Manu who once talked of Shelley and Keats to Saru making her life as beautiful as poetry, he now is the same man who is making it a living hell for Saru in her own house. In India a woman should always stand a step behind her

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male-counterpart in all aspects. This very quality is highlighted by the author via the character of Manu. It is difficult for men to accept the truth rather they find more pleasure in torturing the women. This context is well portrayed in the words of author in her work.

“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. That’s the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage” (Deshpande 137).

Strangely enough Manu is a normal man, a loving and caring husband during the day, who turns to a rapist at night. In front of this lecherous, libidinous rapist who unfortunately is her husband, Saru became a mute sufferer immersing in self-pity and strangled in silence.

“His eyes clear and unclouded. Nothing in them. Was it possible for a man to dissemble so much? The violent stranger of the night...and now, this. Am I crazy or is he? Can a man be so divided in himself?” (Deshpande 99).

Saru is seen playing the role of a two-in-one woman, a successful doctor in the day time wearing a white coat and an air of confidence and a terrified trapped animal at night. The reason of her plight and sufferings is the man whom she trusted to confide in to get peace and happiness.

“No partnership can ever be equal. It will always be unequal, but take care that it’s unequal in favour of your husband. If the scales tilt in your favour, god help you, both of you” (Deshpande 137).

Disillusioned, hopeless, lost and distressed with such a miserable life without self-dignity she goes back to her parental home to escape from her own self. In the peace and serenity of her paternal home she sits to analyse and recollect the dark corners of her mind and soul. She understands that though she has accepted modern ways and styles of living, her psychology remained tradition bound only. She is inhibited yet not free or liberated. She finds herself vulnerable, submissive, and conformist to a certain extent. This is very prominent in the lines:“...to know that the dark holds no terrors. That the terrors are inside us all the time. We carry them within us...” (Deshpande 85).

Escapism is never a solution. Sarita through her journey proves this. In order to free our self from the terrors, we should investigate us. When Sarita deeply introspected, she realised that she is not accountable to the failure of Manu. Saru is awakened at the end of the story, the ‘new’ Sarita who is now ready to confront what may come. She has been escaping the harsh realities of life till the time she came home. With all her dare when she peeped into herself, she discovered many truths. She made herself ready to face Manu. Truly, in every sense Sarita challenges the paradigms of the patriarchal set up. She very wisely takes out the nakedness of patriarchal

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system of society where a fine balance is expected. Balance, for them is not being equal in every aspect rather balance here means that the man should always be powerful and the women ought to be weaker. To make life not out of gear, this balance needs to be maintained.

Saru, becomes the flag holder of ‘New Indian’ woman; woman who is assertive, independent, and ready to live her life according to her own terms. She rejects being a puppet anymore. Finally, she is able to preserve her identity, accepting her own personal and private limitations. She at last affirms her own individuality.

Conclusion

Shashi Deshpande carves out powerfully the psychological problem of a career-oriented woman and puts forward it artistically without crossing the limitations of art. Her women characters tend to discover themselves within their limited arena. The novel defines that strong will can face any problem of however enormous and large dimension it may be. Self-confidence and courage can tackle any problem. Escapism is never a solution. The courage to face hardship is inside the human mind. Sarita’s all endeavours now are focused towards the only objective that is to live. She is mentally prepared to confront Manu. She could not hope for a help from external world rather it was her own self; she has to find out the way out from her inner self. Sarita finally gives an end to the self-imposed exile because of societal pressures. Thus, she triumphs to shed off the darkness which has engulfed her life since her childhood.

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