

**Struggle for Feminine Identity in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions***

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Abstract:

The term 'Diaspora' is used to refer to any people and it has derived from Greek word which means to disperse or scatter. The first-generation migrants like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Bharati Mukherjee projected the issues like rootlessness, alienation, racism, nostalgia, and longing. The recent writers like Jhumpha Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Bharati Mukerjee, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Bharati Mukherjee and Ruth Praver Jhabvala left India and settled in United States. Shashi Deshpande's birth place is Karnataka but she migrated to Bombay. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* depicts the tale of the dark life of a protagonist Sarita who struggles to be free from her childhood till her position as a wife. She portrays Sarita and her frustrations, her awareness of the problems, her recognition of the crisis in her life and her efforts for resolution. *The Palace of Illusions* retells the story of the Mahabharata in Panchaali's point of view about her sufferings. The present paper analyzes the characters of Sarita's predicaments and her struggles in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and Draupadi's sufferings in *The Palace of Illusions* and how both the characters struggle to get their identity and liberty in their family as well as in the society.

Keywords: Love, Marriage, Quest for Identity, Gender Discrimination, Male patriarchy, Guilty Consciousness, Struggle for liberty.

Indian writers writing in English present varying and conflicting images of woman in their works. Indian Writing in English has flourished to a great extent during the post-colonial era. This era has provided great opportunities to many writers in Indian Writing in English. The term 'Diaspora' is used to refer to any people and it has derived from Greek word which means to disperse or scatter. The Immigrants face racial problems, cultural shock, sense of alienation, nostalgic memoirs of their native lands and trauma of displacement to the people of various Diasporas. Diasporic writers are caught between the two worlds and their various themes are based on Postcolonial concepts like colonization, decolonization, search for identity, and

psychological impact of colonization, sense of alienation in one's own land or foreign land and return to native land. In the globalization, everyone wants to move from his or her native soul for a better life. The immigrant characters do not have a sense of belonging to their place and they search for their identities. Indian immigrants seek their identities. Identity is either static for a diasporic person or keeps on changing with time. Some essential elements from markers of identity are food, clothes, language, religion, music, dance, myths, legends, customs, individual community and rites of passage and others. Anyhow, a distinction is made between immigrant culture and ethnic identity. The Diasporic writings are known as expatriate wrings or immigrant writings. Hybrid identity is a fusion of two cultures. Hybridity shows the state of 'inbetweenness, as in a person who stands between two cultures. This concept is embodied in Homi Bhabha's own life. He was born into a Parsi Community in Bombay, India. "He was educated both in his native country and at Oxford University; he subsequently taught at Universities in England and America, and now teaches at Harvard."(Habib 750) The immigrants are citizens of two countries and there are many Indian women writers based in USA, Canada, Britain and the other parts of the world. The recent writers like Jhumpha Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Bharati Mukerjee, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Bharati Mukherjee and Ruth Praver Jhabvala left India and settled in United States. The first-generation migrants like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Bharati Mukherjee projected the issues like rootlessness, alienation, racism, nostalgia, and longing. Shashi Deshpande's birth place is Karnataka but she migrated to Bombay. Her prominent novels are *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *That Long Silence*, *The Binding Vine*, *A Matter of Time*, *Roots and Shadows*, *Small Remedies* and *If I Die Today*. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* depicts the story of a protagonist Sarita who struggles to be free from her childhood till her position as a wife. In their works, women emerge as individuals challenging their existential survival.

Many Indian women writers have moved away from traditional enduring, self-sacrificing women towards that of women in conflict in search for identity.

"The feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the 'women's movement' of the 1960s...Elaine Showalter coined the term 'gynocritics', meaning the study of gynotexts, but the subjects of gynocriticism are the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women... "Showalter detects in the history of Women's writing a feminine phase (1840-80) in which women writers imitated dominant male artistic norms and aesthetic standards; then a feminist phase (1880-1920) in which radical and often separatist positions are maintained; and finally a female phase (1920 onwards) which looked particularly at female writing and female experience."(Barry 116, 118)

Shashi Deshpande, a prominent writer in Indian writing in English, was born in Dharward, in Karnataka in 1938. Her father Sriranga was a renowned Kannada dramatist and also a writer. She belonged to upper middle-class family. She completed her education at a protestant mission school in Karnataka. "Since childhood he was fond of English Literature and used to read various types of English books. Particularly she liked the work of Jane Austen." (Agarwal 12) She lives in Bangalore at present. She is a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990 for the novel *That Long Silence* and the Padma Shri Award in 2009. Besides, the novels and short stories, Shashi Deshpande has also published several children's books in English.

She has written the screen play for Hindi feature film, Drishti. “Her novels are mainly based on women lives and their problems in the Indian context. For this reason, she has been labelled feminist.” (Agarwal 13) Her first novel is *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), and it was translated in to German and Russian languages. *If I Die Today*, *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Vine*(1993), *A Matter of Time*(1996) and her eminent short stories are *The Legacy and Other Stories*(1978), *It Was Dark and Other Stories*(1986), *It Was Nightingale and Other Stories*(1986) and *The Miracle and Other Stories* (1986) “She is preoccupied with the interest of women and their state in Indian society and large traditional joint families. Supremacy of male children and men in Indian families arouses a mild sense of anger and feminist anger in most of her novels.” (Agarwal 122)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (25 July 1956-) an Indo-American author, works as a Professor of English in the University of Houston. She migrated from Calcutta to California in 1976. She at present lives in Sans Francisco with her husband and her two children. Her favorite writer is Rabindranath Tagore who inspired her through his impressive works. She is also a co-founder and former president of a helpline for South Asian Women. Maitri, the organization was initiated by her with the help of a group of friends. Her immigrant experience inspires her to write novels and short stories about immigrants' lives. Her writings are classified into three genres poetry, short story and novels. Her prominent collections of poetry are *Black Candle* (1991), and *Leaving Yuba City* (1997) and her collection of two short stories, *Arranged Marriage* (1995) and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001). Her novels are *The Mistress of Spices*(1997), *Sister of My Heart*(1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Conch Bearer* (2003), *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming*(2005), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *Shadow Land* (2011), *Oleander Girl* (2013), *Grandma and The Great Gourd* (2013), *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016), and *The Forest of Enchantments*(2019). *The Palace of Illusions* retells the story of the Mahabharata in Panchaali's point of view about her sufferings.

The Dark holds No Terrors portrays the story of a protagonist Sarita who struggles to be free from her childhood till her position as wife. She portrays Sarita and her frustrations, her awareness of the problems, her recognition of the crisis in her life and her efforts for resolution. The novel is presented in four parts and the important issues are bitterness towards mother, insecurity of Manu, Saru's relationship with Manu and children, and Dhruva's death. The significant events belong to the first part and the other three parts elaborate Saru's introspection and her reaction to different issues touched upon the first part. In Sarita's point of view, her mother is a domineering woman who in a traditional set up, has gained power as the lady of the house. Sarita disgusts her mother who always interrupts in Sarita's development in her life. The novelist has exhibited the gap between mother-daughter relationships in this novel. Generally, mother will support and take care of her daughter's life but here, it is a conflict between the old and the young, the traditional mother and the modern woman Sarita who has no rights to do anything according to her desire in her life. The hatred is deep-rooted. “A kind of shame that engulfed me, making me want to rage, to scream against the fact that put me in the same class as my mother... if you're a woman, I don't want to be one”(DHNT 55).

This novel reveals the life of Sarita who is neglected and ignored by her parents especially by her mother who is an adamant, stubborn and also deep rooted in tradition in her

character. Her mother shows gender- discrimination of Sarita's mother who treats her son Dhruva and her daughter Saru. Saru's mother loves her son Dhruva than Saru. Her mother does not give importance to her daughter. Her mother does not celebrate Sarita's birthday but every year she celebrate Dhruva's birthday but every year she celebrates Dhruva's birthday. At the same time Saru's birthday goes on silently. On Sarita's fifteenth birthday, Saru expects a gift, smiles and meals from her mother. She receives a pair of ear rings as her birthday gift which is not given to her personally but left in the Pooja room. To make matters worse, she is told by her mother: "You're a big girl now. Time you had something nice to wear in your ears. We must make you some gold bangles next year"(DHNT55). The ear rings are not to make her happy. Therefore the gift is disappointment to her, "Will you live with us all your life? Why not? You can't. And Dhruva. He is different. He is a boy"(DHNT 40). These words of Sarita's mother establish the traditional Indian mother against whom Saru has to rebel all her life. These points show Sarita's mother's gender difference between her daughter and her son.

The novelist explains Sarita's childhood experience in this novel. While Saru, her friends and Dhruva play in the sea, her brother gets drowned and died. After this event, her mother often scolds her for being responsible for her son's death. It is enhanced by her mother's words, "You killed your brother... Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead?" (DHNT 173) Her mother's accusation records in Saru's inner heart and they frequently disturb her at night and day. She suffers a lot of brother's death. Sarita's mother is delight when Saru gets a first class in her higher education, but she opposes Saru's determination to be a doctor. The primary cause is for opposing Saru's decision that she does not like her daughters staying in a hostel in Bombay. Moreover, the medical education is expensive and her father is not a millionaire. Saru rebels against her mother by going to Bombay to study medicine. The hostel life is a kind of rebirth in to a totally different world, "where you don't have to stay outside, for those three days you are no longer untouchable ; you can even talk about it. Oh, damn. I must change again. It's like a tap that's what it is"(DHNT 87). Finally, Saru joins in the medical college against her mother's wishes.

When Sarita falls in love with Manohar, she defies the authority of the mother. Manohar is a Post graduate student. He is not only a good student but also secretary of the Literary Association, an active member of Dramatic Society, a budding writer and also a poet. Sarita chooses her life partner Manohar and marries him against her mother's wish. Sarita's mother curses her, "I know all these love marriages. It's for a few days then quarrels all the time. Don't come crying to us then. To You? ... I'll never do. Never!."(DHNT 62) Sarita's mother denies and despises Manohar to marry Saru due to his low caste. "What caste is he? ...a Brahmin? Of course not... Oh, so they are low caste people, are they?"(DHNT 87). In the beginning, Saru and Manu are quite happy in their marriage life. She says, "My husband is a sadist... He's a wreck, a ruin, a sadist ... Can I divorce my husband? Any reasons? He's cruel."(DHNT 88).

One night Saru wakes up from the dream of Dhruva while Manu asks her about the dream. She suffers due to her guilt of conscious for Dhruva's death. But she says, "I dreamt that you had rejected me" (DHNT 146). Saru begins to establish herself as a doctor. People visit her

for various intentions which create the gap between Manu and Saru. Saru's husband Manu also cannot tolerate the people's greetings to her and ignoring him. After few days, the situation changes and Manu's salary is not enough to manage their family without Saru's earning. Manu also needs her income. She works hard in the hospital as a doctor as well as in her home. But, later she is unable to work too much and becomes weary, "Manu, I want to stop working. I want to give it all up... My practice, the hospital, everything" (DHNT 72). But Manu does not want her to leave her job. He feels that they cannot maintain the same standard with only his income. At the same time, the financial ascendance of Sarita renders Manu impotent. The only way he can regain the potency and masculinity is urged through sexual assault upon Sarita. During day time, Manu is a cheerful human being, a loving husband turns in to a rapist and sadist at night. It terrifies and humiliates Saru. Then, she finds that her husband does not know about himself how he behaves to her in the nights. The next morning he usually talks to his children and also to his wife. It occurs again and again. Saru and Manu have two children, Abhijit and Renuka.

After listening to her mother's demise news, she goes to her parents' home. Everything looks strange to her in spite of the fact, that there is no change in the setting. She is an unwelcome stranger and unwanted guest. Now, she is alien to her parents. She comes back a totally changed woman. When she is at her Parents' home, she often longs for her children. She can feel Renu's smooth cheek and Abhi's weight on her lap. She receives many letters from her children. She proudly shows her father done by Renu. She finds an expression of pride and affection on her father's face. After Saru's marriage, she has no relation with her parents. Thus, her children do not aware of their grandfather. She wants to divorce her husband but she does not do because of her children. Saru inquires about her mother's last words, but she did not say anything about Saru and her mother passed away silently. She admits that it is because of her mother's curse that she is "unhappy, Destroyed" (DHNT 197). Her father speaks to Saru about Manu's letter to Saru who frankly reveals her husband who behaves like a sadist. "My husband is a sadist. He is cruel to be...in bed" (DHNT 180). Everyone is alone and that is no cause for despair. She will no longer be a puppet. Her marriage is a shadow. She held on to the marriage because she did not want to probe her right. Only she can be her refuge. Saru undergoes the arduous journey into herself and learns to free herself of guilt, shame, humiliation, and she is also initiated in to the mystery of human existence. The epigraph of the novel gains its total significance when Saru realizes her parental home cannot be a refuge. She understands that neither her father nor her husband can be her own refuge. She is her own refuge. She has to overcome herself. She has to kill the ghosts that haunt her, she has to find her own way to salvation. The parental home initiated the protagonists in to an understanding of the meaning of human life. Saru reflects on the human situation. "All right. So I'm alone. But so everyone else. Human beings ... they are going to fail you. But because there's just us, because there's no one else, we have to go only trying. If we can't believe ourselves we're sunk" (DHNT 200). These lines show Saru's alienated position and her self-realization and her self-confidence.

Saru's father says, Manu has written letters to him. In the letter, Manu mentions, he wrote many letters to his wife. She writes to her children, not to him, because she keeps all the unopened letters in her suitcase. Saru thinks about her life and reacts to every situation. She becomes sensitive to every sound, all the time conscious of Manu reaching and knocking at the

door. At that moment, she tells her father to ask Manu, "Baba, if Manu comes, tell him to wait, I'll be back as soon as I can." (DHNT 202). Thus the novel ends with the positive hope that Manu and Saru will reunite in their life.

Shashi Deshpande has brought woman to centre stage in all her novels as William Shakespeare in his plays. In fact, in her attempt to portray the whole society in her writings, somehow as the characters take shape, women characters turn out to be the protagonists. Their fear in beginning of the novel in Saru's return to her parent's home and this beginning allows the novelist to use the cinematic technique of Flashback. The title of the novel is appropriately symbolic. It is a shift towards self-realization after getting rid of her guilt and terror. Sarita achieves freedom from despondency after casting off her long life guilt and coming out of the painful memories of her past through new enlightenment, now nights would no terrors to Sarita's significant roles such as a daughter and her new role wife that will help in winning her freedom. Swayamvar is also a kind of Indian marriage ceremony in which a woman selects her husband. Marriages are made in heaven. Draupadi's love and her marriage are one of the prominent themes of Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. Draupadi is an independent woman and therefore she has privilege to select her life partner in Swayamvar. Lord Krishna and others suggest her to select Arjun as her husband in Swayamvar. Traditional marriage is substantiated in the following lines, "An hour ago, I'd put a wedding garland around his neck. " (PI 98) Her marriage changes her name as Panchaali who has married the Pandavas as per Kunti's order. Kunti says, "All of you must marry this woman." (PI 108)

The novelist evokes a good relationship between Kunti and her daughter-in-law Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions*. Draupadi obeys her mother-in-law in cooking and she has other responsibilities in her life. She learns slowly to prepare brinjal curry. Kunti always guides her daughter -in-law to perform good deeds because of her love and affection. Kunti's secret about her son Karna's birth is maintained by her daughter-in-law till her death. Both of them have mutual understanding. When the Pandavas enquire about their brother Karna, Kunti, Draupadi hide it secretly. But Draupadi is in front of all humiliated by Dushshasan in the court. She laughed at Duryodhana while he fell down in the palace that seems magical and illusions. Her laughter with her friends only induces Duryodhana to revenge the Pandavas and their wife. This is the chief cause for her sufferings. Woman is a property and puppet in Male's point of view. The Pandavas failed in the dice game with their rivals. Draupadi's sufferings and revengeful curse are only the primary reason for the war.

Indian woman's happiness lies in the fulfillment of her family role. This can be expressed so: "She fails to understand that her psychological makeup is such that she can never be a happy and true woman without the sunshine of a home, however complicated the home life may be. This is all true of an Indian Woman, who comes mostly from authoritarian houses bound by traditional values." (Chauhan 206)

Generally, men treat women as slaves. When Draupadi comes to know about the failure of the Pandavas in the dice, she exposes her feelings in the following words: "I am a Queen, Daughter of Draupadi, sister of Dhristadyuma, mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like dancing. But then I remembered what I'd read a long ago in a book, never imagining that quaint law could ever have

any power over me. The wife is the property of the husband, no less than a cow or a slave.”(PI 190)

The novelist presents here women’s position after their marriage. She has brought out feminist perspective in *The Palace of Illusions*. Draupadi has been humiliated by Duryodhan’s act of tyranny at the court in front of all the elders: “I found myself in court, a hundred male eyes burning through me. Gathering my disordered saree around me, I demanded help from my husbands”(PI 191) Draupadi’s severe prayer to Lord Krishna rescues her from the critical situation. After Draupadi’s curse, the Pandavas are punished for that they must lead their life in the forest for twelve years and one year disguise life as per Duryodhan’s command. When they live their one year disguise life at the king Virat’s palace, Draupadi works as an attendant in disguise to Queen Sudheshna. Draupadi is often teased and tortured by Keechak, Queen Sudheshna’s brother. Being charmed by her beauty, he harasses her frequently. Draupadi informs this to Yudhisthir, “If Keechack touches me again, I’ll swallow poison.” (PI 231) Bheem assures her to assassinate him in the next day morning. In this way, her husband Bheem solves her problem. Here, Draupadi’s error is nothing to suffer by Keechack. Draupadi obeys her husbands traditionally as virtue and according to the Mahabarat, Wives were considered as movable property.’ The novelist portrays the character Draupadi who follows tradition as virtue and she is also independent to choose her husband and to curse the Kauravas against injustice. But, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Shashi Deshpande depicts Sarita as a literate person, doctor but she does not have freedom to select her low caste lover even though she marries Manu against her marriage and then after her marriage her sadist husband treats her cruelly at night times. Therefore, Indian woman also subscribes to the ideal image of womanhood.

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