

CAREER WOMAN'S PREDICAMENT IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS*

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande is an eminent and distinguished novelist in contemporary Indian English fiction. She is a highly woman-conscious writer who has presented through her literary ventures a truthful account of the Indian woman placed in a male dominated Indian society. She has explored and analysed the emotional world of women with great insight and perception. She admits that she is able to sympathise better with women, and, therefore, her protagonists are mostly women. She says that her writing is born out of her personal experiences, and, hence, she has been able to raise women's cause more sincerely and efficaciously. In almost all her novels she lays bare the wounded psyche of women and provides a peep in their innermost feelings and complexities which they go through in the patriarchal set up. The Dark Holds No Terrors is a novel that explores the myth of male superiority and ego. It also depicts how the women undergo a humiliating and disgusting treatment in the society which is unconcerned and unmindful of their lot. The protagonist, Saru, in the novel, is a 'new woman' who denies succumbing and surrendering and her unyielding will be her strength, howsoever, big the challenge is. This paper will endeavour to see how her struggle symbolizes a wish, a desire to be a whole human being. Her quest for identity and self-expression cannot be limited to her alone, but it transgresses the boundaries and barriers and she becomes a voice of every awakened and liberated woman.

Key Words: *New Woman, Patriarchy, Male Superiority, Identity, Predicament.*

Most of the Indian novels which deal with the issues related with women often provide a superficial treatment or end up glorifying the traditional virtues of Indian woman, like tolerance, faithfulness and servile acceptance of whatever is meted out to her. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, the first novel by Shashi Deshpande, is entirely different in the sense that it analyses the myth of a man's indubitable superiority and the myth of woman being a martyr and epitome of all goodness. It brings to the fore the problems experienced by a career woman, a comparatively new phenomena in Indian English fiction. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a feminist novel not on the loan basis of the female centrality in it. The novel focuses on woman's awareness of her predicament, her wanting to be recognised as a person than as a woman, and her wish to have an independent social image. Saru's feminist reactions take her to her childhood, when she had to contend with sexist discrimination at home. Saru's mother loves her brother but hates her, and when he is drowned, she blames her for no fault of her own. "You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive,

when he's dead"?¹ This is the plight not only of Saru but of millions who are born as girls. The fault lies with their gender and not with them. It brings into focus the concepts of gender which are man-made. As Simone de Beauvoir rightly observes, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature - which is described as feminine".²

When Saru expresses her wish to stay with her mother all her life, her mother disallows. But her brother Dhruva can stay, He is different, he is a boy".³ This gender difference in her mother's treatment of her son and daughter enrages Saru. She rebels against her, "If you're a woman, I don't want to be one".⁴ It is this which makes Saru resent the role of a daughter. She looks forward to the role of a wife with the hope that it will give her relief from the oppression of mother and will give her freedom. This novel projects the postmodern dilemma of a woman who strongly resents the onslaughts on her individuality and identity. The antagonism is faced mainly from two persons – from Saru's mother and from Manohar, Saru's husband. Both of them represent the values and norms established by a patriarchal society. Surprisingly, a woman can advance the male point of view can be seen in the case of Saru's mother. Saru wanted to join medical college but her mother is against her. She tells Saru's father, "Let her go for a B.Sc. – you can get her married in two years and our responsibility will be over".⁵ This reflects that girls are seen as belongings to a different family altogether and their socialization stresses their future role as wives. Saru breaks the umbilical cords – leaves home. This is her first public defiance of the patriarchal system. Saru further flouts when she becomes economically independent and marries a man whom she loves. The institution of home, which is supposed to foster the growth of a child, robs the woman of her respectability and individuality. The rejection of home and family at this juncture in the novel is Saru's first foot towards independence. She meets Manohar and begins to love him. She defies her parents and marries him. Saru's marriage is to get away from her mother and from her home. It is her first step towards autonomy for the mother is the first pedagogue of the do's and don'ts on the woman.

Saru is disappointed with her married life. Marriage, the promised end in a traditional society, becomes only another enclosure in the feminist discourse that restricts the movement towards autonomy and self-realization. Saru even when she comes back home 'felt herself enclosed'. When she enters her room, she finds male clothes hanging on the wall and realizes that she has no room for her own. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* reacts against the traditional concept "everything in a girl's life is shaped to that single purpose of pleasing a male".⁶ There are references to the Women's Liberation ideologue Betty Friedan and that of Virginia Woolf's idea of a woman's right to a 'room of her own'. Saru becomes a famous doctor and her husband turned out to be simply a lecturer. This made her socially and economically superior. Slowly an affected indifference started gleaming through his tone because there were nods and smiles, murmured greetings and namastes. But they were all for Saru and nothing for Manohar. He was almost ignored. The esteem she earned around her made her inches taller. She says that she used to be his bride, now she is a lady doctor and he is her husband. The ego clash became inevitable because

she was something more than his wife, and he remained where he was. This upside down alteration destroys their marriage. She comes to terms with mendacity behind the idea of equality she had read in books. Saru tries to escape from the drudgery of her life with her husband. It was not just drudgery but brutality – both physical and psychological. In a tormenting saga of a tormented wife, Shashi Deshpande portrays the brief rebellion (rather than escape) of a young bright woman. Saru, a successful doctor, is sexually abused by her husband. Although she neither possesses the self-effacing quality of her mother, nor the resignation of her grandmother, she is still unwilling to publicize the relationship she has with Manu, her husband for it is like syphilis or leprosy diseases that cannot be revealed. All she wants is to “sleep peacefully the night through. To wake up without pain. To go through tomorrow without apprehension. Not to think. Not to dream. Just to live”.⁷ As she is too imbued with traditional ideas about separation and divorce, the only way she can rebel is by going back to her father’s house. She remonstrates against injustices done to her by unwillingness to comply unconditionally with the accepted norms. She wants society, her husband, her children, her father to realize that she is not just a wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister but much more. But her rebellion has to be aborted. She will go back with her husband for she is not bold enough to break the tradition.

This novel is a sad commentary on the incompatibility and hypocrisy of married life which Deshpande has presented realistically. What Saru wants is the freedom to think and decide for herself and the liberation for her womanhood. She finds her ‘womanly self’ trapped and suffocated within her family. Hence, she tries to escape from the tailored role. Saru’s silence against her sexual predicament only reveals the modern woman’s dilemma – of knowing the psychological nature of the problem but hesitant to talk about it. She says that she can do nothing. She just endures because endurance is still Indian woman’s way, and the discussion of sex in public still seems ‘indecent’. Saru’s experience compels her to deny the existence of love. Saru’s way of looking at love and marriage only from a sexual perspective aligns her with the feminist perspective for they define these categories only with sex/lust and give no importance to their familial connotations. Saru experiences disillusionment in sex and silently suffers sexual humiliation. She strives for expression through an extra-marital affair with Boozie and Padmakar Rao. What is significant about this relationship is that she suffers no guilt, thus evolving a new code of sexual ethics. She is unable to endure her husband’s torture and decides to leave for her parents’ home which she had rejected earlier. Saru is taken in, but finds herself still a homeless refugee. She feels that her parental home cannot be her shelter. She understands that neither her father nor her husband Manohar can be her anchorage. She has to seek her haven. She has to overcome herself; she has to kill the ghost that haunts her; she has to find her own way to salvation. The parental home makes her to have knowledge of the human life, and Saru reflects on the situation:

All right, so I’m alone. But so’s everyone else. Human beings – they’re going to fail you: But because there’re just us, because there’s no one else, we have to go on trying. If we can’t believe in ourselves, we’re sunk.⁸

Saru has gained the assertion of will and confidence in her. She learns to trust herself. Saru, who has instructed her father not to open the door for her husband Manu, now tells her father to ask Manu to wait if he happens to come. In the very first part of the novel Saru says, as long as there is a patient before her, she feels real. She refers to the profession as a crutch which speaks for its indispensability. The novel's ending with Saru setting out to attend a patient indicates the assertion of her career. There can be no compromise about it. This is the expression of her individuality, her eagerness to encounter the reality and not to run away from it. The doctor in Saru is much more important than the wife and the mother in her. She realises that the profession as a doctor is her own and she will decide what to do with it. "My life is my own". She will no longer be a puppet. Her marriage is a shadow. Manu's seething inferiority complex explodes when a girl while interviewing him asks as to how he feels when he comes to know that his wife earns more than him. His male ego is hurt. His masculinity resurfaces through his sexual onslaught upon Saru. Since that day Manu became a sadist. Thus, the kind and jolly husband by day turns out to be a lascivious and licentious rapist at night. While the woman, out of economic necessity, goes to work, this economic independence, this illusory power, in a way enhances rejection by her man. Even when she does not take advantage of this independence, her husband does not appreciate her. The status of the man is not totally dependent on being a provider as Jessie Bernard seems to suggest. Although he may not be the absolute provider, he is still the dominant force and authority in the house. Often a man's frustration at not finding employment, at not being able to get along in the world outside, at being impotent to protect either himself or his family from the hostile environment make him a tormentor at home. Saru's situation is explicitly described as she says she has come away from her parents in a fever of excitement after the last battle. The die was cast, the decisions were taken and her boats were burnt. She further says there can be no turning back.

P. Ramamoorthi writes: "Woman, in order to achieve her freedom, seeks marriage as an alternative to the bondage created by the parental family. She resents the role of a daughter and looks forward to the role of wife with the hope that her new role will help in winning their freedom".⁹ Saru could not get the freedom which she desired from her marriage. She compromises with the situation. In her utter desperation she addresses girls in a college.

"If you want to be happily married, there is one thing you have to remember. If he's an M A, you should be B A. If he's 5' 5" tall, you shouldn't be more than 5' 3" tall. If he is earning Rs.500, you should never earn more than Rs. 499. That's the only rule to follow – you can nag, complain, whine, moan but you can never be strong. That's wrong which will never be forgiven".¹⁰

Saru wishes if she had belonged to another time where a woman had no choice but to go on. It was so easier for women in olden days to accept and not to struggle because they believed, they knew, there was nothing else for them, and they called it their fate. But Saru is a 'new woman' who denies succumbing and surrendering. She is educated, intelligent and economically

independent; she cannot accept her destiny as her fate written on her forehead. Her unyielding will be her strength, howsoever, big the challenge is. She will go down fighting, gory her end be.

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