

Sarita's Quest of Selfhood: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's 'The Dark Holds No Terrors'

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Abstract:-

Shashi Deshpande has been accepted as a significant literary figure on the contemporary literary scene. Being a feminist, Shashi Deshpande has created some wonderful women characters. Each novel of hers has a woman character at the centre of the action. Each woman is distinguished by her typical traits and she speaks the language of her own sex making her novels female centric. Deshpande's women protagonists are, therefore, anti-patriarchy and they push with their elbows their male counterparts to the border in order to occupy the central position in the action. These women are born and brought up in megacities like Bangalore and Mumbai and speak the language of an educated middle class.

The discriminating socio-cultural values, attitudes and practices which cripple the personality of the female child are highlighted in the novel. The girl child is unwanted at birth and neglected during childhood and

adolescence. Saru of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* suffers from gender discrimination right from her birth. She is unwelcome one in the family because her parent's preference is for a male child as their first – born. Saru sees the jubilation over the arrival of her brother Dhruva at the family as a reinforcement of her discrimination

Introduction :-

Shashi Deshpande maintains a unique position among the contemporary, up-coming Indian writers in English. Meena Shirwadkar notes: “Writers appear not to have paid much attention to the recent phenomenon of the educated earning wife and her adjustment or maladjustment in the family.”¹ We find that Shashi Deshpande has minutely dealt with the phenomenon, arriving at the conclusion that women, after attaining all types of rights, are now struggling to adjust rather than to get free from the traditional world.

The female protagonists of the novels of Shashi Deshpande make all sorts of efforts in order to create their identity in this society which is governed by males. The quest for identity ‘Who I am’ becomes a hard nut to crack for a woman in male-dominated society. She is moulded, reshaped and reoriented by man and for man. Patriarchal social set-up has denied existence to women. This setup assigns the status for a woman that she should be somebody's daughter, a sister, a wife and as a mother. Thus she is always defined by her relation to someone else invariably a male of the family.

Patriarchal social set-up has denied woman the possibility of being a 'She', a person of achieving individualism, an identity of her own.

Change is the rule of nature. Woman began to kick out the imposed identity and cherished the dream of having an identity of her own. P. Ramamoorthi says, ".....A woman is a being. She is not an appendage of man.....She is not an addition to man. She is an autonomous being capable of, through trial and errors, finding her own way to salvation....."¹ Salvation from the tyrannical ways that tend to deprive a woman from her rightful place in the society, that deny her an independent existence of her own. These are the goals of today's woman that she is aspiring for, though her way towards attaining autonomy, is not smooth and she has to face hurdles both from the outside world as well as from her own ambivalence. All the definitions about a woman's conduct and behaviour etc. were given by man. Manu, the law giver of Hindu Dharma Shastra, clearly assigns to woman supporting position to man. The traditional woman was thus the product of man's needs. Therefore the questions which one faces about the new woman are: Is this new woman a part of the old set-up or has broken away completely from the traditional 'old' concepts? Or is she only as extension of the traditional woman with only marginal changes to suit her newly acquired position and dignity? Has she really acquired position and dignity? Has she really acquired the age-old dream of having an identity of her own and she is really capable enough to adhere to it? These are the issues that demand a full concentration because the (identity) question is a complex issue and major concern of today's woman.

Sarita's (Saru's) Quest of Selfhood in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*:-The question of existence, 'Who am I?' and 'What is my own identity?' that Shashi Deshpande deals with is as old as human nature itself. Mary Wollaston Craft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* refuted the idea of woman being weak. According to her a woman's weakness is the direct result of nurture rather than nature, her nurture to the social and familial conditions rather than the qualities which are innate to the female sex. This is the major concern of Shashi Deshpande. This she has reflected in her novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* that marks the beginning of the quest of woman for herself. Her women protagonist, Sarita is continuously engaged in a search of the meaning of her existence. Through this novel Shashi Deshpande explores this conflicting situation of today's educated women and their predicament against the background of contemporary India. While doing so she analyses the socio-cultural modes and values that have given Indian women their image and roles towards themselves as well as towards society. What the novelists tried to illustrate is how these various roles sometimes tend to crush their inner self completely and this makes them benefit of their identity, so that they "become, fluid, with no shape, no form."

Shashi Deshpande in an interview with Lakshmi Holmstrom reacts to this observation saying: "I was astounded. Actually it didn't start for me, that novel, with the notion of rape, or sexual domination. It started with a couple,

the uneasiness or tension between them. And I knew the man was not doing well in his career as the woman was, and I connected the two.”²

Saru’s bitter realization is that a woman must necessarily remain a step behind her husband. Surprisingly enough, no less a person than John Ruskin holds a similar view: “A man ought to know any language or science he learns thoroughly; while a woman ought to know the same language or science only so far as may enable her to sympathize in her husband’s pleasures, and in those of his best friends.”³

In one of her interviews, Shashi Deshpande offers an explanation for this disparity in opinion between a male and a female reader. She says: “I find a lot of men unsympathetic to my writing and a lot of women extremely sympathetic. This is because the world is viewed in different ways by men and women. Women see a mirror image and men see, perhaps, a deformed image of themselves.”⁴

A study of Shashi Deshpande’s novels from a feminist viewpoint reveals the essential loneliness of the heroines bordering on alienation, reminding us of the plight of the protagonists of Anita Desai. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* where Saru as a child grows up almost resenting her mother, while her father remains a shadowy figure in the background. Padmakar has his own selfish reasons for willing to develop a more intimate relationship with her. He likes to meet her because he finds no companionship in his wife who cannot think beyond mundane needs in everyday life. Saru thinks, “Love... how she scorned the word now. There

was no such thing between man and woman. There was only a need which called love.”⁵

Marital bonds are not easy to break both for men and women. Of course, for the woman marriage also represents the ultimate goal of her existence. Without her marital status, she would be a cipher since society views her only as a daughter, wife or mother.

As soon as Sarita becomes a provider of bread and butter to her family, a wall of silence rises between her and her husband. Her economic and professional independence and superiority hurts the ego of her husband, makes him two inches inferior to her and even deprives him of his manhood. In order to seek revenge on his wife, Manu turns a sadist and inflicts on her nightly cruelties which he does, of course, unconsciously at a different level of his being. After fifteen years of her marriage and after the death of her cruel and hated mother, Sarita comes back to her father with her divided self bewildered, dismayed and confused leaving behind her husband and two children. The novelist writes how Sarita is divided into so many selves on account of her failure in balancing her careerism with her wifeness and motherhood:

They come to her then, all those selves she had rejected so resolutely at first, and so passionately embraced later. The guilty sister, the undutiful daughter, the unloving wife.... persons spiked with guilt. Yes, she was all of them, she could not deny that now. She had to accept these selves to become whole again. But if she

was all of them, they were not all of her. She was all these and so much more.⁶

Sunita Reddy rightly remarks:

As long as she (Sarita) is merely a medical student and her husband the bread winner, there is peace at home, even if “home” is surrounded by filth and stench. The problems arise only when she gains recognition as a doctor. Saru remembers even the exact incident which becomes a turning point in their existence.⁷

As soon as Sarita assumes her new role as a career woman, her family happiness which she shared with her husband and children disappears from her life.

One can argue that being an unwanted child is the root, the origin of Saru’s tragic tale. The need of parental love is essential for the well-being of an individual’s mental health. Right from the beginning of her life, she does not belong to any place or person. She is “like a homeless refugee... Which is my room? I have none.” Her life lacks an anchor. She is lost, she is rejected by her mother and thereby, her father in such a complete manner that the sense of being permanently rejected kills her hope, curiosity and sense of expectancy. After getting married, her happiness is short-lived and is marred by her fear of rejection. She cannot drink the cup of joy because her mind is

convinced that she can never be loved. That is the psychology of an unwanted child as well as Saru's. While introspecting, she confronts her fear of rejection. "The fear was there, the secret fear that behind each loving word...lay the enemy, the snake, the monster of rejection."⁸

Saru has worked hard to become a doctor. She is sensible and smart. But no one accepts it, and there it is the reality of an Indian woman. The more capable she is, the more she will be rebuked and condemned by the society. As a typical product of the eastern culture, the Indian girl-child is confused and bewildered at the physical changes taking place within her body at the time of puberty. She feels abhorrent but helpless. With the growth of her body, she is painfully aware of her stepping into that onerous and mortifying state of womanhood. When Kamala of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, comes to know that her daughter is going to marry a man of her choice, the first question that comes out from her is: "What caste is he? Is he is a Brahmin?" a characteristic question from a woman rooted in the orthodox culture of the colonized. In Indian traditional marriages one of the essential conditions is that the bride and the groom are of the same caste. Sarita, however, fights back parental pressure, breaks the societal shackles and marries the man of her choice.

Conclusion:- Shashi Deshpande shows how the modern Indian woman, after getting sufficient education, financial independence and other legal and political rights, is now struggling hard to preserve her identity as a woman and as a human being. This quest for one's identity is the characteristic

shared by almost each of her protagonists who belong to the different walks of life however their path towards autonomy is never smooth. Shashi Deshpande believes that selfhood or autonomy is not fixity rather it is a process leading towards the realization of one's own identity, though the process is quite tiresome in itself because the pressures of their surroundings and the pulls of tradition are so heavily put upon them.

Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* often wonders if her birth was a cause of displeasure to her mother, as she later recalls :

‘I was born.’ But of my birth, my mother had said to me once. . .
“It rained heavily the day you were born. It was terrible.” And somehow, it seemed to me that it was my birth was terrible for her, not the rains. And the Indian view of the girl as a liability and the boy an asset are firmly implanted in her mind.

Ragini Ramachandra, however, feels that this aspect of the story does not ring true. She writes: “The portrayal of Sarita’s mother who adored the son and neglected the daughter seems to be a weak point in the story. Hence the nagging feeling that the book has is an axe to grind.”⁹

However, the gender sensitivity can be observed in all the novels of Shashi Deshpande, especially in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. It is surprising that gender discrimination viewed at this angle is not acknowledged by many Indian writers. According to the research conducted by S. Anandalakshmi, Director, Lady Irwin College, Delhi :

The sex ratio is unfavourable for girls and forces us to conclude that the survival of the girl is a matter of indifference in a considerable number of families. The birth of a son gives a woman status and she invests herself in her son's fixture, creating a deep symbiotic bond.²³

The sad tale of the heroines of the novels of Shashi Deshpande reflects the sad plight of women in Indian society. Not only in India but all over the world the position of women is more or less the same, varying only in degrees and not in kind. India is no exception to this common practice where all women are taught to behave very strictly in a particular manner hence their lives become process of self-denial. Shashi Deshpande shows how this self-denial of women starts even in their very childhood.

Shashi Deshpande's woman being the product of the age and equipped with modern education and the modern ways of living finds the rules and regulations imposed by society as hollow. So she rejects these restrictions. She has been deprived of her rights and she rebels against the age old notions that have lost relevance in contemporary scenario. This rebellious spirit of the modern woman is best personified in the character of Sarita.

Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is well-educated, economically independent woman's search for her identity, which leads to uncover the dormant strength in human beings. It is the story of Sarita (called Saru) and her relationship with her parents and her husband and her agonizing search for herself. It is the story of a marriage on the verge of

breakdown and of a woman who has been made acutely conscious of her gender since childhood.

Shashi Deshpande implies to say that any relationship should never be based on fear and anxiety. Love and understanding between the couple should be the principle that binds them together but in the relationship of all these couples we notice that it is neither love nor a mutual companionship that makes them to stay together rather a necessity which they both fight against. Deshpande tries to suggest that there always remains “a queer sense of disharmony....a discord, a sense of missing something” in their life together. The aim of Shashi Deshpande is, therefore, to make woman aware of her potential, and reach to a state of self-autonomy through self-understanding, self-direction and self-motivation so that woman becomes a fully functional individual.

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