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Predicaments of Sarita in 'The Dark Holds No Terrors' by Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract:

Shashi Deshpande holds great worth as an Indian English woman novelist. She has made bold attempts at giving a voice to the distresses and frustrations of a woman. Through her novels, she has portrayed her protagonists as actually aware of their oppressed and chained existence in a male-dominated society. The realistic description of a woman as a wife, mother, and daughter and their search for identity and sexuality indicates their predicaments. The objective of this paper is to study and analyze predicaments of Sarita (Saru), in the traditional Indian set up formed by gender discrimination, loveless relationship with the parents, and her strained relations with her husband leading to a painful search for herself.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, self-identity, Patriarchal society, Women suffering

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande has emerged as a leading woman novelist on the Indian literary horizon. She occupies an important place among the contemporary women novelists who concern themselves with the problems of women and their quest for identity. She has arisen as an outstanding novelist as one who has taken up the women's cause most ardently, she represents India and contemporary Indian literature, especially in the English-speaking world, with great distinction.

The female protagonists of the novels of Shashi Deshpande make all sorts of efforts to create their identity in this society which is governed by males. In Shashi Deshpande's novels, three types of suffering woman characters recur with subtle changes. The first type belongs to the protagonist's mother or the mother figure- the traditional woman who believes that her place is with her husband and family. Whatever be her troubles, she does not leave her husband, and she strives for a working relationship with him at any cost. Characters like Jaya's mother from 'That Long Silence', Indu's mother from 'Roots and Shadows' and



Saru's mother from 'The Dark Holds No Terrors', falls under this category. The second type of woman is the converse of the traditional type. Here the woman is bolder, more self-reliant, and rebellious. She is consciously inclined towards what could be designated as a radical feminist ideology. These kind of woman characters are rare in her novels. They are mostly the protagonist's friends or classmates, like Saru's friend Nalu from 'The Dark Holds No Terror' who decided to lead an independent life as a spinster. The third type of women characterizes the woman in between. Most of Deshpande's protagonists belong to this type. This woman is neither traditional nor radical in her ideas and practice. She might walk out of her home in protest against her suffering but gradually realizes that walking out does not solve her problems. Sarita, in 'The Dark Holds No Terror' broods over her agonies even after she escapes her marital home. Indu in 'Roots and Shadows' leaves her husband to seek refuge in her ancestral home, but she is unable to accept her fate as any ordinary woman might do.

The novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* has rightly been addressed for its tremendously compelling portrayal of a woman's capacity to suffer and survive in a world that provides a highly disagreeable atmosphere to her. The novel is based on a glimpse she had of a couple. The novel undoubtedly has many major and minor characters but it seems to focus on Sarita (Saru) who returns to her father's house after fifteen years of her married life, though she had once decided and proclaimed that she would never return. Deshpande displays the phenomenon of the marital relationship between Sarita and Manohar. In her father's house, she gets a chance to think over her relationship with her husband, her children, her parents, and her dead brother, Dhruva. The rest of the novel is the remembrance of former days and a brief confession to her father with whom she had hardly communicated so far in her life.

Gender discrimination takes many forms of unequal and unjust treatment in the tyrannically male- dominating and convention-ridden Indian Society. The age-old blind beliefs and superstitious practices which prove to be stumbling blocks for the independent growth of women in an atmosphere of free thinking and free movement, with will and reason of their own. Such instances of gender discrimination make the protagonists in the novels of Shashi Deshpande unveiling a quest for individual identity. Identity is concerned with the self-esteem and self-image of an individual. This search for self- realization is marked by the



protagonists' urge, attitude, and action to be free. The quest to be free and to realize the self leads to inner freedom which enables the protagonists to accept their roles, with a new awakening, uncrushed by challenges and hostilities.

Gender discrimination has been neglected by most writers whose stories are stuffed with loving and sacrificing mothers irrespective of the child's gender. This gender sensitivity can be observed in all the novels of Shashi Deshpande, especially in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*.

This novel is concerned with the predicament of women in the traditional Indian set up formed by gender discrimination, loveless relationship with the protagonist's parents, and her strained relations with her husband leading to a painful search for herself. In the long run, Sarita, the protagonist, grows into a person rather than a thing crippled down by the discriminating social, cultural values, attitudes, and practices destroying the personality of the female child. The novel narrates the profoundly moving and shocking experiences of Saru who becomes a victim not only of gender discrimination in the hands of her mother at home but also of her husband's nocturnal sexual attacks because she enjoys a greater economic and social status than her husband, Manohar.

In the novel, Sarita is always neglected and ignored in favor of her brother. Her mother is very attached to her son Dhruva. Her attitude is a typical one — after all, he is a male child and therefore one who will propagate the family lineage. Saru is not given the importance like Dhruva her brother. No parental love is showered upon her even on her birthdays. Her brother's birthdays, however, are celebrated with great enthusiasm including the performance of religious rituals, whereas her birthdays are hardly acknowledged. Saru often wonders if her birth was a cause of displeasure to her mother. When her brother is drowned, she is blamed for the tragedy. Her mother, in particular, always scolds her for being responsible for her son's death. Her mother's repeated accusation, in effect, makes Saru wonder if, in reality, she has killed him. Her father takes the least interest in her studies or development. His difference can be analyzed as an indirect expression of patriarchy that is emotionally injurious. She is not given any importance. No parental love is showered on her.



As a child, Saru rarely speaks to her father. On the contrary Dhruva, her brother has long conversations with her father. Her father used to take Dhruva out for a ride but not Saru. This biased attitude of her parents has a devastating effect on Saru's growth. The rigidity of do's and don'ts prescribed by the domineering mother makes her more wild and rebellious. Later, she goes to Bombay to study Medicine despite her mother's opposition. Saru's mother is left with no interest in living after her son's death. Her constant longing for her dead son and rejection of her daughter cause deep wounds in Saru's mind. Her mother takes no particular interest in her education and personal advancement. This sense of rejection by her mother fills the mind of the teenage Saru with a feeling of hatred towards her mother. The sense of distancing is a result of her bitter childhood experiences and discrimination.

Saru disobeys her parents in studying medicine and becoming a doctor. She loses her relationship with family and withdraws from the bonds of the family relationship. She becomes victorious in achieving medical education and becomes a doctor. The mother's negligence, the father's indifference, and the guilt of the brother's death forced her to leave her parental home and to seek space in professional life and to challenge them to marry Manohar in order to achieve her freedom.

The initial years of her marital life are absolute happiness when she considers herself as the most fortunate woman on the earth. But all her romantic dreams begin shattered. Soon the moments of frenzy bring only despair and disappointment. After marriage, she enjoys greater financial and social status as a lady doctor. Then equation changes, Manohar and Saru move in opposite directions. In everything be it intellect, or career, or achievement or ambition, she surpasses her husband. She is a busy, successful doctor in contrast to Manu, who is an underpaid lecturer in a third rate college. She establishes herself as a career woman, and her profession satisfies her ego, but this brings her no happiness at home. Her predicament is contrary to the assertion of most feminists that economic independence brings fulfillment to women. Shashi Deshpande, however, proves that in the institution of marriage, and economically independent woman is still bound in chains and must forever live in fear of hurting the ego of her husband. Eventually, she becomes a victim of inexpressible sexual



torture every night in the hands of her husband. All her inner sentiments, sensitivities, and her self-identity have been crushed by his ego.

At this juncture of life, Saru hears the news of her mother's death and goes back to her parent's home, though emotionless. She does not feel at home in her parent's place where once she was born and brought up. The circles of pain- the cruelty of husband, her brother's accidental death and her dejected life, pain and suffering of her mother and herself _ becomes the means of self-discovery that enables Sarita to take the decisive step of leaving her house, children and husband in order to become a free individual and to have an identity and a purpose in life. She quits her home. She comes to her parental home to find her sense of belonging. She analyses her responsibility for the disaster in her marriage. She expects a lot of sympathy from her father having become a hapless victim of her senseless choice of love marriage and the second homecoming of Saru brings no consolation in her life. She finds no change in the home. To her father, her return seems to be a burden. The indifference of her father generates in her heart-rendering loneliness. She was disgusted to see that her father was not even inclined to know the names of her children. This indifference in the family creates horror in her mind.

The short stay away from Manu and children provides Saru with a chance to review her past, her psychology, her place in relation to others in the family, and the society around. Towards the end of the novel, however, Saru receives a letter about Manu's arrival. Initially, on hearing about Manu's arrival, she feels indifferent and thinks perhaps Manu might turn away, tired after knocking at the door. That is exactly what she wants. At this moment of utter despair, it is the call of her profession that steadies her and gives her the courage to confront reality. Saru sets out to attend Sunita who is sick. Saru who was not prepared to face her husband at one stage decides to leave her father also to go away. Her father advises her to live her present with determination. Now the time has come for Sarita to face her husband fearlessly. The fear of darkness or ignorance or the unknown fear that haunted her for so long evaporates and she decides to face her life. The novel ends on an affirmative note of hope as against frustration and despair with which it began.



Conclusion

This paper analyses various problems and predicaments encountered by Sarita and how and why she becomes a victim in the tradition-bounded society. It discusses the inequality and injustice, meted out to Sarita in the name of gender and male ego. It also reveals the gender inequality, a bondage of marriage, parent-child relationship. Initially Sarita rebels against tradition but finally she tries to compromise with the existing reality. She realizes that escapism is never a solution and she is only her refuge. Thus, she achieves freedom and harmony in life without compromising her obligations and responsibilities. Sarita hails from a family known for the perpetuation of gender discrimination and gender oppression and victimization. Sarita is caught up in the clutches of casteism and superstition. She marries Manohar, a man of own choice outside her caste. She has been indoctrinated to conform to the pattern of behavior expected of females. Sarita is told many times how, as girls, she should talk, dress and behave. She is exposed to meaningless dos and don'ts by the restrictions placed on her puberty. Initially, she has a rosy picture of her marriage but soon she feels dissatisfied in marriage with her husband and even realizes the meaning of the word 'love'. In the end, she realizes that she has never been complete in herself and she can't live without her husband. Thus, a woman's increasing involvement is expressed rather than detachment in her predicament through the character of Sarita, which reveals the positive, humanistic side of Deshpande's feminism.



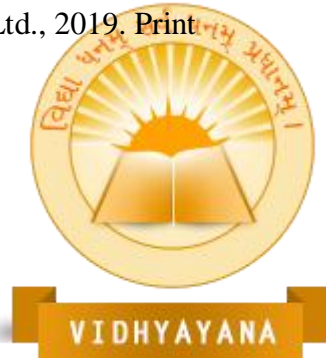
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VIDHYAYANA