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### Saru's Cognitive Dilemma in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

#### Abstract

Woman has been given the secondary status in the society and has no identity of her own. But now she talks about her rights. She feels that she is an individual and should be given recognition in the society. My author, Shashi Deshpande's novels deal with a crisis in the life of the protagonist. Her protagonists are extremely intelligent, introspective and hypersensitive women who embark on a quest for identity and the true meaning of life. In her novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Shashi Deshpande reviews the fractured psyche of the protagonist, Sarita. My paper analyzes the psychological problems that a career oriented woman, the protagonist, Sarita, encounters in her life.

Keywords: dilemma, psychological, identity, feminism, social rights

Woman has been given the secondary status in the society and has no identity of her own. But now she talks about her rights. She feels that she is an individual and should be given recognition in the society. As Uma Narayan in *On Dislocating, Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism* rightly puts it, "Third World feminism is not a mindless mimicking of 'western agendas' in one clear and simple sense . . . Indian feminism

is clearly a response to the issues specifically confronting many Indian women” (13). Shashi Deshpande’s novels deal with a crisis in the life of the protagonists. Her protagonists are extremely intelligent, introspective and hypersensitive women who embark on a quest for identity and the true meaning of life.

In her novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Shashi Deshpande reviews the fractured psyche of the protagonist, Sarita. The novel reveals the quest of an ambitious, anxious and highly self-willed girl. She treats the patients in the daytime but, at night, lives as a terrified and trapped animal at the hands of her husband, Mano. In the end, she learns that her life is her own which she will have to shape on her own. She also learns that terror is not enforced from outside rather it comes from within. The objective of this paper is to portray the psychological problems that a career oriented woman encounters in her life.

The crisis of identity is because of the darkness that persists in one’s mind and to get rid of it the person should come out of this terror and face the problems boldly with courage. The quest for identity has become a dominant theme in literature since the rise and development of feminism, which studies various problems, related to women and creates awareness among them. It is an anti-masculinist movement of the women, by the women and for the women. It is a protest, started by women of the west, for equal social, political, legal, moral and cultural rights for women. The feminist thoughts and movements influenced Indian women as well.

The feminism, as an organized movement, made its appearance in India in 1970s. The Indian struggle of women’s emancipation could not mimic its western counterpart because of the historical and cultural specificities of region. The Indian feminist movement was based on its own strategies and agendas. Over the decades, a number of novels have appeared in the Indian English fiction, in which women’s problems have been projected. The Indian women novelists have presented the woman’s world with great introspective intensity and

authenticity. They have launched a voyage within to explore the private consciousness of their women characters.

Shashi Deshpande is one of them who possess deep insight into the female psyche. Her novels reveal the uneasiness of the modern Indian women in male-dominated society. Her young heroines are aware of their duties as well as their rights. They know that they are multifaceted individuals and their identity should no longer be seen in terms of the identity of their male counterparts.

Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, is a fictional work, that post-mortems the fractured psyche of the protagonist, Sarita. The novel does not confine itself to the feminist problems but Deshpande probes the universally relevant problems which come in between man-woman relationships. The novel tells the story of a marriage on the rocks. Sarita is married to Manohar who is an English teacher in a small college. She is a successful doctor. She treats the patients in the daytime but, at night, lives as a terrified and trapped animal at the hands of her husband. Since her childhood, she had to put-up with gender-based discrimination. She grows up as a victim of her mother's sexist bias. Right from the beginning, she was made to understand that she is a girl and is inferior to her brother, Dhruva, in every way. She was always neglected and ignored.

Even as a child, Saru was aware of her mother's referrer for her brother. She recollects that,

There was always a puja on Dhruva's birthday. A festive lunch in the afternoon and an *aarti* in the evening during which Dhruva as an infant, sat solemnly on Baba's lap, and as a child, by his side, cap on head, fatuous smile on face, while I helped my mother to do the *aarti*. My birthdays were almost the same . . . a festive lunch, with whatever I asked for, . . . an *aarti* in the evening; but there was no puja. (168-169)

She suffers the bullying and curtailment of activities, by the mother.

Don't go out in the sun. You'll get even darker. Who cares? We have to care if you don't. We have to get you married. I don't want to get married. Will you live with us all your life? Why not? You can't. And Dhruva? He's different. He's a boy. (45)

The socio-cultural acquisition of a girl continues to be a region of Indian culture. Saru is always made to feel unwanted, undesirable and ugly. According to her mother, the physical beauty is a pre-condition of worldly success for a girl. She constantly criticizes Saru's appearance. "I was an ugly girl. At least, my mother told me so" (61).

Moreover, Saru was accused of Dhruva's death. Though Saru has no roles in her brother's death, all the balance was shouldered on her, and she was not allowed to have any escape from this sense of guilt. The mother never forgave Saru for being alive, even after Dhruva's death. "You did it. You did this. You killed him . . . . Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead?" (191). The words follow all her life. Saru too, had lost her kid brother and was in need of emotional support but no-one cared for her. The mother doesn't comprehend Saru's bewilderment and sense of being lost. She recalls: "And she (her mother) never really cared. Not after Dhruva's death. I just didn't exist for her. I died long before I left home" (32). This guilt suffocates her and she is made to live with the guilt that she was the murderer. Mother's condescending behaviour and father's indifference deters the balance beauty of Saru's life.

Saru develops inferiority complex in herself which makes her too vulnerable and insecure in her relationships with others. She always feels insecure in her father's house. She wants to be accepted, loved and cherished by someone because she always had been spurned and rebuffed by her mother. She finds love in her relationship with Manohar who was an English teacher in a small college. In spite of her parents' disapproval, she revolts against her

parents and runs away from home to get married to a person of her choice. She marries Manohar. Sarita was brought up in a traditional atmosphere but the education, that she receives, makes her a changed person with a rebellious attitude. She feels herself secure in Manohar's house. He appears to be an ideal romantic hero for her. Manohar too satisfies her hunger for love. "I was insatiable, not for sex, but for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love. Of *my* being loved. Of my being wanted" (40).

The meager income that Manohar got from his job of a college lecturer and their one room in the chawl didn't interrupt their bliss. She was quite satisfied with her choice. She feels herself lucky for getting Manohar as her husband. The life was going smooth but it takes a turn when her neighbours become aware of her professional identity. The respect she gets, as a doctor, disturbs the traditional equilibrium of the superior husband and inferior wife. Her superior economic position, of a reputed lady doctor in the society, is not accepted by Manohar. He gets jealous of her popularity. He can't tolerate that his wife enjoys better social prestige; and it gradually destroys their marriage. She thinks that,

the human personality has an infinite capacity for growth. And so the esteem with which I was 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.  
(42)

As Saru's popularity increases, it starts to affect her happy married life. Her ascendancy renders Manohar less significant and impotent. This disparity deepens the rift in their relationship. The situation worsens when a reporter, from a woman's magazine, comes to interview Sarita and asks Manohar, "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?" (200). This question makes Manohar more conscious of his reverse position. It hurts Manohar's male ego. His sense of inferiority turns him into a

sadist who gets pleasure in insulting, harassing and hurting her. She tells her father, “My husband is a sadist” (199).

Saru sarcastically sums up the conditions necessary for a successful marriage:

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 shouldn’t 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. Don’t ever try to reverse the doctor-nurse, executive-secretary, principal-teacher role. It can be traumatic, disastrous. And, I assure you, it isn’t worth it. He’ll suffer, you’ll suffer and so will the children. Women’s magazines will tell you that a marriage should be an equal partnership. That’s nonsense. Rubbish. 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. (137)

Saru’s bitter realization is that a woman must remain a step behind her husband. Mano thinks that he can retain the potency and masculinity by turning into a rapist at night. “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” (201). His action terrifies Sarita. She finds herself humiliated and a terrified animal at the hands of Manohar. This nightmarish incident is often repeated every time with more brutality. Saru describes,

Panic. Then pain. There it was, for the second time what I had just lulled myself into believing was just a nightmare. The hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar body. And above me, a face I could not recognize. Total non-comprehension, complete bewilderment, paralysed me for a while. Then I began to struggle. But my body, hurt and

painful, could do nothing against the fearful strength which overwhelmed me.

(111 - 112)

She gets so terrified that she embraces silence. She becomes an emotionless human being.

And each time it happens and I don't speak, I put another brick on the wall of silence between us. Maybe one day I will be walled alive within it and die a slow, painful death. Perhaps the process has already begun and what I am is a creature only half alive. And it seems I can do nothing to save myself. (96)

In all these acts of deviation, she finds herself alone. She finds no-one to express her grief. She starts to feel that she has committed a mistake by marrying Manohar, without the consent of her parents. She has a guilty conscious. She thinks that if her marriage had been an arranged one, her parents could be receptive and sympathetic for her sufferings, and might have come to her rescue. “. . . It's my fault again. If mine had been an arranged marriage, if I had left it to them to arrange my life, would he have left me like this?” (218).

In the meantime, Saru receives the news of her mother's death. She decides to go to her parents' house in order to see her father but actually she wants to grab the opportunity to escape from nightly torture. She goes to her father's house. Her father lends sympathetic hearing to her problems. He advises her to face the realities of life with courage and return back to her husband's house. “Don't turn your back on things again. Turn round and look at them. Meet him” (216).

As a result, she gets a new vigor which helps her to achieve wholeness and overcome the identity crisis. The realization dawns upon her that she cannot run away from reality. She learns that her life is her own which she will have to shape on her own. There is no refuge, other than one's own self. She gets the understanding that human mind cannot be intimidated by external forces. Terror is not enforced from outside rather it comes from within. She

decides to assert herself and move ahead to encounter the problems. With this in mind, she confidently waits to confront her husband. “And, oh yes, Baba, if Manu comes, tell him to wait. I’ll be back as soon as I can” (221).

Deshpande probes the inner recess of Saru’s psyche in order to discover the root of her silent suffering and passing resistance. Saru’s life is a journey from self-alienation to self-identification. She is not a philosopher. She is a realist. She accepts the realities of life with courage. She admits, “Philosopher? No, I’m a realist. We are realists. We deal with the ultimate reality . . . the human body” (208).

The novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* reveals the quest of an ambitious, anxious, and highly self-willed woman. Sarita is prisoner of her own fear and confusion. She lacks self-confidence and moves to different persons to seek their help and sympathy. With the help of her father, she regains her inner strength. She becomes aware that she should not run away from the difficulties rather should face them with courage. The solution lies with one’s own.

Shashi Deshpande, through this novel, presents a fair picture of a middle class working woman’s life. She has presented women’s voice without any trace of sentimentalizing or over dramatizing the problems. Her objective is to portray the psychological problem of a career oriented woman. At the end of the novel, Sarita realizes that one should be sufficient within oneself because there is no refuge elsewhere.

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