



GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN *THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS*

N. NEENA BOPAIAH

Ph D. Research Student

RTMNU, NAGPUR

(MS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

The Dark Holds No Terrors is the story of an educated and economically independent woman who is in search of her identity, which leads her to unearth the hidden strength within her. Sarita (Saru), the protagonist of the novel, is neglected and ignored in favour of her brother Dhruva during her childhood. The illogical and absurd traditions, sardonically followed by women, are impediments on her growth as an individual. Through the character of Saru, Deshpande seems to convey a significant truth that women have the power to control and improve their lives, if they are determined to do so, however, for this they have to break their silence. 'The Dark Holds No Terror' is a story of Sarita and her relationship with her parents, husband and the agonizing discrimination she faces throughout her life. It is the story of a marriage on the verge of break down and of a woman who has been made acutely conscious of her childhood. The story counters the prevalent concept that "everything in girl's life is fashioned to a single purpose and that is to please a male"

Keywords: Gender discrimination, patriarchy, identity crisis, oppression, defiance

INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande's novels reveal the inability of the women to express and the fact that positive movement is always the movement towards expression. In Indian middle class, traditionally, the role of women was only to take care of the household activities and to support the husband in all his work/ decisions etc. She was to bring up the children in the right way and to inculcate the sense of belonging and respect for elders in them. When women started to go out of the house to fend for themselves; they realized how they were capable of changing their own lives if they wanted to.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes in her article

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"Can, the subaltern speak?" "Between patriarchy and imperialism subject constitution and object formation the figure of woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'Third-World Woman' caught between tradition and modernization."

Shashi Deshpande's themes are based on the lives and problems of women. Her works ardently concentrate on the predicament of women and male characters are pushed towards the background. Her plots and sub plots point towards the status of women in the tradition bound, patriarchal middle class society, in which they are trying to come out of the shackles of the dilemmas of set norms and thus attempting to redefine their status.

Deshpande makes her female protagonists search for 'self' to discover their identity. She minutely analyzes the unwholesome situation in which a sensitive woman has to live and move about, caught between the powerful currents of tradition and patriarchy, of terror, suppression and gender discrimination.

Hans Bertens describes gender as follows:

Gender has to do not with how females (and males) really are, but with the way that a given culture or subculture sees them, how they are culturally **constructed**. To say that women have two breasts is to say something about their biological nature, to say something about what it is to be a female; to say that women are naturally timid, or sweet, or imitative, or dependent, or self-pitying, is to construct a role for them. It tells how the speaker wants to see them. What traditionally has been called 'feminine', then, is a cultural construction, a **gender** role that has been culturally assigned to countless generations of women (98).

Since time immemorial, women in India have been struggling to come out of the shackles of their traditional image in society, which don't allow them freedom. They are in constant search of privacy, individuality, love, conjugal and domestic harmony in the male dominated middle class family.

Saru understands that by putting up with all her difficulties she was actually trying to prove her mother wrong. According to her mother, Saru was never to be happy and Saru didn't want her mother to feel happy that her mother's preconceived notion or curse has come true. Realization sets in Saru that she is responsible for her own happiness and she was determined not let anyone take away her contentment. After two week long introspection Saru realizes that: "If I have been puppet it is because I made myself one. I have been clinging to the



tenuous shadow of a marriage whose substance has long since disintegrated because I have been afraid of proving my mother right” (P. 220). She decides towards the end that she will not remain silent. She will raise her voice against all the odds, fears and pains of discrimination. Towards the end of the novel she reaches a stage when she decides not to allow herself to be bogged down by apprehension, disagreement, and refutation or by low self-esteem. She comes to a conclusion that to reach self-actualization she needs to live in a conducive atmosphere that is open and flexible.

This paper attempts to find out how Saru is a victim of gender discrimination and how she fights it in her own way by questioning some of the patriarchal norms that seek to chain women at every stage of life.

Saru’s Early Life And Her Mother’s Attitude Towards Her

'The Dark Holds No Terror' is a very powerful novel written by Shashi Deshpande that portrays the life of Sarita (Saru), a lady doctor. In the beginning of the novel Saru goes to her father's house when she gets to know that her mother is no more. Her parental home doesn't hold any special place in her mind, it equally brings back to her the horrible memories of the cruel attitude of her mother who didn't even want to see Saru when she was in her death bed.

The first half of the Dark Holds No Terror deals with the unkind, vicious and prejudiced attitude of Saru's mother. She is a strong product of patriarchal society who considers her daughter responsible for her son's death. "Why didn't you die? Why are you alive and he dead." (p. 14) Saru's predicaments date back to her childhood, when she had to undergo gender discrimination at home. As **Simone de Beauvoir** 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". Saru's mother's attitude is typical of most Indian mothers and Saru's problem is aggravated when the younger brother accidentally dies by drowning. This becomes a turning point in her life. Saru's mother's obvious preference for her brother, Dhruva, creates a sense of alienation within Saru thus precipitating a sense of insecurity. The second half of the story deals with the Saru's life as a wife. Saru is a victim of gender discrimination as a wife too, she is tortured by the sexual extremes of her husband, Manohar, who thinks that being a male he has all rights to treat his wife as he wants. Saru's introspection at her father's home brings home answers to her questions, she understands that the problems of her life can be ironed out only by her and for that she needs to voice her feelings.

Discrimination by Mother and Father



Deshpande successfully rejects the stereotyped image of mother and refuses to use any mawkishly sentimental language to describe the mother- child relationship. Saru receives ignorance in favour of her brother, Dhruva. Her parents have disproportionate love for their son. In family her importance is negligible. It is revealed through the celebration of Dhruva's birth day. His birth day is celebrated with overwhelming love and interest accompanied with religious programme. On the contrary, Saru's birthday used to remain out of their memory. Things become infinitely worse after Dhruva's death when her mother with her characteristic insensitivity blames Saru for his death. Not only gender but also her dark complexion becomes one of the objects of underestimating and discriminating the girl child. Saru as a young girl expresses her wish to stay with her mother all her life, which her mother denies. Home, a place that is supposed to promote the growth of a child, robs the little girl of her rights and self-respect. The mother always kept two different measuring yards, one for the son and other for the daughter. Sadly for Saru the gender discrimination starts at home. Here is one example to emphasise the cold discrimination:-

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. (The Dark hold no Terrors p.45)

This difference in her mother's treatment of her son and daughter enrages Saru. Being a traditional Hindu woman, the mother considers it her duty to remind her daughter that she is grown up and she should behave accordingly. It is a mother's responsibility to see that the children especially the daughters behave well. When Saru attains menarche, the first experience of menstruation is horrifying and painful. Instead of explaining the process to her and putting her at ease, the mother frightens her with the fact that she would bleed for years. She is not permitted to enter the kitchen and Puja-room. She is expected to sleep on a straw mat. Separate plate and tumbler is provided to her, which makes her feel like an outcast during those days. Saru wonders why the woman is considered unholy during the menstruation period. She feels like an unwanted child who is perplexed at her very being. The Indian girl- child, unlike most of her western counterpart, is puzzled and panicky at the physical changes taking place within her body at the time of puberty. She feels repugnant and hideous. With the growth of her body, she is warned that she is stepping into that difficult and shameful state of womanhood: "I can remember closing my eyes and praying Oh, God,

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let it not happen to me. Just this once and no more. Let there be a miracle and let me be the one female to whom it doesn't happen" (P.62). Time and again Saru is made to realize that with physical growth, she has become vulnerable to the atrocious and ravenous clutches of the society. Time and again she is made to realize that being a girl she is different and not as privileged as a boy clearly indicating gender differentiation. It takes time for young Saru to understand she was a female and some things are bound to happen.

"Things fell, with a miraculous exactness, into place. I was a female. I was born that way, that was the way my body had to be, those were the things that had to happen to me. And that was that." (p. 63)

She rebels against her mother "If you're a woman, I don't want to be one" [P 55] says Saru to her mother. This very sentence spoken by Saru tells us the hatred she has for the life of a woman and the basis of the same is the discrimination meted to women at large because of the patriarchal system. Saru's first public defiance of the patriarchal power system is when she breaks the so called protective barrier of her house and leaves home. With a deep seated hurt feeling, she says to her mother: "You don't want me to have anything; you don't want me to do anything. You don't even want me to live"(P. 142). Bitterness and hatred for her mother drives her to leave home and obsessively seek success in medical college.

When Sarita reaches her father's house he is not warm and welcoming. His attitude when Sarita goes to her home is "like an unwilling host entertaining an unwelcome guest." Moreover, his subconscious self also considers it treachery to the dead (his wife) in case he dares welcome his daughter warmly or supports her. Also like a traditional Indian father in a patriarchal set up, he is not concerned with the troubles of family-members, he enjoys the privilege of being the master and head of the family without actually being involved in the problems of the members of the family.

"He had always been so much a man, the master of the house, not to be bothered by any of the trivial of daily routine." (p. 20)

Saru is so badly hurt by the way her husband treats her that she decides to tell her father about it. It was a great effort for Saru to divulge to her father about the kind of treatment meted out to her by her husband. She tells her father about her husband who loves cruelty in sex which is fuelled by his insecurity and inferiority complex. It is beyond the understanding of the father who had always remained reserved and maintained distance with his wife. A woman's feelings were never given importance. Man remained cold towards her and kept her at a distance lest she gains importance. Gender discrimination is a part and parcel of the world at that time.



The whole novel is full of occurrences showing gender discrimination. Sarita's mother shows detestation and bitterness towards her daughter and thinks that she too should have died when her son died. Sarita is not even recognised as a daughter. The mother remarks:-

"----- Daughter? I don't have any daughter. I had a son and he died. Now I am childless." (p. 196)

Sarita's brother, Dhruva's, disappearance in the pond and her father's punishing the mother by not eating food cooked by her reminds Sarita a Sanskrit story from her school-text where a woman did not disturb her husband's sleep even to save her child from fire. Agni, the God of Fire, had to come to save the child. It suggests that woman was made to be the handmaid of man, whose work is only to wait on man. Gender discrimination is vividly displayed here. Saru's wants to be recognised as a person than as a woman and she wants to have an independent social image. It makes Sarita extremely angry at gender discrimination and she thinks,

"Who wrote that story? A man, of course. Telling all women for all time your duty to me comes first. And women poor fools, believed him. So even today Dhruva's mother considers it a punishment to be deprived of a chance to serve her husband." (p. 207)

Mrinalini Sebastian writes: I wish to read Saru, not as a rebellious daughter who is searching for her self-identity, for her freedom, not as an egoist who cannot understand the inferiority complex of her husband, not as the guilty sister who was responsible for the death of her brother, not as a daughter who was never forgiven by the mother, not as a traveller who goes on to a spiritual quest that ends in no resolution, but as a woman who possesses 'white, soft and clean' hands in the beginning of the narration and 'roughened palms' towards its conclusion. The roughened hands at the end 'echo' two other silent figures in the novel: that of her mother and of Janakibai (Saru's domestic servant). This image of the hand is consciously chosen to cancel all the positivistic and philosophical interpretations.

Discrimination After Marriage

As a consequence of the treatment meted at home and in a bid to search for her identity, Saru resolves to be a doctor, hoping that a professional career could be the key that would unlock the door out of the wretched life at home. Whether it is her profession or marriage, Sarita had to put up with the opposition of her mother. Her defiance is further expressed, when she becomes economically independent and marries a man of her own choice. "Women, in order



to achieve freedom, seek marriage as an alternative to the bondage created by the parental family. Saru 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 freedom". Writes P Ramamoorthi She falls in love with a college mate and marries him against her parent's wishes. Saru hopes to get married to go away from this atmosphere at home which is not gender sensitive. She looks forward to the role of a wife with the hope that it will give her relief from oppression of the mother, and will give her freedom from this gender discrimination which she was not able to understand or tolerate. Her married life with Manu had its own ups and downs and it makes her think that even pleasure is a fantasy whereas grief seems more real having mass and matter. The departure of Saru from her mother is the first step towards autonomy. The social acceptance and recognition she gains as a doctor and the demands on her time carve a chasm in her relationship with Manohar (Manu), her husband. Manu cannot tolerate people greeting her and ignoring him. The gender discrimination continues even in the professional arena. Saru being a lady doctor is preferred by all. She gets respect and her husband can't digest that. This changes the loving husband into a sadist. Saru feels a gradual disappearance of love which she had once developed for Manu. She starts hating the man-woman relationship which is based on attraction and need, not love: "Love ...how she scorned the word now. There was no such thing between man and woman. There was only a need which both fought against; futilely.... turning into the thing they called 'love'. It's only a word she thought. Take away the word, the idea, and the concept will wither away (p.65). Manus sexual overtures hurt the woman in Saru. She cannot free herself from him as she is a part of the conservative society. Moreover, the next morning after the night's ordeal, he used to be the same smiling Manu again which Saru is not able to understand or digest. As a man Manu had the liberty to treat his wife the way he wanted, even to the brink of marital rape, but Saru being a woman could not stop his overtures or even complain about it.

"The hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horrible familiar body. And above me a face I could not recognise." (p. 112)

Deshpande explores the strain and anguish of being a woman. She concentrates on woman's pursuit to find out her true worth.

Simone de Beauvoir expresses her own views on man-woman relationship in her famous book 'The Second Sex'.

"Man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general, whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria without reciprocity.----- Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply



what man decrees.....She appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex..... absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her, she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. (The Second Sex p. 534)

The strength of Deshpande's work is her awareness of gender-disparity, sexual division of labor which start at home and which are deeply rooted in the public and empower themselves. Manu gains the identity of the husband of a renowned Doctor, he is not very happy with the steady rise in Saru's social status. This rise in her social status becomes the root cause of disturbance between them. Manu fails to exercise his male domination over his wife hence he tries to play the traditional male dominated role through sexual molestation at night to show his superiority. This is also the result of the gender discrimination which prevailed in the society at that period.

The remarks of Atrey and Kirpal are, "His purpose, though repressed in the subconscious, is to punish her taking on the 'male' role, and to assert his superiority and power through physical violence" (43). Saru's words "A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband" reflect what the male oriented society expects from the female counterpart. Fed up with this gender discrimination at parental and marital home, Saru takes up rebellious steps. She leaves parents' home to seek career and husband's to get her own identity. The root of this problem lies in the social attitude of the people of 1980s. The story set in that era is a tremendously powerful portrayal of one woman's fight to survive in a world that is gender biased. The story is based on realizing that there is more to life than dependency on husband or parents and social acceptance. The woman is self-sufficient in all aspects and in this story the protagonist is in the process of searching that identity.

In an interview entitled—'Everyone Has a Right to Choose a Language', Deshpande tells Stanley Carvalho that: Perhaps, being a woman, I find myself sympathizing with women. If others see something feminist in my writings, I must say that it is not consciously done. It is because the world for women is like that and I am mirroring the world. 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.

Saru's Resolution To Fight The Discrimination.

It doesn't take long for Saru to realize that her coming to her paternal home after she gets to know about her mother's death and to seek refuge from her husband was a futile exercise as she is not welcome there; being a daughter she is expected to be happily parked with her husband. Towards the end of the novel when Saru is informed about Manu's arrival to her



paternal home to take her back she is disturbed initially as she is totally upset about her relationship and does not want to face him. After a bit of pondering over the issue she is able to come to a conclusion. The moment she realizes the importance of life, she resolves to take charge of her life.

She feels "---- because there's no one else, we have to go on trying. If we can't believe in ourselves, we're sunk." (p. 220)

The realization that Saru gets after nearly a fortnights stay in her father's house is that it is her life that she is living and she has to face all the hurdles herself. She has to live for her own happiness by forgetting all about the past. "It is my life and I have rights to live in my own way". She gets the courage to face the Dark, the dark wherein she was subjugated to physical and mental torture by her husband, she knows that The Dark Holds No Terrors if she rises to face it. The novel ends with a positive feeling that matured Saru will do everything possible not to let the gender discrimination come in the way of her happiness, she will fight it out and make her life better.

CONCLUSION:

Shashi Deshpande, through her novels tries to put forth familial, economic and social problems in which the modern middle class woman is groping. When we take review of the protagonists of Deshpande's novels, quest for identity is their goal emanated from experiences in the family. Women are the victims of patriarchy and oppression displayed by their male counterpart in the family. Saru is the example of inferior position and subsequent degradation of her gender. The novelist exposes various subtle processes of oppression and gender differentiation operative within the family. Indian woman has for years been a silent sufferer. While performing different roles in life, she has never been able to claim her own individuality. Women's weak and submissive nature, their love and affection towards family can be responsible for their degradation. Even the educated and economically independent women lack strong willingness and courage to fight against the exploitative forces. Saru goes through rebellion followed by separation from family and experiences that define before becoming empowered women who can balance their role very well in the family. Their stand in the family reflects that women expect only love, respect from the family but not inferior, subjugated or subordinate position in life.

There are some things that we don't have a control over like social stereotypes and parental rejection; these are not her doing. When Saru tells her father that her husband is a sadist and cruel to her in bed her father suggests: Give him a chance, Saru. Stay and meet him. Talk to him. Let him know from you what's wrong. Tell him all that you told me (P. 216). Dr.

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Poonam Bhola, in her research paper, "Feminism in the Selected Novels of Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapoor", (2009) writes that: "women's identity is never separate but is subsumed under that of the male. The women is typecast as 'Mother Nature' thus reducing her to the perpetually giving all forgiving nature that never demands anything and is willing to suffer anything.....". Sarita in the novel 'The Dark Holds No Terror' asserts her rights and individuality, fully aware of her potential. She suffers in her life as a neglected daughter, a guilty sister and finally as an unloving wife. Through the character of Saru, Deshpande seems to convey a significant truth regarding the relegation of women, that in most cases, women are responsible for their lot. Deshpande in her novel tries to reveal the problems of women gender discrimination, lack of identity, fruitless rebel against the subordinate position in the family and finally her helpless submission before the male dominion. Woman becomes the object of love, marriage and sex. Through this age-old oppression she loses her birth right of gender equality. Ultimately the tradition bound family restricts the flowering of girl's personality. In the Dark Holds No Terror, towards the end of the novel Saru evolves as a confident woman who understands that darkness makes one incapable to see things clearly and objectively. Inspired by roots of Indian culture, Saru realizes that she is no longer a 'guilty sister, undutiful daughter, unloving wife instead she is a wise woman who is capable to steer the family out of any crisis and she resolves to stand up for her rights.

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