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Quest for Self Identity in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is about a well-educated, economically independent Woman's search for her identity which leads to uncover the dormant strength in her. Shashi Deshpande's novel depicts how Indian women struggle for freedom from the world of tradition. This paper examines the rejection of the tradition which pronounces that the sole purpose of a wife's existence is to serve and please her husband. It reveals a woman's capacity to assert her own rights and individuality and becomes fully aware of her potential as a woman.

Keywords

Self-Identity; Feminism; *The Dark Holds No Terrors*; Shashi Deshpande.

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Shashi Deshpande has emerged as a leading women novelist on the Indian literary horizon. She deals with the middle class Indian women who represent the overwhelming majority of Indian women and who struggle to adjust in rather than be free from the world of traditions. Shashi Deshpande is deeply concerned with the marginal status of women and she is a feminist in so far as feminism resist all hierarchal positions and institutions primarily because they subordinate women.

Shashi Deshpande's novels explore the patriarchal social set up of India and her protagonists located within the social reality and reach out to define the self in an attempt to free themselves. In their quest for self-realization, each protagonist breaks free of the religious and social codes that circumscribe and undermine a woman's spirit and deny her own identity. These alternative narratives of women's history are transformed into narratives of resistance that forms a strong sub text of the novels.

Elaine Showalter posits three phase in the growth of feminine tradition and they are "limitation, protest and self-discovery". Shashi Deshpande's novels are directly related to all these phases. Her heroines experience the limitation which is explained as self-awareness and protest toward self-discovery which is self-identity. She does not stop with that; she further towards spiritual intelligence. In her novels she explores and exposes the long smothered wail of the incarcerated psyche imprisoned within the walls of domesticity, where the protagonists are sandwiched between tradition and modernity, between illusion and reality and between mask and the face.

Shashi Deshpande's second novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is about a well-educated, economically independent woman's search for her identity which leads to uncover the dormant strength in her. It is the story of Sarita called as

Saru and her relationship with her parents and her husband and her agonizing search for her self. She neither surrenders to nor escapes from the problems but with great strength accepts the challenge.

The novel derives its strength, however from the stark presentation of Saru's childhood, her trauma of being an unloved child and the equally stark presentation of her marriage to a man who is consumed by an inferiority complex which manifests itself in the form of sexual sadism. Sarita is a successful doctor during the day time; at night a terrified and trapped animal in the hands of her husband Manohar, who is an English teacher in a small college. The novel begins with Saru returning after fifteen years to her father's house. She once proclaimed that she would never come to her father's place. She returns as she is unable to bear the sexual sadism of her husband. The rest of the novel is what Saru remembers and a brief confession to her father about her trauma. The narrative meanders between the past and the present.

The novel opens with Saru returning to her parents' house after a gap of fifteen years. She had walked out once, determined never to return. Nevertheless she returns to seek refuge, unable to bear the barbarism of her husband. Her stay in her parents' house gives her a chance to review her relationship with her husband, her mother, her children and her dead brother Dhuruva. She appears to be confused, hopeless, dull, almost thoughtless and a recluse.

Saru recollects her earliest memories which speak about the discrimination shown by her mother in favour of her brother Dhuruva. As her reasoning and questioning develops, she feels she is unable to tolerate the preference shown towards her brother. She feels jealous of her brother when he gets all the parental care and attention. She struggles to attract her father's attention and succeeds only to some extent.

Saritha is humble, modest and very sensitive but lacks self-confidence. As a middle class woman, she is aware of her own limitation. Yet, she longs to break away from the rigid traditional norms and adopts to be an anti-matriarch who

yearns for a new environment where her mother cannot thrust her will on her. She hates her parental home and her quest leads her to discover the hidden strength in her which shapes her life.

Saru the “two-in-one woman” is a successful doctor during day time, and a “terrified trapped animal” at night. This traumatic experience necessitates her to crave for freedom from domineering influences. She wishes to become a free individual and wants to have an identity of her own with a purpose in life. She says: “My life is my own”. Somehow she feels as if she has found it now the connecting link. “It means you are not just a strutting, grimacing puppet, standing futilely on the stage for a brief while between areas of darkness” (220).

Saru’s problem compounds when her brother accidentally dies by drowning. This becomes a turning point in her life. Her childhood memories are replete with her mother accusing her: “You did it, you did this, you killed him” (173). Saru’s most important and recurrent childhood memory is that of her brother Dhruva drowning in a pond. She is persistently haunted by the thought that she is responsible for his death because she is a mute spectator to the incident. When her mother accuses her of murdering her brother, she does not deny or refute the charge, because as Premila Paul observes, “When the mother accuses her of murder, she speaks out Saru’s intentions and not the deed. Dhruva’s demise had always been her subconscious desire and there is a very thin demarcation between her wish and its fulfilment” (4). This clearly indicates the height of sibling jealousy provoked, no doubt, by the mother’s blatant favouritism. So strong is the mother’s attachment to the son who would light her funeral pyre, that many years later, on hearing about her mother’s death, Saru’s immediate thought is, “Who lit the pyre? She had no son to do that for her. Dhruva had been seven when he died.” Life becomes more desolate to Saru after Dhruva’s death.

Saru’s mother’s obvious preference for her Dhruva creates a sense of alienation within her and precipitates a sense of rootlessness and insecurity.

Things become infinitely worse after Dhruva's death when her mother with her characteristic insensitivity blames her for his death. This obvious form of gender discrimination has been ignored by most writers whose stories are replete with loving and sacrificing mothers, irrespective of the child's gender.

Saru is attracted towards Manohar (called Manu), a fellow student in her college. Her senior by a few years, he is already a post—graduate student when she enters college. He is quite popular in the college. He is not only good in his academic performance, but also active as the secretary of the Literary Association. He is actively associated with the Debating Union and he is the life and soul of the Dramatic Society. On top of all that, he is a budding writer and a poet of promise with some poems already published in magazines. He is, obviously, the heartthrob of many a girl student. Saru is introduced to Manu by her friend, Smita. Slipping into the first person narration, Shashi Deshpande makes her protagonist, Saru, describe herself in the most unflattering way in comparison to Padmini, the girl whom Manu is obviously attracted to. Saru recollects:

That evening I went home and tried to imitate the way she had done her hair, and failed miserably. In a fury, I oiled my hair and slicked it into one tight plait and went to college knowing how unattractive I looked with my plump high cheeks, my oiled hair, my unpowdered face with its spattering of pimples. There was even, I remember, a kind of triumphant misery in knowing how awful I looked, how unlike, how terribly unlike Padmini. (52)

She remains totally unacknowledged by the handsome Manu. It was impossible for anyone to want me, love me, need me" (66). In her dreams Saru longs for Manu's love. She is crazy about him and his love appears to her protective, condescending, all-encompassing and satisfying. This is no ego problem and no assertion of identity.

Saru starts fantasizing about Manu. The one-dream that dominates her psyche is the age-old feminine dream of total submission to a conquering male. In her imagination Manu is tender, imperious and passionate. Later, it is Sam who revives the acquaintance with him. As they speak with each other, he also becomes interested in her. When Manu expresses his love for her, she feels flattered. She becomes exultant for having evoked feeling in someone who is emotionally hard to be touched.

And that he, a man set apart from the others, above the others... should love me seemed even more incredible. The fisherman's daughter couldn't have been more surprised when the king asked her to marry him, than I was by Manu's love for me. (66)

In her new role as a career woman, Saru is no longer happy in their shabby apartment and she prefers to move into something more decent and beautiful. She feels that the flat in which she and Manu have been living all these years is narrow and also Manu's earnings now make her feel that it barely covers her needs. Her works keeps Saru away from Manu for longer hours and she reaches home late at night for which he sulks. His ego is hurt by her success, he feels inferior and this sense of inferiority makes him brutal in his behaviour. Though he is normal by day, he turns a treacherous rapist at night and tries to assert his masculinity through sexual assaults upon Saru. Her dream of finding happiness in marriage is soon shattered. Now Saru does not share good and cordial relationship with her husband. She scorns the word 'love' and refuses to believe that such a thing can never exist between man and woman. Gradually, Saru changes her attitude towards Manu and her marital life. The world around her and her place in her life becomes so insignificant that Manu's position and place in her life becomes relatively unimportant. Saru views sex as a dirty word. With her responsibilities increasing outside of home, she recoils from Manu's love—making and he takes her rejection of sex as rejection of himself. Saru, however, is unhappy over the situation. She is so desperate that to save her

marriage, she is prepared to sacrifice her lucrative profession. Saru gathers up all her courage and tells Manu, "I want to stop". She can't stand his brutal behaviour and also that she is prepared to sacrifice everything as long as he leaves her alone. But Manu disapproves of Saru's idea of leaving her job. When he asks her to go on with her responsibilities, Saru feels that it is "sheer necessity" that holds them together. She ponders deeply and finds she has every reason to break away from him. She says to herself: "I have to orient myself, I have to be more sure, more certain" (69). Saru establishes herself as a career-oriented woman and her profession satisfies her ego.

The novelist brings out powerfully the psychological problems of career woman and discuss it artistically without crossing the barriers of art. The novel also transcends feminist constraints and raises issues which the human beings in general encounter in their lives. Desphande means that a woman should assert herself, so that she can overcome or thrash the suppressing forces. She makes Saru analyze her own physical and psychological trauma with the detachment of an analyst.

Sarita does not philosophize as she is not a philosopher. The understanding of reality makes Sarita see for herself the whole world around her in its distinct form. In consequence, she gets a new vigour and the spiritual intelligence, which makes her achieve wholeness and overcome her identity crisis. She rebels against the tradition but ultimately tries to compromise with the existing reality and the awakening of innate goodness and the spiritual intelligence helps in the process. The novel ends in the affirmative note of hope as against frustration and despair with which it has begun. It is also Sarita's freedom which she enjoys, gives her the courage to do what she wants and believes it right and the determination and tendency to adhere to it paves way for harmony in life. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* reject the traditional concept that the sole purpose of a wife's existence is to please her husband. It reveals a

woman's capacity to assert her own rights and individuality and become fully aware of her potential as a woman.

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