

The Plight of Women in Indian Society Depicted in “*The Dark Holds No Terrors*” by Shashi Deshpande

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ABSTRACT

Science has been trying to understand the anatomy of men and women for ages but has not succeeded in discovering the deepest mystery of the life. The deeper it goes into the core of life, the more it becomes puzzled. Sigmund Freud declared that men and women are equal, belong to the same species; and any theory or philosophy which condemn women is simply inhuman and male chauvinist. In Indian society, a woman's identity is defined by her relationship with men: as a daughter, as a wife or as a mother. Throughout her life a woman has to fight a lot to have her own identity. This tradition has made her life miserable. This paper is a humble attempt to point the finger to the plight of Indian women reflected in Shashi Deshpande's "*The Dark Holds No Terrors*". Saru, the protagonist of the novel, suffers from gender discrimination right from her birth. She becomes the victim of the society where parents prefer only a male child. She gradually realises that there is more to life than dependency on marriage, parents and others. Thus "*The Dark Holds No Terrors*" is really a remarkable depiction of Saru's fight to survive in the society.

Key words: plight, dependency, discrimination, exploit, refuge, solitude.

Introduction:

"The woman has suffered slavery, the woman has suffered humiliation, the woman has suffered economic dependence, and above all, she has suffered a constant state of pregnancy. For centuries, she has lived in pain and pain and pain." - Osho

Science has been trying to understand the anatomy of men and women for ages but has not succeeded in discovering the deepest mystery of the life. The deeper it goes into the core of life, the more it becomes puzzled. Sigmund Freud declared that men and

women are equal, belong to the same species; and any theory or philosophy which condemn women is simply inhuman and male chauvinist.

Down through the ages, women have been dominated, tortured and reduced to a nonentity. She has been just a puppet in the hands of man. It seems that the woman that we find in the world today cannot be the woman created by the almighty God. Nature never shows any discrimination in its creation. The gender discrimination that we find in our society is, of course, the product of

the dirty mind of mankind. Woman has been corrupted for centuries. And when woman is corrupted, man cannot remain natural because woman gives birth to man. Man and woman are two different worlds so it is very difficult for them to understand each other. Women all over the world have been deprived of social, economic and political rights. They have been considered as a weaker section and have been abused and exploited in this male dominated society. In the name of religion, social tradition and customs and sometimes as a result of superstitions, women have been exploited socially, economically, sexually and mentally in Indian society. There are communities living in India where the birth of a boy child is celebrated enthusiastically and sweets are distributed but the birth of a girl child is never celebrated, honoured or praised publically.

However, modern world is very sensitive towards the rights of women. In India also fundamental rights have been made available to women without any discrimination. Various acts and laws like Maternity Benefits Act and Factories Act have been implemented but it seems that these acts and laws are of no value before the social customs and traditions. In Indian society, a woman's identity is defined by her relationship with men: as a daughter, as a wife or as a mother. Throughout her life a woman has to fight a lot

to have her own identity. This tradition has made her life miserable.

This paper is a humble attempt to point the finger to the plight of Indian women reflected in Shashi Deshpande's *"The Dark Holds No Terrors"*. Saru, the protagonist of the novel, suffers from gender discrimination right from her birth. She becomes the victim of the society where parents prefer only a male child. She gradually realises that there is more to life than dependency on marriage, parents and others. Thus *"The Dark Holds No Terrors"* is really a remarkable depiction of Saru's fight to survive in the society.

Analysis:

Shashi Deshpande has been considered as a leading woman novelist on the Indian literary horizon. She has been awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *'That Long Silence'*. She projects woman in various roles on the screen of Indian English Literature. Woman has to play the role of a daughter, a wife, a mother and at the same time she has to prove her individuality. Existence of girls is always neglected in the presence of boys in our society. Lack of correspondence creates problems in the husband-wife relationship in which wife is the only sufferer as she has to be confined in the four walls of the house. Due to the patriarchal domination, a woman has remained introvert for ages but now she has begun to raise her voice against the system.

Shashi Deshpande's *"The Dark Holds No Terrors"* is an excellent novel in which the dark aspect of the society is exposed effectively.

"The Dark Holds No Terrors" begins with an epigraph from *Dhammapada*:

"You are your own refuge;

there is no other refuge.

This refuge is hard to achieve."

It is said that Gautama Buddha's last utterance was "Appo Deepo Bhavah" means "Be a light unto yourself". Nobody else can be the light for you. Shashi Deshpande's *"The Dark Holds No Terrors"* is the story of Sarita, who struggles to get her 'self identity' throughout the novel. It seems that she has imbibed the above epigraph from *Dhammapada*. She tries to be her own refuge because she knows there is no other refuge. Though it is very hard to achieve one's own refuge, Sarita succeeds to grow as an individual.

Have you ever come across any mother who would hate to remember her daughter even at the time of her death or who would accuse her own daughter of killing her son? Sarita was such an unfortunate daughter of such strong hearted mother. She was always found faulty when she was a child. How can she be blamed to be born as a girl to those orthodox parents who did not want a girl as their child? After the birth of Dhruva, Saru's younger

brother, her parents began to neglect her even more. Sarita was conscious about it and felt sorrow. She became the victim of gender discrimination in her own house. Her mother believed that a girl is a liability and a boy is an asset. This type of discriminated behavior inculcated a sense of insecurity in the mind of Sarita when she was a child. She recalls the scene of her brother Dhruva sitting on her Baba's lap. She had thought:

"....I must show Baba something, anything, to take his attention away from Dhruva sitting on his lap. I must make him listen to me, not to Dhruva. I must make him ignore Dhruva. But she had not succeeded." (32)

Slowly and gradually Saru developed a sense of hatred towards her mother. She became a victim of her mother's favoritism. When Dhruva was seven, he died. He was drowned. Unfortunately Saru was there when Dhruva was drowned. After Dhruva's death, Sarita was deprived of all the rights of a child. Her mother said, "Why didn't you die? Why are you still alive and he dead?"

Sarita got married to Manohar who was an English teacher in a college. It was a love marriage. Her marriage with Manohar was against her parents' wish. She was a successful doctor but was not happy with Manohar. Manohar felt uncomfortable with Sarita's steady rise in status as he was ignored when people greeted and paid

attention to Sarita only. Manohar's male ego got hurt and he felt jealous of his wife's professional success. Sarita says:

"...this terrible thing that has destroyed our marriage. I know this too....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)

Manohar's inferiority complex resulted in sadism. He couldn't find any other way to satisfy his ego. Sarita confessed to her father that her husband Manohar was a sadist:

"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)

In her childhood, Sarita was ignored and tortured by her mother and after her marriage she had to bear her husband's sadism. During day time, she had to play the role of a doctor and at night she was a terrified trapped animal. In Indian society, woman is not supposed to return to her parent's house without her husband's permission. She has to be with her husband

under any circumstances and has to be faithful to her husband. Manu says in Manusmriti,

"Since woman is not capable of living independently, she is to be kept under the custody of her father as a daughter, under her husband as a wife and under her son as a widow"

But Sarita had to leave her husband. When she left her husband and returned to her father's house, her father was surprised at the unexpectedness of her present. His eyes moved from her to her suitcase at her feet, and then beyond her to the rickshaw standing on the road. She was an unwelcome guest in her father's house. Saru says:"....he sat gingerly on the edge of his chair, like an unwilling host entertaining an unwelcome guest." (18)

Sarita's long hours in solitude gave her chance to think over her married life and her profession as a doctor. Her introspection helped her to make herself free from her sense of guilt that she had made Manohar what he was. She knew that her life was her own which she had to shape as per her will. She came to know that there is no refuge other than one's own self. She decided to return to her own house to live with her husband and to cure her husband of his inferiority complex.

Shashi Deshpande's fiction has something in it which is closely related to the intellectual

and emotional aspects of woman. She has depicted the real plight of women in Indian society. The woman can be satisfied with one love, utterly fulfilled, because she does not look at the body of the man but she looks at the innermost qualities. She does not fall in love with a man who has muscular body; she falls in love with a man who has charisma – something indefinable. On the other hand a man's love is more or less a physical necessity.

Shashi Deshpande, through this novel, suggests that a woman has to analyse her 'self' in order to free herself from the problems of married life. The analysis of her past helped Sarita to understand her true self. Sarita fell victim to marital rape by her husband whom she loved very much. She had to suffer a lot due to the male dominated society. In her parent's house Sarita recalled the memories of her life: her mother's discrimination between her brother and herself, her brother's death, her decision to pursue medicine, her bold decision to marry Manohar, her returning to her father's house and finally deciding to go back to her husband. The novel reflects women's awareness. Saru rebelled against the customs and traditions of the society, but finally compromised with the harsh reality. She, finally, realized that "The terrors are inside us all the time. We carry them within us, and like

traitors they spring out, when we least expect them, to scratch and maul."(85). Thus, she accepted her mistakes and decided to maintain her individuality in her relationship with her husband Manohar.

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