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**WOMEN THROUGH WORDS: A COMPARATIVE READING OF SHASHI DESHPANDE IN  
THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS AND ANITA NAIR IN LADIES COUPE**

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**ABSTRACT**

The present study attempts to bring out the differences in the responses of the two Indian writers, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair to the theme of alienation and the exhortation that they make to the Indian women through the novels, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *Ladies Coupe*. These novels discuss about the sense of alienation that women feels in the contemporary Indian society and their path towards the process of self actualization. Both Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair portray traditional, modern, educated and career-oriented middle class women who are sensitive to the changing situations and times. They always concern themselves with the woman's search for her own identity and individuality.

**Keywords:** womanhood, patriarchy, feminism, empowerment, identity.

The Indian Culture which boasts of a hoary past accepts in principle, the importance of woman in the family and in the society. But in reality it has created a convention that certain roles are to be performed by woman only and the welfare of a family is inevitably dependent on her service to male members. Selfless service to the family is expected as her quality, sacrificing her interests for the benefit of the family is considered as her virtue and satisfying her husband by all means is her priority. It is family and not the individual that forms the basic unit of the Indian society and so the Indian society has become predominantly patriarchal. It has carved out gender specific roles for woman. Her submission to male chauvinism has led her to servility. The male prejudice views her as a partner not on equal footing but born to bear and rear children and to perfectly perform the role of a dutiful wife, mother, daughter-in-law etc. She is well-behaved if she is obedient to male authority. She is respectful if she is submissive to male supremacy. She is fit for family life if she is devoted to her husband and loyal to her

family members. She gains reverence by her sacrifice. Her home is the field of her activity and the world outside is male's dominion. If she crosses her limited territory she loses her position. Under the weight of the malevolent male hegemony, she is unaware of her capabilities. Under the influence of the time honoured patriarchal system she has accepted subservience as a way of life. As a human being she also has a basic instinct of establishing her own identity, but the women of previous generations fall in line with the male members and impose on her the restrictions of patriarchy which they believe to have been in practice since time immemorial.

The twentieth century has seen a host of feminist writers in India who are taking up the issues of alienated and suffering women who is in search of the ways to assert her selfhood in a society prejudiced against men. They are courageous enough to expose the existing irrationality in society prejudiced against men. They are courageous enough to expose the existing irrationality in the

patriarchal Metaphysics in respect to women's status in the society and to renounce the pattern of female expression set by age old patriarchal codes of behavior. By portraying women protagonists who are courageous enough to fight against their subjugation and modify themselves, these writers helps to break the image of eternally suffering women (Myles 9).

Shashi Deshpande and Akhila Nair enthrall the readers with their reminiscent language and narration. They mainly deal with man-woman relationship and move from tender feeling to sensuality and to raging hostility. They illustrate the qualities and the position of women in the families which created ripples in the patriarchal society. Their struggle to express the dilemmas, fears, predicaments, contradictions and ambitions of their protagonists is noteworthy. They are feminists with a difference. They depict the real women, not the ideal ones. Shashi Deshpande's and Anita Nair's feministic opinions are useful for women who are engulfed by the contemporary challenges of balancing tradition with modernity. They differ in their opinion towards feminism but their novels are focused on the issues of individuality, questioning their existence in patriarchal society. Moreover, their women realize that they are in the dominance of patriarchy in every aspect of their life. They present the new image of the Indian women who wants to be a wife, mother, and daughter, and simultaneously desires to achieve her identity.

The novels of Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair communicate the ideological commitment of the authors to the values and principles of feminism. In their fiction both the writers demonstrate how andocentric ideologies affect and control the body, mind, intellect, and emotions of women making them fragile so that they themselves support and sustain the sexist social structure of hierarchy which oppresses them always. Having resolved to oppose and expose the patriarchal power principles both the writers make a narrative of resistance and an assertion of feminist consciousness in their fiction.

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *Ladies Coupe* showcase convincing and wonderful portraits of the contemporary realities of womanhood, and through it both the writers explores the plurality and

complexity of female experience. They not only reveal the realities of womanhood in their respective social contexts but also make ardent advocacy for a social change to alleviate the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual burdens of women.

The extreme sensitivity to the suffering of women and their constant preoccupation with feminist issues and rights of women made Deshpande and Nair deal with the emotional entrapment of the women in the Indian society. Both share a vision of a common future, an androgynous society where egalitarian and intimate relationships between and women flourish and flower. Since they are convinced of the effectiveness of fiction as an ideological apparatus they use their works to project and promote women's search for identity, wholeness and autonomy from the view point of a feminine consciousness and a feminine sensibility.

The ideological assumptions and arguments put forward by both the novelists are worth reading as they are illuminating, thought provoking and relevant in the present century. These ideological concerns cover the nobler concept of a gender free society where political, economical, and social equality of sexes became an established reality. They are deeply convinced by the fact that sexism is only a social practice which can be revised and corrected at any time by adults who are ready to alter their attitude and habits. Both the novelists agree here that patriarchy is so deeply embedded in the minds of people that the character structure it creates in both the sexes is perhaps more the result of a habit of mind than any political system. So they exhorts that the arena of sexual revolution should be within the human consciousness than it should be within any human institutions.

There is no idealization of womanhood in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *Ladies Coupe*. By giving the feel and tone of ordinary Indian life they make their portraits of womanhood realistic and reasonable. Both the writers chooses to represent only a narrow segment but the powerful and privileged, the Hindu section which is very particular in following the patriarchal notions. Thus they bravely challenge the binary oppositions as a way of

conceptualizing womanhood and create lively and lifelike female characters in their fiction. Both Saru, the protagonist of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and Akhila, of *Ladies Coupe* present the psychic functioning and social behavior of women in their functional world. Thus they present before the readers a factual fiction to teach the readers the art of understanding female experience to widen their notions of equality, freedom, true love and tolerance. Through their life the women in the novels explain the causes and consequences of submissiveness and surveillance of women to the sexist system (Myles 12).

A clever combination of fact and fiction enables them to correct and criticize the age old customs and patriarchal conventions which prevent the free growth and development of women. Both the writers deconstruct the popular image of women under the patriarchal dominance and boldly points out the limitless possibilities of women's development and progress in their respective socio-cultural context. They point out the plain truth that, the non performance or lack of performance of women in social and professional fields is due to their ignorance in their inner potentialities.

The modern women is undergoing ceaseless and serious inner struggle of choosing between the conventional ideal femininity and the modern mode of new woman hood. The protagonists here are brave and bold enough to reject the patronizing air of patriarchy and also allow the triumph of self in their decision making procedures. They are not ready to comply with the conventional and hierarchical world of heterosexuality. They not only dismiss the domineering and superficial man-woman relationships but demand intimate and enriching relationships which are solely based on equality, justice, mutual affection and admiration between man and woman.

Both Akhila and Saru give a cultural shock to the patriarchal world by honestly revealing their feelings and experiences while they deal with men. They express their anger, affection and frustration which they experience in their roles as lover, wife, mother and daughter. By portraying the sense of loneliness, humiliation, pain and suffering of a

married and unmarried woman in the conventional Indian society both the writers try to present the truth that in the politics of man woman relationship woman is always subordinate to man whether inside or outside the marriage. Even if she is accepted socially as the 'man of the family' or the 'bread winner' she is always expected to move within the lines drawn by the society. But in the midst of all these serious and severe inner struggles boldly and bravely announce to the world that the old and traditional values are no longer significant for them and with a youthful enthusiasm they adapt themselves to the new values of freedom, self dependency and autonomy. Having found their unique identity as an individual they exhort the readers to throw away their meaningless modesty and fear of failure in order to embrace all possibilities awaiting them.

Besides they try to convince that most of the limitations and obstacles faced by women are in fact they themselves set up in their minds. Women should be aware of the immense talents and potentials in them and should achieve their ambitions and aspirations without any doubt about their abilities. Deshpande and Nair through these novels try to illustrate that by adopting a positive and proactive approach to life women can transform and transcend the limitations of their life. Changes will come out only if women themselves acknowledge and articulate the desire and need for change, actively seek to bring about change and honestly and openly engage with the demands such change imposes. By throwing light upon the duality and dubiousness of the moral standards that prevail in India they create awareness in the women about the dire necessity and productive possibility of change.

A minute difference can also be seen in the attitudes of these writers towards women empowerment. While both of them accept the need of awareness among women about their inner strength Deshpande seems to follow a middle path neither too radical nor too low. Her woman is neither the Western liberated woman nor an orthodox Indian one. In her quest for wholeness of identity, she does not advocate separation from the spouse but there is a tactful assertion of one's

identity within marriage. Saru seeks for an “aesthetic space” (Bhatnagar 53) within the restricting confines of domesticity. She offers a liberal feminism with moderate views unlike the Western militant one that advocates a separate culture and identity for women devoid of the influence of men confines of domesticity. She offers a liberal feminism with moderate views unlike the Western militant one that advocates a separate culture and identity for women devoid of the influence of men. The degree of liberation that is being reflected in Akhila in *Ladies Coupe* is higher and greater than Saru by being a little militant and revolutionary. Nair presents a protagonist who hopes for better co operation from man, an identity and an equal partnership without submitting herself to any societal institutions.

The sensible and logical presentation of the degree of aloofness and loss of identity that is being experienced by the Indian middle class women through the ideological apparatus of fiction Deshpande and Nair energize, anesthetize, and illuminate the minds of their readers and empower them for an aesthetic encounter with the stark realities of the andocentric world. Being androgynous writers who uphold the value of co-operation and comradeship between man and woman, they both envision a world of freedom, knowledge, equality and hope for woman and a resurrection from the present status of frustration, loneliness and anger. Demolishing the existing myths, they try to bring a new social order which is congenial to the physical, social and psychic well being of women. Such a thing will liberate them from subjugation and exploitation; and consider them as autonomous authentic “women selves” rather than imprisoning their “women thoughts” in a patriarchal frame work (Pradhan 120). By that, they will be in a position to lead their lives with dignity and enjoy the full right of their free conscience to create their own values. Such a change will enable women to share power and privilege equally with men; and man woman relationship will have significant positive aspects.

The protagonists in these novels, Saru and Akhila resist the enslaving attitude of the society and triumph over the subjugators by gaining inner

strength. The development of this irrepressible attitude is their progress in life. They all get caught in a whirlpool of changes which initially brings them suffering. Ultimately out of the changes, they evolve as modern women resolutely crossing the barriers and breaking the boundaries. Thus they have progressed from possessing a passive character to displaying a dynamic trait.

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