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QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS*

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande is a leading woman novelist of the 70s and 80s. She has written seven novels and four collections of short stories. As we go through her novels a little critically, we come to realize that her novels contain much that is feminist and that she has genuine concern for women and that she gives a pen-portrait of a realistic society of the contemporary middle-class, educated, urban Indian women. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is the second novel of Shashi Deshpande and the novelist portrays the protagonist Sarita and her frustrations, her awareness of the problems, her recognition of the crisis in her life and her efforts at resolution. Sarita or Saru is an educated, financially independent, middle-class wife. She is made conscious of her gender as a child. She has loveless relationship with her parents and she is deprived of parental care and affection and she lives a pale, loveless life. Her mother loves her brother Dhruwa, but hates her. Saru has strained relations with her husband Manu. She is terrified by her husband's beastly behavior at night when he intentionally humiliates and hurts her and his casual manner in daytime as if nothing has happened. All these events in her life impel her to go in the quest of her identity and the present study aims at evaluating Saru's quest for her identity amidst adverse circumstances in her life.

Keywords: conflict, tradition, feminism, quest, identity, individuality.

I now have no doubts at all in saying that I am a feminist. In my own life, I mean. But not consciously, as a novelist. I must also say that my feminism has come to me very slowly, very gradually, and mainly out of my own thinking and experiences and feelings. I started writing first and only then discovered my feminism. And it was much later that I actually read books about it.¹

Shashi Deshpande, a leading woman novelist of the 70s and 80s, herself confesses in an interview that she is a feminist. As we go through her novels a little critically, we come to realize that her novels contain much that is feminist and that she has genuine concern for women and that she gives a pen-portrait of a realistic society of the contemporary middle-class, educated, urban Indian women. In her novels

she has expressed the disappointments and frustrations of women, their quest for identity, their extra-marital affair, their great mental trauma, and finally their tactful assertion of identity within marriage. Her novels portray the problems of the adjustments and conflicts in the minds of female protagonists who finally give in before the traditional rules in the transitional society. In an interview Shashi Deshpande reveals that all her characters are concerned with their selves and they learn to be honest to themselves. The women in *Roots and Shadows* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* project themselves as women who are strongly interested in the quest for their identity and who do not bother for the restrictions imposed by society,

culture, nature and who are free from their own fear and guilt.

Commenting on *Roots and Shadows*, O.P. Bhatnagar remarks: "The novel deals with a woman's attempt to assert her individuality and realize her freedom. It depicts how it brings her into confrontation with family, with male-dominated society"²Indu is the protagonist of the novel; she is a representative of the educated, middle-class women. She feels agony and suffocation in a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. She undergoes great mental trauma when she refuses to play the role of a doll wife imposed upon by society. She has been a meek and submissive daughter, wife and mother. She has tried her best to keep her husband Jayant happy and satisfied, but to her disappointment Jayant proves to be no different from the less educated and conservative Indian men. She feels a rebel within her and attempts to explore her inner self to assert her individuality. She explores the inner struggle of herself. She represents a set of modern women who are educated and are very much in contact with the society, dealing with the critical problems like love, sex marriage, settlement and individuality. She reviews everything with reason. She analyses the ideal of detachment and freedom and tries to achieve them.

The Dark Holds No Terrors is the second novel of Shashi Deshpande and the novelist portrays the protagonist Sarita and her frustrations, her awareness of the problems, her recognition of the crisis in her life and her efforts at resolution. Sarita or Saru is an educated, financially independent, middle-class wife. She is made conscious of her gender as a child. She has loveless relationship with her parents and she is deprived of parental care and affection and she lives a pale, loveless life. Her mother loves her brother Dhruva, but hates her. Saru has strained relations with her husband Manu. She is terrified by her husband's beastly behavior at night when he intentionally humiliates and hurts her and his casual manner in daytime as if nothing has happened. All these events in her life impel her to go in the quest of her identity and the present study aims at evaluating Saru's quest for her identity amidst adverse circumstances in her life.

The Dark Holds No Terrors opens with Saru's return to her parents' house fifteen years after she left home with a vow never to return. Saru is frightened by nightmares she dreams about at night and realizes they are not dreams but realities. Her relations with her husband become intolerably strained and she gets the news of the demise of her mother, so she knocks the door of her father's home remembering Sudama's arriving at Lord Krishna's palace. The novelist's reference to Sudama who visited Lord Krishna's palace with a weak body and an empty belly but did not say a single word about it, is indicative. As Sudama had faced his life-crisis, so Saru will have to face her life-crisis herself, but she will have courage to fashion her life as she wishes to. The home-coming helps her to sort out her problems, to analyse her life, to review and reexamine her crisis. Here she gets an opportunity to think over her relationships with her husband, her children, her parents and her dead brother, Dhruva, and, thus, her quest begins.

Saru comes home to find comfort in her old surroundings with her father but the pretext was that she had come to console her father who had lost his life partner. In her father's home she realizes that her arrival has made no difference to her father. Her father felt emptiness in home, but he was content, his life was full living with Madhav. She wants to lay bare her soul before her father, but she could not speak about her suffering because it seemed indecent, 'like removing your clothes in public'. She recalls her childhood. She was ignored in favour of her brother Dhruva. She did not receive love and affection from her parents and she did not get any importance in the family. Her brother's birthdays were celebrated with much fanfare and performance of religious rites, where as her birthdays were not even acknowledged. For her mother her birth was a horrible experience for it rained cats and dogs on the day when she was born. Saru recalls the rapturous excitement in the house on the occasion of the naming ceremony of her brother. Her mother was extremely happy, but she treated Saru like a liability. Her mother's adoration of her son at her daughter's cost is the rallying point for the novelist to bring her feminist ideas together. The turning point in Saru's life is the accidental

death of her brother by drowning. When he is drowned, she blames her for no fault of her own: "You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead."³ This is the pitiable plight of not only Saru but millions who are born girls. This sort of blatant discrimination between Saru and her brother leads to a sense of insecurity and hatred towards her parents, specially mother, and her resultant rebellious nature. Saru took on her part has a guilty conscience as she considers herself responsible for having remained a mute spectator to her brother's death by drowning. She never refutes the charge leveled against her by her mother. Her mother's discriminatory behavior makes Saru feel unloved and unwanted leading to a sense of alienation and estrangement. She feels unsafe and insecure and after her brother's death her condition deteriorated from bad to worse. Her mother keeps rebuking her without any rhyme or reason and takes no interest in her education, career or future. Her mother treats her like an untouchable and does not consider her a member of her family. She asks her to sleep on a straw mat and gives her a cup and a plate which are not used by other members of the family. Saru feels utmost shame and humiliation and develops acute hatred towards her mother, "I hated her, I wanted to hurt her, wound her, make her suffer."⁽¹⁴²⁾ Here Shashi Deshpande wants to show that exploitation, persecution and oppression exist not only in male-female relationship but also in female-female relationship.

Saru is fed up with the atmosphere of her family, the callous and cruel attitude of her mother, so she leaves home for Bombay to seek medicine as a career. Her mother opposes her and does not help her in the advancement of her career. Saru gets admitted in a medical college and after some time she meets Manohar called Manu in the novel. Manu is a student leader, he is a young poet like Shelly with noble ideals and high hopes. Saru falls in love with Manu and theirs is the romantic love. Manu adores her and finds her charming and beautiful and Saru likes his romantic talks, his deep knowledge about such romantic poets like Keats and Shelly. But she feels afraid that she might be treated as unwanted, redundant, an appendage one could do without. She feels like the fisherman's daughter who

was requested by King Shantanu to marry him. She accepts Manu fully and unconditionally and wishes to love him and to be loved intensely. She feels it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. The fisherman's daughter had bargained, but Saru does not, as her mother is against this marriage since Manu belongs to lower caste. Her mother says: "I know all these love marriages. It's love for a few days, then quarrels all the time. Don't come crying to us then." Had her mother not been so against him, she would probably not have married him. Saru's father favours her decision to marry Manu. Saru's marriage to Manu is a sign of her turning away from the traditional ways and values her orthodox mother adhered to. She marries beneath her status in order to get away from her mother, her home. She marries to attain autonomy of the self and to secure the lost love in her parental home. Manu is her savior, the ideal romantic hero who rescues her from her insecure, wooden existence in the maternal home. Her marriage with Manu is an assertion on and affirmation of her feminine sensibility.⁴ She says: "I was hungry for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love. Of my being loved. Of my being wanted." Saru realizes that she is the luckiest lady on earth, as the starting years of her marriage are blessings from above. She gets mental peace and physical pleasure and her joys know no bounds when she pours her heart:

I became in an instant a physically aroused woman with an infinite capacity for loving and giving, with a passionate desire to be absorbed by the man I loved. All the clichés, I discovered were true, kisses were soft and unbearably sweet, embraces hard and passionate, hands caressing and tender, and loving, as well as being loved was an intense joy. It was as if little nerve ends of pleasure had sprung up all over my body.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Saru and Manu live in one-room apartment which is dirty, "the corridors smelling of urine, the rooms with their dark sealed in odours" and Saru feels that her apartment is a heaven on earth for her. But heavenly pleasures start disappearing very soon. A particular incident becomes a turning point in their blissful marital relationship. One night she , being a

doctor, helps out the victims in a fire accident in a factory nearby and comes back home late in her bloodstained coat. People living in neighbourhood thus come to know about her identity, and she earns a reputation as a doctor. Patients in large numbers start coming to her for treatment and medical help and her status rises, her economic condition improves a lot. She becomes so busy in her medical profession that she is unable to spare time enough for Manu and children. Manu feels uncomfortable with Saru's steady rise in status, as he feels neglected when people praise and pay attention to Saru. Manu and Saru now do not like to live in their dingy one-room apartment and want to shift to some other place for their own reasons. Manu feels insulted and ignored in the surroundings and Saru is no longer happy in that cramped and stinking apartment and wants to move into something more decent. Earlier she felt pleasure and satisfaction to live on Manu's salary, but in her new role as a career woman she becomes ambitious and resents her present lot. With financial stability and change of situations her attachment and love towards her husband and children begin to disappear. She wants to move higher in life and to advance her career. She comes in contact with Boozie who is a handsome and efficient doctor. He is a flirt and starts flirting with Saru who exploits the situation to her advantage. Boozie helps her financially to set up her own practice in a posh area. In the course of time Saru gets intimate and unscrupulous in her relationship with Boozie and when her conscience pricks, she consoles herself by treating it as a mere teacher-student relation. Both continue their relations due to their own vested interests. Boozie wants to hide his homosexual nature and so openly flaunts his relationship with Saru and Saru exploits him to achieve her much coveted goal of becoming an established, reputed doctor. Although Boozie and Saru enjoy no physical relations, but she creates a misconception in Manu's mind. At the inauguration of her consulting room she is soft towards the flirtations of Boozie but resentful towards her husband. Saru rises in her social and financial status and gets contentment, while Manu is an underpaid lecturer with discontentment and this leads to great discomfort in their conjugal relations. Saru is

extremely ecstatic with her power and glory, with contentment in her career, but at the same time she is extremely grieved, discontented at home. Manu assumes that 'marriage, possession, gave him a life-long right to affection, love and respect.' His assumption angers Saru and she starts scorning the very word love, and considers it only a 'need' of two persons. Certain incidents aggravate the already strained relation between the two to the extent that at night under the red-blooded moon Manu loses his humanity and turns into a beast, a rapist. In an interview with Saru when the interviewing girl asks Manu innocently: "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?" Manu feels humiliated, helpless and effeminate. This particular incident sets the ball of destruction of their relationship rolling and acquires momentum. Though earlier Manu thought that Saru was just a showpiece to be exhibited to his friends, but Saru did not take much notice of it. But after the interview-incident Manu becomes outright cruel and insulting, and makes 'monstrous onslaught' on her person and personality. Saru recalls: "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) The benevolent, cheerful husband by day turns a lecherous, libidinous rapist at night and this occurred again and again till she lost count of it. The circumstances appear all the more unbearable as Manu feigns ignorance in morning of his beastly behavior at night. At this juncture she gets the information of her mother's death and she returns her parent's home.

At her father's house Saru goes into self-introspection and realizes that sins have been done to her no doubt, but she has done more sins as she ruminates, "My brother died because I heedlessly turned my back on him. My mother died alone because I deserted her. My husband is a failure because I destroyed his manhood." (217) Thus, the novel may be considered to be a study in guilt consciousness. Saru's journey is a journey from self-alienation to self-identification, from negation to assertion, from diffidence to confidence. She learns to trust her feminine self, "And oh yes, Baba, if Manu comes, tell him to wait. I'll be back as soon as

I can." This is the expression of the assertion of her individuality, her willingness to confront reality and not to run away from it. A mature Saru now avoids extremes and takes a pragmatic view of the circumstances. She is neither the typical Western liberated woman nor an orthodox, conservative Indian one. Saru's quest for identity is complete, and in quest for the wholeness of identity, she does not believe in separation from her husband, but in a tactful assertion of one's identity within marriage.

Notes and References

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