



Quest For Identity In Shashi Deshpande's The Dark Holds No Terror

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Abstract

The Dark Holds No Terror by Shashi Deshpande presents a true image of the state of women in traditional Indian households. The novel has a variety of women characters and shows their sufferings and subjugations for being women in our society. Deshpande's The Dark Holds No Terror also attempts to highlight male chauvinism that propels men to refuse a subservient position in a marital relationship. The novel narrates the traumatic experience of Sarita (Saru), who enjoys a higher socio-economic status than her husband Manohar (Manu) with Manu resorting to marital rape and sexual exploitation to counter his inferiority complex. Saru has love from none in the novel. Manu, whose advances were once irresistible to her, behaved like a wild beast and she had to bear the violence of her estranged husband night after night. She also had a bitter relationship with her mother that made her childhood hellish. Words from her mother made indelible cuts in her heart, which bled throughout her life. Towards the end of the novel, Saru tries to recollect her shattered pieces of life and compromises with the situations that tormented her the most. This study aims to highlight the quest and assertion of identities of the characters of The Dark Holds No Terror. It also aims to emphasize the man-woman relationship in our societies and Saru's hope of resettlement in the novel.

Keywords: Sufferings, identity, marital rape, relationship, assertion.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Deshpande's The Dark Holds No Terror deals with an educated middle-class and financially independent women who in her search for identity confronts with a plethora of traumatic experiences in the patriarchal society. Her mother's comment, "Why are you still alive...why didn't you die? Why are you alive when he's dead?" (The Dark Holds No Terror, 73) clearly reveals her traumatic childhood. Her mother's discriminatory attitudes towards her makes her feel lonely and discarded leading to a sense of insecurity and antagonism. In her onward journey of self-identity, she unearths her potential and strength. Also, the epigraph of the novel "You are your own refuge. There is no other refuge. This refuge is hard to achieve" highlights how Sarita realizes that her paternal home where she spent all her childhood cannot be a refuge for her. She also lists out that neither her parents nor her husband, Manu,

can be her refuge. She is all by herself and she must overcome her fears that hinder her peace. The novel thus discusses the fragility of the male ego, Saru's quest for identity and independence, patriarchal society and agonizing familial relationships. The novel also highlights the ills of traditional Indian societies where men are always placed at a higher pedestal in comparison to their counterparts.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

This section of review of literature involves a detailed literary study in the subject area. The proposed paper surveys the quest and assertion of Sarita in the novel and how she becomes a voice of the delineated women in our customary society. This novel has been analysed abundantly by critics and reviewers from a wide range of perspectives. N Neena Bopaiah, a research scholar in her titled "Gender Discrimination in The Dark Holds No Terror", published in 2017, highlights how women are always the victims of patriarchy and subjugation. She writes in detail about the illogical and absurd traditions that women counter since childhood. Dr M. Leelavathi and R. A. Hemalatha in their research paper titled "The Passionate Paragon 'Saru' in Shashi Deshpande's The Dark Holds No Terror", published in Infokara Journal analysis the women protagonist Saru in the novel. Their paper explores the frailty of male ego and its refusal to be inferior in the institution of marriage. Dr V. Shekhar (2016), in his research study titled "Victim of Fate: A Study on Shashi Deshpande's The Dark Holds No Terror" throws light on the role one's fate in determining the future. The continued verbal tirades against her after the death of his brother is a testimony of the role of chance and fate in the play. Dr. Shekar in the essay also highlights her helplessness and solitude. The analysis of the previous research studies reveals that there's more to add on the works already done on this novel that is set on the customary patriarchal design. The present study aims to highlight this gap and emphasize on the theme of quest and assertion of identity of the protagonist.

3. OBJECTIVES:

The present paper aims to bring out the struggle for self-identity in the protagonist of the novel. The paper highlights gender discrimination and unconscious submission to the traditional norms which are haplessly followed by women. The paper also aims to bring out the man-women relationship in the novel through the characters of the novel.

4. METHODOLOGY:

Textual analysis of the novel was primarily focused to write this paper. The novel was critically studied to understand the importance of identity in one's life. Descriptive analytical method was used to analyse the content and theme of the novel. The data was gathered from the novel whose utterances and dialogues show patriarchal traditions the position of women in the novel. The novelist's views on feminism were analysed by reading his other plays.

5. DISCUSSION:

Shashi Deshpande is a major Indian novelist and has written many novels that depict the whole gamut of our cultural crisis. Her novels are true reflections of gender discrimination and class barriers with her authentic experiences allowing her to deal these themes highlighting the multi-dimensional Indian societal ethos. Her novels are more women-centred and she emphasizes on personal liberty, human rights and feminine consciousness. All the major female protagonists of her novels make efforts to establish themselves as an independent individual and create their own identity. Though her characters are moulded, reshaped and reoriented by the male characters and for them, she is successful in creating a niche for her female protagonists. The quest/ion of identity in them also plays a major role to shatter our intricately bound patriarchal societies. Deshpande through her fictions gives wings to those women who are caught in between patriarchy and tradition and allows them to fulfil their wishes as a human being.

The *Dark Holds No Terror* is about Sarita, an educated middle-class wife who struggles to find her sense and sensibilities in not only her childhood but also in her disastrous marriage. Her unkind relationship with her mother and later her toxic relation with her husband pushes her for her quest for self-identity in the novel. Her distraught relations with her orthodox mother who wants her to be meek and submissive deeply engraves in her mind to a point where she feels solitary and lack of paternal love in her childhood. She is neglected in her home and her brother Dhurva is always favoured. Her mother always taunts her of her sex and reminds her responsibilities as a woman. Also, her mother's constant reminder that she belongs to the "weaker sex" makes her hate herself. Her mother's constant preference for Dhurva drives her to be rebellious and is at war with her on many occasions in the novel. Thus, her mother's attitude towards her makes her feel unwanted and, in fact, she notes in one her notebook "I am not liked by anyone. I am not cared for by anyone. I am not wanted by anyone." (*The Dark Holds No Terror*, 83). Her relationship with her mother suffers the most when Dhurva dies by accidental drowning. This incident makes her a devil in the house and changes her relationships with her parents for the worst forever. They hold her responsible for the death of their only son and this bitterness with her parents leaves an indelible imprint in her for the rest of her life. Her mother's statement, "You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive when he is dead?" (Deshpande, 191), haunts her throughout her life and each time she tries to reconcile with her mother, she fails. This multiplies her hate for her own self resulting in anxiety and unhappiness. She soon starts hating her mother. Also, Saru's experiences where she finds traditional ethos of our culture that place men at a higher pedestal, alienates her. Thus, her bitterness of gender consciousness grows even further.

Sarita had expected that her marriage would be a means to forget all her past and that she would live a life full of love and affection. But her expectations were short lived as her

experiences with Manohar during her married life shows that women in Indian societies are always victims of male chauvinism. As long as Manu was the lone earner of the family, there was peace and satisfaction in her otherwise gloomy house. Once Saru started visiting patients and gaining bread and butter, problems were quick to arise between them. Her success in her field quickly led her to fame and acceptance in her society as a reliable medical practitioner. The respect and response that she started getting results in disturbance in her life as Manohar felt that his male self-esteem was hampered with her wife's success in quick time. Manu is unable to accept this, and he now considers himself not as the knight in armour or a romantic hero, but as a fallen man with no self-dignity. He grows uncomfortable with Saru's popularity and earnings. Her married life soon gets worse and the love and companionship that they both shared dried up. She began to suffer silently as Manu dominated her in public as well as in private. Sarita "avoided looking at him, his body ugly now with the aura of failure". On the economic front also, Manu was a defeated man. His monthly income was much less than what Sarita earned. This made him jealous over her. Sarita suffered throughout the novel and her harrowing experiences in the novel makes her think, "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." (The Dark Holds No Terror, 217). The novel, thus, explores the fragility of the male ego which refuses to accept a subordinate and second fiddle role in marriage. Deshpande in the novel sympathies with Saru and portrays her as a victim of reality.

Manu's male ego is hurt in the novel because of Saru's self-independence and freedom. He to assert his masculinity throws sexual assaults upon Sarita. Thus, "the benevolent, lovely and respectful" husband gradually turns to a lecherous and libidinous devil at night. To escape Manu's onslaught, she decides to move away from him and comes to live with her father; but is an unexpected and unwelcome guest in her "own" house. The following extract from the novel shows how age-old traditional values of our culture forms or rather deforms Sarita's identity: "That's important... A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he is an M.A., you should be a B.A. If he is 5'- 4" tall, you shouldn't be 5'3" tall. If he is earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety-nine. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage..." (The Dark Holds No Terror, 03).

Fate and chance play an important part in the novel and more particular in the life of Sarita. Sarita's life was but a series of incidents which came one after the other, all by themselves, to deprive her of her even simplest of joys. Her life began with the serious charge of killing her brother Dhurva. She was just a victim of fate. She was to go out of the house to show anger to her parents for not allowing her to go to the film with Smita's family. Children very often show their resentment against the parents, but when Sarita did it, her brother, pampered and self-willed as he was, followed her and got drowned. She made every possible effort that a child could make to retrieve her brother, but she couldn't succeed. The child was branded a murderer and the stigma stuck to her till the end. This stroke of faith alienated her

from her mother completely. Her mother said time and again that she was the murderer and that she should have also died. Sarita, consequently was deprived of love even of the parents from childhood. This particular fact of her life was the cause to a great extent for her miseries. Her first meeting with Manohar was also by chance. Perhaps, Deshpande wants to say that fate and chance play a very important part in one's life. Sarita had been a victim of fate, though it cannot be said that she had surrendered before fate and chance. She had been struggling, yet happiness always eluded her.

Most of the female protagonists of Deshpande's novels have indomitable courage and the strength of the mind, and despite challenges and hardships, they remain upright and uncrushed. Almost all of her heroines challenge the meaningless rituals and reject them to live their life with a sense of dignity and this is an indication of their self-esteem and autonomy to see their lives independently with pride. Deshpande through her novels, thus, gives wings to the female characters and advocates that they are not merely objects that can be tamed and punished.

The Dark Holds No Terror clearly portrays woman's fight for respect and survival. Saru in the novel proves to be one with unmatched courage and determination and takes conscious decisions throughout the novel. She has from her childhood shattered the chains of restrictions and social codes of society; taking up medicine was one of the foremost decisions that proves the same. This shows her courage to take up "tasks that are often not meant for girls". Her marriage with Manu and her decisions there after also show her courage and uprightness. Though, the circles of pain that she has in her disturbs her, she doesn't give up her control over her life. Her decisive decision to leave Manu and her children leads her to self-discovery, although towards the end of her story she waits for Manu's arrival to take her with him once again for the final time. Surely, Saru would lead a life full of joy, independence and confidence after all the purgation she underwent all through the novel.

6. CONCLUSION:

The Dark Holds No Terror clearly portrays male supremacy over women in our traditional societies. Women too are in parts responsible for their suppression. Sarita, the female protagonist of the novel too suffers for her quest for her self-identity in her patriarchal homes. Deshpande has portrayed several instances in the novel that clearly portray male dominance over the female characters. Deshpande has also portrayed psychological issues, familial relationships and the role of fate and chance in the novel. Though initially, Saru suffers from all quarters of her life, towards the end she tackles all the atrocities that she once faced as she tries to recollect her shattered pieces of life. Also, she compromises with the situations that tormented her the most. Thus, Deshpande, spreads positivity through her courageous protagonist and this realistic representation of women in Indian families makes the novel a success.

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