



A woman searching for her identity as reflected in *the dark holds no terrors*

Dr. S Geetha

Assistant Professor of English, Sri K. G.S. Arts College, (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli) Srivaikundam, Thoothukudi District, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Woman has been given the secondary status in the society and has no identity of her own. But now woman feels that she is an individual and should be given recognition in the society. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is about the struggle of an educated and professional woman Sarita. She is extremely intelligent, introspective and hypersensitive woman who embark on a quest for identity and the true meaning of life. After fifteen years she returns to her father's house as she has heard about the death of her mother. Sarita or Saru got the opportunity to review her relationship with her father, mother, brother, husband and her children. She remembered her past days. She got the admission in medical college despite the strong opposition of her mother. While doing her medical studies Sarita fell in love with Manohar, and got married with him. Her mother strongly opposed this relationship but it was of no use. Saru became a successful doctor and Manohar became a teacher in a third rate college. But after sometime when Saru became a popular doctor in their locality, things started to change. The present paper tries to study the protagonist Saru, searching for her identity in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

Keywords: struggle, educated, opposition, relationship, successful, terrified, trapped, compromise, identity, feminism and social rights

Introduction

The Dark Holds No Terrors, a novel of Shashi Deshpande was published in 1980. This novel has been translated into German and Russian. Sarita or saru is the central figure in the novel. The novel reveals the quest of this ambitious, anxious and highly self-willed Saru. The novel opens with Saru's returning to her father's house after fifteen years. She heard from someone about her mother's death, so she decided to see her father. But she did not get proper welcome from her father, perhaps he was loyal to the dead woman. She found no changes there. Seven pairs of large stone slabs were the same leading to the front door. The traditional and religious plant tulsi had been only the spot of green. The plant has a great significance in Hindu mythology. It is believed that the woman who worships tulsi dies before her husband. And here of course, it served the purpose. Saru's mother died before her father. When Saru entered in her house she did not find any changes. But she found changes in the behaviour of her father as she says:

And yet there were alterations. An ashtray full of stubs. (since when had he started smoking). A stained cup with the dregs of tea standing in it. It was as if he had become an apostate revolting against the pattern of living in which to leave a cup unwashed even for a minute had been a crime. (3)

When Saru reaches her father's home, he welcomes her like unwilling host entertaining an unwelcome guest. When Saru left her father's house she had sworn never to return there, but she was unable to bear the sexual sadism of her husband. So she came back to her father's house.

Shashi Deshpande presents a realistic picture of the middle-class educated women who are economically independent and who represent a larger part of the contemporary Indian society. Through in this novel she has presented the problems and

conflicts of educated middle class woman who has to reconcile to the traditions and customs in spite of her desire to prove her individual identity in the society. Shashi Deshpande, realizing the norms and values of the Indian culture, tradition and society, does not deny the necessity of the existence of man in woman's life, but she does not accept the total subjugation of woman before man. Mostly her heroines are practical woman and they do not believe in traditional barriers.

Many educated and professional women of today have to compromise their career for their family in order to save their marriage. In this context it is quite pertinent to mention Prasanees views:

Shashi Deshpande and other women writers have dealt with the predicament of the modern educated women in the traditional society which though has been said to have progressed yet has not slackened its stringency towards the women. As a consequence the self-willed and individualistic women have to face disgrace and suffering caused by broken relationship. Nevertheless, there is no dearth of progressive women who are striving to achieve fulfilment against the defiance of male chauvinism. (4)

Through the women character of her novel, Shashi Deshpande created a new woman who is capable of self-analysis. Her female character as wife, mother and daughter tries to discover for herself new way of living. Sarita or Saru the protagonist in her novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* represents that the new woman who is confined to the family tradition asserts her identity, struggles for her rights and ultimately reaches to self-analysis. She represents a realistic picture of middle-class educated urbane Indian woman who despite being educated and economically independent remained a victim of injustice, simply because she is a woman.

Shashi Deshpande rejects the age-old belief in which the woman must be kept in subordination to the male. Shashi Deshpande said to an interviewer: "I strongly react against any kind of cruelty or oppression against women or any kind of denial opportunities to women. We are all human beings and we should all have the rights to our lives." (5) Shashi Deshpande believed that "a woman is also an individual like man with lot of capabilities and potentials. She has every right to develop all that. She has every right to live her life, to develop her qualities, to take her decision, to be independent and to take charge of her own destiny." (6)

The Dark Holds No Terrors portrays the life of Sarita who is always neglected and ignored by her parents in favour of her brother Dhruva. He was three year younger to his sister. She had ruled over Dhruva completely. That difference of three years gave Saru immense pleasure and advantages. He called her Sarutai.

Even as a child, Saru was aware of her mother's referrer for her brother. She recollects that,

There was always a puja on Dhruva's birthday. A festive lunch in the afternoon and an *aarti* in the evening during which Dhruva as an infant, sat solemnly on Baba's lap, and as a child, by his side, cap on head, fatuous smile on face, while I helped my mother to do the *aarti*. My birthdays were almost the same... a festive lunch, with whatever I asked for, an *aarti* in the evening; but there was no puja. (168-169)

She suffers the bullying and curtailment of activities, by the mother.

Don't go out in the sun. You'll get even darker. Who cares? We have to care if you don't. We have to get you married. I don't want to get married. Will you live with us all your life? Why not? You can't. And Dhruva? He's different. He's a boy. (45)

Dhruva died when he was seven-year-old. He was drowned. Saru was there and she had seen him drowning. She tried to save him but it was useless. Later she was blamed for the death of her younger brother. Her mother accused her and said: "You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he is dead?" (7)

Once there came a lady at Saru's place. She was looking nice and superior to all other women. Saru was much impressed by her personality and later on she came to know that she was a doctor and so she was different. Impressed by the personality and identity of that lady, Saru decided that she could be a doctor and that would be the key which would unlock the door out of this life. She was an intelligent girl. She worked hard and got first class in intermediate and that was the passport to medical college. When her father asked her what subject she wanted to take up for her B. Sc., she boldly said that she wanted to do medicine. Her mother rejected that idea and made several questions to her. She said "I am not talking to you. I'm not asking you for anything. I know what your answer will be. No forever a 'no' to anything I want. You don't want me to have anything. You don't ever want me to live." (8) Saru's mother was a rival to her. Her mother considered her daughter someone who had to fulfil certain family responsibilities, having no choice of her own and supposed to follow the tradition and rule which had been already prepared for her by her mother. Her mother disliked her and was always against her. Veena Das rightly says:

Daughters are similar to something kept in trust for another (amanat). You have to care for them, love them, and you will be held responsible for them but you are destined to lose them. Once

a daughter is properly married and goes to her own house it is like a debt that has been paid. (9)

Saru's mother compelled her to stay within the four walls of the house but she does not accept it. Saru hated her mother. But in reality Saru in herself does not know why she wants it. She remembered how her mother had strongly opposed her admission in medical college. Contrary to her expectations, it was her father who has supported her. Saru regarded her mother as a failure – one who had lost her both children and died silently. Saru wanted to be friendly with her children, otherwise there was a fear to lose them. She desired to be a good wife and a good mother although she had failed as a good daughter.

According to tradition and culture girls cannot live with their parents after a certain age. Parents regard them as *paraya dhan* – something to be handed over given to the rightful owner. Girls were not allowed to choose their own way, they were compelled to depend on others. After getting admission in medical college, Saru fell in love with Manohar. He was academically good and creative student. Manohar was the person she fantasized about, the person around whom she wove her dreams. He became the only dream for Saru. But that was not the real part of her life. She did not enter in college for love and dreams. She had to study and to be a successful doctor. That was the reality of her life – to achieve a destination.

Saru married him despite the opposition of her family. Manohar was her ideal romantic hero who had come to rescue her from the insecure and loveless existence. She was hungry for love, as she said:

I was insatiable, not for sex, but for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love. Of my being loved of my being wanted. If I ever had any doubts, I had only to turn to him and ask him to prove his love for me. And he would..... again and again and again. (11)

Saru became popular as a doctor in her locality. Patients started to come to Saru's home and she listened to them and examined them, advised and prescribed medicine to them. And when Saru and Manu walked out of room there were lots of greeting and namastes for Saru not for Manu. But neither Saru noticed it nor Manu revealed it but Manu took a very serious concern of it. She was always busy in her work and she ignored the physical and mental desires of Manu. So he became abrupt and rough to her. Saru succeeded and emerged as a successful, well known and reputed doctor but at the same time, her marriage began to crumble under the burden of success in her profession. The situation started changing, as Saru says:

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. (12)

Saru sarcastically sums up the conditions necessary for a successful marriage:

A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he's an MA, you should be a BA. If he's 5' 4" tall, you shouldn't be more than 5' 3" tall. If he's earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety-nine rupees. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage. Don't ever try to reverse the doctor-nurse, executive-secretary, principal-teacher role. It can be traumatic, disastrous. And, I assure you, it isn't worth it. He'll suffer, you'll suffer and so will the children. Women's magazines will tell you that a marriage should be an

equal partnership. That's nonsense. Rubbish. No partnership can ever be equal. It will always be unequal, but take care that it's unequal in favour of your husband. If the scales tilt in your favour, God help you, both of you. (137)

Manu's male pride was wounded and he decided to take revenge. Thus bed was the only place where he could assert his animal power over her. He became a mean and loathsome person when he enjoyed in her glory at day and ill treated her at night. So Saru became two – in – one woman, in day time she was a successful doctor and during night a terrified trapped animal in the hands of her husband. Saru describes,

Panic. Then pain. There it was, for the second time what I had just lulled myself into believing was just a nightmare. The hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar body. And above me, a face I could not recognize. Total non-comprehension, complete bewilderment, paralysed me for a while. Then I began to struggle. (111 - 112)

When Saru decided to give up the job, Manu tried to cajole her because Manu could not dream to go back to the shabby middle – class way of life. Saru's attitude gradually changed towards Manu and marriage. Saru felt herself deserted, so she was trying to find the occasion to talk with her father, because there was no one who could comfort her. In her father's house she got time to review her relationship with her husband, her dead mother, her dead brother Dhruva and her children Renu and Abhi. Her review over the relationship gives her the courage to face reality. Her father advises her to face the realities of life with courage and return back to her husband's house. "Don't turn your back on things again. Turn round and look at them. Meet him" (216).

As a result, she gets a new vigor which helps her to achieve wholeness and overcome the identity crisis. The realization dawns upon her that she cannot run away from reality. She learns that her life is her own which she will have to shape on her own. There is no refuge, other than one's own self. She gets the understanding that human mind cannot be intimidated by external forces. Terror is not enforced from outside rather it comes from within. With the help of her father, she regains her inner strength. She becomes aware that she should not run away from the difficulties rather should face them with courage. The solution lies with one's own. She decides to assert herself and move ahead to encounter the problems. With this in mind, she confidently waits to confront her husband. "And, oh yes, Baba, if Manu comes, tell him to wait. I'll be back as soon as I can" (221).

To conclude, Shashi Deshpande's women characters revolt against the social taboos and old tradition. They struggle for their freedom, completeness and their identity. They fight against the existing system and tradition of society and express their feelings, their anger, their resentment against the social taboos but it does not bring them any satisfaction. She reflects good understanding of the grass root reality and woman's plight in India. Her focus is on the domestic affairs rather than the political affairs of modern life. She successfully portrays a complex vision of compromised happiness and withered dreams of middle class women's life.

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