

SENSE OF SELF – EMPOWERMENT IN WOMAN PROTAGONIST SARITA IN *DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS* BY SHASHI DESHPANDE

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Abstract

This present research paper critically and culturally analyzes the condition of Indian women in a patriarchal society. The woman protagonist Sarita in *Dark Holds No Terrors* faces a number of challenges to establish her own independent identity and achieve the phase of self – empowerment in her life. She belongs to a traditional and conservative family and her life is entangled in performing the traditional roles socially and culturally. The protagonist suffers a lot in her life before she becomes a powerful and self reliant person in the patriarchal and conservative set- up. The novelist Shashi Deshpande focuses on the means of woman empowerment in her select text *Dark Holds No Terrors*. Analytically, it is suggested that women education, professional skills and understanding of their strengths of character help them to achieve the state of independence and happiness. Realization dawns upon the protagonist Sarita when she successfully overcomes her challenges of life and performs her roles effectively.

Key Words: Patriarchy, suffering, success, women empowerment and realization

INTRODUCTION

The Dark Holds No Terrors is the second novel (1980) of the novelist Shashi Deshpande. The novelist won the **Nanjangud Tirumabala Award** in 1990 for this present novel. This novel is about the female protagonist Saru who gives a clarion call to women to rise up from slumber and give up their submission and silence for their liberation and self- empowerment. She is a well educated and modernized economically independent middle-class wife, whose problematic and strained relationships with her parents, parents-in- laws and her husband results into her enormous suffering and self realization. The novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* opens with Saru returns to her parents home fifteen years after she left home with an oath never to return to the four walls where she meted out injustice in her childhood in the hand of her mother. But the strained relationship with her husband Manu forces her to seek a shelter in her parental house, where she hopes to have a chance to change her life and to reintrospect her relationships with her husband and her children.

The title of novel empathetically marks that escapism is no solution of the problem; a permanent solution comes from within one's self in life. This novel shows suffering, self-realization and empowerment of Saru in a very sensitive way. The story of the novel focuses on the unsuccessful marital life of the female protagonist Saru, but a successful doctor in the day time and horrified and trapped creature in the hands of her rude and cruel husband Manohar at night. Her spouse Manohar is a lecturer in a third rate- college.

Being a girl child, Saru was discriminated at her home by her mother. The degree of her torture reached to the extreme point when her younger brother met the tragedy of death and she was blamed for the cause of this tragedy. This made her feel bad and sad. In the conservative family, the parents constantly put many restrictions on the girl. The novelist vividly reveals the unavoidable pang of Saru as a girl child through the following conversation between Saru and her 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. (D.H.N.T . 45)

The dignity and destiny of a woman is seen in marriage. As Beauvoir observes: "Marriage is a destiny traditionally offered to women by society" (Beauvoir 444). In the past, the protagonist was addressed by her typical pet name "Sarutai" by her younger brother which caused her to pain. She tried to resist addressing her "Sarutai". Suffering stemmed from her calling her typical name "Sarutai" has been highlighted through the conversation between Dhruva and her:

Tell me, Sarutai.

Don't call me Sarutai. And I won't tell you. Now, Shut up. Or get out you've got to lie down absolutely quiet. Don't kick me. And no giggling. Don't move at all. (*D.H.N.T.* 84)

The protagonist Sarita feels neglected being a girl in the family and expresses her pain of life, "Nobody likes me. Nobody cares for me. Nobody wants me" (*D.H.N.T.* 83). This implies that woman is not considered a vital member of society in a traditional society.

The life of woman is very traumatic in a traditional and patriarchal family exemplified with the story of Saru in the novel. She is always considered the second class citizen in the family. The indifferent attitude of her mother forces Saru to suffer in her childhood. She always blames Sarita for the death of Dhruva by drowning by chance. Her derogatory remarks offend the protagonist, "You killed your brother" (*D.H.N.T.* 146). The following accusation shakes Saru and fills her heart with "fears and terrors". The mother accuses Saru of killing of her brother, "You killed your brother Why didn't you did?" (*D.H.N.T.* 61). Whereas Saru tries to prove that she is innocent. She speaks to her mother when she puts the allegation of the death of Dhruva on her as

I didn't .Truly I didn't. It was an accident. I loved him, my little brother. I tried to save him. Truly, I tried. But I couldn't. And I ran away. Yes, I ran away, I admit that. But I didn't kill him. (*D.H.N.T.* 146)

Here, one can say that Saru becomes a victim of the conservative and rude behaviour of her mother. In a conservative family, the destructive role of family towards the women to keep them down is rightly pointed out by the Afro-American feminist Barbara Christian as, "... that many of us were destroyed within and by our families" (189). Sarita is frequently tortured by her mother being reminded to her that she is the cause of death of Dhruva. He was, in fact, died from drowning. This blame reduces the protagonist to a helpless creature. Moreover, the preference of son to parents in Indian society makes daughters suffer and the mothers turn blind towards the needs and existence and their daughters. As the mother of Saru neglects her and denies her existence and essence in the family. In her young days, Saru, in revolt against her mother, married a man from another social class. This shows a bold and brave woman in the story. Saru being an educated person knows no one is there to help her

because she is a woman. The fear in her of being alone has been expressed in the following manner:

...I am alone. Knowing, with a kind of hopelessness, that it was not a dream, but real. That there was no one who could comfort her. That perhaps, there never would be any one. (*D.H.N.T.* 43)

Thus, she remains in the state of suppression and suffering. Suffering from isolation and silence turns her a helpless creature. The novelist elucidates the pang of Saru in the following way:

And yet, she had the dismal feeling that it was she who had frozen herself into an isolated, lonely suffering she could never break out of. When she came home, she had thought ... I will break out of it. I will talk to Baba. (*D.H.N.T.* 43-44)

The father supports her for making her career bright. Her father gives her full support to embark on her educational journey. Saru is a successful doctor at her workplace. At home she is an object of exploitation at the hands of her husband. She is suffering from isolation and silence in the novel as she stays at her parental home. She is away from her family. She wants to tell her father about her suffering and problem but she remains silent most of times. Somehow, she breaks her silence and speaks to her father about her problems and asks for his advice, "... Baba, I'm unhappy. Help me, Baba, I'm in trouble. Tell me what to do" (*D.H.N.T.* 44).

The novelist Shashi Deshpande vividly points out the strength of woman's character as follows:

Perhaps there is something in the male, she now thought, that is whittled down and ultimately destroyed by female domination. It is not so with a female. She can be dominated, she can submit, and yet hold something of herself in reserve. As if there is something in her that prevents erosion and self- destruction. (*D.H.N.T.* 85)

This resolute attitude and behaviour of the protagonist makes her a strong character in the story to set her independent identity in the society. Saru realizes that her existence in her actions in a rhetorical manner, "... If I cast no shadow, I do not exist" (*D.H.N.T.* 159).

Saru married Manu from another social class. She went against the will of her mother to marry Manu. Their initial years of marriage of Saru and Manu were happy, but later on, marital conflicts begin to appear in their nuptial life. The novelist Shashi Deshpande effectively presents how a particular incident becomes a turning point in Saru's personal and professional life. One evening, she returns back home quite late in her bloodstained coat as she helped out the victims in a fire accident in a factory nearby. Suddenly, the people from her neighbourhood come to know about her as a great doctor. Therefore, the protagonist obtains a huge fame in her profession. People start visiting her for medical help and other related matters. Manu turns out to be a rude husband due to popularity of his wife as a famous doctor. In the beginning, she did not understand that Manu had undergone a change. He could not bear her popularity. She claims her identity and individuality, "He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband" (*D.H.N.T.* 42). Manu feels absolutely uncomfortable with the immense popularity of Saru. Manu feels ignored, neglected and hurt when people only greet and pay attention to Saru. Earlier, Saru was happy with Manu's tiny salary but in new role of a successful doctor of new woman, she becomes discontented. Being an educated and practical woman, Saru ponders over the issue of conflict between Manu and her in the following manner:

For me, things now, began to hurt ... a frayed sari. I could not replace a movie life I could not see, an outing I could not join in. I knew now that without money life became petty and dreary. The thought of going on this way became unbearable. (*D.H.N.T.* 92)

Thus, one can observe that their intensity of love is reduced because their love was based on physical attraction, not on pure love. Saru begins to remain unhappy with her man and starts to hate the man- woman relationship.

With the passage of time, Saru's economical condition becomes good. This results into the gradual decline in the marital relationship between Saru and Manu. She gets great height in her life by treating people in neighbourhood. The jealous and suspicious nature of Manu becomes a bone of contention in their marital life. The result of this jealous nature of Manu is that he starts perpetuating violence on Saru at night. He turns out to be a cruel and violent husband from a romantic lover. Failure in his life and jealousy of his wife's fame make him behave in a

strange and unexpected and ambiguous way. The situation becomes even more horrible for Saru when Manu behaves in two different ways: at night he treats cruelly Saru and in the daytime he remains normal. Moreover, he pretends to be ignorant in the morning of her beastly behaviour with Saru at night. At this point of time, she receives the news of the death of her mother. Though she took a pledge never to return her parental home, yet she moves to take care for her father. The place where she was humiliated by her mother while she was alive. She expresses her physical pain and brutality over her body by perpetuating upon her husband in the following lines in the most realistic manner:

...it was a monstrous invasion of my body. I tried to move, twisting my body wriggling under the weight that pinned it down. It was impossible. I began, in sheer helplessness to make small whimpering sounds, piteous cries. The small pains merged all at once into large one. And still the body above mine. The hands continued their quest for new areas of pain. Now the horror of what was happening to me was lost in a fierce desire to end it. It could not, would not, bear it. I began to fight back, hopelessly savagely. (D. H.N. T.12)

She experiences such extreme pain and agony in her marital life that nobody can imagine her pathetic situation. Atrocities are faced by Saru, who is a mother of two children and a working woman of social repute. Moreover, the offender is none other than her husband for whom she had made all sacrifices of life. At this point of life, Saru becomes emotionally and mentally crippled and hears the news of her odd mother's demise. As Jyoti Singh, in her book, *Indian women Novelists: A Feminist Psychoanalysis Study*, says, "In Indian tradition, an ideal woman is one who suffers all kinds of adversities, but is selflessly devoted to others to maintain the web of connection so that no one is left alone" (41).

Saru is left alone after her failure in her nuptial life. Simone De Beauvoir considers that the institution of marriage becomes an instrument of exploitation in feminism which regards it as a subtle expression of patriarchal control and the most powerful weapon for female subjugation. As she writes, "It has been said that marriage diminishes man, which is often true; but almost it annihilates woman" (*The Sex Second* 496). On being asked by her friend Nalu to talk on Medicine as a profession for women, to a group of college students, the

protagonist sarcastically and boldly hits the conservative traditions and poor mindset of people for women in a patriarchal society in the following manner:

A wife must always be few feet behind her husband. If he's an MA, you should be a BA. If he's 5' feet 4" inches tall, you shouldn't be more than 5' feet 3" inches tall. If he's earning, five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred ninety-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 is n'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 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.
(D.H.N.T. 137)

Thus, these spoken words of Saru express her deep anguish and frustration of not only her marital life but also the pain of Indian women in a male dominated society. The patriarchal codes and traditional mindset always cripple woman and her personality.

A healthy marital relationship fosters the psychological development of people as Jean Baker Miller, in her paper, "What Do We by Relationships," includes five key things for a mutual development of humans in the web of human relationships, especially man-woman relationship. A brief resume of these principles are given below:

- **Zest:** Each person feels a greater sense of zest, vitality and energy. It is the "emotion, the feeling, which comes when we feel a real sense of connection with another person.
- **Action:** Each person feels more able to act and does act has 'an impact on the other in a way important way.
- **Knowledge:** Each person gets a 'more' accurate picture of her/ himself and the person' by understanding each other's struggle.
- **A sense of worth:** listening to one another and responding with respect and care nurtures one another's sense of worth. One cannot develop a

sense of worth unless the people around us who are important to us, convey 'attention to, and recognition of our experience.

- **A greater sense of connection and desire for more connection:** The increased zest, empowered, knowledge and worth lead to a growth of sense of connection and desire for more connections. (Qtd. in *Indian Women Novelists* 96-97)

The woman protagonist from Shashi Deshpande's *Dark Holds No Terrors* is having all above mentioned qualities to foster her healthy relationship with her husband and to maintain the harmony of family.

This story of Saru can be a story of her from self- alienation to self- realization and self- empowerment. It is also from frustration to confidence. After successfully facing the challenges of her journey as a woman of patience and perseverance, Saru realizes the inner power of woman. The protagonist strongly asserts her existence and worth as follows:

My life is my own... somehow she felt as if she had found it now, the connecting link. It means you are not just a strutting, grimacing puppet, standing futilely on the stage for a brief while between areas of darkness. If I have been a puppet it is because I made myself one. I have been clinging to the tenuous shadow of a marriage whose substance has long since disintegrated because I have been afraid of... (D.H.N.T. 220)

Hence, she has epiphany. She has come to know that she has to play her roles of a wife and a mother to bring integration in her family. Alienation and suffering offer a chance to her to reintrospect over herself. With the power of reintrospection, she dispels her inner darkness and fear of being isolated person. Finally, she makes a decision to take a stand for her and her family. She realizes that she is the master of her own destiny. As a powerful person, the protagonist has learnt the things that strike the iron while it is hot. When realization dawns upon her, she becomes aware of her isolated life and realizes that she has to do actions in order to become a strong person in a traditional society. Then, she takes the ropes and reigns of her life and her family in her hands to keep her family integrated and intact. The power of realization makes Saru a powerful and assertive woman:

It is my life. It's my life. Four words forming a sentence. Go on say them and they become meaningless, a jumble of sound, and a collection of letters. And yet, they would not leave her alone. She went back to bed, the words going on and on in her mind. It was maddening. She tried to turn her thought to other things, to go back to that childhood fantasy of hers. The friend would never fail her. But it was no use. That friend had deserted her too. There are only these words instead. We are alone. We have to be alone.
(D.H.N.T. 208)

She regains her confidence and essence when she removes the shell of silence and submissiveness from her life. She is an independent human being, desiring for her individual identity and liberation. With her positive mindset and the dawn of realization, she converts all her difficulties into opportunities. She makes all her possible efforts to live a happy, harmonious and successful life. She handles all her problems bravely and intelligently being an educated woman. Here, one can say that this novel of Shashi Deshpande is a novel of female voice and her empowerment.

The beauty of this novel *Dark Holds No Terrors* is that the novelist Shashi Deshpande brings the psychological insights and strengths of women. She suggests women must have their own self – affirmation and assertion. The dawn of realization makes her self sufficient and introduces her to the world of her potentials within her. Therefore, Saru compromises with her life and the needs of her family and emerges to be a victorious woman in the story.

With the power of emotions and intellect, Saru finds a new way to go ahead in her personal life. She realizes her strength of making her individual decisions and walking on the path of progress independently. Moreover, she has come to know the powers of taking bold and powerful steps in her life to keep her family life smooth and successful. She knows that they are her weapons of registering her identity in the male driven society. The real phase of self –empowerment is attained by the protagonist when she guides and redirects herself in the following manner:

I wake up and I am in my own room at home. I have to orient myself. Yes, I am at home, in my own room. The huge wooden wardrobe is in front of me. And the dressing table, with its mirror

that sways too far back unless propped up by a piece of paper. I have to be more sure, more certain. I walk out of the house, out of the gate, and on to the road. Turn to the right now, and there it is, the cross road. And the signboard painted yellow, with words and figures in black. Here I hesitate. Somehow I feel, I know, that I have to turn right again and take the road leading to... the road which will take me to... that road.... (D.H.N.T . 69)

It is observed, here, that the protagonist is a woman of sense and strength. Towards the end of the story, Saru appears to be a powerful wife, a caring mother and a victorious woman. The way she handles her son Abhi proves that she is a powerful mother. She affirms her strong character as, “I was no longer gentle but firm mother... I dragged him out of the room, while children watched in a shocked silence” (D.H.N.T. 172).

It is noticed that when she is away from her family and profession, she genuinely has concerns for all of them being a dedicated wife and a mother, “And even now I don’t know why I continue to stay on here, as if my children, my home, my practice, my patients...” (D.H.N.T. 69).

The novelist suggests that the core tenet of the happy married life is cooperation and mutual understanding between husband and wife. In the glorious role and status of women, the Hindu sacred book *Manusmriti* describes “Where women are worshipped, Gods reside there” (Qtd. in R.K. Narayan’s book 51).The protagonist Saru turns out to be a powerful and wise woman. Wisely, she knows her parental home cannot be her refuge. Neither her father, nor husband can be her refuge. She tells herself that she herself is her refuge in her own world:

You are your own refuge,

There is no other refuge;

This refuge is hard to achieve._ (The Dhammpada 7)

SUMMING UP

Dark Hold No Terrors is a critical study about the social institutions like family, marriage and gender roles. It is a feminist text. The novelist Shashi Deshpande realistically portrays various types of human relationships in it in Indian context.

Man- woman relationship and sage of woman suffering and realization are the main motifs of this research study in a conservative family. Saru, the woman protagonist, is an example of this motif in the story. The novelist Shashi Deshpande questions the patriarchal restrictions and raises gender issues like subjugation and identity crisis of Indian women. She points out that woman as a sufferer in a male driven world. The root cause of women suffering is the presence of the repressive forces of patriarchy. She offers a piece of suggestion to them to realize their inner strength and follow the middle way to foster a happy and healthy relationship in the family. The novelist puts stress on realizing and utilizing the intrinsic abilities of women to overcome all their challenges. This research paper points out that woman suffers because of the presence of social and cultural restrictive norms that heavily affect the lives of women. The protagonist of this novel is Saru. She suffered a lot in her childhood being a girl child in the hands of her mother. This forced to go on against the will of her mother and she married the man from another social class. The problematic nature of her husband reduces Saru into a helpless person from a successful doctor for a while. Her search for happy married life and her own independent individuality is aborted by the poor mindset of her parents and her husband for a while. Then, she withdraws herself from her family and remains almost alone at her parental house. This withdrawal from family gives her space and time to move to realize her inner strengths to establish her own identity.

Her feminine virtues like patience, perseverance, courage and self- confidence bring empowerment in her and transform her life. Here, one can say that the protagonist, in a real sense, acquires a room of her own for her identity and success.

The Dark Holds No Terrors novel proffers a piece of suggestion the women sufferers that “escapism is no solution of the problem”. The real and final solution comes from within one’s “self”. Thus, one can overcome all problems if one starts recognizing one’s inner potential. Above all, the research paper critically and socially highlights the significance of mutual respect, trust, care, understanding and support for the foundation of healthy human relationship and happy family in this world.

At last, Saru, the woman protagonist emerges to be a victorious person by realizing her inner strength and striking a chord of balance in her familial and

professional worlds. Therefore, one can conclude this present study of woman's emergence from suffering to realization with the powerful remark of the novelist Manal M. Qmar on women as: "We are women of power" (Qmar 38).

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APPENDIX

Abbreviation used in this research paper is as follows:

D.H.N.T: *Dark Holds No Terrors* (select text).