



Images of Women in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*: A Study

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande's novels explore the patriarchal set up in India and her protagonist, located within the social culture reach out to define the self in an attempt to free themselves in their search for freedom they modify the cultural norms that bind them and try to create an identity of their own. Deshpande's woman Saru in *The Dark Holds no Terrors* attempt to reassume her place in family, society on the basis of equality. She tries to understand herself, her past, her culture, her place in society and her relationship with her husband. Deshpande rejects the stereotypes, the myths which have so shaped the image of women, in India.

Key words: Tradition, Modernity, Mind, Family, Society

Shashi Deshpande occupies a unique place among contemporary Indian writers. Shashi Deshpande novels present a fascinating but changing picture of the complex and vigorous life of her time. Her perception is realistic and tempered by personal observation pertaining to Indian social and cultural context. She focuses on women issues, she has women's perspective to the world.

'*The Dark Holds no Terrors*' Published in the year 1990 is a major work of Shashi Deshpande. The main character Saru whose marriage is on the rocks. Saru initiates new norms but she decides to establish her independent identity and arrives at the proper knowledge of the self and other. In this novel Shashi Deshpande explores the search of women to fulfill herself as a human being, independent of her traditional role as a daughter, wife and mother. Saru represents the set of modern women who are educated and in contact with society, dealing with critical problems like love, marriage, sex, settlement and individuality.

The present paper is an attempt to make the protagonist change her image to realize her freedom. She has to reassume her place in family, society on the basis of equality and try to understand themselves, their past, their culture, their place in society and their relationship with each other. They try to redefine human relationships, achieve self-identity, independence, without rejecting the cultural and social background. The hope of Indian women lies in all these protagonists who are ready to face the new challenges of life opting for new roads and new circumstances. Shashi Deshpande emerged on the Indian fictional scene only in the nineteen seventies. She has nevertheless created a place for herself in the galaxy of Indian women novelists in English.

Gauging correctly the mood of Indian society she has seriously attempted to project in her novels aspects of the changing image of women in society. She excels a realistic picture of the middle class educated woman who, though financially independent, is still facing the problem of adjustment between the old and the new, tradition and modernity, idealism and pragmatism. Shashi Deshpande is almost incomparable for her portrayal of the Indian middle- class women when with their desperation, frustration, exploitation and that long silence which has been there for many centuries. Deshpande continues the story in the *The Dark Holds no Terrors*.

The Dark Hold No Terrors (1990) recounts the story of a marriage on the rocks. The focus is on the conjugal life of Sarita (Saru) and Manohar (manu). Saru is a two-in- one woman, a successful doctor in the day time wearing a white coat with an air of confidence and a terrified trapped animal at night.

The novel opens with a prologue which sets the tone of things to come. Saru under-goes a nightmarish experience of rape at the hands of a stranger who, Saru realizes eventually, is no other than her own husband. She finds that the frightening nightmares are not dreams but realities. Throughout the novel, she thinks she has abandoned her husband because of his sadistic tendencies. Saru is a woman who is fettered by her marriage to a man who has sadistic tendencies. The novelist makes an extensive use of interior monologues to bring out Saru's suffering caused either by the husband's inconsiderate treatment or the mother's callous



attitude towards her.

Disturbed, disgusted, disillusioned and demoralized Saru returns to her father's house with a desire to seek relief from a self-destructing situation and here she has enough time at her disposal to review the relationship with her husband. At the end, she is able to confront reality and the dark, no longer, holds terror for her. Saru tries to escape the role of being a wife when she returns to her father's house after fifteen years of her marriage. It is her attempt to revolt against the role of a wife.

Saru had an insecure childhood. She suffers from gender discrimination right from birth. Her brother's birthday is celebrated with religious rites, while her birthday is celebrated on a smaller scale and later it is ignored altogether.

Sarabjit Sandhu observes: "The Mother is very attached to her son; the attitude is a typical one. After all, he is a male child and therefore one who will propagate the family lineage. In another sense, also, the male child is considered more important than the girl because he is qualified to give 'agni' to his dead parents. The soul of the dead person would wonder in fermen[3]." The mother feels that girl child is a liability while the boy is an asset. This cultural tutoring is firmly implanted on her mind. Despite a few exceptions, this attitude firmly prevails in society. Deshpande creates a new image of her protagonist, Saru, as the sense of reasoning and questioning develops, she cannot tolerate the inequality between herself and her brother. The partial attitude of her parents devastates Saru. This cultural tutoring that the girl child is a liability while the boy is an asset is firmly implanted in her mind.

As the sense of reasoning and questioning develops, Saru cannot tolerate the inequality between herself and her brother. The Saru-Manu relationship begins on a note of equality which is against our cultural norms. In the beginning, Saru and Manu are quite happy about their love marriage as Manu says "when we're together it's heaven, wherever we are" (38). Manu cared for her feeling as no one had ever done. Saru's life with Manu has an inauspicious beginning. She discards her life in the Parents' house in a fever of excitement. The decision is taken, She burns her boat with desire to return. But immediately, she has to face a crisis in relation to her new dwelling place. They are compelled to shift in a one-room house in a chawl with a common toilet. Inconveniences of material life begin to weigh heavily on them. Sparks fly and Saru wonders: "Was this not Manu, whom I loved and who loved me?" (38). Her marriage begins to crumble under the burden of her professional success. Manu becomes glum and has a bored look on his face. She is happy to establish herself as a doctor. The situation changes rapidly. Till now "he had been the young man and I was his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband" (42). The loss of status makes Manu a complaining husband. In fact, in a society, a husband who has to play a secondary role is always assigned to a woman. Deshpande, while depicting reality, focuses on altered circumstances and their reaction. She has created a new image of women which is there but not fully accepted by men in society.

Deshpande, while depicting reality, focuses on altered circumstances and their reaction. No man can accept wife's superiority over him. Saru's rise in the professional world brings out the dark facets of Manu's personality. Manu's monstrous behaviors at night may be possible but not justifiable. Deshpande wants her women to fight back and Saru realizes that escapism is no solution and seeks a solution within. This is what the famous lines from The Dharmapada included in the epigraph emphasize:

You are your own refuge/There is no other refuge

This refuses in hard to achieve

Women with their lack of confidence always search for "refuge". But Deshpande suggests that for every one "self" is the only refuge. But this assertion Deshpande is reinventing the image of women. Saru realizes that she has come to her parents' home not to meet her father but to have him declare that he is on her side, like he had done earlier in the case of her admission to the medical course. She wanted some support from him.. She tells her father that "My husband is a sadist" (199). She tells him that Manu is typical Indian husband, a male



chauvinist who wants to be treated with great respect. Saru tells her father about the frustrations and disappointments that she was going through in her life and the cultural oppression in the male dominated society.

This is a new image of a women that Shashi Deshpande has portrayed in this novel where a daughter shares every problem with her father.

There in this novel the mother of Saru symbolizes Indian cultural values, traditions, oppressive customs, where as Saru represents the modern generation of women who consider many of the traditional value systems as oppressive, exploitative and demeaning for the woman and having been educated, she has an identity of her own and thus refuses to become a slave to Manu's unjust whims and perversions. Saru is no longer an appendage to man. Economic independence gives her ample scope to fight subordination and suppression. Saru becomes self aware and this enables her to protest against Manu's animal behavior. Deshpande's women with a growing sense of self-awareness are ready to face two challenges of life positively; they are capable enough to usher some fresh thought and fresh behavior pattern.

Deshpande has dealt very minutely and delicately with the problem of middle class educated women and reached the conclusion that women, after being granted certain liberties by the constitution are coming out with a changing image to and psyche that is not ready to accept various kinds of humiliations from their counter parts. Her women may not react radically like Shobha De's female characters but increasingly it is becoming evident that Deshpande's women have a voice and identity of their own. Her working women may stagnate for some time and then come in direct contact with the society as Sam in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*.

Shashi Deshpande's novels explore the patriarchal set up in India and her protagonist, located within the social culture reach out to define the self in an attempt to free themselves in their search for freedom they modify the cultural norms that bind them and try to create an identity of their own. Deshpande's woman Sam in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* attempt to reassume her place in family, society on the basis of equality. She tries to understand herself, her past, her culture, her place in society and her relationship with her husband. Deshpande rejects the stereotypes, the myths which have so shaped the image of women, in India. Deshpande gives anew social status to Sam in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. Deshpande is a writer with a broad humanistic outlook and paints responsible women who work through self analysis, self understanding, vigilance and courage, self realization and fight continuously against the existing crippling norms.

References:

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- (2) Sarabjit Sandhu, *The Image of Women in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande* (New Delhi Prestige, 1991)19-20.
- (3) Quoted by Shashi Deshpande from *Dhramapada* in the novel *The Dark. Holds No Terrors*.