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CONSTRUCTION OF WOMAN'S IDENTITY IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S
THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS

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ABSTRACT

In the realm of feminist discourse, the patriarchal social structure has always questioned the identity of women from the perspective of male domination, desires, and aspirations. The biology, cultural practices, religious myths, and historical perspectives collectively contribute to determining the nature of women's identities. The present paper critically discusses the issues of woman's identity in the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. The protagonist struggles to develop her own space beyond the paradigms set by the order of society. To elaborate on my topic, I have carried out a thorough reading and subsequent analysis of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. Since the study of the primary source was not enough to carry out my investigation, I had to broaden my analysis to a wide variety of secondary sources. Deshpande has explored the complex and varied nature of issues related to woman's identities in her novel, and she agrees that power politics operate in the society that governs the identity of women in the family as well as society.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Women's Identity, Social structure

In the patriarchal social structure in all nations and societies, a woman's identity is always defined in the context of male desires and male domination. John Stuart Mill in her radical study *The Subjection of Women* concentrated on the abilities of women and made a plea for their rights in professional and personal life that can help women to construct their identity. The binary relationship existing between the two sexes is the greatest hazard in the process of social development of women. She admits:

The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to another – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement, and that it ought to be replaced by principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privileges on the one side, nor disability on the other. (Mill : 3)

The period between 1920 and 1960 marks a radical drift to encourage the issue of woman's liberation and woman's identity. The idea of identity construction includes the realization of human potential against the established conventions or the traditions encouraged by religious history, political structure, myths, and social organizations. The feminist ideology looks into the issue of the subjugation of women as a key concept of history and it has been responsible for most of the social and psychological imbalances in personal relationships. The

realization of such an organized mechanism of subjugation generates one's awareness of identity. Carden admits:

The New feminism is not about the elimination of differences between the sexes; nor even simply the achievement of equal opportunity, it concerns the individual's right to find out the kind of person he or she is and to strive to become that person. (Carden: 2)

In human history, woman's identity has been suppressed for their distinctive biology and anti-feminist religious myths. It has been accepted that women's biological inheritance including their feminine attributes are suitable only for child rearing and homemaking and have no potential to make their contribution in the field of creativity and professional success. However radical feminists believe that feminism is not against the issues of "motherhood" but it is against all those practices that make women suppress the greater part of human potential. Carden expressed the possibilities of the reorientation of social order that can ensure the spaces for the development of the 'human potential' of women. She remarks :

I want to have part in creating a new society... want women to have something to say in their own lives... I have never reached my potential because of social conditions. I'm not going to get the rewards, I've been crippled ... I want to see the kind of system that facilitates the use of potential. (Carden: 12)

The idea of identity awareness is a complex phenomenon that includes an individual's needs, potentials, and belongingness with the group coupled with the realization of the purpose of existence. It is not a concept of social protest but of self-realization against the constituents of social dynamics. Erikson admits, "... identity is a configuration arising out of "constitutional givers' idiosyncratic libidinal needs, favored capacities, significant identification, effective defenses, successful sublimations, and constituent roles. (116) Identity crisis occurs out of the negation of the sense of identification with the social, cultural, and personal surroundings regarding different connotations of the concept of self and identity, Sudhir Kakar observes :

An individual's sense of identity is neither completely conscious nor unconscious, although at times, it appears to be exclusively the one or the other. At some places, identity is referred to as a conscious sense of individual uniqueness, at other to an unconscious striving for continuity of experience, at yet other places as a sense of solidarity with a group's ideal. (16)

Gayatri Spivak, the prominent post-colonial thinker in her thesis on 'gendered subaltern' admitted that the burden of patriarchy does not permit women 'to speak' or 'to express' their views on her own experiences and about the socio-political mechanisms. Women writers have tried to investigate the inner anguish of women against the oppressive mechanism of suppression encouraged in society. Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* has explained the contradictory position of women in society :

Imaginatively she is one of the highest importance, practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover, she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction, but in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips, in real life she could hardly spell and was the property of husband. (93)

The controversial issue of woman's identity is closely related to cultural practices also. The different structures of value systems based on gender ideologies have done greater harm to woman's birth for their femininity and individuality. The idea of the 'Angle of Home' is a serious loss to a woman's identity. Agnes Macphail declares, "I don't want to be the angel of home. I want for myself that I want for other women; absolute equality. After that is secured, then men and women can take their turns at being angels." (29)

The idea of women's identity involves the negation of all those socio-economic principles that are responsible for the subjugation of women at physical and mental levels. Shashi Deshpande with her protagonists has endeavored to construct the comprehensive structure of sexual politics. It involves the steps – (a) Awareness of identity as a woman and as an individual, (b) negation of the mechanism and agonies that have caused serious

damage to female identity, (c) realization of the responsibility as a voice of resistance, (d) reconstruction of alternative identity, (e) transformational politics.

Shashi Deshpande through her female protagonists promotes the idea that each woman retains an instinctive urge for “self-development” both at social and mental levels. The patriarchal social structure that recommends the aesthetics of “silence” and “suffering” can no longer do justice to its women folks. With the social reawakening and the expansion of the opportunities for the expression of hidden potential, women are going to adopt the path of self-assertion and resistance. The expansion of education, the new opportunities of professional competence, and the post-colonial thrust for the emancipation of human identity prepared a conducive atmosphere for “Identity Awareness” among women. Shashi Deshpande being a dynamic and practical thinker, instead of adopting sympathy for the wretched existence of women in patriarchy, portrayed them as self-aware human beings making the desperate search for their individuality, respect for their femininity, and the preservation of their identity. Most of her protagonists are self-willed, possessing the power to carve out their own spaces beyond the traditional burden of womanhood. Shashi Deshpande has confessed that through her female protagonists, she is making a search to discover the individuality of women. She mentions:

It is very difficult to explain. I have a very strong feeling that until very recently women in our society have been looked upon just as “breeding animals”. They had no role in life; I have a strong objection to treating any human being in that manner... I could see that female life had no value at all. The chronology of their life centers around child birth. The stress laid on the feminine functions, at the cost of all your potentials as an individual enraged me. I knew, I was a very intelligent person, but for a woman intelligence is always a handicap. (Deshpande: 2)

Confinement of women to domestic spaces, and the negation of their human potential in the name of gender identity results in the disbalance of personality. According to Freud, “Self” is also the expression of libido and without the balance of libido individual can never achieve “wholeness”. Under such condition, the self withdrawal mechanism for the protection of ego, leads to the destruction of self and identity. Freud admits, “... introversion describes the deflection of the libido away from the possibilities of real satisfaction and its excessive accumulation upon fantasies previously tolerated as harmless. An introvert person is in an unstable condition, the next disturbance of the shifting forces will cause symptoms to develop, unless he can yet find other outlets for his pent up libidos.” (382) In male dominated society, the fabric of man and woman relationship is often determined in context of universally accepted religious myths or under the unconditional authority of male desires without the acknowledgement of the power of self. It leads to imbalance, discontent and silent hostility operating on the consciousness of women. Betty Friedan, eminent psychologist in context of her idea of female autonomy admits, “self development” is essential human condition irrespective of sex determined roles, “For a woman, as for man, the need for self fulfillment autonomy, self realization independence, individuality, self-actualization is important as the sexual need with as serious consequences, when it is thwarted.” (The Feminine Mystique: 282) The protagonists of Shashi Deshpande make search for purposeful life and purposeful relationship. They are in search of “inner spaces” (Erikson : 23). It provides them opportunity to assert their identity against socio-cultural, socio-biological and socio-ethical determinants of human behaviour. The urge for self identity and self preservation is well exposed in the characters Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*.

The process of emancipation includes the unconventional pattern of living, breaking the barriers of social taboos, reduction of the burden of guilt and shame, recollecting the courage to establish personal choices and finally raising the voice against oppression and injustice. Shashi Deshpande exposes the problem of female identity in context of man and woman relationship in which woman is always treated “other”. She admits :

My characters take their own ways. I’ve heard people saying we should have strong women characters. But my writing had to do with women as they are. Most of the women, I’ve known are like that – their decisions are made for them, due to being over-protected, there are people who think one way and do another. So there are all kinds of women. (Interview : Deshpande : 1987).

In the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, through the struggle of Saru, a middle class educated housewife, Shashi Deshpande presents the issue of identity crisis in the life of women who accept the conventions of family at the cost of their freedom and creative potential. In spite of this obscure relationship, Saru, the protagonist possesses the strength to construct her creative self breaking the barriers of social order. Premila Paul admits :

The Dark Holds No Terrors by Shashi Deshpande is a totally different novel in the sense that it explores the myth of man's unquestionable superiority and the myth of woman being a martyr and a paragon of all virtues. It is based on the problems faced by a career woman, a refreshingly new phenomenon in Indian English Fiction. (30)

Saru, an educated and sensitive writer was married to Manohar. Manohar in spite of his liberal vision is governed by the insecurity of being "a superior superhuman male." After marriage Saru accepts the matrimonial ties and in the role of wife, she forgets her commitments as a woman and as a writer. However, at the mental level, Saru seems to be caught in the dilemma of identities. It is said, "The novel *Dark Holds No Terrors* projects the post-modern dilemma of a woman who strongly resents the onslaught of her individuality and identity." (Tripathi: 43) Saru in spite of her acceptance of conventional roles retains the ambitions of economically independent and intellectually enlightened woman. It was a misfortune in the life of Saru that insecurity born out of childhood discrimination was rooted in her unconscious. The narrative in the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* begins at a crucial moment when Saru comes back to her home after a remarkable pause to reconstruct the memories of her forgotten childhood. Her earlier memories are those which underlined the discrimination expressed by her mother in favour of her brother Dhruva. She recalls, "... I was born, but of my birth, my mother had said to me once, it rained heavily the day, you were born, it was terrible and somehow, it seemed to me that it was my birth that was terrible for her, not the rains." (169) Saru recollects the incident how she was treated second to Dhruva. Saru with this negligence of parents develops an intense desire to make her own status so that she might compensate for her "dark complexion" and "homely features". She becomes conscious of self-recognition through professional success. She becomes aware to realize her compact individuality, femininity, and humanity through her suppressed creative talent. It denotes, "Any need is the deficit state that motivated the person to replenish the deficit. It's like a hole that demands to be filled in. This replenishment or fulfillment of a need is what is meant by self-actualization or self-realization." (Hall: 250)

It was a further misfortune in the life of Saru that her brother Dhruva died in drowning and her mother imposed the whole responsibility of the accident on her shoulders. Saru bears the pain of this accusation in silence and makes no effort to refute the charge. In her parental home, she alienates herself from the spaces of the parents. Saru takes no weak course but she becomes active for the sublimation of her suppressed desires. She joins a medical college and becomes a successful medical professional. Her accomplishment as a doctor was an unconscious effort to construct her identity beyond the authority of her parents and the conventions of gender-determined roles. Mother exhorts her to realize her responsibility. Saru denies being the shadow of her mother's desires and determines to go to Bombay to study Medicine. Further, she registers the choice of marriage with a man of her choice outside her caste. She achieves economic independence and intellectual accomplishment as a method of the construction of identity beyond male desires. In this respect, she becomes a self-actualized person. She adopts a professional career that could be "the key that would unlock the door out of this life." (140)

In the novel *Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru's relationship with Manohar explores and exposes other dimensions of the dilemma of identity reflected in the life of an Indian woman. In her identity as a doctor, for a while, she feels emancipated and confident. Her decision to inter-caste marriage was a reflection of discontent against the special system. In the company of Manu, she feels the fulfillment of her individuality and also of her family. She perceives Manu's presence in her life as a Saviour. Her marital life with Manu becomes a sort of affirmation of her identity against the domination of her mother. She feels, "I was hungry for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love of my being loved." (128) S.P. Swain admits that Saru's marriage with Manu was the assertion of her feminine sensibility:

She marries to attain autonomy of the self and to secure the lost love in their parental home. Manu is her Saviour, the ideal romantic hero who rescues her from her insecure, wooden existence in her maternal home. Her marriage with Manu is an assertion on and affirmation of her feminine sensibility. (Swain: 35)

Manohar in spite of his positive acceptance of Saru's success suffers from his own inferiority and it gradually makes him sadist towards Saru. Her immense success and popularity as a doctor distort the psyche of Manu both as a 'male' and as a husband. Saru's life dreams expand. She enters a professional relationship. In contrast to the sadism of Manu, she starts seeking consolation from Boozie, an efficient doctor. The breach in the relationship between Manu and Saru adds another dimension to her quest for identity. Earlier she has tried to get fulfillment in social recognition and now she starts seeking a fulfillment of her feminine desires that Manu failed to afford her. She confessed, "What had I imagined? Love? Romance? Both I knew too well, were illusions and not relevant to my life anyway. And the code word of our age is neither love nor romance, but sex." (133) Through the dilemma of Saru, Shashi Deshpande tries to establish that a comprehensive concept of identity includes both the physical fulfillment and emotional satisfaction but Saru in her life fails to synthesize these two dimensions of personality. Manu turns out to be a sadist and the infliction of sexual violence in the name of marital harmony prepares the ground for the final collapse of her self-dignity and female autonomy. In the privacy of the bedroom, she finds, "the hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar body." (112) With these experiences, her essential feminine self feels 'alienated' and isolated. Being disgusted with Manu's behavior, she determines to go back to her parental home. She declares, "I can't, I won't endure this anymore, I'd rather die, I can't go on." (99) In the company of her friend Malu, she recalls her college days. Saru fails to compromise with the traditional ideology that the sole purpose of a woman's existence is to please her husband. However, Shashi Deshpande admits that the "emancipated identity" is equally a prelude to the loss of the identity of women in society. Saru after her withdrawal from Manu takes shelter in the house of Baba but her inner self remains tied to Manohar and her children Renu and Abhi. Pramila Paul in her criticism of the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* discovers her desire to seek autonomy beyond all social constraints, "Saru is highly self-willed and her problems ensue because of her outsized ego and inmate love for power over others." (61) In fact, the idea of construction of identity becomes problematic in the life of Saru. Her instinct of "Self-survival" makes her shift from one identity to another. If Manu's company was torture, the shelter in the parental home becomes even greater torture in her life. The problem with Manu is that she fails to evolve an identity of her own beyond tradition. There are three layers of Saru's conscience – a woman, a wife, and an individual. Her quest for identity seeks the fulfillment of all the three but in all the three cases, the compulsion of patriarchy is dominant. She accepts that she is "the guilty sister, the undutiful daughter, the unloving wife... person spiked with guilts. Yes, she was all of them; she could not deny that now. She had to accept these services to become whole again but if she was all of them, they were not all of her. She was all these and so much more." (220) By the end of the novel when Saru was desperately waiting for Manu, suddenly she was called upon by one of his friends Ravi to support his ailing mother. She conquers her depression and her professional responsibility comes on the surface. Shashi Deshpande intends to establish that through the reconstruction of her professional identity, and through her creative talent, a woman can compensate for the loss of her inner self. Saru ultimately redefines her identity in a gender-oriented social structure. It is said :

Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* ambivalently projects deconstruction as well as reconstruction of gender roles as the female protagonist of the novel is constantly and often unconsciously in search of an inner space which is instrumental in the reconstruction of gender identity in the wake of its being deconstructed. (Tripathi: 43)

The idea of identity awareness is a complex phenomenon that includes an individual's needs, potentials, and belongingness with the group coupled with the realization of the purpose of existence. The analysis of identity construction in the novel of the eminent novelist suggests that she concentrates on the idea of identity construction within the periphery of her text. The following inferences can be drawn from this study :

- a. The idea of identity construction in the novel suggests that woman is not basically passive and insensitive but every woman retains her autonomy to construct her individuality and human potential beyond the social norms of patriarchy.

- b. In the process of identity construction the writer goes against the existing conventions of patriarchy. She seems to believe that patriarchal social norms are responsible for the loss of identity of women.
- c. The novelist agrees that marital relationship contributes to the loss of a woman's identity but the protagonist constructs their identity within the limits of marital bonds.
- d. Deshpande agrees on the issue of alternative identity construction. The suppressed female sexuality of her protagonist has been replaced by her creative sensibility. Moreover, the writer manifests creativity in different dimensions. Her protagonist constructs her separate identity in varied fields. She diverts her suppressed energy and sublimates it to pursue a career as a writer, freelance journalist, painter, research worker, etc.
- e. The writer challenges sexual colonialism both inside and outside marriage. They agree on the point that men try to crush and suppress woman's identities in the name of sex.
- f. The writer has adopted a specific pattern of awareness of the identity of the protagonist. The protagonist surveys not only her life but the life of other women and reaches a conclusion. Her protagonist follows a universal approach in drawing inferences regarding the deconstruction and construction of feminine identity.
- g. Identity construction involves a certain process- suppression, realization, and self-affirmation of the protagonist, and ultimately creativity is a consolation for the loss of her identity while.
- h. The protagonist contextualizes her identity in relation to family, religion, and social order. Shashi Deshpande constructs female identity within the periphery of tradition.
- i. Shashi Deshpande believes that social norms and mythical images of women have contributed to the loss of woman's identity.

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