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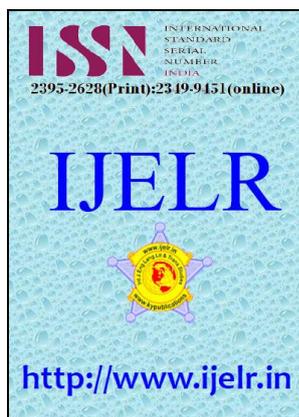
GENDER JUSTICE IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVEL "THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS".

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ABSTRACT



The Dark Holds No Terrors is a tragic story of a protagonist Sarita, a victim of circumstances and conventions of an orthodox and reactionary society. In Indian middle class families, son is always given a preferential treatment while the daughter is subjected to a strict discipline and treated as a burden at times.

Sarita was no exception to this general rule. Sarita's problem was that she was a rebel of sorts in a custom ridden society. When her brother was drowned, her mother accused her. Words of her mother made a deep cut in her heart. Sarita revolted against the injustice of her mother.

Our patriarchal society also considers only the male offspring has worthy enough to carry on the family line. Amidst these traditions and cultures she was made a Doctor by profession by her father and she got married happily. But her happiness was short lived because of the male ego of Manohar, Sarita's husband as she was loved and respected by all.

Growing popularity of Sarita became a cause of humiliation for Manohar. Thus he became a victim of neglect in public and private and consequently became a psychopath.

Deshpande observes regretfully that women irrespective of her class and character, has to play a second fiddle to man, has no room of her own. A woman is put under several restraints right from the day a girl becomes a woman.

On the whole the protagonist rebels against the tradition but ultimately tries to compromise with the existing reality.

From the study of the character of Saru which was undertaken on the problem of female emancipation, it appears that the women own their characteristics position in society mainly on two factors – economic dependence and mute servility.

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The Dark Holds No Terrors is a tragic story. The protagonist Sarita was a victim of circumstances and conventions of an orthodox and reactionary society. Her family consisted of only four persons – her parents, younger brother named Dhruva and herself. In Indian middle class families as they are, son is always given a preferential treatment while the daughter is subjected to a strict discipline and treated as a burden at times. Sarita was no exception to this general rule.

Birthdays were not then a tremendous occasion; they are made out to be now: but the excitement of having one, of being the center of attraction never palled. It was always a fascinating thought – ‘I was born’. But 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 (1)

Sarita’s problem was that she was a rebel of sorts in a custom ridden society. Her friend Smitha was going to see the film ‘Rani of Jhansi’ with her family. She asked Sarita to accompany her, and Sarita also grew eager to go with her friend, but Sarita’s parents did not want to send her with Smitha’s family, because Smitha’s family was unpopular and considered careless slapdash who believed only in enjoyment. Sarita was told by her parents that they would also go someday. But Sarita thought that it was a ploy to put her off. She was angry with her parents and wanted to show her anger to them.

When her brother was drowned and died, her mother accused her. Her mother was grievously shocked and held Sarita responsible for Dhruva’s death. ‘you killed him. Why didn’t you die? Why are you alive when he is dead?’(173). In fact Sarita had tried her best to dissuade him from going with her into the pool but Dhruva was pampered, self-willed and stubborn.

Words of her mother made a deep cut in her heart, which bled ever often. It was a child’s mistake, but it caused bitterness between the mother and daughter for the whole life. Mother held Sarita responsible for Dhruva’s death without knowing the facts while Sarita revolted against the injustice of her mother.

Our patriarchal society also considers only the male offspring as worthy enough to carry on the family line. As Sarabjit Sandhu observes:

The mother is very attached with her son. Her attitude is a typical one after all, he is a male child and therefore one who will propagate to the family as 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 otherwise wander ferment.(20)

Sarita had a craving for man’s love. She desired nothing but love. She therefore agreed to marry a man who did not have even a house to live in and offered to keep her in a chaval. “It is just one room in a chaval. You have to share the toilet. And he didn’t have the chance of getting a house for years. We may not get a place for months, years with little I can offer to pay”(37).

Marriage provided a channel for expression of her passion which she recalled that after her marriage. ‘I became in an instant a physically a passionate desire to be absorbed by the man I love’ (40). The usual and stereo type expressions of love had unusually strong power of evoking love. ‘Kisses were soft and unbearably sweet, embraces hard and passionate hands caressing and tender and loving and being loved, was an intense joy’(40). But her happiness was short lived which hurt the male ego of Manohar, Sarita’s husband took place one after the other.

The men around her lusciously and women said admiringly that she was the lady doctor. One evening, a woman knocked at her door and asked Manu whether the doctor was at home. The woman wanted to consult Sarita about her child who was suffering from diarrhoea. One or the other man visited her almost every day but none ever asked about Manohar. “The rift between Saru and her husband gradually grows wider, and one unfortunate incident blows the lid of simmering pot. It changes Manu into a wild animal at night when he begins to physically abuse her in the privacy of their room”. When they went out of the chaval for a walk, people greeted her. There were nods and smiles, murmured, greetings and namastes. But they were all for her. There was nothing for him.

Growing popularity of Sarita became a cause of humiliation for Manohar. After long and hard hours with patience she could not satisfy Manohar’s urge for love. Thus Manu became a victim of neglect in public and private

But happiness as she soon discovers is only an illusion and one is left with memories which are weighed with grief. As long as she is merely a medical student and her husband the bread winner, there is peace at home even if home is surrounded by filth and stench. The problems arrive only when she gains recognition as a doctor. (57)

Another blow came to him when a correspondent of a women's magazine asked Manu how he felt when his wife was earning more than he did. All these things stung together hit his ego. Consequently he became a psychopath. He started gnawing and biting and beating his wife in a stupor. She told her father

He attacked me like an animal that night. I was sleeping and I woke up and there was this.....the man hurting me, with his hands, teeth,his whole body....I could do nothing against him. I can never do anything. Just endure....it was like battered by him all over again (65).

The situation seems all the more terrible for Saru because Manu pretends that nothing has ever happened. He is perfectly normal in the mornings and goes about as if he was in total ignorance of his own actions. Commenting her on her description of her terrifying scene in bed, Premila Paul says: "married to practicing neuro pathologist Shashi Deshpande presumably has intimate knowledge of the neurotic world of the likes of Manu. But she shows remarkable restraint in the depiction of these scenes and spares readers the clinical details".

It is easy to identify the consequences of the shattering of the male ego. Saru dwells upon this at length in her father's house and tries to objectively analyze the share of the blame in the disaster of her marriage. Her ruminations make 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". (30)

Thought this statement suggest a study in guilt consciousness, the novel in reality presents a stark picture of the gross inequality prevailing in our society: gender discrimination by the parents towards their own children and the superiority of the male ego in a marriage.

Deshpande observes regretfully that women irrespective of her class and character, has to play a second fiddle to man, has no room of her own. A woman is put under several restraints right from the day a girl becomes a woman due to mensuration. Sarita was told by her mother

You are growing up, you should be carefull now about how you behave. Don't come out in your petticoat like that. Not even when it is only your father who is around. She was aghast to hear that she was to be ashamed of herself, even in the presence of her own father.(62)

It became torturous when she was prohibited to enter the kitchen or pooja room during those three days. She had virtually become a pariah in her own home as she was to sleep on a straw mat covered with a thin sheet, eat out of cup and plate placed by her side and served from a distance as if her touch would cause pollution. A kind of shame engulfed her when she was told at sixteen that she was a woman and classed with her mother. Sarita did not want to be a woman like her mother, who had an unshaped figure, having "the cleft which ran down her back, a deep furrow, dividing her body sharply in two. The two buttocks sharpely outlined by the kind of saree she wore, tucked in between her legs. The way her hips moved as she walked."(62)

Therefore she said to herself 'if you are a woman, I don't want to be one'.(62) But it was not easy to escaping being one in the conditions she was living. Soon she became an over plumped adolescent with hideous skirts that came between lumpy halves. Her breasts caused her agony as she tried to hide them from staring looks of the people. Girls in such state find their movements hampered by the consciousness of burgeoning breasts and lips.

Figure apart, women in Indian society have to live virtually of life of a maid servant. Sarita had the example of her mother before her. She had to retreat to the kitchen to dress up, go to a dingy and dark room to comb her hair and apply kumkum, slept in bed like an overnight guest in a strange place. She had literally no room of her own. Sarita realized 'And I have so many mothers lacked. But neither she nor I have that thing, 'a room of our own'. They have never desired it also since they had accepted it as fait accompli.

On the whole Saru represents the middle class working woman in modern India. She repels against the tradition but ultimately tries to compromise with the existing reality. This is largely due to the fact that she is passing through a transitional era.

From the study of the character of Saru which was undertaken on the problem of female emancipation. It appears that the women own their characteristics position in society mainly on two factors – economic dependence and mute servility. Intensifying this situation is the cumulative nature of gender inequality in India – strikingly similar in the lower as well as the upper classes. The condition in general of the

misunderstanding and hapless women in spite of occasional spooks and rebellious does not undergo any significant change.

Most of Deshpande's novels are pre-occupied with the theme of gender justice. Vinay Kripal regards Deshpande's text as 'the most detailed and component record of gender justice in contemporary India'.(363)

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