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SHASHI DESHPANDE'S "THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS": A STUDY OF MIDDLE CLASS
TRADITIONAL SOCIETY AND WOMAN

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ABSTRACT

There exists a strong kinship between society and woman, A woman is supposed to act according to the traditions and customs of the society, but the question is in the interest of the woman whether to adhere to the age old hegemony or react and develop independent thinking and act accordingly and transform.; the question is of transformation or adjustment; we find that there is a gradual change in the woman as they transform from traditional to modern in the contemporary period. Shashi Deshpande is one of such prolific writers well versed in knitting the story emphasizing the age old society especially the situation of women in the patriarchal society and the relationship among different women characters. Though there are many novels to her credit, my interests are in the novel ,”The Dark Holds No Terrors”; the present paper is an attempt to focus the problems faced by a middle class woman since her childhood days. Shashi Deshpande in most of her novels presents the middle-class educated woman as the middle-class women constitute a large segment of the Indian society. Besides, they are a suitable subject to show the clash between tradition and modernity. In her novels, the Indian middle-class woman is engaged in an involuntary struggle to escape herself from the roots of a traditional society. She revolutionizes against age old norms during the process of transformation. The conflict in her protagonists is resolved through their desperate unconscious submission to traditional roles. Thus despite the impact of quest for self actualization, a zeal for independence, they remain intrinsically Indian in sensibility. The concept of adjustment and strong determination to fight the problems by the woman protagonist is of importance in the present study. The issues regarding subjugation of the protagonist by the major characters in the society and her resistance to them in the said novel is of interest to explore the interaction between society and a woman; the effect of such interaction and the output is of the concern.

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Shashi Deshpande in most of her novels presents the middle class educated women as they constitute a large segment of contemporary Indian society. She speaks about the clash between tradition and the influence of modernity. In her novels, the Indian middle class woman is engaged in an unconscious struggle to

release herself from the stranglehold of a tradition-bound society. She tries to transcend it but fails. She raises a protest against social customs and shows a zeal for an escape. The conflict in her protagonists is resolved through their involuntary submission to traditional roles. Thus despite the impact of globalization, they remain intrinsically Indian in sensibility. The issues regarding subjugation of a woman both by parents and husband are found in bounty in the current novel. In fact it's a common phenomenon faced by many a woman in the middle-class Indian society, and this is sketched artistically by the novelist as a reflection of society.

Deshpande's heroine is anti-matriarchal. She explores the situation of women in a patriarchal society; the concept of gender bias; the discrimination between a girl and a boy in a family practiced by mother. She looks for a new environment where the mother cannot exercise her will. She hates the parental home. Her novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is no exception to the presence of the plight of the middle-class Indian woman and its assertion by the protagonist. Dominic Savio writes, "The discriminating socio-cultural values, attitudes and practices which cripple the personality of the female child are highlighted in the novel. A girl child is unwanted at birth and neglected during childhood and adolescence"(60). Ramana Chary writes, "Deshpande's real contribution lies in the portrayal of plights and problems, trials and tribulations of the middle-class Indian women-specially those who are educated and have chosen a career for themselves."

The Dark Holds No Terrors tells the harrowing tale of Sarita, referred to as Saru. Deprived of parental care and affection, she lives a pale, loveless life. Her mother loves her brother but hates her. And when he is drowned, she blames her for no fault of her own: 'You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead?' (34). This is the plight of not only Saru but millions who are born girls. The fault lies with their gender, not with them.

Saru receives education in spite of her mother. Her education makes her see the difference in the treatment of a son and a daughter by the same parents. It makes her see the scorn to which a girl is subjected to; since she has very little to do with the propagation of the family lineage. The male child is considered superior, for he will light the funeral pyre and perform all rites including 'Shraddha' to placate the soul of the dead: "who lit the pyre? She had no son to do that for her. Dhruva had been seven when he died" (21). When Saru expresses her wish to stay with her mother all life, her mother says: "you can't" (45). But her brother Dhruva can stay, for "He is different. He is a boy" (45). This gender difference in her mother's treatment of her son and daughter enrages Saru. She rebels against her: "If you're a woman, I don't want to be one" (63). It is this which makes Saru resent the role of a daughter. She looks forward to the role of a wife with the hope that it will give her relief from the oppression of the mother, it will give her freedom: "I had come away from my parent in a fever of excitement after the last battle. The die was cast, the decision taken, my boats burnt" (37).

But this decision proves to be anti-climax. Her second home becomes the very prison she had escaped. She is soon disappointed with her husband. She feels like a ventriloquist's dummy, those smiles, laughs and talks only because of the ventriloquist. The fear is that without the ventriloquist, she will regress to being a lifeless puppet, a smirk pasted on to its face. Saru feels real as long as a patient is there before her. Later on she wonders how she had gone on so long with her relentless routine – hospital, teaching, rooms, visits, home, and children.

Saru scorns the word love and refuses to believe that such a thing can ever exist between man and woman. She starts hating the man-woman relationship which is based not on love but on attraction and need: "There was only a need which both fought against, futilely, the very futility turning into the thing they called "love". It's only a word, she thought. Take away the word, the idea and the concept will wither away." (72) All love and attachment disappear from Saru-Manu relationship. Saru admits that:

theirs was not a case of love dying, nor even of conflicts. Instead, it was as if a kind of disease had attacked their marriage. A disease like syphilis or leprosy, something that could not be admitted to others. This very concealment made it even more gruesomely disgusting, so that she was dirty and so was he and so was their marriage. (69-70)

The happiness of early married life vanishes soon. The married life of Manu and Saru is dull and drab affair. Her husband is a sadist who bullies her. While she provides bread and butter to the family, he feeds on her

earnings and tortures her both physically and sexually. She looks back: "They had named him Dhruva. I can remember, even now vaguely, faintly, a state of joyous excitement that had been his naming day. The smell of flowers, the black grinding stone" (168).

Against her parents' wishes, Saru marries a boy from a lower caste. Her marriage to Manu is a sign of her turning away from the traditional ways and values her orthodox mother adhered to. She married beneath her in order to get away from her mother, her home. She marries to attain autonomy of the self and to secure the love lost in her parental home. Manu is her saviour, the ideal romantic hero who rescues her from her insecure, wooden existence in the maternal home. Her marriage with Manu is an assertion and affirmation of her feminine consciousness: "I was hungry for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love. Of my being loved. Of my being wanted" (40). But after she sets herself up as a doctor, the situation changes: "He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband" (42).

She is too busy in her profession to look after her children. The working wife stands isolated from familial ties and obligations. Her family life is disturbed. Manu cannot bear people greeting her and ignoring him. She begins to loathe the man-woman relationship which has no love in it:

Love [...] how she scorned the word now. There was no such thing between man and woman. There was only a need which both fought against, futilely [...] turning into the thing they called love. It's only a word she thought. Take away the word, the idea and the concept will wither away. (72)

Saru's feminine consciousness crumbles. Love disappears from her life, cut off from her husband and children, she fails as mother and as wife, "I came home late that night [...] when I came home, I found him (Manu) sitting with a brooding expression on his face that made my heart give painful, quivering little jumps" (78).

Manu's male ego is hurt by her superiority complex. His masculinity asserts itself through nocturnal sexual assaults upon Saru. Thus the benevolent, cheerful husband by day turns a lecherous, libidinous rapist at night. Saru becomes a mute sufferer wallowing in self-pity and choked silence: "I put another brick on the wall of silence between us. May be one day I will be walled alive within it and die a slow, painful death" (96).

Saru's feminine psyche becomes the arena of several warring forces. She is torn between her obligation to her profession as a doctor and her duties of her family as a housewife. She wants to leave her job. She says to Manu, "Manu, I want to stop working. I want to give it all up [...] my practice, the hospital, everything" (79).

But Manu doesn't want it, since it will bring down their standard of living. He says to Saru, "On my salary? Come on Saru, don't be silly. You know how much I earn" (81).

Her mother dies. Saru leaves for her parents' home. But Saru seems not to belong to that after marriage. An unwelcome stranger and an unwarranted guest. She is an alien to her parents:

As she drinks tea [...] too sweet and strong [...] he (her father) sat gingerly on the edge of his chair like an unwilling host entertaining an unwelcome guest. And that, I suppose, is what I really am [...] (18).

[...] there can never be any forgiveness. Never any atonement. 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. (217)

Brooding over her brother's fate, Saru traces the source of her terror: "Poor little scared boy, who never grew up to know that the dark holds no terrors. That the terrors are inside us all the time" (85). Her father shows her no pity, no sympathy as she married against her parents will:

If mine had been an arranged marriage, if I had left it to them to arrange my life, would he have left me like this? She thought of the girl, the sister of a friend who had come home on account of a disastrous marriage. She remembered the care and sympathy with which the girl had been surrendered, as if she was an invalid, a convalescent. And the girl's face with its look of passive suffering. There had been only that there, nothing else, neither despair nor shame. For the failure had not been hers, but her parents', and so the guilt had been theirs too, leaving only the suffering for the girl (218-219).

It is a male-dominated society that Shashi Deshpande portrays in her novel. In the case of Saru's parents, the father is the "master of the house" (20) and is never bothered by any of the trivialities of daily routine. Like a traditional Indian woman, Saru's mother successfully effaces her personality from the room which she shares with her husband. Consequently, the room shared by the couple always seems only "his." Even after her death, the presence of Saru's mother cannot be felt in the house. On her visit to her home, Saru finds no photograph of her mother on the wall. As her father admits, "I should have put up her photograph. I have been thinking of it, but somehow [...]" (18)

Saru's parents have lived together for a long time but the kind of understanding that should develop among the two partners in a happy married life does not exist between them. This is evident from the packet of photographs Saru comes across while cleaning her mother's cupboard in her father's home. One of these is a photograph of her parents soon after their marriage. The mother sits in the chair unsmiling and stiff, he on the arm of the chair equally stiff. The two look like a pair of puppets: "a pair of strangers posing together because they had been told to do so." (57) Saru remembers that when she left the house they were equally stiff and unsmiling.

In her heart of hearts, each traditional woman wants that she should die before her husband. Saru's mother had planted tulsi in the yard of her house and probably prayed to it daily: "Wasn't that what all women prayed to the tulsi for? For a moment she saw her mother standing in front of the tulsi, eyes closed, hand folded, lip moving." (15) Later in the novel Sudhir Dixit's mother tells Saru that her mother was lucky because she died a *suhagan*. She regrets having to live after her husband's death and repeatedly says, "Why I am alive when he is dead." (77)

A woman, who tries to be different, is normally frowned upon. Mrinal, Madhav's sister, hates the village and the kind of life she's leading. She is fed up with the routine existence, doing the same things day after day – getting water from the well, looking after the kids, helping mother. She does not care how but she wants to get away. As Madhav says, "She's prepared to marry anyone who'll take her away from there. Father is looking out for a bridegroom for her but he'll never think of consulting her or asking her what she would like." (122) However, Mrinal would never marry someone living in a village; if that happens, she says she'll drown herself. Saru takes pity on the girl but Madhav calls her "a silly girl," (123) fed on stories in magazines and books and dreams of life.

In Indian society, woman is not expected to be independent, having her own identity. When Shakuntala was rejected by the king, one of the escorting ascetics advised her to stay on in the king's ashram or as his slave because he was, after all, her husband. The weeping, shamed, humiliated and tired Shakuntala refused to do so and was rebuked by one of the ascetics: "What, wanton girl, do you desire independence?" (138)

In a male-dominated society, woman has many a time to take recourse to putting an end to her life. The novel refers to a woman who drowned herself in a well because of ill-treatment meted out by her in-laws. She had continuously threatened to drown herself in the well but had been stopped many a time on the narrow edge of the well. However, one night when she is truly desperate she silently throws herself in it. Obviously the woman was not economically independent.

III

The conflict between Saru and her mother represents the clash between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern, since her mother is an obstruction in her path to self-realization. The feminine consciousness as endowed by Deshpande seems a fusion of the polarities of being: acceptance and rejection, flexibility and rigidity, fantasy and reality, rebellion and reconciliation. All this is blended in Saru, a typical middle class woman. Saru's conflict is every woman's conflict between the desired and the imposed, the willed and the unwilled. Her education makes her recalcitrant and militant. It makes her reluctant to accept the unreasonable and the irrational. A new emergent woman of the modern industrial age, she declines to remain within the four walls of her house. She hates a cloistered and immured life. Hence she protests against her

mother who does not allow her admission to medical college. She says to her, "I'm not talking to you [...] you don't want me to have anything. You don't even want me to live" (142).

Saru's arduous journey in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is an initiation into the mystery of human existence. She realizes that parental home is no refuge. Neither her father nor her mother can provide her shelter. She is her own refuge. The parental home prefaces the protagonist's comprehension of the intricacies of human life. She broods over the imponderables of human predicament:

All right, so I'm alone. But so's everyone else. Human beings. [...] they are going to fail you. But because there is just us, because there's no one else, we have to go on trying. If we can't believe in ourselves, we're sunk. (220)

The new liberated women of Saru's generation are not the one who bears the trepidations. They free themselves from the chains of tradition and fight for their independence for the cause of their self actualization and realize their identity. Saru is symbolic of all these. Thus a journey from traditional to modernity is in progress. The capacity to fight is one of the chief characters of a character like Saru.

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