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IDENTITY FORMATION OF A GIRL WITH REFERENCE TO SHASHI DESHPANDE'S
"THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS"

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ABSTRACT

In the formation of one's character and value structure childhood plays an important role. Childhood as a significant area of human experience is not given ample emphasis as far as literature is concerned. In Indian English literature also women characters are widely depicted and critics have evaluated them. The girlhood of a woman is a critical part of her identity formation. In literature this period of identity formation of a woman is by and large un- examined and un- explored. Childhood experiences and atmosphere form one's personality. The innocent child is like a little plant which is shaped and moulded the way it is nurtured. If it is well nurtured then it turns into a confident, fearless, healthy grown up human being, but if it is not nurtured well it turns into an immature, fearful character that cannot face the challenges in life.

Shashi Deshpande is perhaps one of the few Indian English writers who have portrayed the girl child with deliberation. There is a detailed examination of the girlhood of the protagonist who attempts to define her adult self identity by analysing her growing years. This process helps her realize her family upbringing and socialization in childhood. *The Dark holds No Terrors* reveals the protagonist Saru's life, showing how her disturbed childhood has contributed largely to her inability to establish and maintain personal relationship in later life. This paper focuses on how Saru's girlhood proves to be the identity formation period of her womanhood and after becoming a woman how Sarita reacts to her childhood experiences.

Keywords: Gender Discrimination, Sibling Jealousy, Patriarchal Society, Hatred for Female Identity, A Rebel, Marriage as Rescue, Urge for Power

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INTRODUCTION

Form one's personality. The innocent child is like a little plant which is shaped and moulded the way it is nurtured. If it is well nurtured then it turns into a confident, fearless, healthy grown up human being, but if it is not nurtured well it turns into an immature, fearful character that cannot face the challenges in life.

In normal circumstances the plenitude of warmth and value given to a male child is denied to the girl child. This bias in children makes the girl child either depressed or rebellious. This negative and destructive treatment towards girl child makes her later life miserable. A woman's matured years are determined in her childhood. This discrimination in the society injures the psyche of the girl child and impairs her growth, leaving variously a sense of guilt, rejection and depression. Love is the only basic requirement of children and often girls are deprived of it due to various familial circumstances. It is the family that has to provide girl child with space and opportunity to grow and develop into healthy adult and hence damaging home conditions always exert a paralyzing effect on the girl child.

About The Author

Shashi Deshpande is one of the leading women novelists in India. She depicts Indian women characters in her novels. Deshpande's protagonists represent the predicament of women in Indian society. Shashi Deshpande states in an interview given to Laxmi Holmstrom.

I am different from other Indian who writes in English, my background is very firmly here. I was never educated abroad. My novels don't have any Westerners for example. They are just about Indian people and the complexities of our lives, our inner lives and our outer lives and the reconciliation between them. (qtd. In Barends: 11)

Shashi Deshpande's novels deal with the women belonging to Indian middle class, who are brought up in a traditional environment. They struggle to liberate themselves and seek their self identity and independence. She is also the contemporary writer who has given the graphic detail about the girl child and her psychology. Most of her women characters are able to transcend their identity crisis by analyzing their childhood and the process of upbringing. The crux of all prevailing problems of women is their subjugation which is always present in the form of silent servitude. Their social conditioning generates slavish attitude which in turn creates compunctions in their psyche when they decide to remould or change it. Since her childhood, the psyche of a girl child is moulded in a particular fashion to inculcate in her all types of feminine qualities.

Shashi Deshpande depicts the plight of married women in almost all her novels. In analysing the predicament of the married woman, Deshpande traces the causes to their very childhood experiences. Though Deshpande does not have many child protagonists, except her children novels, but she looks very seriously into her protagonists' psyche and analyse their childhood experiences in the backdrop of their present status in life. By putting emphasis on childhood of her characters, Deshpande reveals her conviction that all of them carry the legacy of their disturbed childhoods into their married lives. Deshpande also seems to suggest that for making a healthy society, girl children need to be given due care and support. Shashi Deshpande is perhaps one of the few Indian English writers who have portrayed the girl child with deliberation. There is a detailed examination of the girlhood of the protagonist who attempts to define her adult self identity by analysing her growing years. This process helps her realize her family upbringing and socialization in childhood.

The Dark Holds No Terrors

Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is her first published novel and as in the case of her other novels, the protagonist is a woman. Saru, the daughter with whom the mother never reconciled, especially after the death of her younger brother, defies her mother, goes to a city, studies to become a doctor and marries the man she chooses herself. The protagonist Sarita is a successful lady doctor. The story tells her conflict that she has to face as a doctor and as a wife. During day time she is popular lady doctor and in night she is trapped animal in the hands of her husband Manohar, who is an English teacher in small college. Saru goes back to her father's house after many years because her marriage had alienated her from her mother all these years. She returns being unable to bear the sexual sadism of her husband. During the day, there is no evidence in his behaviour to suggest anything that should be a cause for her anxiety. There are only bruises which show that the night has been real. Her inability to find out what was wrong prevents her from doing anything about this problem till she returns to her father's house. It is here, living with her father and Madhav, the young student who stays with her father that she tries to come to terms with the various events in her life. It is here that all the tortuous introspection goes on. Her stay in her father's house gives Sarita a

chance to review her relationship with her father, husband, children and her dead mother. This experience changes her perception. She has a better understanding of herself and others. This gives her courage to confront reality.

Role of Family In Identity Formation of a Girl

In this novel Deshpande focuses on the function of family in moulding to a great extent, the psyche and attitudes of an individual towards self, society and life in general. Deshpande examines the role of family in enabling a child, especially a girl child to ascertain his/her bond with the society. Through its support system, family provides the child with emotional security, self-esteem and self-worth. In the warm and sympathetic environment of family, the child learns how to establish cordial relations with other members of the family in particular and society in general. But if the family does not play its appointed role adequately then it can become the main reason of one's stunted and unhealthy growth. And in the long run this kind of family atmosphere can cause feelings of loneliness, bewilderment and a sense of insecurity in a person.

Of all the familial relationships the mother-child relationship is the strongest and the most natural one because mother nurtures the child with her blood and milk. So the impact of mother's nature and behaviour on the psyche of the child is the strongest one in his/her formative years. In a patriarchal set-up like the one depicted by Deshpande, the role of mother becomes all the more crucial and pivotal in shaping the personality of a child, especially the girl child. In Indian social set-up a baby-boy is sought after by the mother far more than a baby girl. Giving birth to a girl child fills the mother with a sense of shame which she unconsciously transfers to her daughter. Resultantly, the girl is deprived of the maternal affection which disrupts the harmony so essential for her healthy growth. She grows with a distorted view of her own self which is presented to her by mother's disliking. Such a pernicious home environment becomes the cause of psychological distortion and a girl faces many problems in establishing relationships and in adjusting with societal norms. Deshpande very clearly depict such psychological distortion through Saru's example. Saru's mother, born and brought up in such a society, carries forward this ideology of discrimination against her girl child in the novel. She blatantly discriminates between her son, Dhruva, and daughter, Saru. Through her behaviour, gestures and actions, she clearly conveys the idea that a son is preferable for her. Some mothers like Saru's mother consider daughters as unwanted burdens, regard sons as power symbols and perpetuators of the family. Sons are elevated to heights and daughters barely exist. Indian mothers have a stigma towards girl children but on the other hands, boys are their jewel in the crown. Desire for sons rather than daughters are ingrained in the psyche of the feminine mother. Such a preference is actually a construct of patriarchy.

Gender Discrimination

The novel depicts the trauma of a girl child Saru. Saru is a victim of gender based discrimination. Saru has disastrous childhood experiences which further reduce her later life into a desperate struggle. The cumulative force of discrimination in childhood coupled with the accusations of her mother for her alleged role in the death of her brother and resultant sense of guilt she has developed maligned her life and put it on uneven terrain. Saru had a very bad childhood, due to her mother, who symbolizes a submissive figure of patriarchy. She follows the rules set by the rigid conventional society to bring up her child. Her mother full of closed minded conservative norms has inculcated a moral bound to prefer a son to daughter. Saru at a very young age is made to realize that as a girl she is inferior to her brother Dhruva in all respect. Saru cannot tolerate the preference which her mother gives to her brother, Dhruva simply because he is a boy. She recalls that there was,

Always a pooja on Dhruva's birthday. A festive lunch in the afternoon and an aarti in the evening...

My birthdays were almost the same but there was no pooja (Deshpande-168-169)

Saru finds her mother's inclination towards her brother Dhruva and a nonchalant attitude towards her very humiliating because they are nullifying her existence as a human being in the family. Dhruva dies by drowning in water. Saru's mother never forgives her daughter for being alive even after her brother has drowned and Saru cannot forget the traumatizing effect of her mother's hysterical outburst.

Saru was deprived of all the rights of a child after the death of Dhruva. Mourning envelops the family and Saru's existence was not noticed. The reminiscence of her girlhood reminds Saru of her fifteenth birthday which was special to her as she received a pair of earrings as a gift from her friend Smita. Saru feels a sense of superiority and importance. However Saru resented the gift given to her by her mother. She became aware that the gift was to give her a flamboyant appearance as a young girl and was not a gesture of love. She remembers:

So that was it, it was not for me, not to please and make me happy but because I should, as a growing girl, have these things to wear... I don't want them. I don't want to eat. I don't want anything. (Deshpande-171)

The psychic unbalance stems from the unresolved love – hate relationship between mother and daughter. While tracing the conflicts of her female characters, Deshapnde has also explored that sometimes mothers themselves create conflicts in the lives of their daughters. To understand mother- daughter relationship in Deshpande's novels it would be appropriate to note what Simone De Beauvoir writes in her chapter on mother. She says,

Some women feel their femininity as an absolute curse; such a woman wishes for or accepts a daughter with a bitter pleasure of self recognition in another victim, and at the same time she feels guilty for having brought her into the world...vexed at having produced woman, the mother greets her with this ambiguous curse: 'You Shall Be Woman.' She hopes to compensate for her inferiority by making a superior creature out of one whom she regards as her double; and she also tends to inflict upon her the disadvantages from which she has suffered. (Beauvoir-533)

The mother at time imposes on the girl child exactly her own fate. Sometimes the mother, on the contrary, forbids the child to resemble her. Beauvoir says that the real conflict arises when the girl grow older and when she wishes to establish her independence from her mother. According to Beauvoir,

This seems to the mother a mark of hateful ingratitude, she tries obstinately to checkmate the girl's will to escape; she cannot bear to have her double become 'another'. The pleasure of feeling absolutely superior, which men feel in regard to women- can be enjoyed by woman only in regard to her children, especially her daughters; she feels frustrated if she has to renounce her privilege, her authority. (534)

Saru, as a child was also deprived of the communication with her father. She could not develop a lasting emotional bond with him. He would make Dhruva sit on the bar of the cycle conveying her message that, "Daughters are their mother's business." (Deshpande-105) This plunges into her tender mind the painful feeling that she is unloved and unacknowledged. Saru feels the she is no one's business. Saru feels very bitter and says, "My mother had nothing for me, either whose business was I then?" (Deshpande-105)

Even her mother does not care for her. Instead she makes her feel more neglected and unloved. Saru's life is choked by her mother's routine criticism and fault finding. For the mother who bore puberty as a pain and shame inflict the same impression on their daughters and the daughters struggle conformity like a disease. That is something shameful, this growing up and girl children are made to feel ashamed of themselves even in the presence of one's own fathers. When Saru's mother points out looking at her that she is growing up there is something unpleasant in the way she looks at her. Saru is made to feel an ugly girl. As Sarita says,

I was an ugly girl. At least my mother told me so. I can remember her eyeing me dispassionately, saying...You will never be good looking. You are too dark for that. (Deshpande-61)

Patriarchal Society

Saru is an unwanted child and her brother's death makes her all the more unwanted. She is at perpetual war with her mother who can never forgive her for being alive when her brother is dead.

Growing up in this environment of hatred and hostility, she nurture seeds of rebellion within her. She has many psychological knots woven into her personality and is ingrained with a fear of rejection. This discrimination leads Saru to rebelliousness, hatred and sense of guilt. Saru rebels against her mother and openly rejects any connection with her. On attaining womanhood she was most worried about her periods not

because of the inconvenience but because it put her in the same class as her mother. The rejection of the mother is very pronounced in the novel. "If you are a woman. I don't want to be one". (Deshpande-63) This is made worse by various kinds of inhibitions imposed on the girl child in patriarchal societies. As she grows, the natural thing, her femininity is made to feel something guilty and faulty. A sense of shame is installed in her for her physical growth. Saru's mother advises her to be careful in her behaviour as a grown up girl. She should be careful of her dress in presence of any male, even if it is her father. This acute self consciousness of her femininity created by her mother and exacerbated by the patriarchal milieu around her causes feelings of disgust for her womanhood.

A Rebel

It is clear that these actions have been instigated by strong impulses of reaction of her normal natural being. They have been taken to hurt her mother by trying to become what her mother never wished her to be. This is in a way more an effort to reject the mother than to assert her own genuine will and choice. Even the crucial decision of marriage with Manohar reflects the same forces at work in her behaviour. As Barche says,

Against her parents' wishes Saru married a boy from lower caste. Her marriage to Manu is a sign of her turning away from the traditional ways and values her mother adhered to. She married to attain the autonomy of the self and to the secure love lost in parental home. (Barche: 87)

Saru later on in a mood of retrospection and honest confession admits.

If you hadn't fought me so bitterly, if you hadn't been so against him perhaps I would never have married him. (Deshpande-96)

It clearly hints at the fact that she is driven to marry Manu more by reaction and sadist rebellion against her mother than anything else. The desire of revolt empowers her to such an extent that she takes the decision of marrying Manu even when she is not economically independent and both of them are students. The more vehemently her parents oppose the idea, the more determined she becomes. Saru begins to express her feeling through acts of defiance which spring from her resentment against her mother. The more she asserts herself in her acts of defiance, the wider grows the gulf between her and her mother. It is this irresistible urge to retaliate by wounding her mother's feelings as she says,

There was a pain in my chest, my throat ached, intolerably, there was a bugging in my ears, a blur in front of my eyes, I hated her. I wanted to hurt her, make her suffer. (Deshpande-142)

She also dreams of her mother being dead. She tells her, "Yesterday night, I dreamt you died I saw your body burning." (Deshpande-143) This also shows her growing tendency to settle scores with her mother and draw a sadistic pleasure out of her mother's discomfiture. Saru is obsessed with what the mother said and did to her that it bedevils the whole of her life even as a wife. It is evident from the way the mother predicted about the marriage, "I know all these 'Love marriages'. It's love for few days then quarrels all the time. Don't come crying to us then". (Deshpande-69) She cannot forget her mother's words, "You won't be happy...I know you won't". (Deshpande-98)

Because of this negative predication by her mother she silently suffers in her unhappy marriage. She does not turn to her parents for support only to prove her mother wrong and to vindicate her decision of marriage.

Marriage as Rescue

Saru meets Manu in college. She is attracted towards him during her college days. He is senior by a few days and quite popular in the college. He is a famous writer and a poet of promise with some poems already published in magazine. She feels privileged because Manu makes her his companion. The initial years of her marriage are quite blissful as Manu seems to be her saviour, who rescues her from her insecure existence in her maternal home. As Prasanna Sree says,

The woman in order to achieve her freedom seeks marriage as an alternative to the bondage created by the parental family. The simple need to be independent eventually becomes a demand of the inflated ego and takes shape as the love for power over others. She resents the role of a wife with the hope that her new role will help her in winning her freedom. (qtd. In Dr. Kavya:62)

Saru at the initial years of her marriage is very happy with her husband. Though they live in a shabby apartment and without any luxuries, they are together and happy. As, Saru remembers,

All the clichés, I discovered were true, kisses were soft and unbearably sweet, embraces hard and passionate, hands caressing and tender, and loving, as well as being loved, was an intense joy... Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love, of my being loved, of my being wanted. (Deshpande-40)

But soon Saru realized that happiness was only an illusion. As long as she was medical student and her husband the bread winner there was peace at home. The problem arose when she began to get recognition as a doctor. As she says,

But now I know that it was there it began...this terrible thing that has destroyed our marriage. I know this too...that the human personality has an infinite capacity for growth. And so the esteem with which I was surrounded made me inches taller. But perhaps the same thing that made me inches shorter. He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband. (Deshpande-42)

Failure as a Mother

A woman who nurtures such deep rooted hatred for her mother and lives quite estranged from her husband cannot be a good mother to her own children. Saru's mother also had a very unhappy childhood. Saru's grandmother was deserted by her husband and she had to return with her two girls, to her parents. This rejected childhood also has contributed in conditioning her mother into a domineering mother. Saru also does not prove herself to be a good mother. She has secret fear in her of proving herself a bad mother. As she says,

When she held Renu in her arms, she had felt not love, but an immense fear, a terrible feeling of inadequacy. Could she measure up to all that this being, so wholly dependent on her, would expect of her? Would she not fail her as her own mother had failed her? (Deshpande-162)

Saru had sworn that she would never fail her children in love and understanding as her own mother had done. But the novel gives no proof that she was able to keep her promise. She has a secret fear that her children might think of her as she thinks of her mother. Once Saru's son Abhi wanted the presents that Renu, his sister, got on her birthday. Since he cried and spoiled her birthday, she would not give them to him. Saru repeatedly asked her to give them and Renu retorted,

Why do you always scold me? You never scold him. You never say anything to him. It's not fair. It's my birthday, my presents...And now you scold me. You always scold me. It's not fair, not fair. (Deshpande-173)

These words of her daughter open up her own childhood wounds and she asks herself.

Do we travel, not in straight lines, but in circles? Do we come to the same point again and again? Dhruva and I, Renu and Abhi...is life an endless repetition of the same pattern? (Deshpande-173)

Saru also is afraid of thinking that Renu perhaps have the same feeling towards her which she was having towards her mother.

Renu, my daughter. She stares at me critically at times, a cold, shrewd, objective observer behind those little girl's eyes of hers. And I become nervous, unsure, uncertain of myself...Nothing emerges, neither her sorrows. And I sense a lack of feeling, of sensitivity in her. (Deshpande-33)

Though Saru had thought romantically about motherhood, when it actually came it was far from being romantic.

Saru's long hours of introspection into her marriage makes her realize that her professional success had killed Manu's spirit. Actually her introspection helps her to free herself from the feelings of guilt throughout her life. She decides to assert herself and fight her own battle. She realizes that her life is her own which she will have to shape as well as face the events of her life. There is no refuge other than one's own self. The fear of darkness or ignorance or the unknown fear that haunted her so long gets evaporated and she decides to face her life. The novelist makes it very clear that a woman's life is her own and she should start thinking that she is an individual, certainly not a dependent but being capable of withstanding all trials in life

alone. Saru earlier, was the prisoner of her own fear and confusion but at the end of the novel she regains her inner strength and realizes that she is the master of her own destiny, as she says,

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

The final picture of Saru is really appealing. At the end of the novel Saru stands poised to receive her husband secure because of her new found confidence in herself. She successfully rids her complexes and guilt and comprehends the meaning of human life where she realizes that she is not the only one caught in loneliness. Kamini Dinesh's observation aptly sums up Saru's development as an individual in her own right.

To be true to herself the woman has to excoriate the film of superimposed attitudes and roles. Her emancipation is not repudiating the claims of her family, but in driving upon the entrapped inner reserves of strength. (Dinesh: 200)

Conclusion

In this novel Deshpande's focus is on the role and significance of family in shaping the psyche and attitudes of an individual towards self, society and life in general. While exposing the wilful discrimination and disastrous girlhood of Sarita is responsible for her feelings of fear, loneliness, bewilderment and a sense of insecurity. So the impact of family member's behaviour on the psyche of the child is strongest one in her formative years. A pernicious home environment becomes the cause of psychological distortion and a girl like Sarita faces many problems in establishing relationships and in adjusting with societal norms. Shashi Deshpande has very artistically depicted these realities of the life of girl how discrimination against girl causes serious damages to her psyche, influencing her life not only as a daughter but also as a wife and a mother.

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