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**From Traditional Being to Modern Becoming: A
Study of Female Protagonist in Shashi Deshpande's
*The Dark Holds No Terrors***

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Abstract:

*Many writers emerged on the literary scene projecting women's issues in the traditional Indian society. They include Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, Bharati Mukherjee, Shobha De, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Arundhati Roy et al. Their writings profoundly deal with women's problems. Shashi Deshpande is one of such contemporary women writers who focus on the problem faced by women especially by career-oriented women. Her writings mainly project the middle class Indian women in general and their inner world in particular. Sarita, the central character in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* searches herself between the patriarchal set up and the modern values throughout the novel. In other words, it is about Sarita's struggle between the traditional set up and her modern thinking and yearning for freedom to live an honourable life. Thus, the paper interrogates how Sarita overcomes her problem as an individual before her marriage and after marriage in life. It also*

explores the destruction of patriarchy and its regulated way of living.

Keywords: Contemporary women's issue; Feminism; Marriage; Patriarchy; Predicament; Society; Traditional

The Dark Holds No Terrors is Shashi Deshpande's first novel which was published in 1980. This novel has also been translated into German and Russian. The story of the novel revolves around the female protagonist, Sarita who returns to her baba's home after getting the news of her mother's death. She comes to her parental house after the gap of fifteen years of her marriage, not for her father, but for her own sake. In fact, she comes in search of the solution for her problem which has destroyed her happy married life. The novel deals with various themes like marriage, love, alienation, identity crisis, parent-child relationship, mother daughter relationship, and most probably quest for self. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is Shashi Deshpande's favourite novel. In an interview, she said:

It has a simple theme and fewer characters. It gripped me so much that I whipped through the writing. (Deshpande 15)

In this novel, everyone calls Sarita as Saru. From the beginning of the novel, Sarita is discriminated at her parental house. But she knew how to handle the injustice done against her. She first time fights against her parents to study medical science, but the college was in Bombay. Her parents did not agree to her decision due to their poor economic condition. But she was rigid at her decision. It hurts her mother's sentiments, too, because Sarita herself started taking decision of her life. There is argument over this until they agreed. At last, they agreed. But they kept a condition that they may pay for fees, books and hostel only and no luxury and no more expenditure on her marriage. Sarita chooses to be educated instead of marrying. She becomes happy when she gets admission in a medical college. She is happy in getting rid of the orthodox middle

class living. In fact, she hates the regulated way of living and the environment at her home. She not only got relief but also a kind of freedom. It was a bit different but cheerful. But her thinking has been same for a long time. She unconsciously had been judging others by her mother's conviction. Shashi Deshpande very well depicted the unchangeable human nature and mindset in this novel:

Human nature may not change, but it isn't there such a thing as a frame of mind, a way of thinking, which is shaped by the age you live in. (70)

In college, Sarita meets Manohar, better known as Manu. Manohar was a postgraduate student when Sarita entered the college. He was a good student. He was also the Secretary of the Literary Association. He was actively associated with the debating union and the life and soul of the Dramatic Society. He was a budding writer and a poet of promise. His poems were published in magazines, too. For Sarita, college implies for lectures in the morning, practical in afternoon and exam every six month. She wanted to work hard to get success in order to secure herself. She didn't want that people may raise question on her existence. In course of her study at college, she develops feeling for Manohar. The thought, "I am a Woman" comes to Sarita for the first time, when she feels male look at herself. This is what Simon De Beauvoir said in her classic book, *The Second Sex* that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvour 293). Finally, Sarita and Manohar got married. Sarita knew that Manohar belonged to a low caste. Therefore, her parents oppose this marriage. Despite their opposition, she marries him. She swears that she will never dominate her husband after marriage and she will never make him feel good for nothing. However, it happened so. Thus, she questions herself:

Can one never control one's life? Do we walk on chalked lines drawn by others? (Deshpande 86)

After the gap of five years of marriage, Sarita's friend, Manda visits her clinic for the children's disease. Manda finds Sarita completely changed. She questions her changed behaviour. Sarita says "changed? Yes, may be, I am more elegant, more sophisticated, I know how to dress, how to carry myself" (24). The conversation between them shows that Sarita regrets her decision of marrying Manohar:

After all, it was you, wasn't it, who said then, so glibly. 'Go ahead, Saru. Get married and to hell with of all them. I am with you both, Remember'. (24)

In the meantime, Manda tells Sarita about her mother's death. For Sarita, this news was an option to meet her baba. So, she decides to go back to her home. She wants to go not to comfort her baba but for her own cause that she hoped to find. She wants "to sleep peacefully the night through. To wake up with without pain. To go through tomorrow without apprehension. Not to think, not to dream. Just to live" (27). She informs Manohar about her mother's death. She reveals her plan to visit at her baba's home. Manohar reacts on her decision saying that she wants to ask forgiveness to him. His reaction angers her:

I am going. To get away from this house, the paradise of matching curtains and handloom bedspreads. This hell of savagery and submission. But what if I carry my own hell within me? Then there is no hope for me at all. But that too I have to know. And therefore I am going home to my father. (28)

The rift starts in their relationship when the patients begin to visit their home. There is knock after knock at their door for Sarita. The next day, there is again knock at the door. This time, Manohar sounded certainly odd. Sarita too identifies his affected and indifferent tone. The people nod, smile, murmur and greet *Namaste* when Sarita and Manohar walk out of their room. But, these were only for Sarita. Now, he felt almost totally ignored. Manohar did

not reveal to her directly what he felt. But Sarita remembers how he reacted once. He says that he feels sick of this place. So, he wants to get out of here soon. The reason was clear what Sarita realised:

But now I know that it was there it began...this terrible thing that has destroyed our marriage. (42)

The esteem she was surrounded with made her inches taller, the same thing made her husband inches shorter. He had been the young man and she his bride. Now, she is a lady doctor and he is her husband. Sarita is too busy to give time at home. Owing to this, the differences begin even more in their relationship. Sarita too, feels sorry for her busy schedule. She even discusses this with Manohar. She makes him sure that she will give up her job. She says that she wants to discontinue her work, the practice, the hospital, everything. Manohar asks her the reason for quitting the job. She replies that like other women, she too, wants to stay at home, look after the children, and cook and clean. But Manohar does not support her decision because his salary was not enough to serve the family, though, he makes Sarita aware of the realities of their life;

Can you bear to send the children to a third rate school? To buy them the cheapest clothes, the cheapest of everything? To save and scrape and still have nothing after the first few days of month? No, Saru, there can be no going back. We have to go on. (81)

Sarita had no other option than to accept Manohar's decision. But, his words, "we can't go back, we have to go on" (82) echoed to her constantly in her sleep that day. Sleeping in bed, in darkness, she asks herself go on where? But the darkness had given no answer to Sarita.

Sarita framed opinion in her mind that she wants him no more. Her experience of life with Manohar changed her thinking regarding

love. Sarita despises the word "love" now. Therefore, she says, "I know all these love marriages. It's love for a few days, then only quarrels all the time" (69). Sarita no more wanted to continue her married life. But it was only about their children, she finds the word "divorce" frightening one. Here, Sarita had no choice except to continue her marriage. Sarita compares her present situation to those days, wherein to accept was easier than to struggle for women. They knew that they will get nothing out of this struggle and fight. This is what they call "fate". But for Sarita, this meaning of fate is just a lie. Because whatever happened with her was not a small incident of her life. On the contrary, it was something big that Sarita herself helped to happen with her for the sake of the children. At times, Sarita feels helpless. She does not understand what to do staying at her father's home. She searches the meaning of her own existence:

Suddenly she felt helplessly confused, floundering, all her confident grasp of her own life lost to her. And I don't know any more what's important, what's matter, how I am to go on. (71)

At home, Sarita could never fulfil her desire what she wanted. She wanted to plant flowers but her father never let her do that. Her parents discriminated between their children. Her mother always prohibited her to go out in the sun. She says she will get even darker as she has to be married. Sarita reacts badly hearing this. Her mother asks her will you live with us all your life? The following lines will show her mother's discriminating nature towards her own children:

Will you live with us all your life?
Why not?
You can't
And Dhruva?
He's different. He is a boy. (45)

Sarita suffers alienation and loneliness before marriage and even after marriage. Once Sarita was playing game with her baba and Madhav. Her baba and Madhav leave for their room, when the game is over. However, she wants their company in order to escape the feeling of loneliness. At that very moment, she felt that she never had any sense of belongingness in her own house. This reminds her of an incident of her life before marriage. She went to her friend's wedding for two days despite her mother's denial. But there too, she had a painful realization. Her own friend left her for others, cousin and close friends. She had a feeling of loneliness, desolate and humiliation. Therefore, she made her own effort to attach with one or another group so that she may not feel awkward. However, it did not work. She failed fighting with loneliness. She had a feeling that she belonged to a group only when all gathered for a feast or ritual.

During her stay at baba's house, Manohar's letter comes. But the concern shown in the letter makes Sarita furious. She talks to herself with what right he asked that everything is normal between us. Because, her feeling for him is still the same. She feels surprised over his double standard:

Was it possible for a man to dissemble so much? The violent stranger of the night...and now, this. Am I crazy or is he? Can a man be so divided in himself? (99)

Even at home, Sarita gets no care. The bond between her baba and Madhav troubles her. Seeing these, she thinks that nobody likes or cares for her. She notes down all these in her notebook in order to get rid of her distress. Sharing her feeling in the notebook was the best means to overcome these situations. Sometimes, she starts reading Virginia Woolf. She reads of a woman's right to a room of her own. She co-relates the phrase to her own life and thought. Then she observes that her mother herself had no room of her own. She feels that she resembles to some extent to her mother what her mother lacked. But neither Sarita nor her mother could have a

room of their own. Sometimes, Sarita herself could not recognize the reason for coming back to her baba's home. She herself says:

All that the dream meant is that I choose to come back here this house, an unknown factor when I decided to do it. And even now, I don't know why I continue to stay on here, as if my children, my home, my practice, my patients count for nothing. (69)

Shashi Deshpande portrays a realistic picture of marriage through Sarita's lecture. Sarita was asked to talk on medicine as a profession for women. She suggests a symbolic truth of marriage in order to get happy married life:

A wife must always walk a few feet behind her husband. If he is an M.A, you should be a B.A. If he is 5'4" tall, you shouldn't be more than 5'3" tall. If he is earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and nineteen nine rupees. (137)

This is what Sarita experienced in her married life. Sarita highlights her views on the economic independence and independent identity. She says that if Draupadi had been economically independent or if Sita had an independent identity, their stories would not have been different, it would have been same. Because these are the things that they willingly surrendered and consciously abandoned. As a matter of fact, this is the way to survive in this world. J.S. Mill in his book, *The Subjection of Women* says, "It is equally unavailing for me to say that those who deny to women any freedom or privilege rightly allowed to men, having the double presumption against them that they are opposing freedom and recommending partiality, must be held to the strictest proof of their case, and unless their success be such as to exclude all doubt, the judgment ought to go against them." (Mill 2)

Sarita's hatred for Manohar surprises her father. He wants to know the reason behind it. He asks her to reveal everything to him. But

Sarita thinks that her father being a man and she herself being a woman cannot talk such things. Sarita, like an Indian traditional wife, thinks that taking husband's name was like a revelation of some marriage intimacy. However, her father suggests that silence is not the solution for every problem. He makes her understand to talk to Manohar. At first, she does not agree but later on she agrees for the sake of her children. She also gives chance to her relationship with Manohar and return to him. Shashi Deshpande's another novel, *That Long Silence* resembles *The Dark Holds No Terrors* in respect of Jaya's quest for self. She too, after her traumatic experience finds herself as a different identity. Therefore, Jaya like Sarita expects to start a new relationship with her husband.

To conclude, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a feminist novel. It is about Sarita's awareness of her problem throughout her life. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is about how a woman living in patriarchal set up emerges as a successful modern woman. Her parents try to suppress her desire, but they fail. Because Sarita knows how to fulfil her dream and desire. Therefore, it is also a protest novel as it is about Sarita's protest against her parent's patriarchal mindset. She was often discriminated on the name of woman at her own house. But she did not let them succeed. On the contrary, she becomes a successful doctor in spite of her parents' opposition. She also chooses to be married with a person of her own choice, who belongs to a different caste. She even faces problem in her married life. But, going back to her parents' home gives her a chance to understand her relationship with Manohar. She overcomes her traumatic nightmares, too, when she comes to know that "the dark holds no terrors", and happily returns to her in-laws house. Finally, she overcomes her fight between the traditional values and her modern life.

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