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Unveiling Shackles Of Patriarchy In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* By Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract: Cambridge Dictionary defines ‘Patriarchy’ as “a society controlled by men in which they use their power to their own advantage.” This approach directly leads to the domination of men in political, social, religious, cultural and economic aspects of life. In this system men enjoy superiority over women and control their role and activities in society. Patriarchy constrains the freedom of women and assigns a subordinate status to women resulting in the marginalization of women although they are the essential and integral part of any civilization. They constitute half the population of world but their existence and importance is not acknowledged in patriarchy. It is quite ironical that in Indian culture they are addressed as ‘devi’ but at the same time they are also referred as ‘abla’ or the weaker sex and hence not assigned equal status in patriarchal set up of Indian society. Since times immemorial women had to struggle hard to break free from the shackles of male oppression. Many women writers have effectively articulated anxieties and concerns of females focusing on the feelings of marginality and inequality. Shashi Deshpande is a major Indian woman novelist who has enriched the canvas of literature by presenting the dilemma of women and their physical, financial and emotional exploitations in the male dominated society. Shashi Deshpande’s fictive world is replete with female characters that expose the gender inequality in patriarchal society and protest against it. Deshpande’s creative talent has beautifully mirrored the pathetic state of urban woman who becomes a victim of patriarchy in her family as well as in society. This paper explores the restrictions and discriminations imposed on the protagonist Sarita in Shashi Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. The novel portrays the struggle of an Indian girl in a traditional family setup where a male child is preferred to a female child. She faces continuous discrimination by her mother who emerges as a spokesperson of the patriarchal society in her preference towards her son.

Sarita or Saru as she is called feels jealous of her brother who gets all the parental care and attention by virtue of being a male. Sarita's mother believes a girl to be a liability and a boy as an asset. The existence of Sarita is always rejected, creating a deep dent in her sense of self confidence and security. Shashi Deshpande has vividly presented social fetters of inequality used mainly as tools of oppression against women, suffered immensely by the protagonist in the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. The paper is an attempt to analyze the self-denial, patience, devotion, silent suffering and sacrifice of Sarita in the male dominated society of India.

Keywords: Patriarchal, immemorial, oppression, anxieties, protagonist.

Men and women both form the basis of human existence on earth. The growth and advancement of any human civilization essentially demands an active participation and contribution of all its members in social, political and economic spheres. Unfortunately, in patriarchy, this ideal state never gets transformed into reality. The traditional Indian social setup denies women equal status with men. Women are deprived of rights and opportunities and are often cursed with marginalized identity. Gender disparity leads to the suppression and subjugation of women in male dominated society. Since ages this remained the accepted plight of women. Literature has effectively mirrored the issues related with gender bias and inequality and played a vital role in enlightening and empowering new woman. Modern Indian English novel witnessed a new wave of women writers who infused a new invigorating spirit in their writings by depiction of independent, assertive, confident and successful female protagonists who effectively resist the subjugation and suppression of women in patriarchal set up. . They are not just sensitive but sensible too. They are fully aware of not just their duties but desires also. This new woman is not only herself empowered to face all odds but has the potential to empower her family, friends and nation as well. The literary works of the modern women writers offer a deep insight into the dreams, ambitions, and challenges faced by the contemporary Indian woman. The study aims to focus on the predicament of modern educated urban woman who is determined to move ahead despite the restrictions imposed by patriarchal society as projected by Shashi Deshpande in her novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*.

Shashi Deshpande, a Sahitya Akademi award winning novelist of international repute has dominated the scene of women fiction writing with her strong female protagonists. Her lead figures refuse to surrender before demands of the patriarchal society and struggle hard to carve a niche for their own survival. Her novels are a living testimony of liberation of women from the age old shackles of patriarchy. In her novels women are usually well-educated, sometimes professionally established, often tossed by the forces of tradition and modernity. B.S.Jamuna critically analyses this position:

“In a patriarchal society, the woman is subjugated to mere existence with no clear identity, individuality or self-will. The woman is acknowledged for being passive, timid and conventional. None of her unconventionality is applauded but regarded as atrocious in an ‘endocentric’ society.” (Jamuna,190)

Shashi Deshpandes fictive world is replete with the lives and problems of women. Her female characters are exposed to the gender inequality in society and protest against it. Deshpande’s creative talent has beautifully mirrored the pathetic state of urban woman who becomes a victim of gender bias inherent in family set up as well as in society. In an interview to Geetha Gangadharan, when asked whether she would like to call herself a feminist, she replied,

“Yes, I would. I am feminist in the sense that, I think we need to have a world, which we should recognize as a place for all of us human beings. There is no superior and inferior, we are two halves of one species. I fully agree with Simone de Beauvoir that ‘the fact that we are human, is much more important than our being men and women.’ I think that’s my idea of feminism.”(Sunday Magazine,11)

This paper explores the shackles of patriarchy manifested in multifarious gender discriminations suffered by the protagonist Sarita in Shashi Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, the debut novel of Shashi Deshpande that was published in the year 1980. This novel has been translated into German and Russian. Shashi Deshpande had a great fascination for this particular novel as she told an interviewer: “It was a simple theme and fewer characters. It gripped me so much that I whipped through the writing the wife had a better job and there was a very obvious tension between them. He was aggressive and surly. That set it off.” (Pathak,15) And again when an interviewer asked her about the ‘Dark’ she said that :

As I told you, it started with this unequal couple that I saw. And then I wrote the short story “The Liberated Woman” I was very ill at the time and I re-wrote the story about 17 times. Somehow I have that figure still in my mind. And I still know that I hadn’t got it right. It went on to get a prize but I still wasn’t happy with it at all. I knew it had to be a novel. But I didn’t have the confidence to do it. So I waited a long time. I wrote a number of short stories, longer short stories, serials and *Roots and Shadows*. But once I began on it I wrote it from beginning to end. I am not saying that every single word came that way, but there was no time when I was actually stuck. Whereas there were points both with silence and the new book when I was stuck badly, when it seemed all wrong. But when I finished *The Dark*, I knew it was a good novel and this is a very rare feeling. I was never sure in that way about the other novels. But about *The Dark* I never had any doubts. (Pathak, 244-245)

The novel highlights the story of Sarita, a highly educated, independent woman who is in search of her own identity. The novel unfolds the traumatic experiences of Sarita faced by her since birth on account of being a woman. Gender discrimination plays a pivotal role in reducing the chances of happiness in her life. The novelist has effectively articulated the pain and suffering she receives at the hands of her family members. Her character

delineation can be well analysed in the light of her relationship with her parents, her husband and also with her own self. From the birth itself Sarita nicknamed as Saru in the novel becomes the victim of gender discrimination in her family. She was the unwanted child for her mother just for the reason that she was a girl. As a child, she longs desperately for her mother's love but only receives her curses. Her mother regards her a burden which she intends to get rid of as soon as possible. Sarita was constantly neglected and ignored by her parents as their attention and focus was always on the apple of their eyes- Dhruva, her brother. Sarita was three years older to him and she grabbed every opportunity to assert her superiority over him. He unfortunately got drowned and died when he was seven year old. Sarita had passively witnessed this mishap and this remained her biggest sin in the eyes of her mother. She directly blamed Sarita for the death of her son because she had seen him drowning. She tried to save him but all her efforts were futile. Her mother accused her and said : You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he is dead(191) All her life she suffered the deep rooted guilt feeling, and the words of her mother rang continuously in her ears: You did it, you did this, you killed him (173). The mother has an authoritarian attitude and she tries to curb the will and desires of her daughter forcefully in the name of tradition and convention. She regards Saru as her rival. The mother – daughter relationship presented in the novel is coloured by the patriarchal mode of thinking. The mother acts as an agent of patriarchy who is endlessly engaged in the promotion of values and norms of a male dominated society. In the course of the novel, Saru recalls that it was only once a year at the time of Puja that she enjoyed more importance than her brother Dhruva. This instance effectively brings out the hypocrisy prevalent in Indian society. Saru painfully remembers that there was always a puja on the birthday of her brother Dhruva but her birthday passed away silently. She was treated as a nonentity in her family as her remarks "----- Daughter? I don't have any daughter. I had a son and he died. Now I am childless." (196). In a bid to prove her existence and individuality to her mother she relies on education. She puts in lot of hard work and secures good marks in intermediate which helps her to get a direct admission in Medical College. Saru's mother strongly opposes her study in medical college. When she fails to stop her from studying medicine, she tries her level best to persuade her husband to stop her from going to the Medical College. She gives out her practical opinion that instead of wasting their money on her studies, they should think of getting her married in two years. For her mother Saru remains only a liability to be taken care of. Saru deeply feels the pain of being a woman as her dreams and aspirations are completely rejected by her unconcerned mother, an ardent supporter of male point of view.

The next phase of her life begins when she falls in love with Manohar and decides to marry against the wishes of her mother. She married him for the sake of love. She hoped to lead a fulfilled life where she had no regrets about the past..Here it is important to note the remark made by G.D. Barche, "The Dark Holds No Terrors: Assertion of the Feminine Psyche," he writes "Against her parents' wishes Saru married a boy from a 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" (87). Bed is the only place where he can assert his animal power over her. Manu was her saviour and she expected

him to heal her bruised heart with his unlimited love. But once again life played a cheap trick and all her hopes of happiness dashed against the harsh and brutal realities of life. She beautifully analyses the causes of the collapse of her castle of love

The next evening, I had scarcely got home when there was a knock at the door. Manu opened it. I heard him ask, 'Yes?' A woman's voice replied, 'Is the doctor at home? There was a pause, and Manu called out, 'Saru, someone wants you.' It was a woman whose child had diarrhoea. I examined the child and wrote out a prescription. The next day it happened again. Is' the doctor at home?' And the day after. And the day after that.....And now, when , we walked out of our room, there were nods and smiles, murmured greetings and namastes. But they were all for me, only for me. There was nothing for him. He was almost totally ignored.(41)

This incident again highlights the fact that men cannot accept themselves as inferior to women. They suffer from an inflated male ego and are sometimes shattered to pieces when their superiority is questioned. Saru, although a woman, scaled new heights in her professional life and this resulted in the unequal distribution of respect, power and money, bringing disastrous disharmony in their marital relationship.

“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 taller, made him inches shorter. He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband” (42)

The situation takes an ugly turn as Manu's inferiority complex becomes overpowering and he ceases to be the loving husband. Saru has to pay a heavy price for having an independent social status and thereby challenging the core patriarchal values. It becomes her sorry plight to suffer every night. She is again reduced to an object with the sole purpose of pleasing a male. She develops a strong disgust for the man-woman relationship which is based on attraction and need, not love: “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 (65). She remembers her nightmares the brutal handling of her physical and emotional self by her husband. The remarks of Atrey and Kirpal in this respect are worth noting , “His purpose, though repressed in the subconscious, is to punish her taking on the 'male' role, and to assert his superiority and power through physical violence” (43). Saru's words “A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband” resonates the patriarchal society's expectations from women. The novel also brings forth the plight of other female characters who also suffer on account of being a woman. Saru's grandmother was left by her husband but without a word of complaint, she accepted it as her fate. Saru's mother never had her own room and her father never cared to have meals with her. Saru's classmate Smita is forced to change her name first as Geetanjali and later Anju because it

was her husband's wish. It becomes quite evident here that institution of marriage imposes several constraints on women,

Saru feels miserable and realizes the fact that women can never escape the punishment of being a woman. Her wretchedness was the outcome of the gender discrimination meted out to her in the patriarchal set up of Indian society. She feels lonely, dejected and depressed and even decides to leave everything. These complex situations in Saru's life focus on the pathetic state of an Indian middle class working woman. Through this narrative, Deshpande compels us to ponder on the question whether the employment of the woman can shield her against exploitation. The novel highlights the fact that both working and nonworking women are subjected to the same plight. The professional success of women does not equate their position with men rather make their situation worse. In Saru's case the family enjoys the fruits of her superior income which provides a higher living standard to her family but her contributions remain unacknowledged. It is quite pertinent to note Simone de Beauvoir's views on man-woman relationship in her famous book 'The Second Sex'.

"Man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general, whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria without reciprocity.----- Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees.....She appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex.....absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her, she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. (534)

The novel brilliantly explores the concept of gender discrimination in the male dominated society of India. Shashi Deshpande highlights the idea of gender consciousness in reference to the journey of women for self realization. Through her novels, Shashi Deshpande reveals the state of enlightened, independent woman of substance who is well aware of her capabilities, but is crushed under the responsibility of managing the dual role of being a good housewife and able professional. She is morally torn apart between catering the responsibilities to her own self while conforming to the norms of the society. Shashi Deshpande in her novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* has vividly portrayed the plight women enduring the pain of invisible shackles of patriarchy.

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