

The Existential Anguish of an Indian Woman in Shashi Despande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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Abstract: Sashi Despande is one of the famous women novelists in the history of Indian English. Here in the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* shows the condition of Indian women. The paper also focuses on the typical man-woman relationship and how it entraps a woman in the web of marriage. The paper shows how Despande in her above mentioned novel portrays a realistic picture of the contemporary Indian-middle class educated women who though financially independent withstand the plight of existence. In the novel *Sarita* the protagonist of the novel faces a very crucial condition with her husband Manohar. She also shows that so called male dominated society cannot tolerate that her wife can earn and held a better position than him. The novel has a feminist approach as it travels from pessimism to optimism and ends with Saru emerging as a new woman by getting rid of marriage bondage.

Key Word: marriage, realistic, financially, dominated, feminist, optimism, bondage

Shashi Despande is one of the most celebrated Indian woman novelists in the post Independence period. Despande appears to be the leading woman novelist in depicting the psychological realities of Indian woman. In 1938 Despande took birth in Dharwad in Karnataka to the wellknown Sanskrit Scholar Shriranga. Though Despande has degrees both in Economics and Law she showed her interest in the field of literature and most probably she inherited literary insight from her father. Despande published many novels as well as collection of short stories. Some of her major works include *That Long Silence*(1980), *Roots and Shadows*(1983), *The Dark Holds No Terrors*(1980), *The Intrusion and Other Stories*(1983) etc. Her first novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* has earned her Nanjangud 'Tirumalamba Award' in 1989 and she was also honored with 'Sahitya Academy Award' for her novel *That Long Silence*. In all her novel we find Despande's concern for the welfare of

women in society. The untold problems of women which lurk within the unexplored region of their minds have been beautifully portrayed by Despande in her novel. The contemporary middle class women are the protagonist in her novels, who experience a sort of existential anguish in the patriarchal and male dominated society. Her novels explain the suffering and plight of an Indian woman in the trap of marriage. Despande through her novels protests against the society established norms of womanhood and asks for the liberty of a woman in the society. As a result the image of women as portrayed in Despande's fiction is more forceful and liberated.

The objective of this paper is to explore the problems that a career oriented Indian woman faces in her life, through the study of Shashi Despande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. The paper also focuses on the typical man-woman relationship and how it entraps a woman in the web of marriage. The paper shows how Despande in her above mentioned novel portrays a realistic picture of the contemporary Indian-middle class educated women who though financially independent withstand the plight of existence.

In our male dominated society a woman is always considered inferior to man although she is neither biologically nor intellectually lesser than a man. A woman is always underestimated and she is given secondary status in the male dominated society though she is capable of endurance, love and affinity, which contributes to the happiness of other persons. Right from the ancient time India is basically a male dominated society which sets restriction for a woman. The socially prescribed norms of sexuality compel an Indian woman to be completely subservient to the male in both the social and economic fields. The patriarchal society does not recognize a woman as human beings and she is known by the name of either her father or her husband. Women are often considered to be a property that can be controlled or owned. However with the rise and development of feminism, Indian women have reemerged as new beings. The feminism as an organized movement appeared in India in 1970 and brought a change in the thought of a man regarding a woman. Uma Narayan has remarked "...Indian feminism is clearly a response to the issue, specifically confronting many Indian women". (Wedden, 1997)

A number of novels in the Indian English fiction have presented the problems of women over the decades. Indian women novelists like Kiran Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal have portrayed the women's world with great authenticity. Sashi Despande is one of those rare women novelists who has the deep insight into female psyche. In her novel she has brilliantly portrayed the existential anguish of a woman in an Indian context.

The novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* published in 1980 by Vikas publishers presents the trauma of a middle class working woman who has become mere trap in the male dominated society. The novel is the story of Sarita, better known to the readers and to herself as Saru who narrates her story. Saru is deprived of parental love from her childhood. A sense

of silence engulfs her life as she is always neglected by her mother only because she is a girl. Like a typical and conventional Indian woman she remains silence when she faces problems. She lives in darkness and reflects in silence. Prabhat K Singh in his essay *Beyond Gender Consciousness* defines the themes of the novel so -

The Dark Holds No Terror.....portrays a life's journey from darkness to light.. The narrative has been woven with the hurt of pain and agony, the terror of silence. The fear of isolation, the burden of guilt, and the representative patterns of life the aches of ignorance and the joy of discovery. (Singh K, Prabhat, 2000)

The novel begins with Saru, returning alone to her father's house after a long gap of fifteen years after her mother's death. Saru remembers her past, her childhood which she has left behind long ago. She remembers the difference between her and her brother Dhruva as she was often neglected by her mother. She recollects "there was always a puja on Dhruva's birthday. A festive lunch in the afternoon and an arti in the evening....My birthdays were almost the same....but there was no puja". (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*). One day Dhruva goes with his sister to a pond and gets drowned accidentally. Her mother accuses her of killing her brother and this accident offers her a bitter relationship with her parents for ever. As a woman in our society is considered inferior to man, Saru is neglected by her parents.

As Saru grows up, she falls in love with Manohar (Manu) and eventually they get married. The novelist presents the typical man-woman relationship through Saru and Manu. Manohar Saru's husband is purely an-'Indian man' who desires to control the family through providing comfort to his family. As a result, when Saru becomes a successful doctor Manu fails to cope up with Saru's rise from a domestic wife to a society established professional. Indian culture expects a man to be the head of a family who earns more than his wife and control the family in every aspects of life. Manu feels inferior to Saru as she is a well-known doctor whereas he is an underpaid college teacher. As the story advances the chasm between them becomes wide to wider. When a reporter from a woman's magazine asks Manu "How does it feel when your wife earn not only the better but most of the bread as well?" his male pride gets hurt. His wounded male ego leads Manu to manifest it in the form of sexual sadism as he assaults Saru physically on bed. Manu's sexual sadism only brings misery and torture for Saru. Though Saru can understand the reason of Manu's frustration, she endures everything silently. She is desperate to save her marital relationship although she has become a victim of marital-rape. Amrita Bhalla in her book *Shashi Deshpande* describes Saru's dilemma thus:

"She sees herself as a victim of economic independence.....experimenting with various strategies of survival in a social structure where the reversal of roles threatens traditional notions of manhood....." (Bhalla, Amrita, 2010)

Like a typical Indian wife, Saru is entangled in the trap of marriage. She treats her patients in daytime but lives like a terrified and trapped animal at the hands of her husband at

night. Though she is financially independent, she cannot come out of this web. What Saru needs is an escape from the darkness and silence which have spoiled her life. Upon hearing the news of her mother death, Saru travels to her father's home only to flee from the brutality of Monohar. As time advances Saru feels that neither her father nor Manu can be her refuge. She emerges as a new woman who is ready to face Manu and overcome the impediments that hamper her happiness and the novel ends with Sarita's return to her family with husband. Ramanavmiwale remarks:

“The novel is a process of Saru's self-identification she goes from complete denial to all desires of life to whole hearted acceptance of them at the end”. (Ramanavmiwale, M.C, 2011)

Thus Despande portrays the theme of marital disharmony in her novel. Through her heroine Saru, Despande reveals the existential anguish of an Indian woman who although financially independent is a mere victim of the male dominated society. Despande in her another novel *Roots & Shadows* portrays a similar story of Indu and Jayanta and shows how Indu considers herself as an object in the trap of marriage. What Despande tries to assert is that despite the development of feminism in India, a woman is still underestimated and she doesn't always get her due liberty. Though we talk about the equality of man and woman gender still plays a dominant role on the social, cultural identity of a person and a woman is still supposed to be subservient to male. However the novel has a feminist approach as it travels from pessimism to optimism and ends with Saru emerging as a new woman by getting rid of marriage bondage.

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