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Prashant Mahajan
Dept. of P.G. Studies and
Research in English Rani
Durgavati Vishvavidyalaya,
Jabalpur Madhya Pradesh

Pragyaa Gupta
Dept. of P.G. Studies and
Research in English Rani
Durgavati Vishvavidyalaya,
Jabalpur Madhya Pradesh

Empowering Women In Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

Prashant Mahajan, Pragyaa Gupta

“May be she had been an animal, only a nice obedient, domestic one, sitting on a cushion, doing as she was told. And in return she had been fed and sheltered”.

As NayantaraSahgal has exclaimed in *The Day in Shadone* (qtd. In Mehta 145), the statement clearly reveals the pathetic plight of woman who had been subdued, suppressed, sidelined and subordinated to secondary position in every sphere of life for ages. On the contrary the so called new woman is very much conscious of her rights, her equitable position in society. Dr. Binda Sharma aptly remarks:

This woman has come to signify the awakening of woman into a new realization of her place and position in family and society. Conscious of her individuality, the new woman has been trying to assert her right as a human being and is determined to fight for her survival. (60)

Her ascent to this reputed position however has not been a smooth one. She has to encounter many setbacks and turmoils in the process and her struggles have not ended as yet. Although she has undergone a radical psychological change but her male counterpart and the old generation whom she is associated with in her life do not approve this new identity. Thus without being hostile she has to win over this mindset also only then she will have a peaceful coexistence.

Kamala Markandeya, NayantaraSahgal, Shobha De, Kamala Das, Anita Desai are a few contemporary Indian women novelists who have most successfully brought out the struggles of a woman; the inner and outer conflicts she confronts in her journey to self discovery. When we particularly talk about the endeavors of Indian middle class women towards the fulfillment of their dreams the name of Shashi Deshpande flashes instantly in our mind. In depicting the inner spheres of middle class women she has no parallels.

In her novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Shashi Deshpande has drawn up the character of Sarita also called Saru, who represents the typical Indian middle class woman. Sarita leads a successful professional life as a ‘lady doctor’ (41). But in the course of her ascent to this long cherished position she had to make many compromises which led her husband Manu develop into a sadist personality who unconsciously enjoys the sexual assaults he inflicts on Saru. Saru on the other hand is frightened to protest against this cruelty as then it would be known to her children. Unable to find any way out of this traumatic situation she escape to her father’s house making an excuse of sympathising with her father on her mother’s death. Here at home also she is terrorized by the past memories of the dead figures of her dominating mother and her younger brother. The present paper is intended to study how Sarita emerges against all odds, recognizes her own potential and prepares her to take on the challenges of life face to face.

Staying in her father’s house Saru recollects how right from her childhood she had been a subdued girl suffering from the sin of her being a girl child. Her mother herself a product of that section of society where people are forced to lead a dependent life – on account of her father having deserted her mother and her – devoid of any sense of belongingness, devoid of love, care and comforts. Such upbringing made Saru’s mother an overprotective and dominating woman. She tried to guide other’s conscience. Dhruva and Saru’s father got easily dominated by her but Saru did not comply with her wishes hence became the victim of her anger. She never treated her lovingly and conditions became worst when her only brother Dhruva drowned in front of her own eyes. Her mother held her responsible for this

Correspondence:
Prashant Mahajan
Dept. of P.G. Studies and
Research in English Rani
Durgavati Vishvavidyalaya,
Jabalpur Madhya Pradesh

unfortunate incident and always cursed her saying, "... Why didn't you die? Why are you alive and he dead?" (34-35).

This lack of emotional warmth in the mother-daughter relationship led Saru to become a rebel. She tried to defy everything her mother would want her to do. In order to show her mother why she was alive she committed herself to become a doctor. Her determination brings her success and she secures good marks to be eligible for a career in medicine. Her mother however strongly opposes this choice on the grounds that her father won't be able to afford the expenses as he will have to spend money on her marriage also. But with the unexpected support of her father she manages to go her own way.

In the college Saru meets Manohar also called Manu for whom she had developed an unconscious liking during her school days. Manu has a stunning personality and he is a great orator and poet thus possesses all the qualities sufficient to attract a young lady. They fall in love with each other and Saru talks to her parents about Manu. Again she faces stiff opposition from her mother due to Manu's coming from a low caste family. Saru determined to defy her mother decides to marry Manu partly because she loved him and partly because her mother hated him. As she later admitted: "If you hadn't fought me so bitterly, if you hadn't been so against him, perhaps I would never have married him (96).

After enjoying earlier days of marital bliss she soon realizes that all of Manu's talents have ended up in a failure and moreover he is slowly accepted the life of deprivations. But she does not like this stingy, miserly existence. She does not want her children to be brought up in such an environment and decided to go for specialization which she could later utilize in getting a good job. At this time she meets Boozie a flirt impotent man who develops an intimacy with Saru for financial gains. Her real predicament starts here when she has to bear fierce and violent intercourse with a person whom she loved so much that she left all her belongingness for him and what annoyed her most was her inability to protest against this savagery. She was afraid of showing any dissent because firstly her husband behaved like a perfectly normal person at other times and secondly if she protested then her dirty self would also be exposed in front of her children.

In the quite atmosphere of her father's house the memories of past unfolds layer by layer. Saru's guilty conscience accuses her of much misconduct. She is held responsible for her brother's death, her mother's miseries and her husband's failure. In the light of the kind of treatment Saru received from her mother, it is quite obvious to think her guilty of her brother's death. But at such a tender age she could hardly have understood the meaning of life and death, then, how could she be blamed for it. For her mother's plight if Saru could be blamed then the blame equally falls on her mother too. They did not share that kind of a bond which could compel any of them to be reconciled to the other. In case of Manu's failure again the responsibility falls on him much more than on Saru. Had she been a weak, submissive wife treading the path her husband would prefer conditions would have been totally different. She raises the question, "Does the sword of domination become lethal only when a woman holds it over a man" (86). Saru never obstructed Manu's way to progress. Instead she provided him with all the resources he could make use of in his way to success. But his typical male mentality does not allow him to accept his wife's superiority over himself and he turns out to be a failure. Thus

her innocent and guilty selves go on accusing and absolving her of all the sins.

In the meanwhile in her father's house also she is visited by patients. She is revealed to the distresses, the grieves the womenfolk were undergoing and moreover their upbringing did not allow them to disclose these secrets to anybody thus doomed to suffer forever. One of her acquaintances relates her to the suffering of her mother before she died. This account made Saru realize that one thing she, her mother and all the other women had in common was that they all suffered by one or the other way and the only difference that lay was that she had been trying to escape.

Saru had come to her father hoping that he would rescue her grief – stricken soul as he had once done when she chose to be a doctor. She disclosed to him one by one the entire trauma she had been undergoing. Her father could only sympathise with her and suggests her ways to come out of her problems as a normal human being would have done. This revelation of her inner self to her father shatters all her illusions to be rescued by someone.

She had once visualized herself to be divided into two personalities: the one grief – stricken and the other carrying on her duties towards the ailing patients. Her grievances had so completely overwhelmed her that she ignored this other aspect of her hands outstretched searching for someone who will eventually rescue her hardly realising that nobody can redeem anyone of his/her sins. She utters:

...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 (220).

This realization comes at the end when all her illusions are broken up. She understands that the real strength lies within her. She has been entrusted the service to the humanity and she is capable of lessening their pains at least to some extent. She cannot deny them their right to be taken care of. Her fights had been against her own ignorance and this enlightenment cleared up all the clouds of fear and instilled in her the new vigour and enthusiasm to carry out her responsibilities more sincerely.

Shashi Deshpande having a deep insight into the human soul has expressed the inner most feelings of a woman's heart. As a very humane and concerned human being she has not only depicted the dilemma of a woman but also suggested an all acceptable solution. The epigraph itself contains the solution to all human sufferings:

You are your own refuge;
There is no other refuge.
This refuge is hard to achieve.

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