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### Gender Discrimination and Marital Discord in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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#### Abstract

Gender discrimination is a universal issue that results in women's predicament. From time immemorial women become victims of gender disparities. It starts with one's own family. The present paper explores the crisis of gender discrimination and marital discord in the life of the protagonist in particular and Indian women in general. As a Child Sarita, the Protagonist tolerates gender discrimination and as a grown-up after her marriage due to marital discontentment. In this paper, many gender issues are explored which in due course of time decrease the moral spirit of women and make them weak and subordinate. Although Sarita is an educated and economically independent woman still she silently suffers. When it crosses limits she raises her voice to assert her self-esteem.

**Keywords:** Humiliation, Gender discrimination, Predicament, Subordination

“Gender parity is not just good for women – it’s good for societies”

-Angelica Fuentes

Gender discrimination refers to unequal treatment of an individual or group of individuals based on gender. Wikipedia defines it in the following words, “Gender inequality is the idea or situation that women and men are not equal. Gender inequality refers to unequal treatment or perceptions of individuals, wholly or partly, due to their gender”. English encyclopedia says, “Gender inequality is the difference in the status, power and prestige of women and men have in group, collectivities and societies”. In India gender disparity is ubiquitous and a long running phenomena that characterizes Indian society at almost every level. Irrespective of all the constitutional rules that grants men and women equal rights, gender disparities still remain. Such disparities affect many aspects in the lives of women from career development and progress to mental health disorders. Right from birth a woman has to face gender discrimination at all levels in Indian society. Although much ink has been spilt to eradicate such inequalities still the problem exists. There are umpteen reasons which supports and promotes gender disparity in Indian society. Some such reasons for gender inequality are prevalent of patriarchal setup in Indian societies, poverty, social customs and taboos, illiteracy, lack of awareness and courage among Indian women etc. It is one of the significant and complex issue in the Indian society that needs to be voiced and addressed. Literature has mirrored such crucial issues since time immemorial and tried to figure out the root causes and sometimes come out with suggestions. In India, many Indo-English writers, especially the female writers have touched the issues of gender inequality and have showed concern in their various works. They have focused on the plight and deprivation of Indian women due to the gender disparity they have to face in their lives. Some of such writers include Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Pawar Jhabwala, Geeta Hariharan, Nayantara Sahagal, Bharti Mukherjee, Anita Deesai, Geeta Mehta, Manju Kapur, Shashi Deshpande, Namita Gokhle, Shobhaa De, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai etc. My thesis deals with the writings of Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai and Shobhaa De. These writers in their works have depicted various faces of Indian womanhood through their female protagonists as well as other female characters. Among these female characters some are traditional, timid and submissive, some are vain and lost and some are assertive, confident and self-dependent. However, they suffer under the clutches of patriarchal domain and social customs and taboos. These sufferings which are sometime silent and sometime revolting are depicted by these writers. The protagonists in the hands of these writers undergoes various types of sufferings due to the inequalities they have to face in their lives and after tackling such problems by raising voice against the injustices they finally achieve an individual identity and freedom. At the same time these writers also portrays some characters who fails in the struggle miserably and are suppressed by the so called male dominated society. This paper deals with two important issues related to women that leads to the turmoil in the life of the

protagonist of Shashi Deshpande, Sarita or Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, in particular and Indian Women in general.

The novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1988), depicts the issues of gender disparity and marital discord in the life of the protagonist, Sarita, in particular and women of Indian society in general. It is a story of Sarita known as Saru, an educated, economically independent, middle-class wife cum doctor, who is a victim of gender discrimination as a child and always carve for love in her relation with parents. She also undergoes a strained relationship with her husband that leads to discover her own self. India is a land where, since ages, a male child is given preferential over a female one. This is the stepping stone of gender discrimination, which has been realistically portrayed by Deshpande in this novel. Saru as a child is ignored in favour of her brother, Dhruva. Saru longs for parental love but she is ignored and not given any importance. Her brother's birthdays are celebrated with much pomp and interest. Religious rites were performed and festive luncheons were organized for him. She remembers the grand birthday celebration of her brother:

... always a puja on Dhruva's birthday. A festive lunch in the afternoon and an aarti in the evening during which Dhruva as an infant, sat solemnly on Baba's lap, and as a child, by his side, while I helped mother to do the aarti. My Birthdays were almost the same...but there was no puja" (TDHNT, 168-169).

Saru always wanted to enjoy the excitement of being the centre of attraction, but after the death of her brother her birthdays were passed over in silence, both at home and at school. She even feels that her birth was a horrible experience for her mother, as said by her mother, "It rained heavily the day you were born. It was terrible" (TDHNT, 169).

It seemed to Saru that it was her birth that was terrible for her mother and not the rains. In India the birth of a son is highly appreciated even if it comes with terrible pain but the birth of a girl child is seen as a burden. She also recalls the joyous excitement in the house on the occasion of the naming ceremony of Dhruva. Saru thinks herself as a liability to her parents. Thus, the idea of preference of boys over girls in India can be witnessed, which is inextricably linked to Indian psyche. The Indian society gives so much importance to the birth of a son and regard him auspicious as he is the one who will carry on the family lineage. The first thought that came to Saru's mind at hearing about her mother's death is "Who lit the pyre? She had no son to do that for her. Dhruva had been seven when he died" (TDHNT, 21).

Here, one can see the age old tradition of the important role a son plays while performing the death rites of parents. A male child is qualified to perform the last rites of parents otherwise the dead person's soul would not get salvation. This could be the main reason for longing to have a male child. As Sarbjit Sandhu aptly remarks:

"The mother is very attached to her son. Her attitude is a typical one - after all, he is male child and therefore one who will propagate the family lineage. In another sense, also, the male child is considered more important than a girl,

because he is qualified to give “agni” to his dead parents. The soul of the dead person would otherwise wander in ferment” (Sandhu,19-20).

Saru’s mother constantly reminds her about her dark complexion and its importance in getting a bridegroom. Her mother stops her to go outside in sun as it would worsen her already dark skin. She recalls her conversation with her mother:

Don’t go out in the sun, you’ll get even darker.

Who cares?

We have to care even if you don’t. We have to get you married.

I don’t want to get married.

Will you live with us all your life?

Why not?

You Can’t

And Dhruva?

He’s different, He is a boy. (TDHNT, 45)

These types of discriminations between Saru and her brother leads to a sense of insecurity and her resultant rebellious nature. She starts hating her parents, especially her mother. All through her life Saru is haunted by the memories of her mother accusing her of her brother’s accidental death by drowning, “You did it. You did this. You killed him. Why didn’t you die? Why you are alive, when he is dead” (TDHNT, 191).

Saru goes into the grips of insecurity as a result of her mother’s discriminatory behavior and she feels unwanted that leads to a sense of alienation and estrangement. After dhruva’s death her life becomes even worse. In the Indian social setup it is common for a girl to face gender disparity. S. Anandalakshmi opines, “The birth of a son gives a woman status and she invests herself in her son’s fixture, creating a deep symbiotic bond” (lakshmi,31)

In India a son is considered as a boon where as a daughter is regarded as a bane. Investment of money on her education is seen as a waste of money where as spending money on son’s education is viewed as a return in near future. When Saru decides to join medical college to study medicine, her mother disapproves it and prefers a simple BSC for Saru to graduate as she can be easily married off with a simple degree. This shows the mentality of Indian society which regard a girl as a liability. Saru also wanted to be loved in the same manner her brother was loved by her father. She always do some or the other thing to get attention of her father, who so dearly loves Dhruva. As a male child Dhruva always gets all the attention and love of both the parents. So many time Saru tries to get the same kind of love and attention but did not succeed,

It Had been Dhruva, Sitting on Baba’s lap and talking to him. And I had thought. . . I must show Baba something, anything, to take his attention away from Dhruva sitting on his lap. I must make him listen to me, not to Dhruva. I must make him ignore Dhruva. But she had not succeeded (TDHNT, 32).

Saru shares an alien kind of relationship with her father who shows no interest in her and regard her as a sole responsibility of mother. Saru recalls, “He never took any interest in my school or college. He left it all to her. And she never really cared. Not after Dhruva’s death, I didn’t exist for her. I died long before I left home” (TDHNT,32).

Saru pines for her mother’s love and affection but her mother dotes on her younger brother and neglects her longing to be loved. Saru possesses no good memory of her mother, “I can only remember that she cursed me like no mother should” (TDHNT, 25).

A kind of agitation and alienation engulfs Saru due to the lack of mother’s love and care. Her mother always snubs her and this sense of rejection and ill-treatment by her mother leads to the hearted towards her own mother. At every step she faces only rejection from her mother that developed more hatred towards her mother, which haunted her whole life. Deshpande clearly highlights the gender disparity by the parents towards their own daughters in an Indian society. When Saru rebels to go to Bombay to study medicine her mother opposes her. And when Saru’s father supports her, She utters, “But she is a girl... And don’t forget medicine or no medicine, Doctor or no doctor, you still have to get her married, spend money on her wedding. Can you do both? (TDHNT, 144).

Shashi Deshpande effectively conveys the psyche of the Indian society who gives due importance to the responsibility of marrying off a girl with a handsome dowry than spending on her education. Spending money on the education of a girl child is still regarded as a waste of money in India. Thus, Saru is deprived of her parental love and affection and starts hating her mother. She feels neglected as a result of gender bias policy and becomes hostile. She ultimately enters the world of alienation and estrangement. All this gives her the feeling of an unwanted person in her own home and she starts thinking of an escape from all ties. In Indian society, a male child is treated as an asset where as a female child is regarded as an unwanted burden, a liability. Moreover, The society is of the opinion that one has to invest for the future of a girl child with no returns, as typically girls require dowries to be paid to the husband’s family, which although illegal in India is still a common practice. Through the character of Saru, Shashi Deshpande has conveyed one of the major problem of the Indian society, ‘gender disparity’, due to which the females, when they grow up become somehow weak and subordinate to the patriarchal domain and they suffer their whole life. This is due to the mindset of the Indian society which is deeply woven into the fabric of patriarchal system, that needs to be changed. Saru develops a sense of insecurity and hatred towards her parents that leads her to a rebellious attitude. Y. S. Sunita Reddy observes, “In this connection Saru’s mother’s attitude is typical of most Indian mothers and a common enough phenomenon in the Indian context” (Reddy, 51).

Saru becomes rebellious just to hurt her mother, she says, “I hated her, I wanted to hurt her, wound her, make her suffer” (TDHNT,142). This hatred drives her

to leave home for Bombay to study medicine and become a doctor, in which she succeeds. She also marries one of her college mate, Manohar or Manu, against her parent's wishes, just to hurt her mother. But unfortunately the marriage gradually turns out to be a disaster. Deshpande, through the discontentment of Saru's marriage, highlights the problem of marital discord and marital rape, which the majority of Indian women silently suffers without complaining just because of the fear of the society. Saru chooses a man from a lower caste to marry and her mother was dead against her marriage. Later she realizes and accepts the fact that, had her mother not been so much against her marriage, she would probably not have married Manu and bought herself to such a miserable condition. She later recollects:

If you hadn't fought me so bitterly, if you hadn't been so against him, perhaps, I would never have married him. And I would not have been here, cringing from the sight of his hand-writing, hating him and yet pitying him too. (TDHNT, 66)

Out of lack of love and security Saru, when she gets attention from Manu, marries him. Their relation was the need of the moment kind in which she hope of getting love, security and all that attention she longs for since her childhood. In the initial years of her marriage she considers herself as the luckiest woman on earth. She marries Manu in hope of getting the lost love in her parental home and her identity as an individual. But soon she realizes that all her happiness is illusory. It all begun when the neighborhood comes to know about her identity as a doctor. She gains recognition and her success as a reputed lady doctor becomes the cause of the strained marital relations with Manu. At first she could not realize the change in her husband. But much later she says in a retrospective mood. "He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband" (TDHNT, 42).

With the steady rise in Saru's status her husband becomes uncomfortable and feels ignored when people greet and pay attention to his wife. With a rise in her social and financial status there is an inverse decline in her conjugal life. Saru's rise in her financial status in contrast to Manu's status of an underpaid lecturer destroys their conjugal relation. Certain other incidents also contribute to make the situation worse and destroy their already strained relationship. It becomes aggravate between the two to such an extent that in the privacy of their room at night he doesn't behave like a husband, but a rapist. In an interview on career women bought out by a woman's magazine, Saru was interviewed. During the interview, the interviewing host asked Manu casually; How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?" (TDHNT, 200).

Although Manu laughed it off at that time but he resent it the whole life. He starts feeling inferior, humiliating and effeminate. But this is a fact that he cannot deny and out of frustration and discontentment he gave vent to his feelings through his beastly sexual assault on Saru. In order to gain his masculinity he turns to be brutal at night



but at day time he behaves like a normal human being who is cheerful and loving. Thus, this particular question of the interviewer stir a poison in their marital relationship. While her staying at her father's place Saru herself recalls; "The bitch. Why did she have to say that? It was the day that it began" (TDHNT, 36).

India being a conservative and a patriarchal dominated society, it is natural for a man to feel humiliated if her wife earns more status than her husband in the society. That is why this fact of status-quo jeopardizes Saru's marital life. Manu cannot accept the fact that his wife earns more than him and he feels congested. As Premila Paul observes:

His sense of insecurity starts with the explosion in the nearby factory. The lover in him dies when neighbors wake up to the fact that Saru is no ordinary housewife but an important doctor. But it reaches the point of culmination with the interviewer's query and a friend suggesting that a holiday tour could be possible if he had a doctor wife. (Paul, 64)

Saru experiences one more nightmarish while on a holiday to Ooty. Prior to their vacation to Ooty they meet one of Manu's college mate and his wife, who taunt Manu by expressing his inability and bad luck in affording such a vacation, to which the colleague's wife replies that he could have also afforded it had he married to a doctor. A humiliated Manu once again victimizes his innocent wife. Later Saru expresses her helplessness to her father; "I couldn't fight back. I couldn't shout or cry, I was so afraid the children in the next room would hear. I could do nothing. I can never do anything. I just endure" (TDHNT, 201).

Although Saru has achieved economic independence, her plight is miserable, as she has to perform double role, one of a doctor in the day time and one that of a helpless wife at night. It becomes intolerable to her as her husband feigns ignorance in the mornings of his beastly behavior at night. Saru expresses her anger in front of her father, "It happened again. . . Yes, again and again and again and yet again. I have lost count" (TDHNT, 201).

Manu is barred by ego and inferiority complex because of the success of her wife. Saru comes out of her illusions and now faces the reality. The behavior of her husband leaves her shattered. What was once a heavenly bliss for her now becomes a curse. While at her father's home Saru remembers the pain that is caused by her husband and contrast it with the pain she feels after sleeping on the hard floor at her father's place. She feels that the pain of sleeping on a floor is a blessed one, but the pain that is given by her husband at night is brutal and inhumane. She compares the two pains:

She struggled to a sitting position, her body waking up to an awareness of new pains, of new areas of soreness, that come from sleeping on the hard ground. Blessedly clean pains. Not like the others. I am dark, damp, smelly hole, she often thought when the pains of the night come back to her in the day, shaming her as if they were evidence of her wrong doing. I am like a house full of unclean things, never cleaned, never opened. (TDHNT, 29)

Deshpande through the character of Saru has thrown light on the most sensitive issue which thousands of women face in their day to day life. But they dare not to protest as they believe that it is against the social norms and can destroy their marriage. Thus, out of fear they remain silent and endure the assault throughout their life. The protagonist in this novel also remain subjugated without raising her voice against the marital rapes she has to tolerate night after night. She wants to rebel but remain silent out of fear of the society. She says; “I struggled to utter the usual words of protest, to say, No, not now, stop it. But the words were strangled in my throat. The face above mine was the face of a stranger. Blank, set and rigid, it was a face that I had never seen. A man I did not know” (TDHNT, 11).

Saru experiences bitterness and frustration after each assault she has to encounter. She has nightmares in which nothing is visible to her first, but as these nightmares grew in number and became intense she now saw not only and teeth but a full fledged body trying to force himself upon her. But every time it came she woke up and could not see the face of the man. But one day she saw the face in her nightmare, to her astonishment it was, his own husband; “And I knew where I was and what has happened. Panic and sensation came back simultaneously. I turned my head slightly, fearfully, and saw him beside me, snoring softly. No more a stranger, but my husband” (TDHNT, 12).

Broken and anguished at heart Saru feels disheartened and hopeless. She despises her husband and tries to avoid him at night as each night becomes a horrible night for her. Saru later recalls:

The hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar body. And above me, a face I could not recognize. Total non comprehension, complete bewilderment, paralyzed me for a while. Then I began to struggle. But my body, hurt and painful, could do nothing against the fearful strength which over whelmed me. (TDHNT, 112)

Thus, Saru who is an economically independent, educated and modern woman, keep silently suffering every night and starts believing it to be destined. She endures as it is a woman’s fate to endure. Later she realizes, “And each time it happened and I don’t speak. I put another brick on the wall of silence between us. Maybe one day I will be walled alive within it and die a slow, painful death” (TDHNT, 88).

Shashi Deshpande brings forth the hidden issue of marital rape and the helplessness of women to protest against it even if they want to and how even educated and independent women become prey of this inhumane, brutal act. Still they suffer and remain silent accepting it as their fate. Such issues needs to be discussed and bring forth in order to emancipate women from the clutches of patriarchy and orthodox norms. Deshpande in order to show the plight of Indian women, portrays her female protagonists as the victims of gross gender discrimination, first as daughters and later as wives. These protagonists are fully aware of the inequalities and injustices done to them. They also question and object the social and orthodox



norms that becomes obstacles and limit their capabilities and existence as an individual being. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is an example of such inhumane practices which the protagonist, Saru faces and how she overcomes the hurdles in her life. The novel is also an example of how men become intolerant when they have to play a second-fiddle role in marriage. They cannot accept the fact that their wives gain a superior status in the society. Shashi Deshpande also holds not only men responsible for such inhumane practices solely but also the society equally. Her works passes out a loud message not only for women but for the whole humanity as well.

**Abbreviations:** TDHNT stands for *The Dark Holds No Terrors*.

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