



### GENDER AND FEMININE CONSCIOUSNESS IN *THE DARK* *HOLDS NO TERRORS* BY SHASHI DESHPANDE

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### ABSTRACT

*Shashi Deshpande, a Sahitya Akademi award-winner Indian novelist, was born in 1938 at Dharwad, a smaller city of Karnataka, India. She is the second daughter of the renowned dramatist and Sanskrit scholar, Shriranga. As a matter of fact, Shashi is gifted with an inborn literary bent of mind and maturity of experiences in life. Consequently, Deshpande is one of the authors of Indian Writing in English who writes sensitively about socio-cultural concerns. She projects Indian people and complexities of their life through her writings. She creates her own environment of Indian ideology.*

#### INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande expresses her social concern, “Every day India, a society in which we breathe a culture to which we belong, her major concerns emerge from our own environment, from our immediate world, holding up mirrors to our own lives... They (my novels) are just about Indian people and the complexities of our lives.”<sup>1</sup>

Shashi Deshpande writes to explore the inner world of women. So, she utters on her own writings, “I realize that I write what I write because I have to because it is in within me. It’s one point of view, a world from within the woman and that I think is my contribution to Indian Writing.”<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, she does not target to blame males as the cause of all troubles as some feminists do. She deals with the nuances of inner mind of women. To some extent, Indian women writers are taking education and getting experience of different lives in

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foreign countries. The traditional Indian women suffer, submit and adjust themselves with the painful circumstances in domestic life. Therefore, this paper reveals gender and feminine concerns with consciousness in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* by Shashi Deshpande

The meaning of consciousness in terms of Indian society needs to be defined. Consciousness is a term that refers to the relationship between the mind and the world which interacts. According to Oxford Learners' Dictionary the meaning of consciousness is defined as follows: "Consciousness is an uncountable noun reflecting meaning as the state of being able to use your senses and mental power to understand what is happening as well as the state of being aware of something."<sup>3</sup> Social consciousness is an integrated part of society. It may be divided into many co-related facets, such as gender, suffering and distress, misery, agony and pain, hunger and starvation, almost real facts in society, educational concerns, inequality, sex and gender discrimination as well as familial relationships in entire society are the basic shades of social consciousness. Gender and feminine are the ingredients of social consciousness. While elucidating gender and feminine consciousness, Oxford Learners' Dictionary defines the word 'gender' as a noun. It means the state of being male or female (typically used with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones). And feminine is an adjective, it means having qualities or an appearance traditionally associated with women, especially delicacy and prettiness. Thus, gender and feminine consciousness means awareness of the tool of sensation and power of mind for perception to respond or react when one is in the midst of gender and feminine concerns in the society.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* the discord and the disillusionment of educated woman in a tradition bound Indian society is reflected. The novel brings out the struggle of a woman in a family where a male child is preferred to a female child. The novel also reveals how the insensitive attitude of the family towards a female can drive her into a schizophrenic state of mind. Saru is a central character of the novel. She experiences the indifference between her mother's and her own guilty feelings. Under the pretext of misunderstanding, she is held responsible for her brother Dhrauva's unfortunate death. Saru's mother preferred her son, Dhrauva and neglected her daughter, Saru. Her mother uses very harsh words that still bother her, "Why didn't you die? Why are you alive and he (Dhrauva) dead?"<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, Deshpande focuses on heroines in her novels. Her heroine is sensitive to the changing times and situations. She revolts against the traditions, to a great extent, in her search for freedom. She succeeds in achieving self-identity and independence. She is cautious enough to choose her partner in life to live within pursuance of her felt need to lead a family life. She performs various roles in family as a daughter, a wife, a mother and also as a woman who makes career. Though she revolts against standing at cross-roads of tradition, she is

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bound to seek change within the frame work of cultural norms so as to enable herself to live with dignity and self-respect.

Similarly, gender discrimination is one of the major socio-cultural aspects of Indian society. Patriarchal stream gives significance and superiority to male gender and considers female gender a curse. This stream inculcates assumption that the birth of a son is a way to reach salvation in Hindu mythology, consequently, the people make gender discrimination. By birth no one is significant and insignificant, superior and inferior neither man nor woman. Besides, biological difference, the impact of conventional socio-culture concerns and psychological attitude of people create the sense of gender discrimination. Therefore, Simon de Beauvoir pens, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman... It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... which is described as feminine."<sup>5</sup> This quote of *The Second Sex* clearly declares that gender is not something that is solely a matter of biology. However, gender is a socially constructed concept. Therefore, society gradually drills woman to make and realize her that she is a woman. Society also inculcates in woman that she belongs to a weaker section and so she needs care and protection of male, otherwise, it would be unsafe to survive in the society. Consequently, as a result of constant impact, woman is always under the constant control of male dominance. Therefore, Manu alleges, "A woman should never have freedom, when they are young, they should be under their father, after marriage they should be under their husbands, and if their husbands die they should be under their sons."<sup>6</sup> In the same way, a mother thinks that she has been a victim of the oppression patriarchy still she sticks to traditional codes and conducts prepares her daughter to tread on the same path and undergoes some sort of suffering by being tight-tongued. Mother plays role to marginalize her daughter by way of imbibing patriarchal paradigms on her mind. Woman is marginalized by society under the pretexts of her place and position in family, sexuality and trauma of monthly menstrual cycles.

In the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita, the protagonist is reminded by her mother that she is a girl and she should behave as a girl. Sarita is again reminded that the ultimate goal of a woman's life is to find a good match to get marry. The mother is always apprehensive of her daughter's complexion that it might not grow darker; otherwise, it would become quite troublesome to find a good match for her. But Sarita hated her mother to such an extent that she shouts, "If you're woman, I don't want to be one."<sup>13</sup> Sarita's mother evinces gender discrimination between her son, Dhruva and daughter, Sarita. In one of the recapitulations, Sarita records a conversation with her mother, "Don't go out in the sun, You'll get darker". "Who cares? We have to care 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 is different, He's boy."<sup>7</sup>

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The above words display both the things the caring of a daughter and gender discrimination, however, Sarita rebels all her life. It also reflects conventional culture-bound attitude of gender discrimination. The childhood experience of watching her brother sinking into water and his consequent death makes her feel guilty. She holds herself responsible for the death of her brother. This feeling is intensified by her mother's words which drive Sarita to hate her mother though under some pretexts her mother is right. See, Sarita's recollection of mother's words, "Why do I never tell her... Dhruva was my kid brother, Who died when he was seven? He was drowned. I watched him drown and my mother said.... Why? Didn't you die? Why are you alive and he died?"<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, when a woman gives birth to a female child it is called ill omen. It is supposed to be a curse. The birth of a girl is considered a terrible thing in some houses. The entire family treats the mother of a girl child with contempt and despise. In the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Dhruva and Sarita are brother and sister of each other. It is expected to celebrate birthday of both son and daughter. But, after the death of Dhruva there is not birthday celebration in their family. Sarita's mother always denigrates Sarita for she is a girl. On the birth of Sarita her mother told that her birth was ill omen and unlucky for family. Sarita utters her grief, "I (Sarita) was born. But of my birth, my mother had said to me once...It rained heavily the day you were born. It was terrible and somehow it seemed to me that it was my birth that was terrible for her not the rains."<sup>9</sup>

According to Deshpande, education is the only thing to resolve all problems and complications in life. So, she insists to gain education. It must be accomplished by a woman to prove herself a capable human being like man. In the novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita is a well-educated woman in a medical profession. Sarita has completed her degree and post-graduation in the medical branch. Sarita took medical education up to M.D. in Medical science is against the wish of her mother. Deshpande has a message that woman must obtain higher education to create transformation and alteration in society. Sarita utters regarding her education and status in medical profession, "A year later I was his Registrar. In less than two years I passed my M.D. four years later I was an assistant Honorary at a suburban hospital, with a consulting room of my own in the midst of other well-known busy consultants."<sup>10</sup> Shashi Deshpande does not only make consciousness about education of woman but she convinces how education equips women. There are schools and colleges in society. There are well educated and qualified teachers selected through the hardest examinations and interviews. They teach very obediently in school. But, the parents have no belief in their skills and knowledge. Therefore, they are strongly insisting to send their children to private tuitions.

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Hence, Shashi Deshpande discloses the agony and plights of Indian woman who is searching for her identity and individuality in a male dominated tradition-bound society. Such a society underestimates female on gender and biological grounds, in a sense, Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is the best example of the revelation of gender and feminine consciousness. Moreover, woman is aware of her abilities to expose them openly by obtaining education and becoming self-reliant without violating the cultural and social ethics of the society. On the other hand, Shashi Deshpande reveals educated, self-reliant and independent woman's boom to acquire an equal socio-economic status in the family. It is clear about Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*.

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