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DIALECTICS OF POWER IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS*

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Michel Foucault had once argued,

> "…individuals should not be seen simply as the recipients of power, but as the 'place' where power is enacted and the place where it is resisted." (Mills 35)

When Foucault considers an individual as the site of oppression as well as resistance, he stresses, on, "the role that individuals play in power relations – whether they are simply subjected to oppression or whether they actively play a role in the form of their relations with others and with institutions" (Mills 35). Sarita, the protagonist in Shashi Deshpande's novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, seems to be an individual, who, if seen in the light of Foucauldian ideas, becomes a site of oppression as well as resistance. Right from her early childhood, Sarita is subjected to the practice of gender - discrimination in her home. Sarita becomes the target of her mother's dislike and scornful attitude, for whom Sarita, the female child is nothing but a "liability" and her brother Dhruva – the precious one who would lit the funeral pyre of their parents. Simone de Beauvoir once said, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (*The Second Sex* 267). These most quoted words by the French feminist writer are totally apt for Sarita or Saru, the central character of the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*.

The notions of the patriarchal set up are so deep-rooted and firmly planted in the psyche of her mother, that Saru always feels a sibling jealously for her brother Dhruva. In fact, once she pushes Dhruva off her father's lap, after hearing the mythological story of Dhruva. Discrimination with the girl child Saru is evident through each and every activity of her mother. As against Saru's birthdays, Dhruva's birthdays are celebrated with extraordinary zeal and enthusiasm. While Saru is never appreciated, Dhruva is always adored. He is the apple of his mother's eye. Saru's mother constantly abuses and scolds her, for one reason or the other. She is often given instructions regarding her conduct and is often reprimanded not to go out in the Sun, as her complexion, she is told, would grow darker. Saru is always made to realize that she is an ugly child. This rejection of Saru, by her mother, this exercise of parental authority, on the part of her mother, affects and torments Saru deeply from within. Later in the story Saru recalls, how her mother used to have a scornful attitude towards her and her appearance, "I was an ugly girl. At least, my mother told me so. I can remember her eyeing me dispassionately, saying… you will never be good looking. You are too dark for that" (*DHNT* 54).

Initially, Saru passively took in the insulting remarks regarding her looks, made by her mother. But gradually, as a reaction to these agonizing remarks, there developed in Saru, a strong desire to look charming and beautiful. In fact, to look attractive became an obsession with her. She kept dreaming that some kind of miracle will take place and some day her appearance would undergo radical transformation. She imagined that, "one day [she] would grow up and be beautiful" (*DHNT* 54). She imagines to become as beautiful as one of her class-mates, who looked like, "an exotic bird, in the midst of …ordinary sparrows" (*DHNT* 54). Eventually, when she grows up, she actually makes sure that she bears an attractive and charming appearance. She is very particular about her dressing sense and out rightly rejects the idea of accepting the nine-yard saris of her mother. She tells Madhav: "I'm not old fashioned. I take great care not to be left behind. My legs are weary, my heart is numb, my mind is blank, but I keep marching on. I have even cut my hair …" (*DHNT* 52).

In being particular to look attractive and fascinating, Saru is actually trying to reject the opinions of her mother about her, who considered her, dark-complexioned and ugly. As Saru grew up, the instructions of her mother became all the more taxing and demanding. She was admonished to be careful regarding her behaviour and body language. Saru always felt the gazing, criticizing eyes of her mother directed towards her and she all the time remained conscious of herself and felt tormented and agonized. Saru's mother told her that now she was a woman. Saru did not like the idea of getting categorized with her mother, as a woman. She abhorred the idea of being called a woman, "If you're a woman, I don't want to be one, I thought resentfully, watching her body" (*DHNT* 55).

However, the most severe jolt to Saru, during her childhood comes, when her brother Dhruva accompanies her to a desolate place and gets drowned. Saru's mother invariably lays all the blame on Saru, as if it was she who had killed him. Saru is considered no less than a murderer of her own brother. And the accusations are so often repeated, that a stage comes when Saru herself begins to doubt whether she had actually pushed her brother into the water – or not. Saru develops a sense of guilt in her, on account of her brother's death. The accusation of her mother, "…why didn't you die? Why are you alive and he dead?" (*DHNT* 29-30) made her realize that she was an absolutely unwanted child. But after the initial passive suffering, Saru resisted the authority and power exercised by her mother on her, in her own way. She refused to be tamed by her mother and became totally defiant. She answered her mother's rejection, by rejecting all that her mother stood for.

In this context, it is interesting to note that Foucault in his book, "The History of Sexuality," had opined that, "where there is power there is resistance" (*Mills* 40). In his essay, "The Subject and Power" he also uses the phrase "anti-authority struggles," by which he implies, "opposition of the power of men over women, of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill, of medicine over the population, of administration over the ways people live" (*Mills* 38). Foucault believes, "in order for there to be a relation where power is exercised, there has to

be someone who resists" (*Mills* 40). He further opines, "where there is no resistance it is not, in effect, a power relations" (*Mills* 40).

The resistance on the part of Saru found manifestation in her decisions, which she took independently, without considering the opinions of her parents. Despite belonging to an economically poor family, she insisted on taking admission in a college in Bombay, to study medicine. Her mother strongly opposed the proposal, but Saru remained adamant and defiant. She once again rejected the power and control exercised by her mother on her life, by going against her wish and by marrying Manohar, who belonged to a low-caste family. As far as Saru's parents were concerned, they wanted to get her married within their own caste – to some Brahmin boy. But Saru seemed to be determined not to let her mother exercise her power on her any more. Whatever she did, it seemed, she did in order to hurt her mother. In fact, each and every action and step taken by Saru in her adult life had become synonymous with the idea of agonizing her mother. Later in the story, when her married life became a hell for Saru, she recalls that all the weaknesses were present in her husband Manu, even when she accepted his proposal of marriage. But one strong reason for accepting his proposal was to defy her mother. She recalls: "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 letters, fighting with terror at the sight of his handwriting, hating him and yet pitying him too" (*DHNT* 87).

Saru had always been made to feel unattractive as a woman and unwanted as a human being. She had always felt an emotional starvation within her, for admiration and for love. As a result, as soon as Manu looked at her with admiring eyes, she gave herself up to him in marriage immediately, without giving second thoughts to the suitability of the match. Psychologically speaking, it was her way of resisting the feeling of being unwanted: "It seemed incredible to me that I could evoke an emotion so strong in anyone. That anyone could care for me in that way and to that extent" (*DHNT* 58).

She was so surprised and exalted with the feeling of being desired, that she did not think anything beyond it: "And yet there was always a gnawing disbelief…how could I be anyone's beloved? I was the redundant, the unwanted, an appendage one could do without. It was impossible for anyone to want me, love me, need me" (*DHNT* 59). This need of being loved, admired and appreciated was nothing but a psychological reaction to her mother's taunting remarks and her gazes of contempt towards Sarita. Having faced this rejection all along, the fear of losing Manu always remained at the bottom of her heart:

> And still, for long the fear was there; the secret fear that, behind each loving word, behind each kiss, lay the enemy, the snake, the monster of rejection. Sometime, some day, I thought, the truth will out and I will know I was never loved. (*DHNT* 59)

Having been subjected to her mother's dominion for long, Saru determines to become an autonomous being, neither dependent on, nor bullied by anyone. Therefore, she decided to become economically independent. The story of her grand-mother's plight also troubled and agonized her. After being deserted by her grand-father, her grand-mother had to shift with her two daughters to her parental home. However, Saru abhorred the idea of being dependent. She looked forward to become an economically independent woman, equipped with mature vision, combined with strength and confidence that came from her knowledge of medicine. The decision to become economically independent was also her way of resisting the patriarchal set-up, where a female had to develop a submissive and servile attitude in her. Saru wondered at the patience with which earlier women like her grand-mother, endured their suffering. As for herself, she found it extremely agonizing to deal with the traumatic experience of her life, where her husband, who at one time used to be a caring lover, had gradually turned into "a sadist" (*DHNT* 180) and a beast. He could not accept the success of his wife as a doctor gracefully and his male ego, combined with his sense of being a failure in life, leads him to brutalize his wife physically as well as mentally. The domestic harmony of their life gets shattered, when Manu fails to accept a subordinate position in their relationship. "Though theirs was a love marriage, Manu and Saru lead a life which is full of adjustments done from Saru's end." (Priya)

Born and brought up in a patriarchal society, his conditioning is such that he fails to liberate his psyche from the image of man, created by the male dominated society. Rather than working in the direction of growing his own personality and improving his career, he applies all his strength in trying to possess Saru physically and sexually, in order to display his male prowess. Having failed to surpass his wife intellectually and professionally, he tries to subjugate her, by brutalizing and victimizing her physically. In this novel, Deshpande has effectively depicted, "the traumatic experience the protagonist Saru undergoes as her husband refuses to play a second- fiddle role. Saru undergoes great humiliation and neglect as a child and, after marriage, as a wife" (Sharma 13-14).

The male-ego of Manu, his sense of being a male and a desire to supersede his wife in all walks of life, shattered the marital bliss of Saru and her husband. Saru, the tormented daughter, became a brutalized wife, as she became a victim of her husband's physical power and authority. However, Saru as a daughter had successfully resisted the hold of her mother on her by being openly defiant and autonomous. But Saru, as an oppressed wife oscillated between the feeling of guilt and hatred for her husband and wondered how to resist his brutality. In her newly married life, Saru had found a deep sense of fulfillment in her relationship with her husband. But gradually, her status as a lady doctor began to rise and the stature of her husband began to appear smaller in comparison to her own. The dirty place, where Saru lived with her husband, immediately after her marriage, gave her such marital bliss, that she considered it a heavenly place.

But this state of heavenly bliss lasted only till Saru got recognition. As soon as their neighbours came to know about Sarita's profession, their indifferent attitude suddenly transformed into one of warmth and regard. But unfortunately, the warmth and regard were meant exclusively for Sarita, not for her male counterpart. While brooding and searching for the reasons behind Manohar's bestiality, Sarita recalls: "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." (*DHNT* 36)

People started paying visits to their room for consultation with Sarita. As a result Manu began to feel uncomfortable and expressed his desire to shift to some other place. Things grew all the more worse, when people began to make comments on their professional status. A girl, who had come to interview Sarita, asked Manohar, "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but the bread as well?"(*DHNT* 30) There was yet another incident, when a friend of Manohar accompanied by his wife, came across Sarita and Manohar, who were shopping for their Ooty trip. His friend's remark that he could not afford such a trip and his wife's remark that he could have afforded if she would have been a doctor, came as insults heaped upon Manu. Complex began to creep in Manu's psyche and its intensity grew higher, when he could not arrange the amount, needed for the setting up of a private clinic for Sarita, and a third person Boozie did. When Sarita informed her husband that he need not worry for the money, as Boozie would make provision for it, Manu did not ask the reason for the generous help extended by Boozie's yet the question, though never asked, remained between them. Reflecting on her relationship with Manohar, Saru recalled that it was that very night when her husband had tried to possess her sexually, but had failed miserably. In the process, he only ended up hurting her physically as well as emotionally.

Until her marriage with Manu became a target of his male ego, Saru used to exult in achieving dignity and status, fame and respect. But eventually, to her dismay, she realized that success and marital harmony could not go hand in hand:

> But now I know that it was there it began… this terrible thing that has destroyed our marriage. I know this too… that 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. (*DHNT* 37)

Sarita realized that she was happy and cheerful with her husband only till "he had been the young man and (she) his bride. Now (she) was the lady doctor and he was (her) husband" (*DHNT* 37). She understands that the very achievement, which filled her with exultation, self-esteem and pride, proved catastrophic for Manu. Her success actually had a strangling and suffocating effect on him. As a result, Sarita was torn from within. She became a split personality from within. T.M.J. Indra Mohan observes in this context, "She is a mentally

disturbed person… Absolute confusion prevails upon her. She feels that she has done injustice to her mother, husband and her children as well" (102).

Saru's reaction to Manu's bestiality, night after night, so much grieved her, ached her, and filled her with terror, that she found it very difficult to defend herself against his male power and authority. She kept oscillating between the feeling of pity for Manu and her contempt for him. Her mind got split with the feeling of guilt for her husband and contempt for his being a failure and a tormenter at one and the same time. But her condition became all the more worse, when she realized that it was impossible for her to share this trauma with anyone. She could have resisted the physical power exerted by her husband by screaming and crying, but her middle-class inhibitions made it impossible for her to unveil their marital relations. She consistently bore all the pain and agony all alone:

> And there was something more. The fear that that by speaking she would be unlocking the door of a dark room in which someone had been murdered. That by opening that door, she would be revealing to the world the pathetic, lifeless body of the victim, grotesque in an enforced death. And, her greatest fear was that they would all know the dead body to be his, her husband's. They would know too what she herself did…that it was she who was the murderer. (*DHNT* 38)

Saru felt a deep, agonizing pain when she considered herself responsible for her husband's plight. All the same, her mind repelled her husband, whose lethargy and failure had led to their present condition. The fact that Manu forced himself upon her night following night, also made her despise her marriage. Saru found herself absolutely powerless against her husband's brutality: "I never knew till then he had so much strength in him… I could do nothing against him. 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." (*DHNT* 182)

Saru felt so helpless and powerless that she began to consider the traditional system of marriage far better, where the husband occupied a status higher than his wife. She expressed the desire to leave her profession and live as an ordinary house-wife before her husband too. In an imaginary speech to the girls of a college, she implores the girls to be practical regarding their notions about the institution of marriage:

> A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he's an M.A., you should be a B.A. If he's 5' 4" tall, you shouldn't be more than 5' 3" tall. If he's earning Rs 500, you should never earn more than Rs 499. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage… No partnership can ever be equal. It will always be unequal, but take care that it's unequal in favour of your husband. If the scales tilt in your favour, god help you, both of you. (*DHNT* 124)

Unable to tolerate the burden of her marriage and her silent suffering, Sarita takes refuge in her father's home. She resists the power of her husband, by escaping from her husband's house and by shifting to her parental home. However, towards the end of the novel, Sarita, gathers strength to discuss the matter with her father. Her father advises her not to avoid the problem, but to discuss it with her husband. After some contemplation, Sarita prepares herself to face her husband and deal with the problem. She also tries to get herself rid of the triple guilt she bore on account of the death of her brother, the desertion of her mother and the frustration of her husband. Sarita also makes efforts to overcome her loneliness and her decision to look after a patient in the neighbourhood, towards the closing pages of the novel, indicates her state of mind, which appears to shift from alienation to reaffirmation.

The novel is open-ended and the future events have been left for the readers to imagine. However, one thing about Sarita seems to be certain. She would no longer tolerate the power and authority of her husband passively. She would search for some way out to deal with the problem. In a conversation with S. Prasanna Sree, Deshpande clears her intention, "My women protagonists are all very intelligent thinking women capable of self- analysis. They don't go back to the same point, they move on. Now where they are moving I'm not specifying. The ending is always open. Because to write that, I have to write another novel" (146). She does not lose hope in the distress after getting separated from her husband. She displays the real courage as she convinces herself, "All right, 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" (*DHNT* 220). Saru gets herself free from the chains of traditions. She begins the quest of searching her own identity in which she gets successful with her courageous efforts. S.P. Swain rightly asserts, "Saru's journey is a journey from self – alienation to self identification, from negation to assertion, from diffidence to confidence. She learns to trust her feminine self" (39).

Thus, through the life of Sarita, Shashi Deshpande has depicted the life of a middle-class, educated female, who is initially subjected to parental authority and later to marital subjugation. But her protagonist is portrayed, not as a passive individual, who endlessly tolerates the power exercised on her. Rather she is painted in such a fabulous way that she resists retorts and answers back to her subjection and humiliation. It is evident then, that in this novel Shashi Deshpande has given a true picture of the society and not a biased one. A critic observes, "In the context of contemporary Indian writing in English, Deshpande is one of the most understated yet confident voices, who explores individual and universal predicaments through the female psyche" (Aditi De). It is quite startling that she does not agree of being a feminist in her writings, yet she admits that in her personal life, she is a feminist:

> I now have no doubts at all in saying that I am a feminist. In my life, I mean. But not consciously as a novelist. I must also say that my feminism has come to me very slowly, very gradually and mainly out of my own thinking and experiences

and feelings. I started writing first and only then discovered my feminism. (Reddy 68)

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