

Woman Emancipation in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

Sadaf Mushtaq Nasti

*M. Phil Scholar
Deptt. of English
Bhagwant University
Ajmer, Rajasthan
Email :sadafnasti.sn@gmail.com*

Dr. Etti Sharma

*Research Supervisor
Deptt. of English
Bhagwant University
Ajmer, Rajasthan
ettisharmaa@gmail.com*

Abstract

*Shashi Deshpande has primarily a deep sympathy and concern for women as she articulates the vociferous voice and uncovers the multifarious levels of oppression while unveiling the women's strife and struggle for self-respect. She like Virginia Woolf records the hearthrobs of grief-stricken woman and dives deep into the sentiments, emotions and inner feelings that pass through human consciousness. Her novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* specifies the emergence or dawn of essential feministic voice in Indian English Fiction through the matrix of familial relationships. She traverses the contemporary Indian society and encapsulates the complicated assimilations and societal transitions of the 1980's. The cardinal theme in her novel is not only the schematic one of combating modernity with tradition or the occidentalisation of Indian culture rather than women characters struggling with their agonies and sufferings, which drags them through experience and virtue, girlhood and adulthood, ignorance and knowledge, sadness and happiness, submission and rebellion. It is absolutely a distinctive novel in the manner that it explores the myth of woman being paragon of all virtues and at the same time martyr at the hands of phallocratic society and myth of man's unchallengable superiority. It is rooted in the predicament experienced by a career woman, an appetizingly new occurrence in the Indian English Fiction.*

Keywords: *Oppression, Women, Modernity, Tradition, Occidentalisation, Phallocentric.*

Reference to this paper should
be made as follows:

**Sadaf Mushtaq Nasti
Dr. Etti Sharma,**

*Woman Emancipation in
Shashi Deshpande's
The Dark Holds No Terrors,*

Notions 2018,
Vol. IX, No.3,
pp. 22-30,

Article No.4

Online available at :
[http://anubooks.com/
?page_id=5005](http://anubooks.com/?page_id=5005)

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande's first and foremost novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* was published in 1980. It is about a middle class woman, Sarita who is traumatic and is trapped in the bigotry and supremacist system as she is sandwiched between sadistic husband and mother's gender inequality. She is economically independent, well educated woman and a doctor by profession. The novel speaks for the meek and submissive women who fall prey to the marital rape at the hands of masculinist and chauvinistic power. It discusses in detail the women problems in terms of ideology, illiteracy, status, issue of caste, the problem of dowry and patriarchal social structures. The woman character in the novel longs for freedom and justice.

The novel is hinged on the problems and worryment faced by a professional woman in a patriarchal society. It is the story of marriage on the rocks as she is a successful lady doctor in the day and a caged animal in the hands of her husband at night. At the very outset of the novel, she happens to be returning to her father's house notwithstanding the sexual brutality of her husband, Manohar. But to her misfortune her parental home also brings back for her the horrible memories of cruel attitude of her mother who held her responsible for her brother's death. As she is sandwiched between the brutal sexual assaults of her husband on one hand and cruel attitude of her mother on the other, it leads to agonizing search for her true self as is the case with the majority of Deshpande's protagonists. In her parental home she gets a chance to ponder over her relationships with her husband, her parents, her children and her dead brother, Dhruva. She finally decides to return to her husband's home and to live with him as Deshpande's women characters learn in due course to arrive at a compromise and find a sense of balance in life:

Life is full of choices. Life is full of compromises. Life is an adjustment. Even a compromise is one of the respectable choices that are developed as a survival strategy by Shashi Deshpande. (Compromise: The Strategy in Shashi Deshpande's Novels 83).

The protagonist Sarita is married to Mohan, who is a man of vicious tendency. The novelist makes an ample use of interior monologue to unfold Sarita's anguish and afflictions due to her mother's callous attitude and her husband's atrocious treatment towards her. Her mother is a typical orthodox woman who considers boy as an asset and girl as liability. She is destitute of parental affection and appreciation as her mother prefers her brother, Dhruva over her. Her mother throws words like pots and pans to her and she dies deep inside, "you killed him, why didn't you die?

Why are you alive, when he is dead” (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*62). It gets so deeply engraved in her that her mind as well as heart that her future plans get stained and she develops the rebellious nature. She also develops estrangement effect at home and pens down in a diary, “Nobody likes me. Nobody cares for me. Nobody wants me” (*TDHNT*83). This act of gender discrimination in the very childhood makes Rajini. P. to remark:

Even at a very tender age, this disparity gets fixed in the female psyche which forces her to opt for other options where it might get rectified. Yet to the contrary, the agonizing indifference continues on all spheres which the women is unable to reach during her life time. (Sociological Disparities in Shashi Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terrors* 80).

In a patriarchal society a boy is always seen with bright future while a girl is always tamed as a future woman who is to get married, bear children, maintain household chores and remain obedient to her husband’s wishes and desires. A girl child endeavors agony from the deprivation of parental love. The considerable crumbling force on girl child is the prejudice, discrimination and intolerance shown to them. Sarita’s nourishment seems to be a no different case as she recollects her conversations with her dead 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’s different. He’s a boy. (*TDHNT* 40).

This very conversation substantiates the fact that in a typical orthodox Indian family and society, more importance is given to the boys. According to Manohar world is conquered by a man when he becomes the father of a son, he enjoys perpetuity by that of a grandson, and by the grandson’s son the great grandfather relishes eternal happiness. Furthermore it is a son alone who is qualified to perform the last rituals or ‘agni’ of his parents. In the same society, girls are merely objectified

as future wives to suffer at the hands of male chauvinism and hierarchal power structures that use marriage as a tool to impose authority and physical subjugation over them.

In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millet vehemently expostulates that in the patriarchal social setup women are debased to an intolerable subordinate position. Saru undergoes the same circumstances and becomes the victim of this hierarchal system not only at the hands of her husband but right from her birth, at the very hands of her own mother. The hostile masculinist social environment has shaped the psyche of the mother and at the same time made a girl child a commodity of her mother's persecution as they are always considered as unwanted burden. Saru after getting good grades in her school wants to pursue higher education. The moment she tells her father about her higher studies, her mother rebukes her and objects to it. She again tells her father about her interest in medicine and that she wants to join a medical college in Bombay. But her mother tries to persuade Saru's father not to allow her to join the medical course although she remains unsuccessful. Her mother sees her with no bright future in medicine or higher studies except that of a wife as she says:

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. Medicine! Five, six, seven....god knows how many years. Let her go for a B.Sc ...You can get her married in two years and our responsibility will be over.

(*TDHNT* 144)

In Saru's case it is not only a male, her husband who doesn't want to see her as a professional woman reaching new heights every day. But it is a woman also, her own mother who doesn't want her to pursue her career and fulfill her dreams of becoming a successful and renowned doctor. Her mother like herself wants her to accept and adhere by the traditional and conventional role of a passive and dominated wife, assigned to them by the phallocratic society.

Sarita, grows up abhorring and disgusting her womanhood as her mother makes her feel ashamed of her own sexuality, when during her menstrual periods she (her mother) places unfair curtailments on her. Saru sinks in the sea of shame on her mothly cycles, desperately praying for a miracle to happen to put an end to it. She resents the conventional practices in her orthodox home during those first three days:

It was torture. Not just the three days when I could not enter the kitchen or the puja room. Not just sleeping on a straw mat covered with a thin sheet. Not just the feeling of being a pariah, with my special cup and plate by my side in which I was served from a distance, for my touch was, it seemed pollution.

(TDHNT 62)

Sarita's mother is so biased towards her that she badly mistreats her even during her monthly cycles which are but natural to a woman.

The principle leitmotif of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is quest of women for self and their struggle for exploration to unchain themselves from the curtailment of nature, culture and society. Its focal point is the awareness of women of her plight and problematic situation, her inclination to be noticed as a person and human being rather than woman and her desire to have an individualistic social image. Sarita's womanism dates back to her infancy when she had to grapple with sexist determination at home.

As the novelist has deployed the flashback technique in the novel, it begins with Saru going back to her parental home after a long aperture of fifteen years. The reason behind her visit to her father's home is her mother's demise. Living away from her husband, Manohar gives her comfort for sometime as she has been living in perpetual silence under her as is evident from the novel, "it was not to comfort her father that she had come. It was for herself" (TDHNT 43). Here she gets enough time to contemplate over her life from the very beginning till the present moment, through which the readers get acquainted with her asphyxiating silence and the emotional barrenness between her and her sadistic husband. She reverberates on her past and probes into her relationships with her parents, brother and Manohar. As she dives deep into the dark interiors of her past, she no longer upholds the terrors and nightmares of the dark with her and the title of the novel turns out to be apt as she meditates, "The dark holds no terrors. That the terrors are inside us all the time. We carry them with us, and like traitors they spring out, when we least expect them, to scratch and maul" (TDHNT85).

The novel presents the marriage as an established institution which proves to be a snare for even a well-read and professional woman, Sarita whose noose is wired by Manohar. She is a victim of marital rape as at night her husband sexually abuses and ravishes her and she becomes a caged animal in the hands of her husband. Initially scenario was altogether different. She was delighted and flying high with

Manohar as so far she was living under the burden of a crime of her brother's death imposed on her by her mother. She was a lovelorn daughter of her parents. Bereft of parental love and care, she desperately wanted a person to overwhelm her with all his love and affection. She seeks marriage as the best alternative to achieve freedom from her suffocating life. She looks for the role of a wife anticipating that this role will provide her with freedom and resents her helpless role as a daughter.

The problem starts with the esteemed and reputed social status of Sarita after her marriage as she becomes a successful doctor. The moment she starts to acquire the fame, her married life starts to fragmentize as her posture challenges the patriarchal supremacy and position of her husband who can't compete her in the day, so unfurls his frustrations of incompetence and inferiority by sexually assaulting her in the night. Her success as a doctor and Manohar's ineptness and inferiority complex in comparison to her are the two divergent poles which are totally against the norms of the value hierarchal system.

Sarita the unknown personality began to be recognized when one day an explosion takes place in the close-by factory and she happens to be nursing the wounded bodies in the hospital. All the neighbors got to know about her profession. Since then time and again she would respond to the knocks at her door from the neighborhood calling her for aid and abet. Suddenly her stature hits like rocket and she becomes an apple of everyone's eye. People predominantly sideline Manohar and start acknowledging Sarita, "When we walk 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" (*TDHNT* 42). This realization deep down develops a canker in Manohar's heart and metamorphosis takes place in him – a kind of sadistic figure.

And so the esteem with which I was surrounded made me inches taller. But perhaps the same made him inches shorter. He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband. (*TDHNT*42).

The scene dramatically changes as so far in conventional society, a woman has always been seen in relation to man but in this case a man – Manohar is seen and recognized in relation to a woman – Sarita and through this, Deshpande announces the arrival of feminist voice in Indian English Fiction.

In a masculinistic dogma, man is always placed at the top of the 'Great Chain of Being', no matter whether he is intelligent or mediocre, good or bad, sadistic or masochistic, interdependent or independent, dominant or recessive, famous or notorious, educated or illiterate. The nightmarish stance of Manohar annihilates Sarita's

feelings. She eventually abhors him for callous and egoistic attitude and it takes them least time to turn their good chemistry into worst one as Sarita in her interview affirms that she is earning bread and butter for her family. It pinches Manohar and he begins to feel insecure and develops inferiority complex because he contemplates that his wife is earning more than him.

The problem takes an enormous stance when one day there is an interview published by a woman's magazine on 'career woman', resulting in their shattered married life. Manohar is questioned by the interviewer, "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but also the bread as well" (*TDHNT* 35-36). It not only makes Manohar, who is marred by ego, inferior but also shatters his equilibrium. The question by the interviewer haunts him and makes him more sadistic as Sarita later in her father's house recalls that day, "The bitch. Why did she have to say that? It was the day that it began" (*TDHNT* 36). In response to her wife's superiority, he decides to assault her sexually at night to show his powerfulness. In a distressed mood, Sarita says, "He attacked me like an animal that night. I was sleeping and I woke up and there was this. This man is hurting me with his hands, his teeth, his whole body" (*TDHNT* 201). She later realizes that a man can show his dominance only with the sexual affluence as Manohar at night behaves like a ferocious stranger and ignorant and pathetic man at other times. The sexual assaults lead Sarita to ponder of a divorce multiple times but as an obedient and loyal Indian mother she doesn't do so, taking into consideration her children and society. She recognizes that in a male driven society:

A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he is an M.A, you should be B.A. If he is 5'4 tall, you should not be more than 5'3 tall. If he is earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety nine rupees that is the rule to follow if you want a happy married life. (*TDHNT* 137)

In a male driven society, it is but obvious that a man feels choked if her wife becomes financially independent and gets recognition in her life. This fact endangers their life. It makes her husband descend into a non entity; a fact that is indigestible to him. With the result the cracks in their married life become apparent. Marriage is a delicate affair and 'trust' and 'love' are the two key factors which keep it unblemished, and the moment anyone of the two is missing, it becomes hell. Same is the case with Sarita's married life and she draws to conclusion that the very concept of love in marriage is an illusion, only as mirage. Furthermore, Manohar is known by his nickname

Manu, “A name no doubt carrying overtones of the legendary patriarchal law-giver who saw the world from a male centered perspective” and in reality he is actually the manifestation of the same that his nickname suggests. Sarita soon realizes that there is no love between them and that the marital bliss is over. She also realizes that she is reduced to nothing but a sexual object by her husband. She then decides to return to her father’s home.

Deshpande through Sarita’s alienated self and fractured psyche evokes sexual frustration. In her father’s home Sarita downs into the dump after narrating the woeful tale of Manohar’s ill treatment and his brutal sexual assaults to her father and wants to seek the remedy of her solutions. She says, “I could not fight back. I could not 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” (*TDHNT201*). But her father was left blank and he barely could answer him. He suggests her, “All the more you are a doctor, you should know. May be he needs treatment...” (*TDHNT203*). After then she gets an email that Manohar is coming to get her back home and she decides to confront him rather than to avoid him as she realizes, “Escapism is no solution: a permanent solution has to come from within. She finally leaves the dark behind that has blinded her vision and steps into a phase of light which makes her acquainted with the new meaning of her life:

My life is my own...somehow she felt as if she had found it now, the connecting link. It means you are not just a strutting, grimacing puppet, standing a futilely on the stage for a brief while between areas of darkness. I have been a puppet it is because I made myself one. I have been clinging to the tenuous shadow of marriage whose substance has long since disintegrated because I have been afraid of proving my mother right. (*TDHNT 220*).

S. P. Swian has aptly remarked about the protagonist, “Sarita’s journey is a journey of self-alienation to self-identification, from negation to assertion, from indifference to confidence. She learns to trust her feminine self.” (*Indian Women Novelists* 39)

The novel ends on the optimistic note and brings to light the study of how women feel in their lives. The novelist Shashi Deshpande has time and time again exposed the patriarchal hegemony in subjugating and dominating the women along with their souls as patriarchy takes different forms to subjugate women in different ways.

References

- 1 "Compromise: The Strategy in Shashi Deshpande's Novels" (An Article pub in ISSN-0974-2832, Vol.II, Issue-6. Feb.09- April.09) p. **83**
- 2 Shashi Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990)
- 3 P Rajini, "Sociological Disparities in Shashi Deshpande's The Dark Holds No Terrors" *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, Vol 2, Issue 4. p. **80**
- 4 S. P. Swain "Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*: Saru's Feminine Sensibility". *Indian Women Novelists*, (Vol IV, 1991), p. **39**