

Female Struggle for Equality and Respect in a Smothering Society: A Study of The Novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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Abstract:

Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* presents a powerful delineation of gender roles, expectations of society and the psychological struggles of women in a patriarchal society. The novel follows the journey of Sarita, a woman who defies traditional norms to become a successful doctor, yet finds herself trapped in a marriage where she faces emotional and physical abuse from her insecure husband. This study examines Sarita as a female warrior who fights for equality and respect, both within her marriage and in the larger social context. Through Sarita's experiences, Deshpande highlights the paradox faced by modern women—while they achieve professional success, they continue to battle deep-seated patriarchal structures that refuse to grant them autonomy and dignity in their personal lives. Sarita's return to her childhood home symbolizes a quest for self-discovery and liberation from societal constraints. Her struggles reflect the broader feminist discourse on power dynamics, gender-based violence, and the need for self-assertion. This study delves into the psychological turmoil, societal pressures, and cultural conditioning that shape Sarita's identity and responses. By analyzing her journey, the paper underscores the need for women to reclaim their agency and demand respect in both the personal and public spheres. Ultimately, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* serves as a poignant commentary on the silent suffering of women and their relentless fight for dignity and equality in a world that often refuses to recognize their worth.

Keywords:

Gender roles, patriarchal society, modern women, self-discovery, feminist discourse, cultural conditioning.

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1.1 Introduction

In the post-colonial Indian Literature, many Indian writers are attracted to the themes regarding gender issues. The rise of the feminist movement brought critical scrutiny to the social and cultural positioning of women, prompting a reevaluation of their roles within both the private and public spheres. While the Indian Constitution enshrines equal rights for women, this legal framework catalyzed a shift in women's perspectives—particularly concerning familial relationships and marriage (Forbes 34). Increasingly, women began to assert their individual choices and ambitions, often clashing with traditional expectations. This friction between modernity and cultural tradition led to a sense of alienation, as women struggled to reconcile personal autonomy with societal norms (Kumar 112).

The feminist wave in India also illuminated longstanding gender disparities rooted in patriarchal customs and educational deprivation. This consciousness gave rise to a new generation of writers who captured the emotional and psychological landscapes of Indian women in their literary works. Themes such as marital discord, gender discrimination, the search for identity, male dominance, and sexual politics are frequently explored in contemporary Indian fiction (Tharu and Lalita 58). These narratives not only reflect women's lived experiences but also challenge the structures that have historically silenced them.

1.2 Shashi Deshpande: A Writer of Female Struggles

Shashi Deshpande, born in 1938 in Dharwar, Karnataka, has established herself as one of the most prominent voices in contemporary Indian English literature. Her works primarily focus on the lives and inner conflicts of middle-class Indian women, who constitute a significant demographic in Indian society. Rather than portraying outright rebellion against patriarchal norms, Deshpande often presents her female protagonists as individuals navigating the complexities of tradition and modernity. These women strive to adapt, negotiate, and redefine their roles within deeply entrenched cultural frameworks (Rao 76). A recurrent theme in Deshpande's fiction is the marginalization of women, a subject she approaches with nuanced sensitivity. As a feminist writer, she challenges hierarchical structures and social institutions that perpetuate female subordination, yet her feminism is rooted in realism rather than radicalism (Tharu and Lalita 193). Beginning from her first novel "The Dark Holds No Terror" published in 1980, She furthered the same idea of female struggle and conflict in her novels "Roots and Shadows"(1983), "That Long Silence"(1989), and the "Binding Vine"(1993).

1.3 Theme of Deshpande's Novels

Shashi Deshpande's novels probe the patriarchal structure of Indian society. Her protagonists go through bitter experiences in their pursuit of self-definition and liberation. She brings out the religious and societal norms that limit and repress the woman's spirit but allow reclaiming her identity in the end.

Shashi Deshpande's works focus on educated middle-class women who are confined by the constraints of a patriarchal society. These women often experience intense psychological turmoil marked by frustration, despair, and disillusionment, as they struggle between their personal aspirations and the restrictive societal norms imposed upon them. Her female protagonists typically undergo a crisis of identity, leading them on a journey of self-discovery. Through deep introspection, they confront their suffering, examine their cultural conditioning, and ultimately make conscious, positive choices. This journey is marked by alienation, internal conflict, and indecision, but it gradually leads them to a mature realization that true happiness lies in peaceful coexistence. However, such acceptance also calls for a reciprocal understanding from the male members of society.

Parama Roy in the book entitled *Traffic: identities in Question in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, presents the ideas of how women during colonial and postcolonial times have evolved themselves and have struggled to maintain their identities. It presents a grim picture of women's conditions before the independence of the nation. Poverty, patriarchy, ignorance and illiteracy had a deep impact on women keeping them far away from the mainstream of development and identity. This loss of identity has not recovered till now and they are, in spite of, rapid changes at national and international levels, struggling to bridge this long-drawn gap (Roy 23). The present research paper attempts to explain how the heroine of the novel 'The Dark Holds No Terrors' faces the deep-rooted discrimination and marginal position at her own parental home from childhood. Her husband, once loving and caring, becomes hostile and avenges himself indirectly as he finds her more successful and respected than himself. She secures a place and status for herself as a doctor but her success is appreciated neither by her parents nor by her husband. She longs for equal treatment and respect but gets disappointment. The condition of other women also reveals the fact how the tradition has numbed their power of dreaming a new morning of life.

1.4 Gender Bias Deeply Rooted in Society

The novel begins with Saru returning to her parental home after a fifteen-year absence. Though she had once left with a firm resolve never to come back, circumstances compel her to seek refuge there. During her stay, she reflects deeply on her relationships—with her husband, her mother, her children, and her deceased

brother Dhruva. Saru appears overwhelmed by confusion, a sense of hopelessness, and emotional numbness as she grapples with the complexities of her past and present. In her earliest memories, Saru recalls her mother's discrimination between herself and Dhuruva. When her brother receives all the parental love and attention, she feels envious. She tries hard and only partially succeeds in getting her father's attention. A daughter is unwanted and viewed as a liability in society, but a son's birth is celebrated with a feast and almsgiving. According to Amrita Bhalla,

... girls have to bear the shame of being treated as untouchable during the days of menstruation. Saru is debarred from the puja room and given separate utensils to eat. It goes on until it is over. This is unacceptable to her as she is not adapted to it. She is constantly reminded that she is not good-looking and not fair, an obstacle in finding a good groom. It nurtures an inferiority complex in her which results in a lack of confidence. (Bhalla 65)

The death of her brother by accidental drowning worsens Saru's problem. This becomes a turning point in her life. Her childhood memories are replete with her mother accusing her: "You killed him, why didn't you die? Why are you alive when he is dead?" (DHT199) and also "You did it, you did this, you killed him" (DHT173). This accusation disturbs her so much that she begins to think herself responsible for her brother's death. She could do nothing to undo this incident and save her brother. According to her mother Saru was murderer of her brother and Saru is unable to accept or deny it. Subconsciously, she also desired his death so she could get the attention of her parents. Her wish turned into reality and she was in dilemma whether to feel happy or sorry. It is an indication that she had developed sibling jealousy and the reason was her mother's blind favours towards her brother. The mother's attachment to the son is so strong that many years later, on hearing about her mother's death, Saru's immediate thought is, "Who lit the pyre? She had no son to do that for her. Dhruva had been seven when he died." It is written in the 'Shastras' that the parents would not get 'Mukti' if the rites after death were not performed by a son. Life becomes more desperate for Saru after Dhruva's death. The conversation between mother-daughter shows how girls are not considered a part of the family and concerns regarding their marriage – "Don't go out in the sun. You'll get even 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." (DHT)

One significant aspect of the parent-daughter relationship in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is the contrasting attitudes of Sarita's parents toward her education. Unlike her mother, who rigidly upholds patriarchal traditions and resists Sarita's

academic aspirations, her father exhibits a more progressive stance by permitting her to pursue a medical career. The more distressing reality, however, is that Sarita's mother, herself a woman, fails to support or empathize with her daughter's ambitions. After the death of her mother, Saru returns from her husband's home. She expects affectionate and cordial treatment from her father as she is returning after a long gap of years. But she gets a cold reception. She feels so helpless and alone but her father does not even ask about her condition, her reason for coming or about her husband and children. Since it was a marriage against the wishes of her parents, she was fully responsible for its success or failure. Saru introspects 'It's my fault again, if mine had been an arranged marriage, if I had left it to them to arrange my life, would he have left me like this?' (218). She pours out her heart before her father to make him realize how her husband inflicted brutality on her. It was a thing she could share with none than her near ones, one of whom was not alive to listen. If she were, she would have declared Saru deserved it as she had gone against them breaking the tradition. It was not a plea of the daughter but of a woman to a man. Her father however, was not much moved and advised her to settle the dispute.

1.5 Female Success and Male Ego

The novel explores the theme of the male ego and its resistance to accepting a subordinate role within marriage. It portrays the deeply troubling experiences of the protagonist, Saru, who attains a higher economic and social standing than her husband, Manohar. Unable to cope with this imbalance, Manohar's frustration takes a toxic turn, manifesting in acts of sexual abuse, making Saru a victim of both emotional and physical oppression. Deshpande also brings forth society's reaction when a wife reaches a superior status in marriage. The result is a sense of being less which makes the husbands develop an inferiority complex. The novel also shows how gender discrimination begins and how parents have biases against their daughters. The Novelist effectively brings out how middle-class families yearn for a male child and pour out everything on him. No importance is given to the wishes of a girl. She has no choice but to accept what her brother leaves for her. How it damages her personality, no one cares as she is not the heir of the family. This lack of parental care and love has deep repercussions and Saru can't recover from it all her life. She is never free of the guilt and sense of shame. The cruelty of her husband further strengthens it.

The novelist exposes the inherent contradictions within Indian society regarding gender equality, respect, and women's empowerment, revealing them as largely rhetorical and unimplemented ideals. While programs are organized and seminars held on women's rights, their practical execution remains largely absent.

A paradoxical stand is seen in Indian culture on women—on the one hand, they are made victims of systemic oppression and servitude, while on the other, they are idealized and given higher positions in religious and social rituals. A woman is expected to be dedicated like mythical figure of Gandhari who wrapped a strip and didn't see anything because her husband was blind. She is revered and given the status of a goddess and also called 'Ardhangini' meaning the equal half, but, she cannot be more than half or equal, if she does, she hurts the 'man'.

Saru is a successful doctor and people admire her but her social and professional height is not absolute, she is always compared to her husband, Manohar. Her realization exposes the deeply established societal expectation that a wife must remain subordinate to her husband in all aspects—education, status, and financial earnings. Saru lives the paradoxical life of the "two-in-one woman"—a self-dependent and respected lady doctor by day, yet a sufferer of abuse and domination at night. What a plight! A source of inspiration becomes a target of jealousy. Her professional achievements should have been a matter of pride and praise but they have turned into drives of resentment. Her husband takes it as his failure and inflicts physical and psychological torture on her. Her dream of finding happiness in marriage is soon shattered. Now Saru's relationship with her husband is far away from being good and cordial. The word 'love' was meaningful before marriage. How heavenly feelings she had in his arms! How she had revolted against her parents for him! Even the small 'chawl' in a slum area full of the smell of urine was comfortable. And now the big comfortable house feels like a prison! She can't believe that something like 'love' can ever exist between a man and a woman. Her thoughts run like this: 'A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he's an MA, you should be a BA. If he's 5'4" tall, you shouldn't 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... Don't ever try to reverse the doctor-nurse, executive-secretary, principal-teacher role' (DHT137). Similar thoughts are presented by Jaya, the protagonist, in the novel 'That Long Silence' "A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There's no room for anger in my life.....there's only order and routine- today I have to change the sheets, tomorrow, scrub the bathrooms; the Day after clean the fridge....."(TLS147).

1.6 Attempting a Balance Between Tradition and Modernity

Through her portrayal of Indian middle-class women, Shashi Deshpande presents a feminist critique of patriarchal norms while simultaneously advocating for a balanced integration of tradition and modernity in the lives of contemporary women. She views tradition as a source of stability and harmony rooted in the Indian

ethos, whereas modernity represents the pursuit of autonomy and self-identity. For Deshpande, the ideal path lies in reconciling these two forces, enabling women to assert their individuality without completely severing ties with cultural values.

The contemporary Indian woman in post-independence India must balance the traditional ideal of wifedom, which is upheld by societal norms and myth, with contemporary ideas of professional women who work outside the home. Having an identity of her own effectively reduces Manohar's, and she tries to deal with the pretense of being inferior to him in order to deal with the guilt she feels. She is shown as a woman trying with different survival techniques in a social framework where conventional ideas of manhood are threatened by the reversal of roles. She tries to abandon that role to become purely a wife and mother- an easily recognizable and acceptable role: 'live like the others do...stay home and look after the children. Cook and clean...a mother in an ad, in a movie, loving and beloved. A picture of grace, harmony and happiness' (DHT80)

1.7 Conclusion

The Dark Holds No Terror presents a detailed examination of identity, self-worth, and the quest for liberation in a world that resists change. The journey of Sarita illustrates that a woman's identity is shaped by the roles society assigns her. Her struggle to change the situation and come at the same level brings tensions in the relationships. She goes through bitter experiences on her journey without any support from her parents and husband. The issue of marital rape is also discussed in the novel. Physical relations are meant to mitigate the differences and tensions rather than inflicting shame, fear and brutality. By the end of the novel Sarita reaches a level of self-awareness and realizes that she must reclaim control over her life. She will surely return to her husband but not until the storm within her subsides. She says: "My life is my own". Somehow, she feels as if she has found the connecting link. "It means you are not just a strutting, grimacing puppet, standing futilely on the stage for a brief while between areas of darkness" (DHT220).

Abbreviations Used-

1. DHT- *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (New Delhi: Penguin Publication, 1990.)
2. TLS- *That Long Silence* (Kolkata: Penguin Publication, 1989.)

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