

# Gender Equality and Socio-Cultural Explorations in Shashi Deshpande's "*The Dark Holds No Terrors*"

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## Abstract

In Shashi Deshpande's novels, one can find the variety of characters too. In Deshpande's literary world there are characters taken from almost all the sections of life. They are medical practitioners and writers, educated housewives, uneducated ones and maidservants. Besides poverty, bereavement and such other common adversities, there are some causes of suffering exclusively for the female. Deshpande renders with sympathetic understanding the variety of suffering a woman has to undergo. Sometimes the suffering is attached to the social taboos, and sometimes the women are silenced in the name of family honor, and are compelled to digest torture. Shashi Deshpande usually describes Indian women in her novels. That is what the condition of women in most families. Shashi Deshpande's sincere attempt to break the silence of women has been widely acclaimed at home and abroad. Her clear understanding of human relationship, her close observation of the way of the world, her unbiased attitude to dogmas and movement enforced one to do a study in this direction.

**Key Words:** Sympathetic understanding, maidservants, dogmas, social taboos.

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* as novels of the woman in self-quest and hope to posit the view that women in these novels have established themselves as autonomous beings. Free from the restrictions imposed by society, culture, nature and free from their own fears and guilt; that women have reached a stage of understanding the fundamental truth: one has to find it for oneself.

Our society is full of paradoxes and contradictions. Here a female is considered a peripheral member of the family, both in her parent's house as well as her husband's. Throughout her lifetime, she is unable to decide her roots and this leads to her insecurity. As the daughter is closest to the mother, this insecurity is tagged on to her also. The novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, the mother-daughter relationship is centered on gender-bias and loveless ness. Sarita also called as Saru is the daughter of the family, deprived of parental care and affection.

Shashi Deshpande's heroines reject rituals that are the vestiges of the past. In their rejection of their mother, they also discard the meaningless rituals like circumambulating the tulsi plant. Saru refuse to undertake such rituals that are meant to increase the life span of their husbands. The rejection is an indication of their autonomy and their capacity to see their

lives independent of their mother's, the past. These heroines shudder at some of the natural biological functions of the female associated with the mother and they have developed, from their childhood, apathy towards their body. Shashi Deshpande's heroine is confronted with the problem of what the mother stands for and the only way out for her is to seek a new environment where the mother cannot exercise her will.

The woman in order to achieve her freedom seeks marriage as an alternative to the bondage created by the parental family. She resents the role of a daughter and looks forward to the role of a wife with the hope that her new role will help her in winning their freedom.

Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* too, under goes similar trauma, confronts reality and, at the end, realizes that the dark no longer holds any terrors to her. She survives in a male dominated world that offers no easy outs to women. She neither surrenders to nor does escape from the problems but with great strength accept the challenge of her own protege.

Saru also undergoes the arduous journey into herself and learns to free herself of guilt, shame, humiliation and she is also initiated into the mystery of human existence. The epigraph of the novel, "You are your own refuge There is no other refuge This refuge is hard to achieve (The Dhammapada)" gains its total significance when Saru realizes that the parental home cannot be a refuge. She understands that neither her father nor her husband Manohar can be her refuge. She is her own refuge. She has to overcome herself; she has to kill the ghosts that haunt her; she has to find her own way to salvation.

It is to be noted that Saru, at the end of the novel, has come to realize that her profession as a doctor is her own and she will decide what to do with it. "My life is my own." She will no longer be a puppet. Her marriage is a shadow. She held on to the marriage because she did not want to prove her mother right. Only she can be her refuge. Everyone is lonely and that there is no cause for despair. In short, almost all the literary ventures of Shashi Deshpande revolve round the pathetic and heartrending condition of women in a male dominated society. The novelist's contribution lies in the heightened sensitivity and the fresh insights that she brings to bear on the well-known types and situations. The action of the novel is triggered off by a crisis in a middle-class family.

The true substance of the novel lies in the mental processes that Saru goes through during her apparently eventless existence at her father's place. She thinks. She analyses all the dark corners of her soul. She introspects. She judges life, relationships. We find her true self while she is unweaving her mind through memories and dreams. The process demands real effort. She endeavours hard to gain what she had lost-her self-respect. She tries hard to overcome her psychological fears. The terrors are inside us all the time. We carry them within us and like traitors they spring out, when we least expect them, to scratch and maul.

Love... There was no such thing between man and woman. There was only a need which both fought against, futilely, the very futility turning into the thing they called 'love'. It's only a word, she thought. Take away the word, the idea, and the concept will wither away (72).

Saru's character can be truly understood only in the light of psychological precepts.

First, she carries within her the sad effects of gender discrimination. Social psychology deals with the stereotypes about the two genders. Saru's feminism springs out as a reaction to this discriminatory psychological set up of society and her parents in particular. Secondly, Saru also has the deep-rooted mentality of an unwanted child. Psychologists have dealt in detail with the mental makeup of an unwanted child. Thirdly and most tragically, Saru suffers the bruises of a terrible physical trauma on her psyche. The life that she lives at her father's place is essentially a spiritual life. It is a reaction against her dirty physical experiences. For her, all that is physical is filthy. Her femininity being brutally crushed, she loses forever the dreams of sentiment and passion. Love, Romance, both, she knew too well, were illusions and not relevant to once life. One may put forth a word about Saru's dual life. For the world, she is a scared, tortured woman. She is going through quiet and abnormal pattern of life, which in the

daytime wore a white coat and an air of confidence and knowing and at night became a terrified, trapped animal. Saru has in her character what makes a fictional figure universal. Whatever her faults, whatever her life but she does reach depths of self-actualization. At last, she reaches a stage when she is not beaten down by other people's rejection by low self-regard, by anxiety, or by conflict. The theory goes that if the self develops in an open, flexible, expansive manner, the individual will continue on the road to self-actualization.

Saru is presented simultaneously as an individual and as a female. Her predicament is contrary to the assertion of feminist that financial independence brings security to woman. Saru yearns for security and emotional attachment. She wants her father to support her and her feeling raised against Manu's brutality.

Thus, the novels of Shashi Deshpande clearly reveal the author's perception of the endemic imbalance between the sexes. It is, however, obvious that the author stops short of trying to correct this imbalance. The numerous minor characters in the novels suffer in silence or accept that fate with resignation but do not take any step that might jeopardize their marriage or reputation in society. It is however important to note that each of her novels ends on a note of determination by its protagonist who resolves to take the reins of her life into her hands.

She introspects philosophically and reaches to the conclusion that escape is a ridiculous idea. There is no refuge, other than one's own self. She realizes that she cannot attain happiness through anyone else be it a husband, a father or a child. She can attain peace of mind by her own efforts. No one gives peace. It has to be created within. Thus, free from fears and pain, the final picture of Saru is appealing indeed, when she confidently waits for what used to be the greatest terror of her life, her husband. She is ready to face him. She is ready to face life.

I could feel the stares. Everyone's except Manu's. Who would not look at us. And I should have hated him then... not Manu, for he had nothing then for which I could hate him, but this attractive, ravishingly masculine man who was doing this deliberately. Attracting attention to the two of us. But, funnily enough, it was not him I hated. It was Manu for doing nothing. This man... no, I could not hate him, knowing what I did about him. That behind the facade of aggressive, virile masculinity there was nothing at all (94).

Shashi Deshpande's major concern is to depict the anguish and conflict of the modern educated Indian women caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand, and self-expression, individuality and dependence for the women on the other. Her fiction explores the search of the women to fulfil herself as a human being, independent of her traditional role as daughter, wife and mother. She has examined a variety of common domestic crisis, which trigger off the search. Deshpande's concern and sympathy are primarily for the woman. While revealing the woman's struggle to secure self-respect and self-identity for herself, the author subtly bares the multiple levels of oppression, including sexual oppression experienced by women in the society.

In the changing scenario of post-colonial Indian society that observed crosscurrents of traditional ideals and newly imported ones, Shashi Deshpande's was burdened with the task of giving the women characters the specific roles that would fit in the socio-cultural modes and values of the changed society. A new generation of women emerged, embracing the changed values according to which women have a voice of their own, a voice that had been suppressed for centuries. These women, who have the capacity to make free choice and need not therefore depend on the choice of the male, are portrayed in the novels of the new generation women novelists. These new women characters are not however the same everywhere dilemmas are exposed accordingly. In her novels, we get the theme of poverty stricken, hardworking, sincere and silent women of India who live like animals, embrace intolerable sufferings for survival, and yet hope for a better future for their issues only to be crest fallen at the end. Nothing happens in their life but series of disappointments along with humiliation, torture and repeated displacement. Besides the rural mass, there are middle class woman in the innumerable towns and cities of India who are often unable to enjoy the legal status conferred on them. Women are now treated on equal terms by law as far as inheritance of property and opportunities of jobs are concerned. But on the social level, these women who have been struggling since ages to assert themselves, are still being heckled by their male counterparts and forced to remain silent. The voice of this newly emerged class of woman, who have the same education as the men are having and are sometimes given the opportunity of supporting themselves financially, is heard in the writings of Shashi Deshpande. A voice of protest against the marginalized condition of women as a class is also audible in her works. The bold heroines, having moral courage necessary for self-assertion replace the meek and submissive heroines who were accepted as the standard women characters.

Deshpande's literary world there are characters taken from almost all the sections of life. They are medical practitioners and writers, educated housewives, uneducated ones and

maidservants. Besides poverty, bereavement and such other common adversities, there are some causes of suffering exclusively for the female. Deshpande renders with sympathetic understanding the variety of suffering a woman has to undergo. Sometimes the suffering is attached to the social taboos, and sometimes the women are silenced in the name of family honor, and are compelled to digest torture.

Shashi Deshpande's sincere attempt to break the silence of women has been widely acclaimed in home and abroad. Her clear understanding of human relationship, her close observation of the way of the world, her unbiased attitude to dogmas and movement enforced me to do the present attempt in this direction. She has steadfastly resisted the temptation of creating strong, glorified female heroes, and has presented the Indian woman as facing the very dilemma of having to choose between modernity and convention. Deshpande bares the subtle processes of oppression and gender differentiation operative within the institution of the family and the male centered Indian society.

Deshpande's feminism does not uproot the woman from her background but tries to expose the different ideological elements that shape her. These include religious and cultural elements (such as myths, legends, rituals and ceremonies) and social and psychological factors (such as woman's subordinate position in the family and her restricted sexuality). The protagonists of Shashi Deshpande's novels are modern, educated, independent women, roughly between the age of 30 or 35. Their search for freedom and self-identity within marriage is a recurring theme. All her protagonists are shown to be in a state of confusion at the beginning. Slowly as the novel unfolds, they go through a process of introspection, self-analysis and self-realization. At the end, they emerge as more confident, more in control of themselves, and significantly more hopeful.

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