

Delineation of Gender Issues in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*.**Dr. Prashant M Mannikar**Associate Professor & Head,
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The Dark Holds No Terrors is a tremendously powerful portrayal of a woman's fight to survive in a world that offers no easy outs. In this novel, Shashi Deshpande has dealt with the traumatic life of a modern, educated and career-oriented middle class married woman, Sarita. The central figure, Saru, goes through the phases of subjection, humiliation, negation, suffering, and recognition of the self, and at last, comes in terms with life. Without taking the sides of the central female protagonist, Shashi Deshpande has depicted Saru's life more as a human being than as a woman. The inside turned out the life of Saru moves and makes us rethink, redefine our social and ethical codified life based on gender discriminations.

Key Words: Gender, Sex, Social Construct, Discrimination, Subjection

Shashi Deshpande (b.1938) is an award-winning Indian novelist. She is the second daughter of famous Kannada dramatist and writer Shiranga. She was born in Karnataka and educated in Bombay (now Mumbai) and Bangalore. Deshpande has degrees in Economics and Law. When she was living in Mumbai she did a course on journalism at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan and worked for a couple of months as a journalist for the magazine 'Onlooker'. She published her first collection of short stories in 1978, and her first novel, 'The Dark Holds No Terror', in 1980. She is a winner of the Sahitya Academy Award for the novel 'That Long Silence'.

The Dark Holds No Terrors is a tremendously powerful portrayal of one woman's fight to survive in a world that offers no easy outs. In this novel, Shashi Deshpande has dealt with the traumatic life of a modern, educated and career-oriented middle class married woman, Sarita. The central figure, Saru, goes through the phases of subjection, humiliation, negation, suffering, and recognition of the self, and at last, comes in terms with life. Without taking the sides of the central female protagonist, Shashi Deshpande has depicted Saru's life more as a human being than as a woman. The inside turned out the life of Saru moves and makes us rethink, redefine our social and ethical codified life based on gender discriminations. Deshpande considers this novel close to her heart. In a note from the author, *The*

Dark Holds No Terrors, Penguin India, 1990, Deshpande writes:

All authors, like most parents, have their favourite children: but, unlike parents, authors can, without any compunction, declare their partiality. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is, of all my novels, the one dearest to me. Perhaps this is because it is the one that came closest to the vision I had of it when I conceived it. Perhaps this is because it was this book that gave me the never-to-be-experienced-again happiness of first acceptance.

The lines from Dhammapada, at the beginning of the novel, outline the very thematic concerns of the novel-

You are your own refuge ;

There is no other refuge.

This refuge is hard to achieve.

Saru goes in search of her 'real self' and comes back to the place from where she had begun her life. But though the circle is complete the search remains incomplete for his father has no solutions to her problems. Her father's home is not her home, nor her husband's. She is a homeless-a refugee. Saru realizes that

She is her own refuge;

There is no other refuge.

And that-

This refuge is hard to achieve.

Shashi Deshpande narrates the story in the flashback technique sequence. Years on, Sarita still remembers her mother's bitter words –'You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he is dead?' (DT. P.191) -uttered when, as a little girl she was unable to save her younger brother, Dhruva, from drowning. The novel begins with Sarita, usually known and recognized 'Saru', coming to her father's house after fifteen years of married life. She had once determined and had proclaimed that she would never come back to her father's home. Now her mother is dead and Sarita returns to the family home, ostensibly to take care of her father, but in reality to escape the nightmarish brutality her husband inflicts on her every night.

The novel deals with the man-woman relationship within the institution of marriage in our contemporary society, as a sub-theme. Shashi Deshpande discusses several problems related to women, marriage, and tradition. There are several faceless wives of Manohar's friends who do not even utter or register any emotion but serve their husbands and his relatives & friends without a murmur. Saru's friend Smita had to change her name and had to depend upon her husband. She had no freedom to spend money according to her desire and always borrows money from Saru. Vidya had to give up her marriage to the theatre, many other women are also portrayed, serving in the background as wives. Men also suffer, when they are pressurized into marriages they did not want. Saru ultimately realizes that marriage is not a guarantee of happy fulfillment –"It's easy to generate, she thought, and say she is better because she never married, never bore a child. But that would be as stupid as calling me fulfilled because I got married and have borne two children (DT.P.121).

In the quiet of her old father's company Sarita reflects on the events of her life: her stultifying small-town childhood, her domineering mother, her marriage to the charismatic young poet Manohar, who turns vicious when he realizes his career is going nowhere and that his wife has overtaken him professionally, her children... As she struggles with her emotions and anxieties, Sarita gradually realizes that there is more life than dependency on marriage, parents, and other such institutions.

Realizing that she is her refuge, she resolves to use her newfound truths to make a better life for herself.

It is not only Saru who suffers in this androcentric world. She remembers her grandmother deserted by her husband but "had never, so she had heard, complained. It's my luck, she said, my fate. It was written on my forehead" (DT. P.62). Her mother did not have a room of her own. Baba tells Saru that "silence had become a habit for us." (DT. P.181). This silence demarcates the confines and outlines the margins. This suggests that women constitute a muted group, the boundaries of whose culture and reality overlap, but are not wholly contained by the dominant (male) group.

Apart from the other problems that are faced by a woman in today's male chauvinist society, the strange mother-daughter relationship is a centrally significant component in understandings this novel. The mother, herself a victim of a male-dominated conservative society, has inculcated a moral bound to prefer a son to a daughter. The novel exhibits the trauma of a girl-child Saru who grows up a victim of her mother sexist and gender-based bias. This initial victimization reduces her later life into a desperate struggle to overcome it. Her stay in her father's house gives Sarita a chance to review her relationship with her father, husband, and her dead mother. She has now, a better understanding of herself and others. The rest of the novel is Saru's remembrance of the past, a brief confession to her father about her trauma, and her courage to confront reality.

Sarita is an ordinary, simple, modest, sensitive, middle-class woman. She wished and hoped and always longed to break away from the rigid traditional norms. She yearns for a new environment where the mother cannot thrust her will on her daughter. The unhealthy experiences at her parental home lead her to discover the hidden reserved strength in human being, which at times leaps up to help the individual by shaping life into a pleasurable and a possible one.

Saru's mother never forgave her for being alive even after her brother had drowned, "You did it, you did this, you killed him... you killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead?" (DT. P.191). The words

haunted her for days, months, years, and all her life. Society treats the male-child, the son as an ultimate solution to all problems, whereas the girl-child is always treated like an unwanted burden, as she cannot fulfill the parental needs or ungratified ambitions. If the plentitude, warmth, and value given to a male-child are denied to the girl-child, it naturally makes her either depressed or rebellious. If this negative and destructive social treatment is not countered by the affection and loving care of her mother, the daughter is condemned to a life of bitterness.

Even as a child Saru is aware of her mother's affection for her brother Dhruva. To understand her present, she recollects that there was - "always a Puja on Dhruva's birthday. A festive lunch in the afternoon and an Arti in the evening. my birthdays were almost the same - but there was no Puja" (DT.P.168-169). Her mother's casual attitude makes Saru believe that her birth was a terrible experience for her mother. Her experiences at home have made her discover inferiority in herself as a fixed and preordained essence. Her mother used to treat her as an adult rival in her adolescence. Her mother is always meant to show that she still has the upper hand. After her brother's death, the family slides into perpetual mourning and there are no celebrations. Saru's mother never forgave Saru for her son's death and has not been able to comprehend her daughter's bewilderment and sense of being lost.

Saru, too, had lost her little brother and required emotional support. Though Saru was not responsible for her brother's death, all the blame was put on her. She was not allowed to have any escape from this sense of guilt, which made her too vulnerable and insecure in her relationships with others. She recalls "And she never really cared. Not after Dhruva's death. I just didn't exist for her. I died long before I left home (DT.P.32). Saru fails to get any sympathy from her father, and this guilt suffocates her. She is made to live with the guilt that she was the murderer.

Apart from this guilt, Saru has to put up with Gender-biased discrimination, typically common to the Indian middle-class Society. Being herself a victim of social conditioning Saru's mother makes her to understand that she is a girl and she is inferior to her brother in every

way. A girl was always made to feel like a bird of passage in her parental home. Even the educated middle—class people perpetuated and rationalized "boy-girl child syndrome". What touches the reader painfully is - not only the humiliation inflicted upon the girl-child, but the unquestioning acceptance of collective consciousness and the blind submission to generations of conditioning.

The socio-cultural conditioning of a girl is still a part of Indian culture. Saru's lively life is gradually suffocated by her mother's constant criticism and fault finding. Saru is always made to feel ugly, unwanted, and undesirable. Her mother had felt that for a girl physical beauty is a precondition of worldly success. She constantly criticizes her daughter's appearance - "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". (DT. P. 45).

To a mother, a boy is all the more important, but not a girl. Her father, too, takes the least interest in her studies or development; he shows no love, anger nor dislikes towards Sarita. His indifference can be analyzed as an indirect expression of patriarchy that is emotionally injurious. Physically and socially there are different measures that patriarchy employs in placing women and marking their space. Even the natural growing up is made shameful, she is segregated, served from distances in a separate cup and plate, and is not allowed in the house for three days. This treatment is part of the collective male response towards everything feminine. As a girl grows physically, she is made to feel different and conscious about revealing her femininity to the male member of the family, "you should be careful now about how you behave. Don't come out in your petticoat like that. Not even if it's only your father who's around." (DT. P.62).

Saru, very vividly remembers her fifteenth birthday. Her friend Smita presents her a pair of earrings, which, she keeps them secretly and wears them only when she is away from the home. Saru knows that her friend's gift would not be approved off. Her mother too gives her a pair of earrings, but Saru spurns this gift

because she thinks that it was given under obligations and her feelings were not important to her mother. Saru feels that the gift was not for her, "So that was it! It was not for me, not to please me and make me happy, but because I should, as a growing girl, have these things to wear- I don't want them, I don't want to eat, I don't want anything" (DT.P. 171). Slowly an aversion to one's own femininity is developed in a child till the child cries out only in horror -"If you're women, I don't want the one" (DT.P.63)

Saru's defiance towards her mother awakens her careerist ambitions. She wants to be a self-reliant person and at the same time, she dreams of a superior strong conquering male who will give her the meaning of her life. Even in her dreamy world, Saru never forgets about her career and craving for recognition, and satisfaction: and not even her mother, a symbol for the stultifying tradition. Never for a moment in her waking hours, she forgets her exams and is constantly worried about getting the first class. Her mother's attitude has given rise not only to remorse but also to a revolt.

The mere presence of her mother makes her a culprit, and in order not to be like her she acquires a medical degree. The image of a lady doctor, seen in her childhood becomes a source of inspiration for her and hence aspires for a similar detachment and superiority. Saru seeks her father's support for her admission to the medical college, and her father for the first time, is on her side. Saru has stopped talking to her mother; this behavior projects her hatred which she had nourished throughout her childhood. Saru feels quite lost in the delicate web of emotions and gets shattered and quite humiliated when the parents fail to show any kind of emotions towards her. She builds a barrier of hostile silence around her. The shadows of her unhappy relationship with her mother darken her adolescence, her early youth, and for that matter even her first love.

Later, in her life, at every success, she hesitates and wants to turn back, as if to seek her mother's approval, and as if to tell her that despite everything she has done to her, she is happy and successful, as if to address her in a mute appeal for withdrawing the curse, which constantly resounds in her, ears, "You would be happy with him. I know you won't." (DT.P.98).

Beneath her strong wanton defiance lies a lonely, shivering, and in a secured girl, who wants to be accepted, loved & cherished by someone, only because this lovely, unsecured girl had always been spurned and rebuffed by her mother. Thus her love for Manohar is lingering with this feeling of insecurity.

Marriages normally subordinate the wives to the husband and it also idealizes female martyrdom. After marriage Saru begins to enjoy superior financial and social status. Both enjoy a harmonious relationship so far as Saru was only his wife. But after she assumes the role of a lady doctor and he is recognized as her husband, the equation changes, he becomes a jealous, sexually aggressive husband. She feels 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. He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband" (DT. P.42).

In Indian society a career-minded woman always finds herself alone- there is no comfort in marriage and she can't go back to her parents. Her first and foremost profession as a woman is considered as her success in her marriage. A woman should know that success in marriage means manipulating, sacrificing, adjustments, and silently maneuvering her relationship with her husband according to the socially accepted norms. All her intellect, her carrier, her achievement, her ambitions- in case supersedes her husband, then, she must understand that they are the stigmas and she will have to carry like black mark forever. Manohar's sense of inferiority changes him into a sadist, who gets pleasure by insulting his wife, harassing and, hurting her sexually.

She is two persons in one woman, she is a successful doctor during daytime and a terrible terrified trapped animal at night. At the initial stage, Saru cannot oppose, because, her mother had molded her psyche to accept drudgery and self-negation as the norms of routine existence for a married woman and to treat herself as an undesirable person in a sub-conscious manner.

The message of the novel is that the fear of losing oneself in the dark labyrinthine passages of this mysterious world is dispelled if

a woman understands that she will have no refuge in any relationship unless she believes in herself and accepts the responsibilities of her own life. Dr.K.R.Srinivas Iyenger aptly puts it - Sarita, "strips herself of self -deceptions, guilt complexes and emotive illusions, and Shashi Deshpande's language itself flickers like a candle and blobs of remembrance melt and flickers form of furrowing thought. Sarita cannot forget her children or the sick needing her expert attention and so she decides to face her home again. In this in a predictable world, even total despair can open up a new spring of elemental self-confidence.'

The proposition that Saru puts forward at the beginning of the novel to test whether she is carrying the hell within is proved right, and it is the time for the confrontation of the hellish terrors within. The dead mother, the dead brother, Manu, and even Renu to an extent are externalized aspects of those terrors within. The mother and brother have been sealed beyond confrontation of reconciliation. Saru has to deal with the living at least. She knows that she has been carrying the light, the solution within, and has to light up the situation and let the terrors flee.

All along she had placed the problems outside of her, in Manu. She realizes that the problem lies as much within as outside. Earlier it was only Manu's inadequacy that she saw. Now she sees her inadequacy too -her inability to combine roles and be a source of love as a daughter, sister, wife, and mother. With the self-realization comes the decision to confront the

problems. She will not allow herself to be the object Manu can take his frustrations on. Manu, too, has to accept the fact of his wife's success in her career. The doctor in her is more important than the wife or mother in her.

Though Saru's suffering is like that of the other women in the novel, yet she is different from them in that she becomes her protégé. Unlike other women who bear suffering silently, she gathers strength not to surrender, not to run away from the problems, not to commit suicide, not to submit to 'women are the victims' theory, but to prove herself a good daughter, a good wife, a good mother, a good doctor, and a good human being- not from a phallogocentric point of view, but her own 'female' point of view. Thus Saru becomes what Elian Showalter calls 'a revisionist questioning the adequacy of accepted conditional structures' and 'tries to provide an alternative.' The overall implication of the novel points towards the poetics of the liberation of women by women.

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