

An Exploration of Identity in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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Abstract

Indian writers who pen their thoughts in English depict a diverse and sometimes contradictory portrayal of women in their literary works. Renowned writers such as Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, among others, endeavor to encapsulate the entirety of women's lives, encompassing their intellect, emotions, and sentiments. Shashi Deshpande's novels reveal the women's quest for self-exploration into the female psyche and an awareness of the mysteries of life. Deshpande's women are tolerant, submissive. But a feminism awakening and upswing is all along notable in their feeling and conduct. Sarita, known as Saru, in *The Dark Hold No Terrors* has childhood trauma. Her mother has gender difference in the treatment of her son Dhruva and her daughter. Saru hates her mother and rebels to challenge the age-old traditions to marry a man, Manohar, outside of her caste. But that love marriage between them doesn't prove to be fruitful. Both Saru weds out of her race and her husband's home becomes a prison. Saru is initially disappointed with her husband Manohar. She envisages marriage only interns of the dark rooms where terror awaits them. The visit to the parental home is like the rites of passage, and the home they discarded becomes the very place of refuge. Saru withstands her husband's sadistic behavior and strives diligently to conform to the traditional roles dictated by her mother and husband. Ultimately, she breaks free from the traditional and patriarchal constraints that bind her. Saru's assertion of individuality is a testament to her resilience determination to break free from the shackles of conformity. Shashi Deshpande makes an aesthetic plea to free the female psyche from the conventional male control.

Keywords: conformity, gender, patriarchy, resilience, shackles, self-exploration, traditional

Shashi Deshpande's fictional world revolves around the lives and challenges of middle-class Indian women. Her works offer insightful glimpses into their struggles, aspirations, and the societal expectations within a traditional patriarchal setting. Her protagonists navigate the

tribulations imposed upon them by society and family, clashing with their own aspirations. As a result, the women in her novels must confront issues related to marriage, motherhood, career, and self-assertion. Deshpande's characters often strive to balance societal expectations with their desire to assert their individuality. Deshpande's novels explore the patriarchal structures and gender dynamics in Indian society, highlighting the subjugation and marginalization of women. She delves into the complexities of marital relationships, focusing on issues like love, companionship, sacrifice, and compromise.

In Shashi Deshpande's compelling debut novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, (1980) Saru, the abridged form of Sarita, is the protagonist. It is a compelling portrayal of the protagonist, Sarita, and her determination to survive in a world that offers no easy escapes. Sarita is a well-educated, economically independent woman, as she searches for her identity and uncovers hidden inner strength. The novel explores her complex relationships with her parents and husband, highlighting the struggles within her marriage and the acute gender consciousness she has faced since childhood. Saru's intricate relationship with her mother, her husband's insecurities and subsequent perversion towards her, and the death of her brother Dhruva are key elements in the narrative.

Saru is successful doctor while husband Manohar, referred to as Manu, is young poet and works in a third rate college as a teacher. The novel poignantly depicts Saru's journey from girlhood to motherhood, highlighting her struggles with her husband and her eventual return to her father's ancestral home to assert her individuality. Her traditional, domineering mother constantly exerts power and disrupts Saru's attempts at independence, showcasing a significant gap in the mother-daughter relationship. Unlike typical narratives where a mother supports her daughter through life's challenges, this novel portrays a conflict between a traditionally conservative mother and a modern daughter who is denied her right to act independently, leading to deeply rooted animosity from Saru towards her mother. Y. S. Sunita Reddy observes, "This obvious form of gender discrimination has been ignored by most writers whose stories are replete with loving and sacrificing mothers, irrespective of child's gender" (2001, 51)

She faces neglect and humiliation from her mother, who holds a deeply rooted, traditional, chauvinistic mindset. With the onset of puberty, Saru becomes a 'pariah' to her tradition-bound mother, who treats her even more harshly during her menstrual cycles. Her very touch is considered pollution, and she is treated like an outcast. Saru is not allowed to attend to her regular chores in her traditional home. This treatment is common for all the girls in her community. However, as a nonconformist, Saru does not want this to happen to her. When her mother reminds her that she has become a woman, she doesn't want to be woman at all. Her

hatred is so deep—rooted that she wants to yell, “A kind of shame that engulfed me, making me want to rage, to scream against the fact that put me in the same class as my mother” (DHNT 62).

It was only when she began studying anatomy and physiology in her first year of medical school that she was suddenly freed from the prison of her fears and shame. Everything fell miraculously into place. She realizes that being born female meant her body was naturally designed this way, and these changes were meant to happen. The bodily growth that once caused her intense self-consciousness and a desire to hide from the world now became something she could be proud of. The change in her attitude about her selfhood and womanhood, and her transformation to accept her state of being a grown-up woman, can be observed in her own words when Saru reflects, “I learnt how to dress, to accept the curve of my hips, the slimness of my waist. To take in male stares and admiration with outward equanimity and secret pride” (DHNT 63).

Her mother does not value Saru as much as her dead son, Dhruva. While Dhruva's birthday is celebrated grandly, Saru's birthday passes quietly. Saru never brings her friends home and rarely goes out with them after school. Whenever she does, her mother always creates a scene. Saru is filled with a sullen hatred that she can't adequately express in words. During these times, her mother's outrage and anger humiliate Saru deeply, and her wounds reopen. When Saru recalls her mother's words of admonition, Saru hates the very phenomenon of growing up. On her fifteenth birthday, Saru receives a pair of earrings, but the gift comes with a caution that she must now behave as a grown-up, “You're a big girl now. Time you had something nice to wear in your ears” (DHNT 171). Thus, the birthday gift becomes a source of disappointment rather than joy for Saru. Her mother constantly reminds her of her changing body and growing up. The way her mother treats her becomes unpleasant for Saru. At times, Saru feels like running away from her mother's intrusive stares at her private parts. Saru feels ashamed of growing up and even feels embarrassed in the presence of her father. Saru recalls the words of her mother about her body, “You should be careful now about how you behave. Don't come out in your petticoat like that. Not even when it's only your father around” (DHNT 62).

Saru's most significant childhood memory is her brother Dhruva's drowning, which she feels responsible for as a silent witness. Her mother's accusation of murder deepens Saru's sense of alienation, rootlessness, and insecurity, feelings that intensify after Dhruva's death due to her mother's continued insensitivity and blame. While Saru, her friends, and her younger brother were playing on the seashore, her brother drowned and died. Saru mother's condemnation, “You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead?” (DHNT 191), keep ringing in her mind. After this tragic incident, her mother scolds Saru, accusing her of being responsible

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for his death. And so it started: the hysteria, the screaming, and the words that would haunt Saru for days, months, years, and the rest of her life. This accusation leaves Saru feeling guilty forever. Her mother's accusation becomes deeply embedded in Saru's mind, haunting her day and night.

Saru recalls her mother's words about the day she was born: "It rained heavily the day you were born. It was terrible" (DHNT 169). To Saru, it seems that it wasn't the rains her mother found terrible, but her birth. She suffers greatly from her brother's death. Despite this, her mother feels happy when Saru secures a first class in her higher secondary board exams. However, when Saru expresses her desire to become a doctor, her mother opposes it. She does not want to leave her daughter in a hostel in Bombay. Moreover, Saru's father is not rich enough to afford the cost of her medical education there. Despite her mother's objections, Saru rebels and goes to Bombay, and joins a medical college to pursue her dream. Hostel life opens a new chapter in her life. "Freedom at last," Saru has exulted when she has left home to join medical college. It hasn't been just a relief; it felt like a rebirth to move from her home to the hostel, which is vibrant with cheerful, feminine energy. Saru has never experienced the kind of natural, unfussy indulgence that living in the hostel offers. Initially, her orthodox middle-class sensibilities are shocked by the conversations she overhears: "Oh, damn. I must change again. It's like a tap, that's what it is. Oh God, look at me. I must clean my underarm" (DHNT 96). This reflection of Saru captures a significant moment of transformation and liberation for Saru, highlighting the contrast between her conservative upbringing and the new, more liberal environment of the hostel. It signifies a dramatic shift in Saru's life, suggesting a profound sense of liberation from the constraints of her previous life.

Without the support and understanding of a sympathetic mother, Saru develops aversion to traditional practices during puberty and adolescence due to her mother's rejection. This leads to psychological insecurity, manifested through recurrent dreams and acts of defiance, often reflecting guilt over her brother's death and her mother's accusations. The defiance is primarily rooted in her resentment towards her mother and her beliefs, recollecting her attitudes towards her as a young girl and child, "I hated her. I wanted to hurt her, wound her, make her suffer. But I do not know how" (DHNT 142). Saru, as a child, witnesses her grandmother's hardships and desertation by her husband, prompting her to seek economic independence as an insurance against subordination. Her life is largely inspired by this goal, and in her adolescence, she is attracted to Manohar (called Manu) a man from outside her caste. He is a Post Graduate student and the Secretary of the Literary Association and an active member of the Dramatic Society. Additionally, he is a budding writer and poet. Saru's mother disapproves of this relationship and rejects her intention to marry Manohar. She blames and curses Saru for choosing a non-Brahmin

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boy, holding a low opinion of love marriages because she firmly believes they do not last and lead to constant bickering. The low esteem of Saru's mother about Manohar is explicit in her contention with Saru:

What caste is he?
I don't know.
A Brahmin?
Of course not.
Then, cruelly...his father keeps a cycle shop.
Oh, so they are low-caste people, are they?
I hope so (DHNT 96).

These words from Saru's mother, steeped in disgust, hatred, and centuries-old prejudices, have enraged Saru. For a long time, Saru unconsciously has adopted her mother's standards, judging everything by her mother's convictions. However, during her first vacation home, Saru realizes how much she despises the rigidly regulated atmosphere. Upon returning to the hostel, she leaves behind everything she has learnt during her eighteen years at home. Her unconscious adherence to her mother's standards and her eventual rejection of them after experiencing the stifling atmosphere at home emphasizes the emotional journey of Saru.

Despite her mother's strong objections, Saru defies her authority and marries Manohar, choosing her own partner against her mother's will. However, years later, Saru recollects that, it was her mother's aversion against Manohar that made her marry him. She regrets that if mother was not so against him, she would not have married him and would have landed herself in such a precarious position as of now. It was her intense desire to hurt her mother that sealed her bond with Manohar. Saru alleges that her present bickering marital relation with Manu was only because of her hatred towards her mother. She ruminates, "If you (her) hadn't fought me so bitterly, if you hadn't been so against him, perhaps I would have never married him. And I would not have been here...hating him and yet pitying him too. For he is groping in the dark, as much as I am" (DHNT 96).

In the early stages of her infatuation with Manohar, Saru feels privileged to be chosen by him and finds her need for attention satisfied through his love. She idolizes Manohar, making all other boys seem insignificant in comparison. Her love for Manohar makes her feel luckier than the fisherman's daughter who was asked by a king to marry him. But during the course time, she realizes the true colors of her husband Manohar. In hindsight, she realizes that she foolishly gave her love to him unconditionally and undeservedly, just to be loved in return. All things

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considered, it is fair to acknowledge that Saru's parents both played roles in her marriage to Manu. Her mother's blatant hostility and her father's passive silence each contributed to her current predicament.

In the initial years of her marriage, she feels like the luckiest woman on earth, experiencing sheer bliss. She marries to gain autonomy and to heal from the lost love of her parents. Manohar appears as a savior, rescuing her from the insecurity and lack of affection at her parents' home. Her marriage with Manu affirms her individuality and feminine sensibility, leading her to revel in love with wild abandon. Despite living in a dingy one-room apartment, she sees it as a heaven on earth.

Saru initially believes she is happy, but later realizes that happiness is just an illusion, leaving her with memories full of grief. While she is a medical student and her husband is the primary bread winner, their home remains peaceful despite being in a poor environment. However, problems arise when she becomes a practicing doctor and gains recognition. A significant event—a fire accident at a nearby factory—brings many patients to her, increasing her prominence as a doctor. Initially, she doesn't notice the changes in her life, but later, she reflects and understands how these events led to the deterioration of her marriage. Manu struggles with the reversal of traditional gender roles as his wife becomes the primary earner. Initially a romantic hero who quotes poets like Keats and Shelley, he gradually transforms into a brooding and resentful husband. His discomfort with his wife's rising status and success leads to a deepening sense of insecurity, straining their relationship. As Saru advances in her career, she becomes dissatisfied with their shabby apartment and desires a better living situation. At first, Saru manages the household on Manu's salary, but once she starts earning, she develops a new vision for the life she wants to lead. This shift causes her to resent Manu's contentment with their modest lifestyle, leading to a growing disconnect in their relationship. She ponders, "I had begun to wonder at his acceptance of our shabby way of living. For me, things now began to hurt...The thought of going on this way became unbearable" (DHNT 92).

Saru's life would have been smoother if she had focused solely on being a doctor. However, her ambition to lead a high-profile life as a successful doctor wants to do Post Graduation in medicine for which Manu cannot support complicates her strained relationship with Manu. At this point in her life, the novelist introduces Boozie, a charming and handsome doctor with a playboy image. Saru, determined to achieve her goals, uses Boozie to further her ambitions, and she is surprised when Boozie shows interest in her. She willingly responds to his playful behavior accessibly. In no time Saru accomplishes her aim and starts practicing in a posh

area with financial support of Boozie. She feels it is like a student-teacher relation. But soon she realizes that his interest in her is not as a student but as a woman.

Saru's transformation under the guidance of Boozie is phenomenal. He plays a role similar to Pygmalion in shaping her into a more refined and sophisticated individual. Initially feeling crude and inexperienced, Saru learns various aspects of elegance, such as dressing well, speaking proper English, enjoying good food, and appreciating the finer things in life. Boozie's influence goes beyond teaching Pediatrics, as he helps Saru evolve into a more polished version of her. Saru keeps aside her conscience by indulging her self-explanation, "I told myself my relationship with this man couldn't, wouldn't hurt Manu. It was just a teacher-student relationship...It had nothing to do with me and Manu" (DHNT 91). There's nothing physical between Saru and Boozie literally. In fact, Boozie openly flaunts their relationship to mask his homosexuality. Meanwhile, Saru never tries to dispel the deep suspicion in her husband's mind. Instead, she deliberately fuels it, feeding his doubts about her apparent connection with Boozie. This behavior reveals the intensity of her loathing for her husband. Soon after Saru acquires MD degree, she is appointed as an Assistant Honorary at a suburban hospital consultation room. But Manu never asks her how she got money for that. She feels deep contempt that he hasn't questioned why Boozie gave her the money to open her own consultation room.

As Saru's financial and social status steadily rises, surpassing that of her husband, she becomes absorbed in her work as a successful doctor. Meanwhile, her husband, Manu, remains an unpaid lecturer at a mediocre college. Her ego gets satisfied. While Saru thrives in her career her growing stature brings no peace at home. Instead, her economic independence creates a significant strain on her emotional well-being. But, by attaining financial autonomy, Saru asserts her individuality as a woman. It is apt to cite the words of Betty Friedan, "For woman, as for man, the need for self-fulfillment—autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization is as important as the sexual need" (1971, 282).

Shashi Deshpande's portrayal of Saru demonstrates that, despite a woman's independence and career success, she remains bound by societal expectations, living in fear forever and ensuring she does not hurt her husband's ego. As the emotional void between Saru and Manu deepens, their marriage becomes a façade. Saru's disinclination to share physical intimacy leads Manu to physically abuse and sexually assault her at night. He attacks her like a wild animal but pretends to be unaware of his actions the next morning appearing completely normal. The dichotomy of Manu, "The fearful stranger of the night, and the rather pathetic Manu of other times" (DHNT 96), frightens Saru. At a point of time, Saru wants to 'divorce' Manu as she feels "He's wreck, a ruin, a sadist" (DHNT 97).

She wants to reason through her distance from him and their life together with a rational mindset. She dispassionately examines his motives, and her reactions, trying to understand why these changes are occurring in their marriage. However, at home, sitting in the same room with him, watching the familiar gaze and the mask-like rigidity, and at night, waiting for the terror to strike, she transforms into a terrified animal. She thinks about how she is powerless against his manic strength, how her panic leaves her unable to resist, and how the presence of their children, Abhi and Renu in the next room, traps her in a state of fearful silence. She believes, "I can't, I won't endure this anymore. I'd rather die. I can't go on" (DHNT 99). This situation becomes even more unbearable for Saru because Manu acts as if nothing ever has happened. Unable to endure her husband's sexual torment any longer, she returns to her parents' house—a place she had sworn never to return to. She is partly able to go back because she knows her mother has passed away, sparing her the humiliation of enduring her mother's taunts. Additionally, she can easily explain to her father that she has come to visit him after her mother's death.

The novel concludes with an open ending. During her brief stay at her parents' house, Saru receives numerous letters from her husband, which she leaves unanswered as she remains indecisive. Towards the end, Saru receives a telegram and begins to prepare herself to confront Manu. While her decision is ambiguous, it is evident that she no longer intends to allow Manu to unleash his frustration unchecked. Despite the open ending, the reader is left with little doubt about the novelist's intentions. It is interesting to observe that *The Dark Holds No Terrors* end on a positive note. It is evident, while going out to attend a patient in the neighborhood, she instructs her father, "Baba, if Manu comes, tell him to wait. I'll be back as soon as I can" (DHNT 221). To sum up in the words of Premila Paul, "*The Dark Holds No Terrors* effectively brings out the psychological problems of a career woman, never before seriously and artistically discussed in Indian fiction" (1991, 81).

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