

# A woman's search for refuge in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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**Abstract---** *Shashi Deshpande is incomparable for her portrayal of Indian middle-class educated women with their turmoil and frustrations and for the long silence, which has been their lot for centuries in the past. In all her novels, the problems confronted by the protagonists are almost the similar issue, namely, their search for self-identity which to a greater extent emancipates them from the suffocating problem of being stifled under the weight of man's hegemony or male chauvinism. The central theme of her novels seems to be the search for individual autonomy and self-realization in the web of family relations. Seeing the educated middle class women caught up between the restrictive forces of patriarchal family system and male-chauvinism, she creates her protagonists as characters facing many odds and confronting many an impediment in their way of finding out some exit. Her characters are made to pass through many trials and tribulations, before they emerge with aplomb and supreme self-confidence and finally stand on their own feet. Deshpande believes that her protagonists have potential or talent in a dormant stage and they must explore new opportunities to sustain themselves and thus they must discover their own identity. Deshpande does not believe in the theory that "Women Are Victims". She believes that the 'dependency syndrome' in women is responsible for their victimization. Her feminism is pro-woman but it is not anti-man.*

**Keywords---** *Patriarchy, Self identity, Hegemony, Gender discrimination, psychological agony.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande is entirely different from any of her contemporary women novelists. Her writings are complex but seamlessly woven narratives which explore the lives of people, especially women. Unconsciously, her writing is related to the modern Indian woman's beleaguered existence. The central theme of her novels seems to be the search for individual autonomy and self-realization in the web of family relations. Seeing the educated middle class women caught up between the restrictive forces of patriarchal family system and male-chauvinism, she creates her protagonists as characters facing many odds and confronting many an impediment in their way of finding out some exit. Her characters are made to pass through many trials and tribulations, before they emerge with aplomb and supreme self-confidence and finally stand on their own feet. Deshpande believes that her protagonists have potential or talent in a dormant stage and they must explore new opportunities to sustain themselves and thus they must discover their own identity. Her protagonists are educated young women of middle class families; and they are full of grit and gumption having the courage to face any eventuality. Thus her central characters shed off their old slough of tradition for the one of modernity. This is the central theme in all her novels. Deshpande's special tendency is to delve deep into her psyche and comes out with her psychological interpretation of the character. She has an x-ray

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insight into every character and lays bare the heart and soul of the character. She deals with the predicament of the educated middle class women from different angles; and most of the predicaments of these women arise from family relationships; very often these relationships involve wife and husband.

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a story of a middle class family that consists of just four members, father, mother, a young daughter, Sarita and her little brother. Sarita's family has been unhappy from the beginning and, if one pauses for a moment, and try to understand the problem that is responsible for the unhappiness of the family, one understands that the attitudes of the members of the family, especially, in the present context mother and daughter are antagonistic to each other. Mother does not play her role as a mother towards her daughter. Saru's mother is the very product of a well established tradition and she imbibes thoroughly the spirit of tradition. In a traditional family, mothers have gender discrimination and it is a part of their traditional thinking. The male child is given paramount importance and the female child is totally neglected and as a result, the female child is deprived of the legitimate share of her motherly love and affection and this alienation from mother's care leaves the child psychologically insecure and a feeling that it is not wanted by its parents. This is, indeed, a gross discrimination which results in a sense of disillusionment and a feeling of insecurity on the part of the female child. An impartial analysis of the problem reveals that the whole flaw lies with the mother who bestows all her care, love and affection on the male child to the total exclusion of the female child. In such a domestic atmosphere where it is vitiated by the bias of the mother against the female child, the growth and personality of the female child will be stunted and it leads to so many psychological disturbances in the child.

In most Indian families, the mothers are products of tradition. A similar situation as explained above reveals, Saru, short for Sarita, is a victim of such a family as theirs. Dhruva, Saru's younger brother is the very apple of her mother's eye and the mother bestows all her care and affection on the male child as if the female child did not exist at all. There are countless instances where Saru is made to feel that she is treated almost like a step-child by her mother. As a sensitive girl, she feels that she is neglected by her parents—her father, a bank employee, is indifferent to whatever is going on in his family and as such Saru feels that her father's role which should be patriarchal and assertive, plays, in Saru's opinion, a negative role. There has been not a single occasion where her father interferes in favour of Saru when the latter is treated by her mother in an unmotherly way. It is against this bleak domestic background, which is void of any kind of parental love, Saru is indignant with her mother and grows completely indifferent to her and her indifference is one form of suppressed anger. Saru, a very sensitive girl, feels like an outsider from the beginning as her mother is dominant, aggressive and almost unkind towards her. She develops a strong feeling of animosity against her mother. This hatred on Saru's part against her mother manifests itself in different forms in her behaviour. Her mother being a very traditionally-minded woman, Saru, in order to hurt her feelings, would deviate from all traditional practices and she knows that her mother would be infuriated with her untraditional behaviour. This kind of behaviour on Saru's part would give her bloated ego, a kind of ease and relief and, therefore, at every given opportunity she resorts to be untraditional in her attitude to certain things. Thus an unbridgeable hiatus grows on widening between the mother and the daughter and finally it results in an open rebellion of Saru against her mother. For instance, she marries a man outside her own caste much against the 'will' of her mother and she is very stubborn in pursuing her higher studies when her mother is stoutly opposed.

Thus the reader feels that there is no love lost between them. Saru's mother seems to be quite moderate in her hating own daughter and she is so dominant in the house that she would not hesitate to insult her own daughter Saru. For instance, the mother insults her daughter Saru to her face when she says,

“You will never be good looking. You are too dark for that” (p.61)

Deshpande creates a few situations where the mother and the daughter are in direct confrontation with each other. With the death of her little son, Dhruva, the mother has stopped all kinds of celebrations on happy occasions which were celebrated grandly and on a large scale when Dhruva was alive. Saru's mother constantly used to blame Saru as the cause of Dhruva's death although Saru repeatedly denies the charge against her.

Sometimes the reader sympathizes with Saru, who is so constantly snubbed, scorned and detested by her own mother. It is common knowledge that girls especially, during the period of adolescence are very sensitive and takes every 'snub' to heart. The confrontation between Saru and her mother is one instance in point. Actually the real cause of estrangement between the mother and the daughter is a question of misunderstanding and refusal to look at things in the right perspective. Want of sympathetic understanding between a person and a person, especially between a mother and a daughter, will certainly make things worse and poisons the domestic atmosphere. Saru's mother's love of her male child almost borders on a kind of mono-mania that blinds her to the truth of the matter. This is what has happened in the family of Saru.

Adesh Pal observes :

“For Saru the very word ‘mother’ stands for old traditions and rituals, for her, mother sets up a bad model, which distorts her growth as a woman, as a being – Thus the strange childhood experiences false up her inflated ego and her thirst for power over others. (Paul-74)

Once Saru and her little brother go to the nearby pond where Dhruva, her little brother by accident gets drowned in the pond. Saru is there but she simply watches her little brother drowning. This is, as one can easily understand, due to a feeling of jealousy which she has harboured at the back of her mind against her brother. The untimely accidental death of her little son Dhruva becomes the cause of her irretrievable sorrow that gradually becomes responsible for her early death. A critical and sensible reader can easily perceive a guilty feeling somewhere in the subconscious mind of Saru that she wishes the death of her own brother. When Saru returns to her father's home almost towards the end of the novel, she reviews her whole life from childhood to the present moment in retrospection, she admits to herself that she has been at fault and, perhaps, is partly responsible for the present sorry affairs in her life. In the process of recollecting her past, she feels guilty that she has quietly watched her brother drowning in the pond instead of rushing towards to rescue him. “But there can never be any forgiveness. Never any atonement. My brother died because I heedlessly turned my back on him. My mother dies alone because I deserted her. My husband is a failure because I destroyed his manhood.” (TDHNT-217) She imposes all blame on herself for everything that has befallen on her family life.

The memory of the tragic incident of Dhruva's accidental death has continued to haunt Saru almost to the end of her life. Because she feels guilty that she is in a way responsible for his death, for at the time of his drowning, Saru

stands at a little distance, silently watching the tragic incident like an indifferent spectator. This shows that Saru has been wishing for Dhruva's death somewhere in her subconscious mind. Saru's sibling jealousy is mainly due to her mother's discriminative attitude towards the male child; so if it is a fault on the part of Saru, it is also partly a fault on the part of the mother. Gender discrimination is to be avoided even by mothers. This is, perhaps, suggested here by Deshpande. The mother thoroughly identified herself both emotionally and psychologically with the male child that she could not stand the death of her son Dhruva. And his death hastened her death in double quick time. This kind of gender discrimination shown by the mother creates a sense of alienation within Saru and that results in a sense of ruthlessness and insecurity. Psychologically, Saru feels that she has severed all connections with the family and as such she has thoroughly erased all memories connected with her mother. Here the reader must observe that most novelists generally stress the aspect of mother's sacrifice, love and affection for their children, but this aspect of gender discrimination is not dwelt upon at least casually. But it is a very serious aspect when it comes to a mother's love towards her children, male or female.

Shashi Deshpande creates the protagonist of this novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* as one that is self-willed and self-opinionated and never to compromise with anything, and at any cost. The gender discrimination shown by her mother has made Saru hate her own mother and made her jealous of her own little brother. Every year the birthday of the male child has been grandly celebrated by the mother. But the birthday of Saru has not been celebrated at all and if celebrated, it was nominal. There was only one solitary occasion when Saru's mother presented a pair of silver bangles on the fifteenth birthday of Saru. When Saru wants to go for higher education, her mother vehemently opposes Saru's proposal for higher education. But it was Saru's good fortune that her father who never interfered in her favour, asserts himself and tells his daughter that she can go for higher education. Saru's admission to the medical college, in a sense, marks a turning point in her life because it is here she comes in contact with Manu, a young, handsome, talented student leader. Saru considers herself very fortunate to have been enamoured by such an outstanding student like Manu. She tells herself: "How could I be anyone's beloved? I was the redundant, the unwanted, an appendage one could do without. It was impossible for anyone to want me, love me, and need me." (TDHNT-66)

Saru, once she completes her education and becomes a doctor, falls in love with an English lecturer in a private college and naturally she feels that she has become independent. When working Saru's parents are trying to marry her to an eligible bachelor, Saru tells them that she is in love with a young man and she has made up her mind to marry him. Her mother is taken aback and asks her who that man is. Saru says that she does not know anything except that he is a lecturer in a college. "Is he a Brahmin? Asks her mother. No..! She says" almost in an indifferent tone and Saru marries a young man outside her own caste and much against the 'will' of her parents and she leaves her parental home with a vow that she would never step into her parents' home. Her resolve to marry a man of her own choice was her first deliberate assertion. As Viney Kirpal quotes P. Ramamoorthi, "The departure of the heroine from the mother is the first step towards autonomy. For the mother is the first pedagogue of the do's and don'ts on the woman." A quest for identity is a major propellant that sets Sarita's thoughts in motion when she thinks of marrying Manohar. Her hatred for her mother spurs her more into marrying him. As S.P Swain writes, "Her marriage with Manu is an assertion on and affirmation of her feminine sensibility." Sarita later on thinks: "If

you hadn't fought me so bitterly, if you hadn't been so against him, perhaps, I would never have married him" (TDHNT 96).

Deshpande very vividly describes their happy moments in the initial stages of their married life as things usually happen in real life, the impending incidents full of irony would happen. These moments of absolute happiness in the company of Manu, Saru totally forgets everything of her past life including her mother and father. Saru has the least feeling of regret to have forgotten her parents, especially her mother; but the irony of it is that Manu feels that Saru might feel pained to see that she is cut away from her parents.

Deshpande has a peep into Saru's mind and makes Saru express her feelings:

"Have you seen a baby being born? Do you know, Manu, how easy it is to cut the umbilical cord and separate the baby from the mother? Ligate, cut and its done. There is scarcely any bleeding either. It's as if nature knows the child must be detached from the parent. No, Manu, for me there will be no trauma, no bleeding." (TDHNT 39)

Saru and her Husband Manu initially lead a very happy life. Gradually Saru becomes very popular as a doctor and her financial position, compared with her husband's salary is far more. She becomes an efficient, respectable doctor and economically independent. But in her private life, though she has become a mother of two children, she is not happy in her conjugal life with her husband Manu. Manu – an English lecturer in a private college and a man of no consequence – feels jealous at the ever-increasing popularity of his wife, Saru. And this turns him into a sadist. Thus Saru, despite all her popularity as a doctor and better financial conditions, has been a helpless victim to her husband's sadistic behaviour. Manu's acts of sadism have reached a saturation point where Saru is not able to put up with. Saru, who is determined not to live with him, in the light of the unbearable tortures inflicted by her sadistic husband Manu made up her mind to leave her husband and her children behind and go back to her parental home. She comes to know through one of her friends that her mother had passed away a few days ago. Naturally Saru wants to see her bereaved father by way of consoling him. So, Saru goes back to her father's house, although fifteen years ago when Saru left her parents' house, in a recriminatory mood tells her parents that she would never again enter the portals of her parents' house. Human life is full of ironies. Saru would never imagine that circumstances conspire against her and force her to go to her parents' house. This is how a wide hiatus is created between her husband and herself. Deshpande, in depicting the character of Manu, reveals one particular aspect or trait in him. Generally speaking, man's ego is likely to be hurt when his wife is superior to him in certain aspects especially in the opinion of the public. Manu in many respects cannot stand comparison with his wife Saru. What actually hurts him deeply is that as a man he is totally ignored by the outside world since Saru as a doctor becomes more and more popular and financially she is far above her husband. It is this particular aspect of being inferior to his wife that hurts his ego and Manu gives vent to his hurt feelings in the way of his sadistic behaviour to his wife. His experience of self-humiliation on the part of Manu turns him into an incurable sadist. At night in their bed, Manu behaves like a

sadist and tortures and torments his doctor wife, Saru, but by day Manu behaves as if nothing had happened in their life. Saru recollects “He attacked me like an animal that night. I was sleeping and I woke up and there was this man hurting me. With his hands, his teeth, his whole body.” (THDNT 201)

Deshpande adopts a technique of the flash back narration. Saru, at her father’s house, gets an opportunity of reviewing her own past which narrates Saru’s life till that moment. At this juncture, a call from the neighbour comes, requesting the doctor to attend to a patient in their house. Before Saru leaves her father’s house to attend on the patient, she leaves word with him saying that if, in the mean time, Manu comes to their house, and he must ask the latter to stay till she comes back. Saru has been expecting him any moment since he has written many letters and sent a telegram too asking her to come back. But Saru has been indifferent to all the letters, giving no reply to any of them. Here closes the novel with an open ending.

Deshpande is incomparable for her portrayal of Indian middle-class educated women with their turmoil and frustrations and for the long silence, which has been their lot for centuries in the past. In all her novels, the problems confronted by the protagonists are almost the similar issue, namely, their search for self-identity which to a greater extent emancipates them from the suffocating problem of being stifled under the weight of man’s hegemony or male chauvinism.

In the present novel, “The Dark Holds No Terrors”, the protagonist, Saru, is almost on the verge of breaking of her marital bond with her husband. Deshpande very trickishly gives the novel an ‘open ending’; and as it admits of two solutions: if Saru, as a mother, cares for the welfare of her children, the reader imagines that Saru will join her husband and her children; but, if the reader draws a clue from the epigraph with which the novel opens which tells that ‘you are your own refuge’, though it is difficult to realize it. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, an eminent critic of Indo-Anglian literature aptly observes: “Sarita cannot forget her children or the sick needing her expert attention; and so she decides to face her home again.” (758) She realizes that escapism can never be possible way out. It is apt to quote Seema in this context, “Escapism is no solution; a permanent solution has to come from within.”(113) Truly Deshpande sets new ideas working in this novel. She exhorts the fact that human relations cannot furnish solutions to rectify our problems. One has to look within only; then true path can be sought. It is like seeking God within. There is no possible glancing at God outside but only a real peep inside can prove fulfilling and can help in attaining the spiritual truth. No doubt Sarita is awakened in the end. She does not want to escape now but she wants to confront the harsh reality.

The reader concludes that Saru would not change her decision in favour of going back. Deshpande, is no doubt, is a staunch feminist. Although, at first she did not like to be labelled a ‘feminist’; and her treatment of women protagonist reveals that she is a post-modern writer.

One might suggest that there are two possible ways open to her: The novel starts with an epigraph which states that man/woman is his/her ultimate refuge but it is not easy to be one’s own refuge according to the idea embedded in the epigraph, Saru, with no second thoughts, must stick to her decision of leading her own life independent of Manu, her husband. It is indeed a conflict between the two roles in her; the wife and the mother. Naturally the pull of the mother will be greater than the pull of the wife. In that case, she must go back for the sake of her children.

Shashi Deshpande does not believe in the theory that “Women Are Victims”. She believes that the ‘dependency syndrome’ in women is responsible for their victimization. Her feminism is pro-woman but it is not anti-man. Deshpande’s protagonists are not rebellious or revolutionary in their views regarding marriage, family system and the freedom of an individual. They try to look for happiness and self-fulfillment within the framework of family itself as she knows that breaking off the family bonds would result in loneliness and unhappiness.

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