

Gender Dynamics in The Dark Holds No Terror: Subverting Traditional Roles

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Abstract

The novel "The Dark Holds No Terror" by Shashi Deshpande deftly negotiates the complexity of gender stereotypes while questioning established social conventions and assumptions. This essay explores the ways that Deshpande challenges these preconceptions through her theme research, narrative devices, and character portrayals. This essay seeks to emphasize Deshpande's criticism of gender conventions and her support for personal power and autonomy by evaluating major characters and their roles as well as the novel's underlying themes. It is clear from an in-depth examination of the text that Deshpande's work offers a potent commentary on the limitations of gender stereotypes as well as the potential for struggle and change.

Keywords: Gender Perception, Social Conventions, Struggle, Autonomy, Identity.

Introduction

Numerous Indian books address issues specific to women. However, the novels end up celebrating the conventional attributes of Indian women, such as patience, love, and blind acceptance of whatever is thrown at her—and the treatment is frequently merely incidental. Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a very different book since it dispels the notion that women are the embodiment of all virtues and those men are superior. It is centered on women's issues, which is a very novel phenomenon in Indian English writing (Joseph and Krishnaraj, 2021).

A failing marriage is the subject of the story in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. Called Saru, Sarita is a "two-in-one woman" who works as a successful doctor during the day and is at night "a terrified trapped animal" in the care of her husband, Manohar, an English teacher at a mediocre college. The story begins with Saru going back to her father's house, which she had vowed never to go back to since she could not stand her husband's sexual abuse, fifteen years later. The remainder of the book is a combination of memories from the past and a quick confession to her father, with whom she had not previously had much communication (Pandey & Agrawal, 2021). As a result, the story veers between the past and present. Sarita gets the opportunity to reflect on her relationships with her husband, her late mother, her deceased brother Dhuruva, and her children Renu and Abhi during her stay at her father's home. Even though she doesn't change in the end, she now understands herself and other people better. This offers her the confidence to face reality. There is no longer any fear in the dark. Her inner world is explored in a way that makes the novel exceptional. By liberally dousing India in sociological facts or oriental mysticism, Shashi Deshpande does not reveal any intention or ulterior motive to sell India overseas. She

views the psychological environment of the individual as a very empirical subject to study (control, 2006).

Saru has a strong sense of self-will, which leads to issues due to her inflated ego and natural desire for dominance over other people. At the first hint of danger to her mother's home, she breaks convention. Whereas Saru's defiance comes naturally to her, Gauri, the protagonist of Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Gouri*, becomes defiant due to her husband's mistreatment of her. "Sarita... defies her mother to become a doctor, defies her caste to marry outside, and defies social conventions by using Boozie to advance her career," Prema Nandakumar writes in *The Seventies and after* (821) (Narayan, 2009). However, in both situations, Saru and Gauri's ability to act is a result of their economic independence. Saru had witnessed the grandmother's plight as a little child—separated from her harsh husband and viewed as "an unwanted burden" by those loved. Since then, achieving economic independence has been a lifelong ambition for Saru, who saw it as a safeguard against repression or subjugation. In life, everything you do is geared toward achieving that objective (Sarkar, 2020).

Eventually, the basic urge to be independent develops into an inflated ego's need and manifests as the ability to control people through love. Saru perceives her win over the glitzy Padmini as having occurred when she earns Manu's affection. Her desire to work with and for "a superior, superhuman male," submits to him in every way, and be his submissive is merely a passing phase in her emotional development (Joseph & Krishnaraj, 2021).

"There was no "I" then, not as yet, craving for recognition, satisfaction. The craving, which when it came, was always accompanied by a feeling of guilt if the "I" dared to over-reach a male, as if I was doing something

that took away shreds of my femininity" (47).

Shashi Deshpande uses her acute awareness of the unified pattern of societal customs and interpersonal relationships to conceive the fabric of her narrative work. A person's options for expressing his identity are constrained by conflicting obligations in his personal life, social norms, and the hidden aspects of his own aspirations. Shashi Deshpande conjectures in his 1990 novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* on what would happen to middle-class Indian women who choose professional freedom in order to create places for alternative identities free from the constraints of patriarchal and familial authority. Saru's trial serves as the basis for this speculation. Saru, the main character in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, is a clear example of a wise modern woman, redefining her "self" in order to break out from the never-ending darkness of injustice, torture, and shame. She uses her professional accomplishments to confirm her identity in order to escape the shadow of her parents' enmity, and she later strives to find fulfillment in her married life (Sarkar, 2020). But after failing at these two points, she goes back to her parents' house to gather and rearrange the things she had left behind. Shashi Deshpande takes a roundabout approach to defining the mobility of feminine identity in this regard. Premila Paul acknowledges; *The Dark Holds No Terror* by Shashi Deshpande is a totally different novel in the sense that it explodes the myth of man's unquestionable superiority and the myth of woman being a martyr and a paragon of all virtues. It is based on the problems faced by a career woman. A refreshingly new phenomenon in Indian English fiction (30).

The protagonist of the book *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru, is portrayed as a sufferer of insecurity from her early years. Even though Shashi Deshpande has insight into the protagonist's psychological obsessions, he addresses the idea that women's identities are important only in terms of their subordination to men and that the idea of a "separate identity" is merely an illusion that hides the seeds

of greater disaster and disappointment. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* centers on the efforts of a perceptive and well-educated lady who makes room in her professional life to attain financial independence, accountability, and purposefulness in order to develop her own "self" outside of her father's constraints. She does not, however, succeed in achieving her ideal identity in her family or in society (Pandey, 2021). The following assertion, which can be regarded as the main tenet of the arguments made in the book *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, reveals the pointlessness of her attempts and the anguish that resulted from them:

She discovered herself for the first time, slowly and with hesitation, finding her way to her true self, the person she wanted to be. However, searching for one's true self has started to resemble a dog scrounging for a long-buried bone. Earthen piles sprang skyward, but where in heaven was the bone? Or if there had never been a bone in the first place (124).

Rebuilding Identity: Saru's Audacious Dispute with Gender Roles and Cultural Expectations

The beginning of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* features the past and present represented by the balance of time. Following a significant period of time and after becoming a prosperous doctor, Saru learns of her mother's unexpected death and makes the decision to see her father in her childhood home. Her father, referred to as "Baba," was living a solitary and lonely existence. Saru's unexpected and abrupt arrival to her father's doorstep makes her think of the Hindu tale of Krishna and Sudama, which tells of the parting of childhood friends Krishna and Sudama, who go their separate ways, with Krishna becoming king of Dwarka and Sudama living in poverty. Saru also aspires to strike a balance between her early experiences growing up in her parents' house and her experiences in life after marriage, realizing the differences in betrayal between her husband's household and her parents'. Saru chose to justify her guilty conscience by going back to her parents' house, even though it was not her preferred course of action. Saru challenges the gender norms that she is obligated to uphold (Pandey, 2021). Tripathi highlights, "The novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* projects the post-modern dilemma of a woman who strongly resents the onslaught on her individuality and identity" (43). Shashi Deshpande rejects traditional gender roles and searches for new ones, arguing that women must balance their inner selves and social representations to be fully realized. These spaces play a crucial part in the rebuilding of gender roles. Tripathi correctly remarks, Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* ambivalently projects deconstruction as well as reconstruction of gender roles as the female protagonist of the novel is constantly and often unconsciously in search of an inner space which is instrumental in the reconstruction of gender identity in the wake of being deconstructed (42).

She becomes more untamed and rebellious due to the controlling mother's strict rules about what she should and shouldn't do. As per Hall Calvin, Saru accepts challenges and achieves independence through his career achievement to seek recompense for his losses. She becomes a self-actualized individual by taking on obstacles and putting in every effort to reach her objective; these individuals are devoted to their vision, intelligent, realistic about their possibilities, and willing to take risks to succeed (250) (Sarkar, 2020).

Despite her mother's objections, Saru decides to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor and travels to Bombay to study medicine. Fortunately, her father supported her. Saru's mother is unaware of the value of a girl's education. Her mother says, "But she's a girl... And don't forget medicine or no medicine doctor or no doctor, you still has to get her married, spend money on her wedding. Can you do both? (144). She aspires to look for new forms of relationships, just like a number of Shashi Deshpande's

protagonists. Saru withdraws from the ties of filial piety and loses her affinity for her family. She succeeds in completing her medical school coursework and eventually becomes a physician. In her life, Manohar provides comfort. He encourages her to pursue her job. But rather than being a fulfillment, Saru's deal with Manu was merely a diversion (Pandey, 2021). In this way, the story depicts Saru's two main life facets: her relationship with her parents and her intimate relationship with Manohar. When Saru decides to wed Manu, her argument with her mother reaches a breaking point. She is expressing her rejection of her mother's traditional customs and values by choosing a boy from a lower caste. She remembers the talk she had with her mother when she told her that she wanted to ruin Manu.

"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?" (96)

Saru found solace in Manu's marriage as a buffer against the animosity of the parents. Shashi Deshpande asserts in the sequence of events that follows that a married couple cannot reinvent the nature of a relationship that formerly existed. Saru made a mistake when she decided to be married as recompense for her loss, which negatively impacted her aspirations and perspective of her personal life. Manohar often said, "When we're together, it's heaven, wherever we are," (38) which made her want to leave her parents' house. But she soon learns from the realities of a married relationship that the complete fusion of two unique people is a "Fraud" and will never be the way things actually work out in real life. She leaves her parents behind and adopts a serene stoicism in her parent's house, saying, "For me, they were already the past and meant nothing" (39). It was the reason Manohar entered her life as a representation of a protective and loving father. In her post-marital relationship, she inadvertently looks for a reconciliation of her pre-marital life. She acknowledges:

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? Legate, cut and it is done. There is scarcely any bleeding either. It's as if nature knows the child must be detached from the parents (39).

The personal battle of Saru is acknowledged on both a horizontal and vertical axis in novel. Within Manohar's organization, the problem still centers on her own achievements as a physician and her roles as a wife and mother. Her rise to prominence as a successful doctor and her withdrawal from social and professional life culminates in her lack of interest in Manohar, which eventually causes a rift in their relationship. Manohar feels that his professional complacency is affecting his masculine ego. He feels abandoned and ashamed of himself without even realizing it. At this point, Shashi Deshpande offers a perceptive examination of the divergent reactions of male and female awareness. Saru realizes that Manohar's detached reaction is a result of her over-interest in her work life. Beyond the stereotypes that society accepted, her reactions were distinct. She feels guilty about her separate spaces acting as an obstacle in her married life.

Due to her unwavering sense of justice and her sensitive, morally aware nature, Saru feels bad for both Manu and her father. Shashi Deshpande acknowledges that although a guy can be kind and sympathetic, he is unable to link his interests with those of a woman. A woman will always identify her interests with those of a man. It also represents underlying insecurities and complexes in the male brain. The reversal of gender roles encourages women to give up their stable careers and maintain stability in their personal

lives (Sarkar, 2020). When a woman succeeds professionally, she rebuilds her identity in a way that makes giving up male autonomy unnecessary. It also negatively destroys the life and perception of masculine awareness since it rejects gender norms. Saru states, "a+b being told us in Mathematics is equal to b+a. But here atb are definitely not equal to b+a. It becomes a monstrously unbalanced equation, lopsided unequal, impossible" (42).

Saru remembers Sarla, her friend that was in charge of Manu and Saru's relationship, during these trying times. She saw Manu's presence as a haven rather than a victory, a concession rather than an affirmation. She acknowledges:

As I grew up, they became the dream of a total female. I was all female and dreamt of being adored and chosen of a superior, superhuman male... There was no "I" than and not as yet craving for recognition, satisfaction. The craving which when it come, was always to be accompanied by feeling of guilt if the "I" dared to overreach a male, as if I was doing something that took away shreds of my femininity (53).

She even neglected to address Manohar's sentiments. She still harbors a deep-seated dread of being let down or rejected. The novel makes the important symbolic implication that one's conscience, not the absence of light, is the source of anxiety. The human senses interact in real-time with thousands of invisible variables that are present in the unconscious self. It is acceptable to use Saru's following quote from the book as a gauge of her mental condition. She bitterly realizes that marriage is nothing more than an accommodation of interest and that the concept of love in it is a myth. She responds scornfully:

Love... there was no such thing between man and woman. There was only a need which both fought against futility turning into the thing they called "love". It is only a word. Take away the word and the concept will wither away (72).

Her obsessive focus on her career stifles her femininity and makes her impatient with raising a lovely family and a wife. Her loss is apparent; she was "a mother in a movie dressed in a crisply starched sari, wife and mother, loving and beloved. A picture of grace, harmony and happiness. Could I not achieve that" (80). For Indian women, identity shifting is an inescapable situation. Despite being a prosperous doctor, Saru fosters the need for a caring and protecting spouse; this is where radical feminism promoted in the West differs from Indian feminist ideas.

A woman's identity is defined by her familial relationships, and she cannot separate from them. Saru returns to her parents' house, carrying with her countless unspoken anxieties and the memory of Abhi and Renu. When she meets Baba face-to-face, she confides in him about her inner turmoil, her relationship with Manu, her thoughts about Dhuruva's passing, and her unwavering inner hostility towards her mother. Baba stands up for his mother and chastises her for putting up such a fight. Saru's consciousness was further damaged by Baba's indifferent response. Her parents were the target of her rage, not Manu herself. The societal system that allows the resentment of binary relationships to be passed down from one generation to the next is at fault. Sarita's crisis turns into a reflection of the plight of Indian women. Saru's challenge to Baba represents a challenge to the entire system of gender-based socialization. Let us act as though it has never existed and doesn't exist. Baba, isn't that how you do things? I guess it was after all these years... It was as though Saru didn't exist at all. Let's forget about Saru. No, there was never a Saru; you didn't have a daughter because you didn't want her around and she was a bother. It makes sense that when you saw me standing at your door that day, you were taken aback (182).

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru shows herself to be a pitiful character who struggles and fights against situations and events that go against her interpretation of reality. Her battle both with societal norms and with herself leaves her in a void from which there doesn't seem to be any cooperative way out except to retreat—that is, to die. Saru's inner self turns into a battleground in her life. While Saru's self-accusation makes it clear that she suffers from remorse and humiliation, Sumi in *The Matter of Time* and Indu in *The Roots and Shadows* do not. Dhruva's demise marked the start of it, Manohar's cruelty and apathy marked its end, and Mother's passing marked its conclusion. Saru's self-reproach implies that societal images are so deeply ingrained in people's minds that, for both sexes, confirmation of the connection's fabric across them is an unquestionable precursor to tragedy (Joseph & Krishnaraj, 2021). Sarita admits:

But there can never be any forgiveness. Never any atonement. My mother died because I heedlessly turned away my back on her. My mother died alone because I deserted her. My husband is a failure because I destroyed his manhood (217).

Shashi Deshpande pursues the path of elevating human awareness to the level of deeply personal and familial matters. As Saru comes to terms with her circumstances, she becomes a symbol of Indian women. She falls prey to her own guilt-ridden consciousness, which allows her to refuse to give in to life's hardships. She owns up to her mistakes and says, "It is 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). This admission undoubtedly elevates Sarita's suffering to a remarkable level and places her among the greatest heroines. She experiences a strange feeling in this void since everything is pointless and her relationships turned into perfect farces. She experiences what almost feels like euphoria—a sense of weightlessness. She now excuses both Manu and his mother and even rejects the notion of leaving the house. She creates the idea of a life free from social restraints. Her all-encompassing understanding of "Self" is where family, societal interactions, and interpersonal relationships take on a subordinate role. She claims,

... Somehow she felt as if she had found it now, the connecting link. It means you are just as a strutting grimacing puppet, standing futilely on the stage for a brief while between areas of darkness. If I have been a puppet it is because I made myself one. I have been clinging to the tenuous shadow of a marriage substance has long since disintegrated because I have been afraid of proving my mother right. (220)

This signifies her ultimate retreat, not just from the world, her parents, or Manohar, but also from a feeling of emptiness and a rejection of existence altogether. She doesn't create room for herself as a sensitive woman and as a unique person. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, the ultimate triumph of the immensity of human awareness is visible in a complicated novel with an intricate framework, socio-psychological and socio-philosophical justification of person's confronting of the norms of society. The novel is indisputable (Pandey, 2021).

As a result, Saru takes on the role of the author's spokeswoman, sharing the unease of an educated Indian woman. The novelist has also highlighted a career woman's psychological issues. The author illustrates a girl's battle to escape the grasp of ominous patriarchal ideals through her narrative. In this sense, her tale becomes the story of every woman who fights to break free from the constraints placed on her by tradition, society, and the elements. She faces the obstacles of life head-on, accepting them with incredible strength rather than giving in to them or running away from them. Ultimately, according to Ramnavmiwale's perspectives, "she has her own voice- clear and strong. Her return to life- to hope - to

rejuvenation -is like achieving wholeness" (834). While preserving the sacredness of family customs in Indian culture, Saru also exercises her independent judgment. Thinks independently, won't give up her uniqueness, and won't do anything those conflicts with her moral principles. As a result, Saru truly liberates herself and realizes who she is. She realizes that she is neither divided nor compartmentalized, and the book closes on a positive note (Maheswari, 2021). The lead character, who is determined to take control of her life, exudes a strong sense of resolution.

Conclusion

The Dark Holds No Terrors by Shashi Deshpande skillfully weaves together the narrative of Saru, a woman dealing with pressures from her family, society, and herself. Deshpande challenges cultural standards and gender norms by providing a poignant perspective on the struggles faced by educated Indian women through Saru's journey. Saru's path to autonomy and self-actualization is a mirror of the greater fight for women's liberation in Indian society. Saru demonstrates that she is a strong, resilient person who challenges all odds, including social expectations and familial obligations, and who will not submit to the constraints imposed upon her. Saru has grown more self-aware and agency as the novel draws to a close, illustrating the advantages of eschewing societal norms and valuing one's uniqueness. Deshpande's analysis of Saru's inner struggle and eventual determination resonates as a potent representation of the complex relationships between gender, individuality, and social expectations in contemporary India.

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