

Resilience of Women:
Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror* and
Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*

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Abstract

Patriarchal society makes women undergo mental traumas right from their birth. While few women survive the odds, others end up in losing their lives. Women who endure sufferings either become mentally deranged or lose their traditional values. The two women writers, Shashi Deshpande in *The Dark Holds No Terror* and Bharati Mukherjee in *Desirable Daughters*, focus on how the patriarchal society forces the women protagonists Sarita and Tara respectively to lose their psyche as a consequence of their attempt to survive. Yet, the urge to endure agony makes them empowered and brings them back to life. Besides, the writers portray how the power of Indian roots strengthens the women characters to resolve the crisis in their married lives.

Keywords: Shashi Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terror*, Bharati Mukherjee, *Desirable Daughters*, Subaltern, Patriarchal society, Myth, Psyche, Empowerment, Trauma, Indian roots

Introduction

Women writers generally share a same mental framework when it comes to the portrayal of women's sufferings. Their aim is to alert the society about the threats surrounding the human lives, which people can overcome easily when there is understanding, cooperation and respect between men and women. Women writers analyse a variety of issues in the lives of women to highlight the fact that societal practices should do away with the practice of oppression and suppression of women.

A comparative study of two women writers always throws a fresh insight into handling women related issues effectively. Shashi Deshpande in *The Dark Holds No Terror* and Bharati Mukherjee in *Desirable Daughters* have dealt with how a woman's psyche breaks down in the

event of subjugation at different phases of her lifetime. Shashi's Sarita and Bharati's Tara emerge successful despite the odds that they face in their lives. This in turn, proves the fact that the sufferings make women strive hard to get empowerment. Interestingly, the two women writers have overcome the barriers of women by excelling in their chosen fields.

Shashi Deshpande

Shashi Deshpande, one of the eminent novelists of the contemporary Indian Literature in English, writes about the issues related to women such as love, marriage, relationships and gender discrimination. Her characters are educated middle class women, who do not voice their pain, but work towards liberating themselves from the restraints. In *The Dark Holds No Terror*, Sarita, the protagonist “undergoes great humiliation and neglect, as a child, and after marriage, as a wife” (Sharma P.14). Though Sarita endures sufferings silently, she emerges from the predicaments successful.

Bharati Mukherjee

Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian immigrant writer, writes about the issues related to immigrants. According to Myles, “Mukherjee places her protagonists in a cross-cultural scenario and the nodal point of her focus is the immigrant population” (12) Bharati's characters experience the clash between the two cultures. In *Desirable Daughters*, Bharati analyses the problems of Tara Chatterjee, an immigrant who encounters dangers while trying to solve the mystery of a stranger - an alleged son of her elder sister. The author uses the character Tara to express her pride for Indian heritage and acknowledges the alien culture for giving strength to women to resolve the issues.

Shashi and Bharati, through their novels project the idea that the patriarchal society subjects women to physical and mental tortures, which push women to experience suffocation and sufferings. The writers analyse in detail the institution of marriage, which forces women to transform themselves according to the whims and fancies of their husbands. The protagonists Sarita and Tara are no exception to this subaltern treatment. Yet, they find their own ways to tackle the issues. Finally, both emerge empowered. This proves that beneath women's fragility underlies their intrinsic power.

Early Life of Sarita and Tara

Sarita and Tara experience mental sufferings in their girl hood days. They do not get freedom to express their views, which makes them feel chained. This instigates them to take revenge on their parents. Unfortunately, social practices subject men and women to overlook moral values. When our society frees itself from gender discrimination, a healthy living atmosphere will prevail.

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Sarita gets sense of loneliness as a girl because her parents attach themselves more to her brother Dhruva than her. Sarita feels neglected at every point of her lifetime, which subjects her to mental trauma. As a girl, she determines to get success in order to turn the attention of her parents towards her: “I had to work hard, to be a success, to show them --- I had to make myself secure” (DHNT, 50). In fact, the hostile attitude of Sarita’s parents puts her on the sail to empowerment.

Societal practices condition women to a great extent. Indian women give more importance to male children than female ones. Sarita’s mother also follows this practice. Shashi refers to this situation in her “Writing from the Margin” thus “a mother whose partiality for her son coloured the daughter’s life” (13). A mother’s attachment to her son and detachment to her daughter ruin the lives of both mother and daughter.

Sarita and her mother experience strain in their relationship till the death of the latter. Strain between mother and daughter intensifies with the death of Dhruva, Sarita’s brother. Sarita’s mother believes that her daughter is responsible for her son’s death, but the truth is otherwise. In Sarita’s words, “I loved him, my little brother. I tried to save him. But I couldn’t” (DHNT, 146). After this incident, Sarita undergoes severe mental trauma for no fault of hers. She feels, “Now, I am a skeleton in my own cupboard” (DHNT, 60). It is an irony that a daughter gets subaltern treatment from her mother. Hence, Sarita does not express grief even when her mother dies. Gender discrimination is more pronounced in *The Dark Holds No Terror* than in *Desirable Daughters*.

Sarita’s only goal in her life is to “show her mother, to make her realize” that she is a person with determination and ambition. She trusts that succeeding in life alone could be a panacea for her to be relieved from her mother’s words: “Why didn’t you die? Why are you alive and he dead?” (DHNT, 95)

Sarita’s second phase of life starts when her father supports her in pursuing medical course. She observes, “It had been not just relief but a kind of rebirth to get away from home to the hostel, so feminine with its cheerful feminine jangle” (DHNT, 95) In this phase, Sarita meets Manohar, a young and handsome poet, with whom she falls in love and decides to marry him. Her decision to go against her parents’ wish proves that Sarita wants to take revenge on her parents, for neglecting her as a child: “If you hadn’t fought me bitterly, if you hadn’t been so against him, perhaps I would never have married him” (DHNT, 96)

Unlike Sarita, Tara is exposed to conservative childhood, which was filled with love and affection. The atmosphere infuses her with the feel that obedience and duty reflect love in one's life. Having been brought up in a traditional lifestyle, Tara starts her life as a submissive daughter. So, when her father says, "There is a boy and we have found him suitable. Here is his picture. The marriage will be in three weeks" (DD, 23), Tara accepts her father's decision without second thoughts. Through this incident, Bharati subtly exposes the Indian tradition and its custom.

Married Life of Sarita and Tara

Sarita and Tara get into the institution of marriage with the hope that it will bring them happiness and fulfillment. Both experience happiness in their early phase of married life. Sarita says, "if there is heaven on earth, it is this..." (DHNT, 40) and to Tara, "This is the life I've been waiting for ..." (DD, 81) The women protagonists experience happiness without any kind of reservations.

Happiness of the women characters do not last long when Sarita starts earning more than her husband. On the other hand, Tara's husband Bish becomes a multi-millionaire, who gives prime importance to his work and neglects his wife. Money ruins the contented life of Sarita and Tara. While Manohar's insufficiency drags Sarita to misery, Bish's abundance drives Tara to loneliness.

Contrary to the traditional setup, Sarita's husband relies on her for the luxuries in life. Sarita's determination to establish an identity of her own makes her adopt immoral means of pleasing her professor. The desire to get away from subaltern treatment makes Sarita violate moral codes. Once she achieves status, Sarita disregards her professor. Sarita's temperament stands proof for her yearning to become empowered at any cost. Contrary to her expectations, Sarita's empowerment brings in a gap between her and her husband.

Empowerment of women makes men feel inferior. Humiliated by his inefficiency, Manohar tries to throw an air of supremacy over his wife. Hence, he starts behaving brutally towards Sarita at nights, turning the darkness into a frightening experience. A quote from Collard explains the mentality of men in such a situation:

"In patriarchy, nature, animals and women are objectified, hunted, invaded, colonized, owned, consumed, and forced to yield and to produce (or not). This violation of the integrity of the wild spontaneous being is rape. It is motivated by a fear and rejection of life and it allows the oppressor, the illusion of control of power of being alive".

Sarita feels that love cannot exist between man and woman when she sees her husband's sadistic approach towards her.

Similar to Sarita, Tara experiences falsehood of love when her husband Bish starts spending "fifteen hours a day in the office, sometimes longer" (DD, 82). With a view to expanding his status, Bish concentrates on travelling quite often ignoring his wife and child. Bish trusts that love happens to be "the residue of providing for parents and family, contributing to good causes and charities, earning professional respect, and being recognized for hard work and honesty" (DD, 82)

Despite professional commitments, Bish adopts every means to keep his wife in the conservative framework. Once in a year, Bish takes Tara to India only to project her as a good cook, wife and daughter-in-law. Bish gives his mother the pride that she is responsible for bringing up a 'bright and obedient boy'. However, this practice of visiting India does not make any impact on Tara, thanks to her life on the American soil over a decade.

The impact of American lifestyle brings in a perplexing change in Tara. Confrontation with her husband's real nature and her assimilation into the American culture gives Tara the strength to self-explore. When Tara understands that she can't cope with the selfishness of her husband, she dares to get divorce from him. Even she gets the courage to bring her teenage son up. She gets a job in a school and starts raising her son.

Tara takes pride in her empowerment. However, sense of alienation overpowers her. Naturally, she gets attracted towards Andy, a Hungarian Buddhist contractor and yoga teacher. Tara falls in love with him and violates the moral codes through her cohabitation with him. Tara's new lifestyle satisfies her ego. She feels that she has got freedom from the traditional lifestyle, which reduced her to the status of a slave to the family.

Like Tara, Sarita gets into relationship with her professor 'Boozie'. She does that only to survive and get success in her professional life. Sarita observes, "He was a fairy godfather who could, with a wave of his magic wand, make things easier ... if only I could please him. I knew I could if I tried. I did" (DHNT, 92). Initially, Sarita pleases her professor to elevate herself to the level of a Registrar, becomes Doctor of Medicine and starts working as an Assistant Honorary in a suburban hospital. Alongside, she opens a clinic of her own with the support of her professor. After fulfilling her dreams, Sarita stops flirting with the professor.

Sarita and Tara, the poor women in their attempt to break the shackles of the patriarchal society, voluntarily violate moral codes. In fact, distress leads them to immoral behavior. While

Sarita adopts immorality to achieve professional status, Tara wants to enjoy freedom, “which touches the woman like the kite though flying, yet, being stringed into the manipulative and manoeuvring hands of men” (Singh, 8).

Complexities in Life

Sarita experiences humiliation through her husband and her misplaced sense of guilt that she is responsible for her brother’s death. Though her brother Dhruva drowns accidentally, her mother blames Sarita. Her agony aggravates as nightmares haunt Sarita continuously. Nevertheless, physical and mental traumas awoke her inner self, which tries to cull out the reasons for her troubles.

Tara gets the feel of a subaltern, when complexities surround her life. She lands in troubles when Christopher makes an entry as the illegal son of Tara’s sister and the consequent attempts of hers to save her sister’s reputation. Her happy life with Andy comes to an end, when Tara disapproves of Andy’s advice against Christopher. Tara realizes that she has failed in judging men. This crisis makes Tara delve deep into her psyche. She understands that her emotional fulfillment through her cohabitation with Andy lacks substantial strength. While she tries to come out of this, she learns that her son Rabi is a gay. She blames herself for failing in her role as a mother.

Having left alone, Tara suffers a lot as she does not have people around her to share her grief with. She reminisces about her early days thus: ‘We are sisters three as alike as three blossoms on flowering tree’ (DD, 16). Tara feels that the three sisters are not as close to one another as they seem to be. They hide their family secrets from one another. They remained silent in the midst of their sufferings only to preserve peace, which otherwise may lead to emotional disturbance. Thus, it becomes clear that women lead a life of suffocation throughout their lifetime.

Catharsis

Though Sarita accomplishes her desire of being an empowered woman, the tortures and torments of her sadistic husband Manohar puts her on the verge of losing her sanity. At this juncture, her mother’s death paves way for her to get into the parental home, where she does a thorough self-analysis. This gives Sarita a fresh insight into her life. She understands that her husband’s cruelty is the manifestation of the sense of supremacy that he has nurtured within himself.

She cleanses herself of the guilty conscience and the other complexities that life offered her. The change in her perception of life helps Sarita get rid of the terror, which darkness offered

her through the death of Dhruva and her husband's terrorizing behavior. Consequently, nightmares stop tormenting her. When she feels that the terrors are nurtured within her, she gains the required strength to exorcise them. Sarita's struggles continued, as long as she considered her body to be the ultimate reality. But when she understands that the mind has complete control over the body, she heals herself.

The strength of women is that they struggle within themselves and try to find solutions to problems. With renewed energy and understanding, Sarita gets ready to take up her roles of a dutiful wife to her sadistic husband, mother to her children and a good doctor to her patients.

Tara's failure in her married life induces her to see her sister leads an untroubled life. Therefore, Tara tries to resolve the mystery encompassing the life of her sister. She travels to India to trace the whereabouts of Christopher and gets frightened by the truth that he is a criminal. Sensing threat to the lives of her husband and son, she tries every means to protect them, but in vain. Criminals set her house on fire, which gives Tara a chance to understand the importance of the bond between husband and wife. As a caring husband, Bish dares to save his wife ignoring his safety and gets severe injuries in the fire accident. Tara gives respect to the age old customs and unites with her husband, leaving behind her miseries.

Indian roots in Tara bring her back to her culture, though she was misguided by American lifestyle initially. Bharati Mukherjee, through this character ensures that Indian women respect Indian culture. Besides, this culture offers women the necessary strength to undergo torments and face the challenges boldly. In fact, the author projects her view that the Indian women take up the blame on themselves and try to adjust with their men, giving value to them. When patriarchal society understands and considers the value of women, there will be hardly any chance for breach of morality and peace will prevail in the lives of men and women.

Summation

Sarita and Tara face a lot of ordeals in a patriarchal society. Yet, they survive the odds and bounce back with vigour and vitality. Struggles do not hinder them from accepting their role as wife and mother. Both exhibit dignity in accepting their misfortunes and sorrows as the essential ingredients of life. Their struggles and sufferings elevate them to this magnitude. Indeed, the journey of ordeals gives them a true perception of their identity.

Shashi Deshpande and Bharati Mukherjee through their novels portray the social conventions and attitudes that victimize women. However, the women characters exhibit strength and resilience through their struggle for survival. Their encounter with tragedy wakes them up to

reality. The strength of Sarita and Tara is quite obvious through their intrinsic capability for compassion, sacrifice and acceptance of the inevitable.

In Indian society, a woman is considered to be a peripheral member of the family both in the homes of her parents and in-laws. She may be assigned a place on the margin, but she can become the center of her own life: this is the proposition of both the writers taken for study.

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