

Saru in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

Dr. C. Ramya, M.B.A., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Asst. Professor, Department of English
E.M.G. Yadava College for Women
Madurai – 625 014
Tamil Nadu, India
rramyachelliah@gmail.com

Abstract

This research paper is written with an aim to interpret the heroine Saru depicted in the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* by Shashi Deshpande who has emerged as an icon for the young women writers illustrating women sandwiched between tradition and modernity. She represents Saru as a dominating girl who does not accept the inequality shown between her and her brother by her parents, especially by her Mom. She just tolerated the arrogant traditional orthodox mother Deshpande neatly delineates the Self-will of Saru, who took own decision for her marriage against her parents. She did her higher education in medicine and it was the only weapon to safeguard her life even after love marriage. This neatly analyses how being a woman writer Shashi Deshpande portrays Saru who explores the problems a woman faces in day-to-day life, even it is an arrange marriage or love marriage. Through this, every woman faces darkness in life, but through their strong personality and self will they just ignore terror in it.

Keywords: Shashi Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru, Modernity, tradition, dominating, Self-will, egoist, inequality, terror.

The appearance of woman in the field of literature is “a significant fact. The advent of female literature promises woman’s view of life, woman’s experience, in other words a new element” says George Henry Lewes. In almost all the literatures of the world, the woman writers are transcending the boundaries and making their presence felt on the international stage. Women writers like Anita Desai, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, and Shashi Deshpande occupied a significant place in Indian English fictional world. Indian English writing cherished in the hands of women writers after a lot of efforts owing to the prejudice that they wrote what they experienced. They basically dealt with female subjectivity, domestic space, and personal sufferings. Today women’s writing is considered as a dominant and influential medium of modernism. The phenomenal achievement of carving the niche for themselves by these writers has brought a change in the way women’s literature is looked at today. These writers deal with not only domestic spaces and personal experiences but also openly describe the women’s world

with striking honesty. They deal with the most burning issues, sensitive aspects of life bridging the gap between tradition and modernity.

The present day women writers have realized the need to come to terms with the need of an hour making successful attempts in the directions of conquering the masses through their writings and many of them have written on the male-dominated societies, the sufferings and trauma faced by women, exploitation, complexities of man-woman relationship, social and personal dilemmas and such important other issues socio-economic, political and feminist ones. No doubt, a significant contribution to Indian fiction has come from women writers experimenting with the genres, tones and temperaments. With the skill of storytelling and expressing in the best possible way the modern and traditional linkages, they have succeeded in making a remarkable difference in both theme and outlook. The works of novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande have been widely noticed and acclaimed.

In the context of contemporary Indian writing in English, Shashi Deshpande is “one of the most understated yet confident voices exploring the individual and universal predicaments through the female psyche” (Sinha 173). In her quest for the human self within the woman, Deshpande lays her trails, and tribulations under the impact of the conflicting influence of tradition and modernity. Through myth and modernity, Shashi Deshpande has emerged as an icon for the younger writers. She was born in 1938 in Dharwad, south India. Being educated in Bombay and Bangalore, she took degrees in both Economic and Law. Deshpande’s writing career began comparatively late. At the age of thirty, she spent a year in England with her family. Her husband who is a pathologist insisted that she should pen the sweet memories of the trip and retain them through writing. So to keep the memories fresh and evergreen, she wrote about her experiences and her memories of the trip in three articles and handed them over to her father. Her father Sriranga, being a great playwright found the glow of a writer in her daughter and so handed the articles to a publisher. The major factors in the life of Shashi Deshpande that shaped her career are her father, her education which was exclusively in English and the fact that she grew up in a “home which was a harmonious mixture of languages” (Naresh 30).

Shashi Deshpande gained confidence in writing and started writing in a spontaneous way. She has to her credit publication of such notable works as 1.*The Legacy* (1971), 2.*The Miracle* (1986), 3.*It was Dark* (1986), 4.*The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), 5.*Come Up and Be Dead* (1983), 6.*Roots and Shadows* (1983), 7.*That Long Silence* (1988), 8.*The Binding Vine* (1992), 9.*A Matter of Time* (1996), 10.*Small Remedies* (2000), 11.*Moving On* (2004).

G.S. Amur writes of Shashi Deshpande thus: “Women’s writing can be seen at its best in Shashi Deshpande’s fiction. An important reason for this is that its main motivation comes not

from borrowed ideology but from authentic experience and understanding of what it means to be a woman in the Indian context” (P 84). In the words of Sunita Sinha, “Her work reflects the whole gamut of Indian cultural issues, the thickly populated world of her novels, the working out of relationships within families and marriages, the fine insight into human character as well as her boldness in the treatment of sex and class barriers which have been the major concern of her fiction” (P 173).

The fiction of Shashi Deshpande has gained wide acclaim at National as well as International levels. Major research on Deshpande novels is being carried by some researches from feminist point of view, for she has produced an excellent number of novels, short stories and children’s books. She is different from others in that she puts in front of the readers the bare realities of life. The character she portrays is around us which makes the readers one with the work, being part of it. Being a woman, she writes about women and tries to bring change in the existing social condition and position of women. Her writing should, no doubt, be read with special and intense concentration as it speaks the language of the common man, focusing the tradition of middle-class women and presenting the multidimensional Indian ethos. Her novels “sharply accuse the age-old customs, beliefs, blindly following the traditions and culture and imposing them upon women” (Nikam 16). Hatimi Nafisa is right in saying so:

“Shashi Deshpande has emerged as one of the mainstream women writers in India and has drawn critical attention because of her detailed, sensitive and realistic representation of Indian middle class women in the domestic sphere” (196).

In her own view, her works have an impact on women’s lives. She evidently says:

“I think over the years it is certainly making a difference. And I think my books have been very empowering for women, because I have more and women coming and telling me about how they felt kind of liberated after they read, and I think they say it does give them courage. And I also had a man who wrote me a long letter saying that I never knew what women thought of until I read your books. Hopefully it has opened up certain areas” (web source).

Deshpande’s concern for women is reflected in her fiction which is deeply rooted in the line of socio-moral sexual fiction. Since her fiction is women-centred, the feminine consciousness evidently gets reflected rather effectively. She is neither a Marxist feminist nor a lesbian feminist because her feminism is particularly Indian in the sense that it is born out of the predicament of women placed between two poles: tradition and modernity in India, between family and profession, between culture and nature and she mixes ‘humanism’ and ‘feminism’ in her fiction. In the olden days, the voice of women used to go unheard and unsung in the

patriarchal world. Though the world today is still patriarchal and male-dominated, the women have gained legal as well as social liberty to voice their problems and to protest against injustices done to them. It was sometimes in the 1960's that the women's Liberation started. The women came to the forefront and tried very enthusiastically to overthrow all the taboos ordained by the male-dominated society. But unfortunately, their enthusiasm could not continue for a long time. Issues like individual freedom and equality with men no longer exist and now the question is how far women have succeeded in getting the rights for which they fought. Shashi Deshpande, being the author of the 70's and 80's, understands the women well and has tried to project a realistic picture of the middle class educated woman who is finally independent. Though Indian woman who is educated and employed is economically independent, financial freedom is not enough. Family marriage and social norms bind her completely. The ideal man-woman relationship in the Indian context as the dominant man and the submissive woman is so prominent that even the most brilliant man is incapable of looking at woman in terms of equality. Shashi Deshpande has tried to show that the women, even after resisting the social taboos want to submit themselves to their conventional roles.

The novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, which explores paragon of all virtues, picturizes the problems faced by a career woman, a refreshingly new phenomenon in Indian English fiction. It effectively brings out the psychological problems of a career woman. It is the story of Sarita, often referred to as Saru in the novel, and her convulsions and conflicts. The novel reveals the life of Savita, who is always neglected and ignored in favour of her brother. She is not given any importance, and no parental love is showered upon her even on her birthdays. Her brother's birthdays are, however, celebrated with full enthusiasm including the performance of the religious rituals. Here, the novelist vividly portrays the importance given to the male child in the conservative Indian society. When Saru's brother is drowned, she is blamed for it. Her mother, in particular, always scolds her for being responsible for her son's death:

“You killed him, why didn't you die?
Why are you alive, when he's dead?” (DHNT 173)

Due to her mother's accusation, Saru begins to wonder if in reality, she had killed him. It is much later, after rethinking and pondering over the event, after her mother's death that she realizes the accidental nature of her brother's death. Saru grows up and acquires education against her mother's will. As an educated young lady, her sense of reasoning and questioning develops. She can no more tolerate inequality between brother and sister. She remembers how her brother was named:

“They had named him Dhruva. I can remember,
even now vaguely, faintly, a state of joyous

excitement that had been his naming day.

The small of flowers the black grinding
stone” (DHNT 152).

The mother is extremely attached to her son. The male child is considered more important than a female child because he is qualified to give ‘agni’ to his dead parents. When Dhruva was alive, her mother indiscriminate between the two had been very apparent. As she grows up, resentment and hatred drive her to leave home and obsessively seek success in medical college. There she falls in love with a collegemate and marries him against her parent’s wishes. Her mother, being an old traditional orthodox woman, does not want her daughter to get married to a person who is from a lower caste:

“What caste is he!
I don’t know. A Brahmin, of course, not.
The, cruelly ... his father keeps a cycle
shop” (P 87).

Saru revolts against her parents and runs away to get married to a person of her own choice. Saru is “just an Indian woman, or a house-wife. She is a well-educated modern Indian woman, a doctor by profession, a feminist lady who demands equality with men and a rebel who protests against man’s whisky and cigar’ politics”. (Patel 223).

Saru has considered economic independence as an insurance against suppression. Every move in life is towards the realization of that goal. Saru has a lot of childhood scars hidden in her subconscious mind, because of her mother. Due to her mother’s ignorance and arrogance, Saru feels her position at home rather insecure. Saru is depressed to the core by the unchanging monotony and the strictly regulated way of living at home. For living at home means to live the life of an orthodox Brahmin performing rituals, pujas and other duties, until she is ripe enough to get married off.

But Saru is not for such a dreary and dull life and develops hatred for all the meaningless rituals, the rites and customs which seem to stifle her. Saru’s life with Manohar does not run a smooth air. She finds him odd. She is bored of working too much for the family. Once even she declares that she cannot work:

‘I said I want to stop working’
‘You’re joking’
‘No. I’m not. I’m serious’ (P 80).

Saru is bored of life, one may say. She writes of her anguish:

“Nobody likes me.
Nobody cares for me.
Nobody wants me ...” (83)

Saru is not scared of her husband as she was never scared of her parents and even Boozy. She thinks how she never worried of the dark in her life. In a reference to her brother, she knows “the poor little scared boy, who never grew up to know the dark holds no terror” (P85). The dark referred to her context is the dominance of tradition, ignorance and, of course, the dominance of male over the female. She says,

“Perhaps there is something in the male,
she now thought that is whittled down and
ultimately destroyed. It is not so with a female
she can be dominated, she can submit, and
yet hold something of her in reserve” (P 85).

Saru is modern in her educational and marital choice and in planning her life. The conflicts in her mind reveal that she has the traditional part also within her. Even as a child, she rebels against her mother’s attitude of male dominance. She is against the importance given to Dhruva in her family and her mother’s notion of being fair and beautiful to please the husband. A jobless husband is a nightmare to her and feels that his position as a lecture gives her some prestige. Saru succeeds and emerges as a successful, well-known and reputed doctor. At the same time, her marriage begins to crumble under the burden of success in her profession. She is happy until she begins to establish herself as a doctor. Now the situation undergoes a change. When the society confers so much importance on the doctor in her, she proudly wears it on her sleeves, whereas it leaves Manu thoroughly insecure and Saru happily aware of the fact:

“When we walked out of our room, there were nods and smiles, murmured greetings and Namastes. But they were all for me, only for me. There was nothing for him. He was almost totally ignored.... And so, the esteem with which I was surrounded 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 a + b they told us in mathematics is equal to b + a. But here a + b was not, definitely not equal to b + a. It became a monstrously unbalanced equation, lopsided, unequal, impossible” (PP 36-37).

Manohar was once proud about him as a promising poet and as the effective secretary of the Literary Association, Debating Union and Dramatic Society. Many girls felt attracted towards him. Saru was engulfed by his presence too. Her admiration of Manu gives him the necessary confidence and his unreserved response, in turn pleases her ego. The life that they begin together eventually becomes a power race of two egoistic people in which she overtakes him effortlessly. Her respect for him wanes when she recognizes him to be a failure. Manu is no ordinary male chauvinist. He has absolutely no reservations about considering his wife as an equal and as a person. But when her success begins to highlight his failure, he degenerates. Her career gives her so much importance and power over the others. Her inability to procure time for herself and her family upsets her family life. Manu, her husband, cannot tolerate people greeting her and ignoring him. He cannot express it openly but sings out of irritation:

“I’m sick of this place.
Let’s get out of here soon” (P37).

He does not love her the way he used to love her earlier. She starts hating the man-woman relationship which is based on attraction and not on love:

“Love.... how she scorned the word now. 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.... Take away the word, the idea and the concept will wither away” (P 65).

This is an awkward situation in which she is placed. At a personal level, she feels a gradual disappearance of love and attachment which she had once developed. The children do not get proper love and care from their mother as she gets late in returning home. The husband sits waiting:

“I came home late that night ... when I came home, I found him sitting with a brooding expression on his face that made my heart give painful, quivering little jumps” (P 71).

While there is a decline in her conjugal relationship, her status in society rises day by day. People visit her for different purposes which widens the gap between them. The financial ascendance of Sarita, at the same time, renders Manu important. The only way he can regain that potency and masculinity is through sexual assault upon Sarita, which for him, becomes an assertion of his manhood leading to a sort of abnormality at night, as he is a cheerful normal human being, a loving husband during day, turning into a rapist at night. Saru’s silence against her sexual predicament only reveals the modern woman’s dilemma. She knows the psychological nature of the problem, but she is very much hesitant to talk about it, she says:

“I can do nothing.
I can never do anything
I just endure.” (P 182)

Endurance is still the Indian women’s way. She is not ready even to seek guidance of the psychiatrist and deceives herself by thinking that what is happening is only a nightmare. In this novel, Manu satisfies his ego through sexual assault upon Saru. Shashi Deshpande as a feminist writer brings out the predicament of the modern women in their physical relationship with their husbands. One critic by name Indira Nityanandan obviously remarks:

“Shashi Deshpande’s primary focus of attention is the world of women – the struggle of women in the context of modern Indian society. Unable to fully defy traditional, patriarchal norms of their identity not only as women but also as human beings” (40).

She finds out that the life of a woman is full of artificiality. Society is responsible for this attitude which makes the women believe that marriage and children give real meaning to a woman’s life. Shashi Deshpande explores the problems a woman faces in day-to-day life. She marvelously depicts the sexual harassment of the protagonist Saru at the hands of her husband, Manu. Saru strongly resists the attack on her personality by her mother, and her husband who does represent the patriarchal society. She suffers humiliation and faces psychological problems in her own family. The critic P. Venugopalan rightly comments:

“The novel is by and of a woman. It traces the heroine Sarita’s growth to womanhood through a bitter, claustrophobic girlhood, followed by an industrious studentship idyllic romance and finally, a horrific wifehood” (17).

The Dark Holds No Terrors represents the modern woman Saru, with her own needs and aspirations. She wants to be economically self-governing but also desires a sturdy male support in her life. Education invokes in her consciousness and a desire for self-identity which was missing in the old generation. She loves and wants to be loved. With a very indispensable and normal wish, Saru as a child grows up but never gets parental love in the traditional family set-up. She constantly analyses what causes the physical illness between herself and Manu, whether she or he or her parents are to be blamed for this. She reaches the core of the truth very slowly. She realises that love finds fulfillment only in the sexual act. She also realizes that love and romance are all illusions, which are not relevant to her life. She initially sought refuge in love but later it became a trap. Saru’s mother has her own conventional stand regarding love marriages:

“I know all these ‘I love marriages’,
It’s love, for a few days, then quarrels

all the time.” (P 62)

Saru sees happiness neither in love; nor in arranged marriages. Marital life is nothing but a queer combination of several forces acting upon two human beings in different capacities to fulfill the marital ambition and play a vital role in the society. Saru attains economic independence but she is unable to look after her family. She expects sympathy from her father but no avail. Rather her father, after listening to all the failures in her life in adjusting with her husband, turns his back on her pretending to put rice on the stove. Under such circumstances, Saru feels that if it had been an arranged marriage, she would have got support from her parents. She thought of a girl, the sister of a friend, who had come home on account of disastrous marriage. The girl was surrounded by care and sympathy in her parents’ home. But her married life is full of unspeakable suffering and torture.

Thus, it is found that Shashi Deshpande goes on depicting the elite Sarita and her problems, particularly in relation to her father, her obsession with her mother and brother and others. She is worried of her loss of love, mother’s affection for her and her future with respect to Manohar. It is praiseworthy that Deshpande has highlighted the inner psyche of a female so subtly by presenting Saru as a victim of patriarchy undergoing pain and the sense of alienation. Throughout the novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, the novelist portrays Saru as a dominating, a self-willed and an egoist girl.

To conclude, the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is about Saru’s assertion of herself, her personality, her position in human society. She gets medical education even in the teeth of opposition; she marries outside the caste and she does what an educated woman can do. So, the ‘dark holds no terror for her’. The title virtually presents the need for conflict and disagreement by means of light and darkness, love, and hatred.

Works Cited

1. Deshpande, Shashi. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990.
2. Naresh, Jain (ed.). *Women in Indo-Anglian Fiction: Tradition and Modernity*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1998.
3. Nasifa, Hatini. “Conflict and Violence in Shashi Deshpande’s ‘The Intrusion’ and Bharati Mukherjee’s ‘A Wife’s Story’” *Gender and Narrative*. New Delhi: Rawat Publication, 2002, P.196.
4. Nikam, Madhavi. *The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande*.

- Jaipur: Vital Publications, 2014.
5. Nityanandan, Indira. *Three Great Indian Women Novelists*.
New Delhi: Creative Books, 2000.
 6. Patil, Mallikarjun. *Studies in Indian English Literature*.
New Delhi: Sarup Books Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2010.
 7. Sinha, Sunita. *Post-colonial Women writers: New Perspectives*.
New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2012.
 8. Venugopal, P. "Bildungsroman: Shashi Deshpande's Version
in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*". *The Quest*. Vol.16,
No.1, June 2007, P.17.
- =====