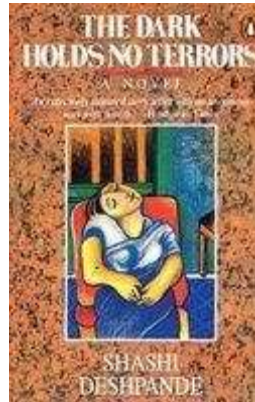


A Feminist Dilemma in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

Vimala.V., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate

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Introduction

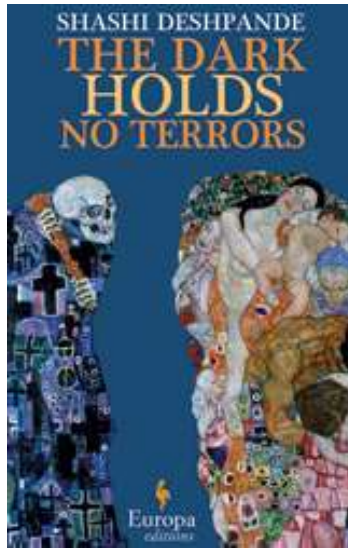
Shashi Deshpande is a celebrated Indian woman novelist who has great concern for the welfare of the women society. The unspeakable problems of women from their unexplored regions of minds are clearly portrayed by her novels. Her deep insight into woman psychology and perfect understanding of Indian society brought her international recognition. In these light factors, this research paper makes an attempt to bring out the theme of feminist dilemma through Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*.

Beginning of the Novel

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The novel begins with Saru visiting her father after a gap of fifteen years. On hearing through a friend about her mother's death a month ago Saru wants to visit her father's house from where she had left as a young woman. Defying her parents she married Manohar. She now returned to it as a well-established doctor and a mother of two children more out of an urge to escape from the hell of life she is passing through. She appears to be confused, hopeless, dull almost thoughtless and a recluse.

The traditional Hindu Woman in her rises up only to disappear for soon. Alienated from her husband, she comes to her parental house to see her sense of belonging to the world but Saru eludes her. Initially, when she comes to her father's house, she feels like a 'stranger' as Sudama standing at the gates of the palace of Krishna and Rukmani. She is conscious that she is no 'Sudama' in rags, bare feet and filled with humility.

Cold Reception

But she gets a cold reception at her father's house. At times Saru even regrets her visit. "Why had it seemed so important to come here, at once? As Saru stays at her parental house, she gets a chance to review her relationship with her husband, her dead mother, her dead brother,

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with her own children. Her earliest memories are those which speak about the gender discrimination shown by her mother in favour of her brother Dhruva. Saru has had an insecure childhood. As her sense of reasoning and questioning develops, she feels that she is unable to tolerate the preference shown towards her brother. She feels jealous of her brother when he gets all the parental care and attention. She struggles to attract her father's attention and succeeds only to some extent. Saru's mother, who believes a girl to be a liability and a boy an asset, instills a sense of insecurity in her daughter's mind. Saru rarely speaks to her father, but her brother often has long conversation with her and the father often used to take him out for a ride.

There is always a puja performed on Dhruva's birthday. His birthdays and other religious rituals related to him are given top priority and celebrated with much pomp while Saru's are barely acknowledged. This disparity of treatment makes her to think that her birthday is only a matter of displeasure for the family.

Saru's Mother's Preference

Saru's mother's strong preference for her brother drives her to a sense of restlessness and alienation. The partisan attitude of her parents has a devastating effect on Saru. She becomes rebellious in nature. When her brother dies by drowning in the pond accidentally, she mutely watches the whole scene without rushing to his help. Since then, she is haunted by the thought that she is responsible for his death. Even her mother finds her guilty.

Life becomes more desperate to Saru after Dhruva's death. There are no celebrations at home, her own much awaited birthday passes off in silence both at school and at home. Saru's mind is filled with deep and indelible scars as her mother constantly pins for her dead son and rejects even the presence of her daughter.

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Growing Hatred

Saru's hatred gets intensified when she attains puberty. She resents the onset of her woman hood. She resents the traditional practice in her orthodox home when she is treated like an outcast during those three days. Thus rejection by her mother during the early impressionable years leads to psychological insecurity in Saru. She begins to express her feeling through the acts of defiance which spring from her resentment against her mother as a young girl, and then as a child. She hated her, she wanted to hurt her, wound her, and make her suffer. She hopes for a miracle to happen and that one day she would grow up and be beautiful. But when it actually happens, growing up becomes shameful for Saru. The Rigidity of do's and don't prescribed by the domineering mother makes her grow more wild and defiant later. She goes to Bombay to study medicine in spite of her mother's opposition. Luckily her father encouraged her. Saru's mother doesn't understand the importance of girl's education.

“Perhaps there is something in the male, she now thought, that it whittled down and ultimately destroyed by female domination. It is not so with a female. She can be dominated, she can submit, and yet hold something of herself in reserve. As if there is something in her that prevents erosion and self-destruction. (If not, she would have been destroyed too easily. But they, have I not been destroyed?)”

(The Dark Holds No Terrors, 85)

Saru's Confrontation with Her Mother

Saru's confrontation with her mother reaches its peak when she decides to marry Manu. Her choice of a boy from a lower caste is a sign of her rejecting ways and values her orthodox mother. The conversation between daughter and mother is as follows:

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“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?”(P-98)

After her marriage Saru is hurt to hear from a mutual acquaintance that her mother told that word “let her know more sorrow that she has given me”. She even thinks at one point that she is ‘unhappy and destroyed’ in her marital life because her mother has cursed her. But gradually her hostile attitude towards her mother changes to a positive one. She even begins to see her mother as the creative essence of the feminine. She makes efforts to understand her and even identify herself with her mother. Valli Rao finds this as a “search for her own feminine side for the reunification of her split self” and finally we see ‘rebirthing’ her own individual personality separate from her mother’s. Thus, she finally emerges from her ordeal a person more whole, more capable of accepting and forgiving herself that she has been at the start. Saru’s entry into Medical College leads to romance with Manu. In the first flush of her infatuation with Manohar, however, Saru considers herself highly privileged to have been chosen by him. In her dreams Saru longs for Manu’s love. She is crazy about him and his love appears to her protective, condescending, all encompassing and satisfying. This is no ego-problem and no assertion of identity.

Fantasizing about Manu

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Saru starts fantasizing about Manu. The one dream that dominates her psyche is the age-old feminine dream of total submission to a conquering male. In her imagination Manu is tender imperious and passionate. Later it is Saru who revives the acquaintance with him. As they speak with each other, he also becomes interested in her. When Manu expresses his love for her, she feels flattered. She becomes exultant for having evoked feeling in someone who is emotionally hard to be touched. She expresses her love as follows:

“And that he, a man set apart from the others, above the others should love me seemed even more incredible. The fisherman’s daughter couldn’t have been more surprised when the king asked her to marry him, than I was by Manu’s love for me.” (p-66)

Marriage in the Offing

However, the very thought of marriage unnerves Saru. Perhaps it is the fear of sex, the unknown. Till they get married Manu and Saru are quite innocent in their relationship. This may be because of their middle-class inhibitions. Marriage opens the sesame of all enjoyment for Saru. After the first moment of apprehensions, there is nothing that holding in her. Saru, who lacked love once now finds a saviour in Manu.

Saru, by marrying Manu, has a permanent break in the relationship with her mother. At a point Manu fears that cutting Saru off from her parents will be painful for her. But Saru, on the other hand, feels quite detached from her parents.

The mother in her turn successfully erases the memory of daughter from her mind and even predicts the fate of Saru’s marriage. “It’s love for a few days, then quarrels all the time”. It is from this moment that Saru takes a vow never to see her parents. Saru is happy with Manu,

thought they live in her dingy one room apartment. But soon this happiness turns out to be only an illusion.

Change in Status and Change in Relations

As long as Saru is a student, Manu has been the breadwinner. They had peace at home despite its filth and stench. But problems begin to slowly creep in the moment when Saru is recognized as a doctor. Her economic independence makes Manu feel thoroughly insecure and this casts a shadow on their married life. The seeds of jealousy are shown in him when there is an explosion in the near by factory. Burnt and mutilated bodies pour everywhere and Saru has to attend on them. After this incident, Saru emerges as a successful and reputed doctor almost every morning there is a knock at the door and her visitors demand her medical attention. Saru, young and quite unused to her profession is thrilled with her new job but Manu's behaviour begins to change. He feels totally ignored as Saru gets all the attention.

In her new role as a career woman Saru is no longer happy in their shabby apartment and she prefers to move into something more decent and beautiful. She feels that the flat in which she and Manu have been living all these years is narrow and also Manu's earning now makes her feel that it barely covers her needs.

Her works keeps her away from Manu for longer hours and she reaches home late at night for which he shouts. His ego is hurt by her success, he feels inferior and this sense of inferiority makes him brutal in his behavior. Though he is normal by day, he turns a treacherous rapist at night and tries to assert his masculinity through sexual assaults upon Saru. Her dream of finding happiness in marriage is soon shattered. Now Saru does not share good and cordial relationship with her husband. She scorns the world 'love' and refuse to believe that such a thing can never exist between man and woman. Gradually, Saru changes her attitude towards Manu

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and her marital life. The world around her and her life place in her life becomes so insignificant that Manu's position and place in her becomes relatively unimportant. Saru views sex as a dirty word. With her responsibilities increasing outside of home, she recoils from Manu's love making and he takes her rejection of sex as rejection of himself. Saru, however, is unhappy over the situation. She is so desperate that to save her marriage, she is prepared to sacrifice her lucrative profession.

Visit with the Father

On hearing the death news of her mother through her childhood friend Manda she tries to console her father. This desire is aggravated by Manu's behaviour and hence she goes to him after a gap of 15 years. It is from this parental care and security she had walked out once with a vow never to return. Nevertheless, she returns to seek refuge, unable to bear the barbarism of her husband. Saru is aware of the woman's strength is going after arranged marriage.

Yearning for Emotional Attachment

Saru, yearns for security and emotional attachment. She wants her father to support her and her feeling raised against Manu's brutality. She even rehearses these thoughts and recites them as if she was reading out a clinical history of an unknown patient. But when the real moment comes she blurts loudly and crudely, "My husband is a sadist". Her father fails to understand her vocabulary like sadism, love and cruelty. Painstakingly Saru makes every possible effort to explain to him about her problems and when she speaks to him, is not as a daughter but as a woman to a man. Saru's father expects that they should talk like matured persons because he feels that this kind of relationship of intimacy or sharing has never occurred even between him and his wife. Manu says "Silence had become a habit for us". He enquires Saru about the events that have happened and gradually his unnatural composure and

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indifference have disappeared. Saru eagerly tells him everything about Manu's brutality and expresses her helplessness. She expects moral supports from her father and she becomes more frantic and requests him.

"Don't go out in the sun. You'll get even darker.

Who cares?

We have to care if you don't. We have to get you married.

I don't want to get married.

Will you live with us all your life?

Why not?

You can't?

And Dhruva?

He's different. He's a boy". (p-45)

Isolated and Lonely Life

On listening to Saru, her father simply leaves her and goes away. Saru lives an isolated and lonely life. She wants her father to listen to her but her father's unchanging attitude saddens her. She thinks that they are like people that "are fated to be strangers". Many times she wants to tell her father, "Baba, she was unhappy, help me, Baba, she is in trouble. Tell me what to do". But her feelings remain inside her. At times she regrets for having come to her parents house, as she is reminded of her children, her practice and her patients. In all these memories her husband doesn't figure at all. Her visit to her father's house is a kind of escape from the sadist husband and her loveless marriage. It is a kind of solace from her hectic daily routine too. Staying with her father and Madhav who makes no demands on her and on her whereabouts is a relief to Saru.

The whole day in her parent's house is completely dedicated to her own desires and comforts. She also reminiscences the kind of life she had lived as a child.

Saru's World View

To Saru, the idea of men going to work, children going to school, and women staying at home to work, clean, scrub and sweep appealed as she finds a kind of harmony in these tasks performed by women who stay at home. This kind of contentment as Saru discovers in her new routine life makes her feel that she has a totally new life, and now as Saru calls herself totally changed persons and nothing of the old Saru is left. At her father's place, slowly she loses the awareness of her feminine. She stops thinking about herself as a woman. The doctor in her is more often seen that the wife on mother in her. Neighbourhood women visit her to talk about their ailments. Mostly these women keep everything as a secret. This makes Saru to think that "Their very womanhood a source of deep shame to them and she calls them stupid, silly, martyrs, idiotic heroines, Going on with their task and destroying themselves in the bargain, for nothing but a meaningless modesty".

Saru like her neighbourhood women can never voice her feelings until the real day had arrived. Her heart explodes and she becomes so restless. She objectively analyses her share in her marriage turning out to be a disaster. Her ruminations make her think. "My brother died because I heartlessly turned my back on him. My mother died alone because I she deserted her. I husband is a failure because, I destroyed his manhood".

After reliving memories of her brother's death , Saru is able to confront deeper problems. She at last receives confront from her father who advises her to forget about her role in the death incidents her brother and her mother. He further advises her that she should learn to encounter adversities as they come along in one's life, and she must be prepared to meet the

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present problems of facing her husband Manu. Earlier the disillusionment in her marital life makes her look for other avenues. Even affairs with Boozie and Padmakar Roa one temporary substitutes for her unfulfilled marital life.

Affairs with Boozie and Padmakar Rao

To Saru, Boozie is a handsome and masterful man. Everything about him right from his language, his swift progress through the hospital wards etc., appears to Saru, as if he does everything in perfect co-ordination. Later Saru realizes that Boozie's interest in Saru is not that of master and student but that of a man and woman. Though it looks strange to her, she responds fittingly to his flirtatious manner. Very soon their relationship reaches a stage where Boozie helps her with enough money to set up practice in a decent locality. She manages to fulfil her desire of attaining higher education and also better quality of life, which otherwise may not be possible for a common girl like her.

“I told myself my relationship with this man couldn't, wouldn't hurt Manu. It was just a teacher-student relationship. If he put his hand on my shoulder, slapped me on my back, held my hand or hugged me...that was just his mannerism and meant nothing. It had nothing to do with me and Manu.” (P-91)

Growing Social and Financial Status

Although Saru's social and financial status grows, there's no peace for her at her home. Her feelings on being an economically independent individual are worse. In fact, her economic independence, though asserted by feminists, brings to fulfillment to her. Another extra marital relationship of Saru is with Padmakar, often called as Padma. He was her classmate in Medical College, whom she meets years later, but after a few incidents, she dissuades him from doing so

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as she wants to bring an end to their relationship. This relationship is neither soothing nor comforting to her.

“And I? Now, I knew it was not just the consequences I feared and hated, but the thing itself. What had I imagined? Love? Romance? Both, I knew too well, were illusions, and not relevant to my life anyway. And the code word of our age is neither love nor romance, but sex. Fulfillment and happiness came, not through love alone, but sex. And for me sex was now a dirty word” (p-133)

Childhood Friends

Saru happens to meet her two childhood friends, Smitha and Nalu while Nalu is a spinster, who teaches at a college, Smitha is a housewife. If Nalu moulds herself with an air of dignity and confidence Smitha surrenders herself totally to her husband. Smita has given up her identity, her name is changed as Anju, short for Geetanjali, as her husband is fond of Tagore. Saru also despises Smitha for her servile dependence on her husband. When she compares herself of Nalu, she doesn't seem to be happy on being labeled as a woman who is fulfilled just because of her marriage and two children. She says, “But that would be as stupid as calling her fulfilled because her got married and she have borne two children” contrasting the joys and sorrows by a wife, a mother and that of a spinster, Saru thinks it is difficult to estimate the value of happiness and fulfillment among them. Saru has contempt for the traditional concept according to which the sole purpose of a woman's existence is to please her husband. “Everything in a girl's life was shaped to that single purpose of pleasing a male”.

Saru remembers Mai Kaki's advice to keep her hands soft and smooth, so that her, “husband will never let go of them”. But Saru's husband has left her hands because she has

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failed to please him. When invited by two students to speak on the topic, ‘Medicine as a profession for women’, Saru starts to rehearse an imaginary speech on the relationship that exist between a husband and a wife, and also imagines an old fashioned couple where the wife walks a few steps behind her husband.

“That’s important, very important, because it’s symbolic of the truth. A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he’s an MA, you should be a BA. If he’s 5’ 4” tall, you shouldn’t be more than 5’ 3” tall. If he’s earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety-nine rupees.”(p-133)

Some Regret

Saru that she has done injustice to her mother, husband and children and everybody else. When Saru goes away to her father’s house, she does remember the little needs of the children, like seeing Renu off to school every morning and converging Abhi with a blanket every night. However, these thoughts do not compel her to go back to her house as in the case of R.K. Narayan’s Savithri in the “The Dark Room”. She takes this opportunity to test, to establish, and to reinforce her indispensability. Saru, it seems, would subordinate all her emotional ties to please her ego.

No Glorification of Saru’s Sufferings

Shashi Deshpande does not glorify Saru’s sufferings. Though she tries to enlist a sufficient amount of sympathy for her protagonist, it is not merely on the grounds of her being a female sufferer. Saru being a realist perceives the ultimate human reality and its process of decay. She finds loneliness as a painful but inescapable human condition. She also understands that the suffering of multitudes does not mitigate one’s suffering in any way and that one has to

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watch patiently the way happiness recedes from one's self. It is this realization that helps her understand her mother's words. "We are alone we have to be alone". Further, the feeling of homelessness drives Saru occasionally to the longing to be released from existence itself. She wonders, "Would it always be a failure, any attempt to reach out to another human being? Had she been chasing a chimera all her life hoping for someone? Perhaps the only truth is that man is born to be cold and lonely and alone".

Saru understands that despite loneliness, man seeks meaningful life in human interdependence too. The perfect partnership between her father and Madhav is a pattern where they make no demands on each other. It's partnership, world less uncomplaining and perfect. It is ironic that the father whom Saru has always considered a negative man, incapable of strong feelings and who always avoids things, the truths, facts, and life's confrontations is the one who ultimately urges Saru's to confront the facts. Even the courage to admit herself that her orbit comprises her children, her home, her practice her patients and that very definitely her husband Manu brings enormous relief to Saru. He advises her to face the situation.

Saru's father advises her that how she should behave with Manu. He appeals to her not to go away without meeting her husband. Though Saru thinks that Manu is responsible for shattering her dream of happiness in marriage and she wants to be free from her terrifying loveless trap, she feels guilty of her share in the breaking off of their marriage. She puts off the moment of confrontation, not only with her parents but also with herself.

Internal Commotions

Though Saru considers these words to be meaningless, soon she realizes that if a young boy like Madhav can think of herself and his life, why can't she who is successful doctor, think of herself and her life. Saru now feels that she has to face the situation courageously and it is she

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who has to decide about herself. Besides, one cannot get back to life, one has to continue on the path of one's own choice where even it leads;"all those ties we cherish as eternal and long-lasting are more ephemeral than a dewdrop". Saru says that the ultimate reality in one's self is one's own self. She is confused, gets nervous and finds no answer. Gradually, the need for quest arises. Saru laments "It's all a question of adjustment, really. If you want to make it work, you can always do it". Saru would only think "I wished... I had stayed what I was once ... a blindly adoring female". Now she is also able to identify that her being aloof started showing its impact on her children, specially the bewildered looks on Renu's face. However, all the events are capable of bringing reawakening slowly yet steadily.

Darkness makes one incapable to see things clearly and objectively. Darkness is also a some of constant fear when viewed from outside. It hampers the outlook of the inside, but it holds no terror in itself. The darkness of mind ceases to be terrible the moment one is prepared to face the situation. Saru has begun to understand things as she finds that the dark is not terrible. As realization draws upon her, becomes aware that neither secluded life nor the "wall of silence" shall be of any help to her. She decides to speak of her being, the individual fragment will not be taken away by anyone. To Saru, marriage is no guarantee for happiness. By gaining the identity as a woman, a new Saritha is identified to whom past was always receding and there was no future. Saru is in the process of gaining her identity as an individual.

Self-Realization of Her Own Character

Saru understands that it is she, who is self assertive and that she has been cruel to her people like her own brother Dhruva, to her mother and her husband, Manu. She feels that till her last breath, She will not be able to get rid of the thought that she was cruel to them.

You are your own refuge, there is no other refuge. Saru realizes, that one has to be sufficient within oneself because there is no other refuge elsewhere and Saru needs to apply to herself what she has cautioned Dhruva once. There is no need to escape from the darkness or curse the darkness.

The message which Shashi Deshpande finally conveys is that the women's emancipation lies neither in suffering quietly like a fatalist nor in repudiating all claims of the family and society like a rebel. She must draw upon her inner strength, which her education and knowledge has given her and bring about reconciliation between tradition and modernity without losing her own identity

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Vimala.V. M.A., M. phil., (Ph. D)

Research Scholar

Assistant Prof.essor in English,

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Bharath Niketan Engineering College,

Theni - 625531

Tamilnadu

India

vimjawahar@gmail.com

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