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ASSERTION OF LIBERATING SELF IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THE  
DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS*  
RESEARCH ARTICLE

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**Abstract**

This paper offered a close textual study of self of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and a fact emerges that she forms her fictional world equating traditional values and voices with that of new beliefs and old customs. She strongly speaks and opposes the notion which declares gender consciousness in respect of women of this so-called notion of feminism against men and take feminism as an idea, supportive to their literary creation and self-revelation. In *The Dark Hold No Terrors*, Shashi Deshpande seeks to discuss the male ego which refuses to accept a secondary position in marriage. The novel narrates the harrowing experience of Saru, who enjoys a greater economic and social status than her husband Manohar. Deshpande makes the readers aware of society's reaction to the superior status of the wife in a marriage, which leads the husband to develop an inferiority complex. Denied parental love and victim of gender bias, Saru, liberates herself ultimately from guilt and humiliation to gain full control over her life. This study aims to emphasize that it is important for women to seek self-respect, honour and dignity in society and at home. It also aims to highlight the fact that the real emancipation of women is yet to come. Men and women are not separate identities, they depend on each other for emotional and moral strength.

### **Assertion of Liberating Self in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors***

Shashi Deshpande emerges as an outstanding writer among the modern stream of women novelists. Her novels are the quest for reality in the traditional image of woman. Following Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal and others who documented this female resistance against a patriarchally-dominated Indian culture, Shashi Deshpande has comparatively a new face to the literary arena. She has re-incarnated the new Indian woman and has reinforced the female dilemma in her novels. She attempts to project the 'New Woman' who is assertive and conscious of her own individuality. She does not compel herself to use the thought pattern given to her by the patriarchal order. She attempts to evolve her own thinking process and her own intellectual pattern. Hence, she probes the mental states of the protagonists, their social and inter-personal relationships and their roles as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers. She also evolves her own moral code in the light of which she evaluates the social norms. The idealised image of woman based on the mythic models, like, Sita, Savitri, Gandhari - the silent sufferers - the archetypes of Hindu womanhood does not seem palatable to her. Rooted in her culture, Shashi Deshpande seems attuned to ordinary experience, vividly rendering the ordinary with intelligence, learning and insight.

The novels of Shashi Deshpande concentrate on woman as the central figure and theme. She brought to the forefront, first of all, the sensitive woman troubled and hemmed in by the social shackles, which blind her to traditional attitudes and expectations. Moreover, she depicts the discord and disappointment in marital relationships caused by traditional attitudes held by men. Hence what mostly dominates in her works is the woman's frustration and her attempt to achieve personal autonomy within the conventional marriage by seeking equal partnership and mental understanding. The crux of her works is the modern woman's journey towards self-realisation and fulfilment and the difficulties faced in it because of her various types of domestic roles. The quest for self-fulfilment is often manifested in the form of a conflict between traditions and individualism.

With a woman as the central figure, Shashi Deshpande probes the universally relevant issues of human relationships as well as the untouched phases of a man's psychology and personality also. The other new issues dealt with by Shashi Deshpande are purity and virtue in relation to sex and marriage, the assertion of the self as against obligation of the self, and self-indulgence as against self-denial. With her keen observation and sensitivity, Shashi Deshpande has brought out various problems that confront the middleclass woman. The woman's lack of identity in the patriarchal Indian society has been a pre-occupation with her. She admits that in her writing she is mostly influenced by Jane Austen, whom she still reads regularly, and in her thought she acknowledges the influence of Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer who stimulated her.

Besides these influences, her novels are often inspired by real life incidents or a person she met or read about. The idea of *The Dark Holds no Terrors* came to her when she met a couple. The wife had a better job and there was a very obvious tension between them. Despite the feminist tone,

she differs much in the art of articulation from those who wrote and write under the influence of the Women's lib in the West; her feminism treats woman as an individual. She possesses a keen insight into the subtleties of human behaviour, probes oneself more than the other self, identifies herself with the crisis of times or day-to-day life, in search of meaning and purpose of life and analyses why and what an individual is. We also notice in her novels two parallel streams in Indian thought and thrust- the individualistic and the socialistic, and she seems to contribute to the former notion.

Sarita alias Saru, the heroine in the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* tries to escape the drudgery of her life. Not just drudgery but brutality- both physical and psychological. In a pathetic saga of a tormented wife, Shashi Deshpande portrays the brief rebellion (rather an escape) of a young bright woman who is a successful doctor but is unfortunately sexually abused by her not-so-successful husband who is a teacher. There are a number of Indian novels that deal with women's problems. But the treatment is often peripheral and the novels end up glorifying the stereotypical virtues of the Indian woman, like patience, devotion and abject acceptance of whatever is meted out to her. But *The Dark Holds no Terrors* is a totally different novel in the sense that it explores the myth of man's superiority and of woman being a paragon of all virtues. It is based on the problems faced by a career woman trapped in a marital trap, refreshingly a new phenomenon in Indian English fiction.

Through *The Dark Holds No Terrors* Shashi Deshpande tells us the story of a marriage on the rocks. Saru is a 'two-in-one woman' who in the day time is a successful doctor and at night 'a terrified trapped animal' in the hands of her husband. The narrative in this novel meanders between the present and past. The stay in her father's house gives Sarita a chance to review her relationship with her husband, her dead mother and dead brother, Dhruva and her children Renu and Abhi. Though she remains unchanged till the end, she has a better understanding of herself and others. This gives herself the courage to confront reality and the dark no longer holds any terror. When Saru arrives at her father's home, she appears as a confused, hopeless, dull almost thoughtless and a recluse-runaway. Here immediately past overtakes her. The traditional Hindu woman rises up only to disappear too soon. Alienated from her husband, she comes there to seek her sense of belonging to the world, although the same she had lost herself knowingly. Saru's quest works up in two directions simultaneously- as an individual and as a female-only to meet at one point later, but both are very important to her. She desperately wants her father not to remain indifferent to her. Her mental condition is in a state of shock and bewilderment although she is enjoying ironically 'a most happy family' of four.

The novel moves on with the quest of an anxious, eager, ambitious, self-assertive and self-righteous woman, Saru who gains her 'self' successfully in the end after such toil. Her quest leads to uncover that strength in human beings which makes living a pleasurable possibility. A common strain as found everywhere in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is of the autobiographical 'self,' which has been often remarked. It means here that the novel is not autobiographical in the sense of describing Saru's entire life, but in it the author is rather portraying her own aspirations, longings

and emotions as an exercise of self-analysis. As the novel is an exercise in reflections of the past, the crisis, its cause and the quest for identity go side by side, excepting the last few pages devoted to the present realisation. The individual in Saru is in crisis on all fronts- as a mother, a wife, a sister, a daughter, and above all as a woman. She is in search of happiness and peace of mind. Apparently, she has all but the sense of belonging to her parents' home, her husband's home and her children. It fails her. She craved for her parents' affection and care, without which she is even unable to become a happy and complete woman. She questions:

Why is happiness always so unreal? Why does it always seem an illusion? It is a grief that has a bulk, a weight, a substance and stays real even after years. Happiness is so evanescent, nothing is left. Except sensations and feelings. (40)

During daytime, Manohar behaves as a tender husband. He enjoys her money but is unwilling to recognize her status. Although Sarita neither possesses the self-effacing quality of her mother nor the resignation of her grandmother. She finds herself in a shameful and pitiable condition and for the sake of her self-respect she does not like to tell it to anybody as if it would be syphilis or leprosy disease that one feels embarrassed to reveal it. All she wants is to: "Sleep peacefully the night through. To wake up without pain. To go through tomorrow without apprehension. Not to think, not to dream, just to live" (27). She wants everyone to realise that she is not just a wife, mother, daughter, sister but much more. Her hopes of finding maternal love received a final blow with Dhruva's accidental death for which she has always been blamed by her mother, while it was not the fact. She lacks a sense of belongingness and begins to feel alienated and rootless. Ultimately, she revolts against the traditional norms and takes the decision to go to Bombay and study medicine. Saru's meeting with Manu, an old college fellow, brings love in her life. For the first time the unloved child in her got the love and identity amongst people. But here again she faces diversities unfortunately for which she sets her mother responsible who always abused her as per her belief for the crimes she had never committed.

The traditionally accepted roles of a man being the breadwinner and wife, the homemaker dominates Manu's psyche. Ultimately getting frustrated on this ground he turns from an amorous lover to a sadist husband and a rapist:

... it was a monstrous invasion of my body. I tried to move, twisting my body, wriggling under the weight that pinned it down. It was impossible. I was pinned to a position of an abject surrender of myself ... I could not, I would not bear it. I began to fight, hopelessly, savagely. (10)

As a result, Saru loses interest in the profession for which she had struggled and leads a life with no focus. She works like a 'ventriloquist's dummy' by day and becomes a trapped animal by night. Many incidents of her daily life in which she observes the position of Indian women either in her relatives or colleagues make her conscious of the fact that the woman is forced to accept a life of self-effacement. Yet, even being a successful doctor, Saru is unable to find self-respect and dignity. Despite being professionally and financially independent, she feels degraded and abused. Like Dhruva, her younger brother, she is too afraid of the 'dark.' The objective of the writer is

to probe into the deeper layers of human sensibility, she shows that man's basic desire is to be himself, but the pressure of other considerations is so overpowering that it is lost in wilderness. Saru's returning home brings her the much-needed experience. She analyses the dark corners of her soul and tries to understand her life. A peaceful and undemanding life with Baba and Madhav, a poor student living with her father for study purpose, helps her. She realises that in her quest for independence, she had fallen into a trap. Somewhere on the way she had lost her real identity and her real self. She realises that she has to find her true self shedding other multiple selves that have choked her.

Shashi Deshpande has woven the story of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* around three main problem incidents, that are evoked step by step by the protagonist Saru from her bitter memory in a fragmentary fashion in the first three sections of the novel. These strands are put together in the last section and all are said responsible in regulating and even controlling Saru's life and their memory always eclipse Saru's happiness. The first one is Saru's interview for a special issue on career women brought out by a woman's magazine. The interviewer puts a casual query to Manu—"How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?" (182) It undermines Manu's confidence totally. He starts feeling a kind of inferiority complex. The lover in him dies when everybody knows the fact that Saru is no ordinary housewife but a doctor. But it reaches the point of culmination with the interviewer's query and a friend suggesting that a holiday tour could be possible

if one had a doctor wife. Unable to realize the situation and becoming practical he feels that he is a failure in life, Manohar lets his wounded male pride manifest itself in the form of sexual sadism: "the hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar body" (102). G.D. Barche, "*The Dark Holds No Terrors: Assertion of the Feminine Psyche*," has taken note of it without trying to peep into the causes at work in the deep recesses of her psyche. According to him, "Against her parents' wishes Saru married a boy from a lower caste. Her marriage to Manu is a sign of her turning away from the traditional ways and values her mother adhered to. She married to attain the autonomy of the self and to the secure love lost in parental home" (87).

Bed is the only place where he can assert his animal power over her wife. Manu becomes a mean, loathsome fellow. Saru's sexuality is thus destroyed with marital rape and she sees herself as nothing by "a dark, damp, smelly hole." Married to a practising neuro-pathologist, Shashi Deshpande presumably has intimate knowledge of the neurotic world of the likes of Manu. But she shows remarkable restraint in the depiction of these scenes and spares readers from the clinical details. Although Saru's career is Manu's problem, he shudders at the suggestion of her giving up the job and tries mediocre tricks of cajoling her by offering to take her out for a movie. He cannot think of going back to 'the shabby middle-class way of life' with cheap clothes and third-rate schools for the children. He lets pass her relationship with half-shut eyes. When Saru goes away to her father's house, he writes to her and plans to come and take her back home as if nothing had gone and that the marriage had given him "lifelong right to affection, love and respect."

The second moot point that is evoked in the novel with bitterness is Prof. Kulkarni's (Manu's one-time image builder at college who had encouraged their marriage) message. He makes Saru aware of the feelings of her mother, in which her mother totally rejects Saru's existence: "Daughter? I don't have any daughter. I had a son and he died. Now I am childless ... I will pray to god for her unhappiness. Let her know more sorrow than she has given to me" (178). The third important incident that Saru recalls repeatedly is her brother Dhruva's death by drowning in the pond. Saru's love for power can be identified in her relationship with the brother too. She also resolves through introspection in her parental house that being older to him by three years gave her the advantages of dictatorship. Because of the mother's extra and undue favouritism, Saru starts hating Dhruva. Saru recalls that her parents, mostly her mother, gave much importance to her brother, Dhruva and overlooked her. She recalls many small memories in which she realized this fact. One of them was the celebration of her brother's birthdays. Dhruva's birthdays were celebrated with full enthusiasm in a ritualistic way. This extra attraction of mother towards Dhruva, made child Saru jealous and being older to him by three years, in turn, provided the right of dictatorship on him.

Her sense of hate is depicted in her words: "I must show Baba something, anything, to take his attention away from Dhruva sitting in his lap. I must make him listen to me, not to Dhruva. I must make him ignore Dhruva" (32). Thus, Shashi Deshpande makes the readers realise that the child Saru, being deprived of love and care of her parents, especially of her mother, becomes jealous and a subconscious desire to get rid of Dhruva takes birth in her mind: "Dhruva and I ... Dhruva and I ... Did I push him? The question sprang at her out of nothing, again and again ... Did I? Did I?" (72) Now on self-realisation she comes to know that this charge on her for Dhruva's death is one of the many reasons of her persisting unhappiness. A feeling of guilt stays out in her mind that she is now destined for her gloomy life because of so many accusers viz., her dead mother, dead brother and even her husband also. She expresses a sense of expiation:

Maybe I deserve it after all, look what I've done to him. Look what I did to Dhruva. And to my mother. Perhaps if I go on suffering . . . It's because I wronged her that I'm suffering now. And, the more I suffer, the greater the chance, perhaps of my expiating that wrong. (185)

By this all, through opening the dark corner of Saru's heart, Deshpande here propounds the theory of karma of Hindu philosophy that as to why Saru had to suffer so much in her present life.

Delineating delicate relationship of mother and daughter, Shashi Deshpande indicates that giving much importance and weightage to the son at the cost of the love to daughter, makes her in return, rigid and obstinate and may be violent to some extent, as happens with Saru. She becomes more furious when her mother makes her recall that she is not beautiful.

Here, Shashi Deshpande is taking the humanity in general. She does not approve the notion of discrimination between a son and a daughter. For a mother a child is child and she should, therefore not discriminate in between a son and a daughter. It gives a very bad impact upon a child's mind. As an artist the author is championing the cause of love rather than a sense of

discrimination.

By such incidents Shashi Deshpande wants to clarify the importance of values like parental love and child care as never dying and that parents should not impose their will to an extreme extent on their children, because it will restrict them in developing their own independent personality. Like Saru, the student Madhav, who lives with her father, is also the victim of parental restriction. He is interested in growing flowers but his father insists him to develop only a vegetable garden and thus wants to suppress his aesthetic spirit in the undue favour of utilitarianism. A similar reaction we also find in Manohar, who does not like and allow his children to have a bicycle as his father had a cycle shop.

A close study of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* evolves that the modern writer like Shashi Deshpande is impatient of the prevailing cultural value pattern and is anxious for a change. The traditional, idealized, self-effacing, kind and affectionately devoted mothers, leading the stereotypical roles as protagonists are missing in Shashi Deshpande's novels. For example, mother is not creative and sustaining but destructive and stultifying agent as we

find in *The Dark Holds no Terrors*: "Daughter? I don't have any daughter. I had a son and he died. Now I am childless ... I will pray to god for her unhappiness. Let her know more sorrow than she has given to me" (160). In turn, Saru is also disgusted with the sordid mechanisation of childbirth and finds procreation an ugly and indecent process:

But when, after a day-long struggle, she had felt, through a haze of pain and shock, Renu's head forcing itself out, she had been outraged at the indignity of it. Her posture, her grunts, her cries, the pain which made an animal out of her was this the prelude to motherhood? (146)

Thus, here we find a protest and revolt against the conventional beliefs. The novels of Shashi Deshpande possess a different kind of delineation of motherhood as compared to that of

other Indian-English writers where motherly characteristics of patience, self-sacrifice, love and care and many other such types of values construct and support the idea of true womanhood. Though motherhood is still the value in literature which is simple, untarnished, feminine state remaining unblemished and untouched by any external pressures, in *The Dark Holds no Terrors* the motherhood myth as it is the only feminine fulfilment, is systematically modified.

Saru's arrival at her parental home gives her a chance for retrospection. She carefully watches and seriously thinks over the peaceful life with Baba and Madhav which helps her in self-actualisation. She realises that in her quest for independence, she had fallen into a trap. Somewhere on the way she had lost her real identity and her real self. Here Shashi Deshpande expresses that attainment of independent identity is a very difficult process for everybody and cannot be easily achieved. But it does not mean that it is not worth achieving.

Women like Saru are the road builders, paving the way for those who come after. Yet the abuse suffered by Saru- the terrible nightmare world in which

we as readers are engulfed in the opening pages of the novel is, very stoic. But the epigraph taken from the Dhammapada suggests that the weakness and the strength available to every individual lies in the possession of selfhood. Shashi Deshpande points out the hard road of life: "You are your own refuge; there is no other refuge. This refuge is hard to achieve" (160).

Here Shashi Deshpande means to suggest that the valuable idea of 'independence' and the notion of 'freedom' are never what they seem for male or female. The self might provide its own refuge, but it is never unattached or free-floating- one cannot be free from his or her roots. Thus, through delineating the character of Saru, Shashi Deshpande adds again that the self might ultimately be its own refuge (for better or worse), but it is also attached to others i.e. the real 'self' or essential self, is always tied to relational selves. Thus, looking at the very idea of emancipation with a new angle, Shashi Deshpande draws the result that the decision of renunciation from the worldly ties and responsibilities, is worth condemning. Shashi Deshpande strongly deals and goes ahead with the issues like self-realisation which are serious for both men and women commonly.

Exploring her extraordinary versatility, Shashi Deshpande takes the idea of gender consciousness in reference to women's human emancipation i.e. the fresh ideas for both men and women and asserts that it must operate within particular historical parameters which remains in imagination only when tried to get detached from the roots. It is constrained as well as free within that particularity- i.e. India is not West. She adds again that the self might ultimately be its own refuge, but it is also attached to others i.e. the real 'self' or essential self, is always tied to relational selves- a position that Saru herself reaches at the end of her narrative when she recognizes that the relational selves she had so vehemently rejected cannot be denied: "Yes, she was all of them, she could not deny that now. She had to accept these selves to become whole again. But if she was all of them, they were not all of her. She was all these and so much more" (220). Thus, taking herself beyond the ideas of women's emancipation, she strongly deals and goes ahead with the issues like self-realisation which are serious for both men and women commonly.

Through this novel Shashi Deshpande deals with the themes of love, marriage and sex on a vast plane. A deep critical study of the novel tells that she has a strong urge to bring the change in traditional values that still persist and dominate the minds of men and women even today. Marriage is still assumed to be primary business of a woman's life. With her extremely poignant and realistic portrayal of marital structures, she fixes a literary space for exploration of power mechanism in marriage. She demarcates between traditional, sexual and marital expectations and demand of self. She presents the ground for a change in the institution of marriage and suggests an inversion in the patriarchal set-up.

Through the story of Saru, Shashi Deshpande tells how sex, which is to be an essential part of love, turns and acts as an instrument of estrangement. When Saru was an adolescent, sex was a shame, then it became an embarrassment, then a matter of pride, then a source of enjoyment:

After the first moment of apprehension a purely physical response, or lack of it, rather there was never any withholding in me. I became an instantly physically aroused woman, with an infinite capacity for loving and giving, with a passionate desire to be absorbed by the man I loved. All the clichés, I discovered, were true, kisses were soft and unbearably sweet, embraces hard and passionate, hands caressing and tender and loving, as well as being loved, as an intense joy. It was as if little nerve ends of pleasure had sprung up all over my body. (40)

So Saru's later withdrawal cannot be interpreted as frigidity. She feels utterly humiliated at the thought of being used and reduced to "a dark, damp, smelly hole." She sees sex as a dirty

word and the experience of a terror, an inhuman insult to her personality.

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* should not be termed a feminist novel on the lone basis of the female centrality in it. Any definition of feminism attempted would be highly arbitrary as the very concept differs from person to person. If woman's very awareness of her predicament, her wanting to be recognized as a person rather than a woman, her wanting to have an independent social image be considered outstepping the limits, the novel has definite feminist leanings. Saru's feminist reactions date back to her childhood when she had to contend with sexist discrimination at home. The framework of the novel provides good acoustics for woman's voice and establishes that woman too has choices in life. Throughout the novel Shashi Deshpande maintains a commendable objectivity and avoids generalization and partial views. Having a considerable shift from the Feministic issues, the novel, in fact, explores questions like: "Who is the victim and who is the predator? Are the roles so distinct, so separate? Or are we, each of us, both?" (144) Saru analyses further:

There is something in the male ... that is 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 then have I not been destroyed. Does the sword of domination become lethal only when a woman holds it over a man? (70)

Women characters in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* raise their voice against the straight jacketed role models of daughter, sister, wife and mother and refuse to be the object

of cultural and social oppression of the age-old patriarchal society. They rebel against the social prohibitions, the cramped, wrinkled traditions and values of their ancestors, question the very concept of love, marriage and sex and feel an urge to redefine human relationship and behaviour.

Shashi Deshpande is concerned with portraying the role of women in family and

society. She explores the changes in the role of women as individuals as well as social beings. The orthodox society, with its existent culture, shames a woman if she defies the criteria of passivity and repression and doubts her virtue if she refuses to adhere to its norm. A woman is taught to suppress sexual desires and needs by conceding all pleasure to the male; even talking about participation and satisfaction in sex is a taboo for her. As a result, women develop apathy for sex and regard it as something undesirable. This

kind of thinking deprives them of the joys of life. Thus, she goes far away from living herself. A woman must learn to love herself, both as a woman and as a sexual being, before she can love another. She presents the image of women in family and society in her own way. Shashi Deshpande in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* has very effectively mirrored the problem of sexual impotency on the part of Manu leading to sexual sadism inflicted on Saru. The solution given by Shashi Deshpande to this sexual predicament is very clear and beyond any argumentation. Her credo is, "take refuge in the self: which means that the "self" is not metaphysical but psychological.

Through her novels, Shashi Deshpande reveals the state and condition of the present-day woman who is intelligent and articulate, aware of her capabilities, but thwarted under the weight of male-chauvinism. In other words, she means that the heroines will, in future, assert themselves: they will no longer allow their 'she' to get devalued. By this assertion of the self, Shashi Deshpande certainly takes her heroines to the pole of feminism and gives the birth to the 'New Woman.' Moreover, she emerges with the different qualities of a grave and powerful writer.

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