



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Initial subjugation and final Upshot of the female protagonist in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

**Dr. Mini V.S**

**Asst.Professor**

**Dept of English, St.Xavier's College for Women, Aluva, M G University**

**Abstract:** The present day Indian writing in English is characterized by a potent and influential representation of the New Indian woman who is thoroughly dissatisfied with the traditional manacles of cultural, natural or sexual roles assigned to her from immemorial times. Women are found striving hard to assert her self-esteem and dignity as a recognizable human being in this world. The writings of Shashi Deshpande reflect a supra-realistic picture of contemporary middle class Indian woman and project her issues to the outside world. The novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* projects the dilemma of a modern Indian woman who strongly resents the onslaught of her individuality and identity. The suppression and subjugation suffered by her have high consequences and the aggressive experiences of her life force her to look deep within her, thereby enabling her to discover her true worth.

Indian writing in English is now characterized by a powerful and influential representation of the New Indian woman who is thoroughly dissatisfied with the traditional shackles of cultural, natural or sexual roles assigned to her from immemorial times. They strive hard to assert their self-esteem and dignity as distinguishable human beings in this world. The writings of Shashi Deshpande reflect a genuine picture of contemporary middle class Indian woman and project her issues to the outside world. With a woman's perspective of the world, the novelist creates her own world where the woman is working hard to free herself from the tangles of tradition and patriarchy imposed on her since the dawn of the world.

As an effective novelist, Shashi Deshpande starts with the characters and then goes on to weave the stories. Her heroines are not ladies of supra-human power, but identifiable as women next door. Their lives are less colourful, without much adventure, punctuated and relieved by births, weddings and deaths. In fact, the “middle-classness” of her characterization proves to be a highly remarkable quality of the novelist’s technique.

Indian society is traditionally patriarchal, and in such a society women find it difficult to establish their identity. But modern Indian women, as presented by the novelist are working towards that goal. A woman’s fight in the modern Indian society is to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important of all, as a human being. Deshpande’s awareness of contemporary Indian social reality and her not aiming at the western audiences is reflected in her use of the English language. The sincerity of her language is the result of her identification with the present-day Indian writing and the Indian audience for whom she writes.

The essential spirit of a house is positioned on the mother figure of the family. It is not the building that makes a beautiful home, but it is the wife, the mother, the woman who has found peace in her heart that constitutes the spirit of a beautiful home. Among the various types of human relationships, that between man and woman is the most divine. Woman too enjoys an equal status with that of man. The Rig Veda presents the picture of woman as the equal of man in civic and religious spheres. But in later ages, the position of women gradually depreciated. The privileges employed by her were cut short, and there came the practice of early marriage and giving less education to them. Every opportunity of their development was thus blocked.

But as soon as India entered the modern period, several practices inimical to woman’s growth and development were removed. Great leaders like Gandhi, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda and others stressed on the urgent need to educate the Indian women and said that a bird cannot fly on one wing alone.

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) tells the story of Sarita, often referred to as Saru in the novel, her convulsions, struggles and conflicts. According to Carl G.Jung, “Middle life is the moment of the greatest unfolding, when a man still gives himself to work with his whole strength and his whole will. But in this very moment evening is born, and the second half of life begins” (45). Strong and intelligent people overcome the middle life crisis around thirtyfive years of age. The first half of their life is centered upon conforming to social obligation. In men, this involves acquiring education and a job. For women living in traditional culture, it is becoming a wife and a mother. According to Jung, its onset is marked by a growing dissatisfaction with the persona. Women suffer this more as they are merely trained to be wives and mothers. They are forced to develop a flawless social mask suited to the strict mould of the society around them. Thus the virtues encouraged in women are submissiveness, patience, generosity and industry, accompanied by the heedful repression of intelligence, ambition and the will to proceed. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* begins at a very critical point in the life of the heroine. Saru’s pilgrim progress to self-knowledge illustrates Jung’s ideas on “middle-life crisis” which leads to a recognition and individuation of the self.

The novel projects the dilemma of a modern Indian woman who strongly resents the onslaught of her individuality and identity. The suppression and oppression suffered by her have high ramifications and the aggressive experiences of her life force her to look deep within her, thereby enabling her to discover her true worth. Being a woman of duplicate selves, Saru is a successful doctor in the day time and a 'terrified animal' in the hands of her husband, Manohar at night. Manu is an English teacher in a third rate college. The novel opens with Saru returning to her father's house after a long gap of fifteen years- a place once she had discarded and also sworn never to return to. Unable to bear the sexual sadism of her husband, she comes back to her ancestral home where she hopes to get some solace. The rest of the novel is a remembrance of things past and a brief confession to her father with whom she had hardly communicated before. This short sojourn gives her a chance to examine her relationship with Manu, her dead mother, her dead brother, Dhruva and even her children, Renu and Abhi. Thus Saru's attempt to understand the male psychology in fact helps to expose the inner layers of the female psyche too.

The female protagonist of the novel appears to us as a brave lady because she had defied her mother to become a doctor as well as her caste to marry outside. She was highly conscious of the pathetic plight of her grandmother who was an unwanted burden in the family after she got separated from her husband. Since then, economic independence had become a goal in Saru's life which she believed to be a strong insurance against repression and suppression. Her medical profession boosted up her confidence and she was able to gain high respect and popularity among the public. In her self-centred search to attain progress, she could not recognize Manu's existence as something valuable and this nullification of his existence reduced him to a mere zero. But Manu let his male ego manifest itself in the form of sexual sadism in the "hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar body" (*Dark* 102). Saru finds this kind of repression extremely difficult to adjust with.

Saru's mother had always neglected her. She remembers her mother who once said, "Daughter? I don't have any daughter. I had a son and he died; now I am childless..." (*Dark* 178). Because of the extreme kind of favoritism, Saru hated her brother, Dhruva too. The kind of treatment she received from the inmates of her house, especially her mother forced Saru to defy any value of tradition and domesticity. But the treatment she receives from Manu is not of love, but of extreme antagonism and brutality. Thus, Saru's mother as well as Manu becomes the representatives of the norms and values established by the patriarchal society. Even if Saru was economically independent and even earning more than Manu does, she was stripped of her independence by virtue of being assigned the job of a housewife and a mother. Extremely fatigued by the duties, both indoors and outdoors, Saru wants to leave the latter one. She tells Manu, "Manu I want to stop working. I want to give it all up...My practice, the hospital everything" (*Dark* 72). But Manu is against Saru leaving her job as he thinks it difficult to maintain the same standard of living with only his income. He says, "On my salary? Come on Saru, don't be silly. You think we can live this way or that?" (73).

Saru finds it extremely difficult to psychologically adjust with her husband. Hence, separation between them becomes inevitable. Saru is a representative of the middle class women with a proper blend of acceptance and rejection, flexibility and rigidity, fantasy and reality living in the modern industrial, social structure. The novel is thus a movement from the repressive phase that brings about ramification, which finally culminates in the self-actualization and recognition of the female protagonist. The society presented in the novel is certainly one going through transitions where at least economically independent women could have choices in their life.

Saru is totally against the traditional stand which considers woman as a mere play thing in the hands of the elite sections of the society. This is evident from her inability to render a speech in the woman's college that advocates so.

Listen girls...whatever you do, you won't be happy, not really, until you get married and have children. That's what they tell us. And we have to believe them because no one has proved it wrong till now. But if you want to be happily married, there's one thing you have to remember. Have you girls, seen an old-fashioned couple walking together? Have you noticed that the wife always 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 M.A., he should be earning Rs 500, you should never earn more than Rs 499.....You can nag, complain, henpeck, whine, moan but you can never be strong. That's wrong which will never be forgiven (*Dark* 124).

The novel is a reaction against the traditional concept that "everything in a girl's life is shaped to that single purpose of pleasing a male" (*Dark* 148) and that is the reason why Saru was unable to deliver the trained speech effectively well. Her feeling of homelessness is an affirmation of her sense of isolation. She leaves "home" twice in the novel in her journey to self-actualization. For the first time, it was to establish independence from her mother's suppression and repression, and for the second time, it was to establish her indispensability to her husband and children. When victimized by Manu, she returns to her earlier home which once she had rejected. In spite of her coming back, she finds herself to be a refugee without home and considers her sojourn at home merely as a fleeting interruption. The feeling of homelessness even drives her at one point to relinquish her existence. She wonders:

Or be alone? Never a stretching hand? Never a confronting touch? It is all a fraud then, the eternal cry of...my husband, my wife, my children, my parents? Are all human relationships doomed to be a failure?.../ 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 (*Dark* 176).

But Saru will not be herself bogged down by this for long. She places trust in self-confidence and the possibility of human interdependence. The feeling of homelessness is suggestive of her inner tension and dissolution. She has to suppress her identity in front of her mother as well as her husband. At times she sees herself as two

separate halves, “a two-in-one woman”, a confident doctor at day time and a trapped animal in her husband’s hands at night. This dichotomy of the self in her is a main reason for her disintegration. The clash in Saru is a direct effect of Manu’s own opposition, who is a normal and loving husband at day time, but a monstrous animal at night. She understands that it is essential to find a balance between the two halves in order to maintain accord within and without. A confrontation of the disintegrating elements alone would make integration possible. She understands that escapism is not the way; the solution should come from within, and not from any outside source.

The title of the novel itself presents the need for confrontation in terms of light and darkness. Saru’s caution to Dhruva- “the dark holds no terrors. That the terrors are inside of us all the time. We carry them within us, and like traitors they spring out, when we least expect them, to scratch and maul” (*Dark* 76-77) is what she needs to apply to herself. Rather than escaping from the dark or cursing the darkness, she understands that it is essential to break the self-imposed exile, light a candle and declare that the dark holds no terrors. Her coming back to her original house, meeting her father and disclosing so many latent anxieties and fears to him help to reduce her tension to a great extent. But her father advises her to be bold enough to confront facts. She packs up everything to take an escape route, but becomes unsure of where to go. When Manu sends a telegram about his coming to take her, she pleads that her father should not open the gate for him.

Saru says that she has come to her father’s place to escape the drudgery of the professional life, even though it is actually to escape from the clutches of her husband. During the moments of utter despair, it is actually the call of her profession that gives her courage to confront reality. As a true doctor, we see her going to attend Sunita’s illness at the end of the novel. This indicates the assertion of her career. There can be no compromise about it. Confrontation can never be a one-way process. Manu too understands his failure and Saru’s success. The doctor in Saru is much more important than the wife or mother in her. Even if Saru’s decision to confront Manu leaves the ending of the novel a little unconvincing, it can be said that the Indian familial atmosphere always demands a harmony or synchronization despite violent conflicts and confusions.

Saru tries to analyse her life, what she has and what she has not, the experiences from the past, which disturb her and her current dilemma. Thus essentially, this novel is about an individual and her confusions to reach the phase of self-recognition and self-actualization. It is a movement from the extreme repressive phase to that of realizing her true self and recognizing her true worth. The story of Saru is the one that explains the guilt she bears for her brother Dhruva's death along with the guilt of abandoning her parents, guilt about her mother's death which she learns about accidentally and which in turn haunts her entire life, her feelings about herself, her career as a physician, her marriage, her feelings towards her husband, Manu and the kids. Throughout her life she remains trapped by her need to succeed at any cost, but faces much isolation and anguish all her life. This kind of utter loneliness a human being faces in life stands at the core of *The Dark Holds no Terrors*. Saru is lonely because she has not received any love all through her life. At the end of the novel, she understands that her life is more

than a mere dependency on parents or husband. This self-realization in fact leads to self-actualization or an awakening that illumines Saru's woman in her.

The irrational and bizarre traditions, ironically followed by women, are restraints on her growth as an individual. Even in the novel, all through her life one passion rules Saru's actions, to show her mother, to make her realise that she is also a person, a living and breathing person, a person with her own will, ambitions, and rights; to succeed in life is to be the solution for Saru's problems. Her mother thought that she should have died instead of her brother, as if her life did not have any meaning.

Men always have a loftier position in Indian household. They always get what they want, but women are destined to live in paucity. Why men are considered superior to women? Why this inequality? Saru experiences this in its wholeness and it creates strong consequence which leads to her self-actualization. It is not the dark that holds the terror but what is in her own careworn mind. The physician who thought that the body is the ultimate reality realizes the real control that the mind has over matter and finally learns to cure herself.

### Works Cited

Shashi Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd., 1982.

Jung, Carl.G. *Aspects of the feminine*. Trans. R.F.C Hull. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982.