

From Fear to Fearlessness: A Thematic Analysis of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror*

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande (b.1938) has been publishing her novels since 1980. They explore woman's quest for her identity. Her characters are middle class educated women who resort to silence and are denied the freedom to exercise their free will. Women, albeit endowed with immense potential make little use of it, when compelled to lead a life by stringent patriarchal norms. With no voice of their own, women are expected to carry out the role of a submissive wife, isolating themselves like a cocoon. Even if she becomes a success in her profession, she is not treated on par with her husband as he wants her to be one step below him and thus she becomes a victim of her husband's inferiority complex. The article attempts to analyse the problems faced by Sarita and how she succeeds in coming out of this in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror*.

Key Words: patriarchy, silence, mental agony, potential

Shashi Deshpande's writing is a long voyage of Indian Woman's search for self-identity and self-awakening as a human being and it focuses on the innermost cord of female experience. Deshpande's protagonists are educated middle class women linguistically and emotionally silenced by men in their families. Deshpande's realistic portrayal of her characters gives an insight into their mental make-up and psychological problems. Her admirable relentless yet sympathetic, probes into the innermost depths of women's psyche have enabled Deshpande in her thoughtful narratives of ensnared women's struggles in an insensitive, chauvinistic and male dominated society "that has made it possible for men to impose on women their ideas of what women should be like and how they should live" (Ranjana Harish, Interview with Shashi Deshpande 28). In spite of their mental anguish, suffering and suffocation in an androcentric culture, they arise like phoenix birds with great courage and fortitude and succeed in having a voice of their own and materialize their dream to be a whole human being. Women breaking their silence, finding a voice of their own and searching for their identities are the recurring themes of her novels like *The Dark Holds No Terror*, *That Long Silence*, *Roots and Shadows*, and *The Binding Vine*.

A loving and supportive husband, happy conjugal life, and an emotionally contented married life are the hopes and dreams of a woman when she steps into a married life. But in the case of certain women, these dreams get shattered when their husbands dominate them and when they realize that their very existence is being crushed down by the patriarchal norms imposed on them, fettering their freedom of speech. When the husband turns out to be a rapist, sexually harasses her, the mental agony of the wife gets exacerbated. Deshpande's novels delineate such issues.

The Dark Holds No Terror narrates the saga of Sarita, a middle class, educated and professionally proficient doctor, in the backdrop of a traditionally oriented Indian Society. The narrative shuttles between the past and the present. Fed up by her husband's sadism and inferiority complex and bored with her profession as a doctor, Sarita decides to return to her parental home, soon as she learns of her mother's demise. Her home coming, on the pretext of seeing her father after a gap of fifteen years, is truly an escape from the terrors she has experienced from her husband. "It was not to comfort her father that she had come. It was for herself" (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terror* 43). She longs "...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). Sarita longs to discharge the agonizing thoughts off her mind, desires to seek peace and consolation.

Sarita's stay in her childhood-home, affords her ample time to contemplate in full privacy, over her unhappiness as a daughter and as a wife. Though she sleeps without fear, the memories of her piteous upbringing haunt her as "if she had exchanged one pair of pinching, torturing shoes for another" (83). The silence that pervades her home appears to be throbbing and heavy which actually takes her back to the emptiness she has experienced in her childhood. Sarita is emotionally distanced from her mother who loves her son more and she feels that she is a nonentity when compared to him. Even she feels envious of her younger brother who fears darkness without knowing that "the dark holds no terrors. That the terrors are inside us all the time. We carry them like traitors they spring out, when we least expect them, to scratch and maul" (85).

Her bitterness gets aggravated when she is held responsible for the death of her little brother, who is drowned to death. Her mother's hysterical words haunt her throughout her life, "you killed him, why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead?" (191). The hatred ingrained in her makes her consider herself as "the wronged child, the unloved daughter and the scapegoat" (182) and compels her to escape from the world of anguish to a world of freedom where she can be her own self. Her mother, bound by traditional beliefs is loath to accept Sarita's decision to pursue medical studies. Like a stereotypical conservative woman, she deems that a girl should be married at an early age and get settled in life; she presumes that the female child a liability while a male child an asset to the family. Sarita is prevented from asserting her individuality, bound by her mother's traditional outlook. The impartiality she has felt from her childhood, emotionally distances Sarita from her mother. Her mother says, "It rained heavily the day you were born. It was terrible" (169). These words seem to her that it is her birth that is terrible for her mother, not the rains. Sarita's marriage with a non- Brahmin boy infuriates her mother who considers her daughter dead.

Though the first phase of their married life is happy, Sarita's successful career as a doctor creates ripples of disharmony in her conjugal life. There begin the terrors of the dark. Manu's inferiority complex replaces the love and affection he pours on her and takes revenge by raping her when she is sleeping, inflicting pain on her both physically and mentally. He attacks her like an animal, "With his hands, his teeth, his whole body" (201). She starts fearing the fall of darkness. The competent doctor during day time is an entrapped animal at night. To escape the sadistic cruelty of her husband, she returns home with disdain. After many days of introspection, she finally decides to pour her heart out to her father, who patiently listens to her painful outbursts. His suggestion to her to give him treatment augments her mental anguish as she feels she has wronged her brother, mother and now her husband. Her father tries to bring

her to the present moment as she has been caught in the memories of the past, haunted by feelings of guilty conscience. Sarita experiences the fear of darkness which her brother experienced once and now she realizes the reason why he came up to her for help. She feels forlorn, “no place to go, no room to breathe...she was alone, alone in the dark like Dhruva. And her mother who had died alone in the middle of the night (219). As this thought of loneliness and nothingness creeps in, she experiences a strange and “queer sensation as if everything was unreal. Her own body felt insubstantial...even her fears fade into insubstantial ghosts. And with thus sense of unreality came the thought... none of this matters, not really (219). The traumatic experiences she has undergone makes her an escapist, when she takes refuge in her father’s house, but later Madhav’s words to her father, “I can’t spoil my life because of that boy. It’s my life, after all” (208), transforms her mental make-up and boosts up her confidence to reconcile with her husband. She decides to passionately embrace what she has rejected resolutely. She reassures her father, “Baba if Manu comes, tell him to wait. I’ll be back as soon as I can”(221). Sarita understands the inexorable truth that “We come into this world alone and go out of it alone. The period between is short. And all those ties we cherish as eternal and long lasting are more ephemeral than a dew drop” (208).

Sarita who advises her brother not to fear darkness, fears darkness, and later comes out of that fear, through the voyage into her inner self and realizes the potential in her and decides to go back home and face the challenges of life and this shows how “in this unpredictable world, even total despair can open up a new spring of elemental self-confidence” (Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* 758). Shashi Deshpande in an interview opines, “For me, the real truth of feminism is that it means a better relationship between men and women, a better life for men and women. A relationship without fear and inequality is always better. And a life in which both men and women have a chance to utilize their potential to the full is bound to be better” (Ranjana Harish, Interview with Shashi Deshpande 29).

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