

# A Wife's Dilemma: A Reading of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror*

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## Abstract

Women in modern India seem to have acquired education and financial independence as well as an identity of their own. With the eradication of various social evils in Indian society since early 19<sup>th</sup> century, there has been an increase in the number of woman aspiring for education and empowerment. However, in spite of various measures taken for their upliftment, women are still facing various forms of oppression and abuses silently. Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror* is a novel that portrays a female protagonist during the 1980s, caught in mayhem of social obligations and individual freedom. The novel skillfully depicts the dilemma of a woman who, in spite of her financial independence is unable to break free from the confines of society and marriage. This paper attempts to analyze the role of the institution of marriage in Indian society and its several facets. Moreover, the paper will focus on the dilemma faced by a woman as a wife irrespective of her social position.

**Keywords:** Economic independence; Indian society; Marriage; Sexual violence; Social norms.

## Introduction

Although movements concerning women's condition in Indian society dates back since the 19<sup>th</sup> century reform movements under the colonial influence, it was limited mostly to the women of upper castes Hindus. Confined within some of the major social issues like abolition of *Sati system*, spread of education, widow remarriage, etc., the movements were limited in their scopes and observations so far as the question of gender and women's role in every aspects of the society were concerned. Moreover, the movements in pre-independent India seemed to have dispossessed the lower castes women of the exposure of their condi-

tions and their concerns were noted and highlighted by a few reformers like Mahatma Phule and TarabaiShinde who brought out the issues of lower castes women. (Ghosal) It is worth mentioning that the late nineteenth century did witness some of the greatest Indian feminists like Rasasundari, Kailashbasini, Kundamala and many others who spoke for the upliftment of women's condition but at the same time there was a growth of a new concept of womanhood which was subservient to the nationalist agendas. Uma Chakravarty writes, " the national identity lay in the culture and more specifically in its womanhood. In the changed political and social environment, the image of womanhood was more important than the reality" ( Charkravarty as quoted in Ghosal 798) The construction of an ideal image of woman as pious and modest and the nationalist fervor during the period overshadowed the women's question in the truest sense. Moreover, the minimal feminist spirit existed at the period could not reach women in every nook and corner of the nation. In other words, it may also be said that the feminist movements during the period couldnot delve deep into the grassroots. Feminism, in its fullest strength emerged in India only during 1970s and 80s when numerous feminist groups raised their voices against various forms of gender based violence and discriminations.

While on one hand, issues regarding women's health, education, economy and empowerment were focused, on the other hand, several socio-economic and ecological issues too were raised by the feminist groups. Women also got involved in various campaigns and agitations like Women's revolt in Bengal during 1946, Chipko movement in 1980s, Shahada movement in 1970s and many more. The 1980s feminist movements showed an enormous progress in reforms related to women's issues. Apart from various measures taken up by the government of India, there emerged various NGOs which worked against numerous forms of violence against women as well as gender based discrimination prevalent in the Indian societies.

Thus, the period between 1970s and 1980s in India ushered in some of the new trends in the feminist movement which continued till the contemporary times. Women's status in India had radically changed since then thereby lessening the extent of exploitation and oppression meted upon them. The major changes in the field of economy, politics, legislation, law and orderas well as socio-cultural aspects have made their lives easier and granted equal status as men. Women in modern India seem to have acquired education and financial independence as well as an identity of their own. As stated by Balram S. Sorot , " Free India pro-

vided the female population the constitutional right to equality of opportunity and status before law, right against discrimination, right to property, reservation of seats in legislative bodies at various levels, rights of choice in marriage, and numerous other rights and privileges." (Agarwal, 78). However, despite the emergence of feminist movements, question may arise as to what extent these reformations have contributed in reaching out women of all the communities and regions of the nation. Did these movements lead to complete freedom of women from all the socio-economic and political subjugation in every nook and corner of the country? Did education and economic independence contributed in liberating women from the fear and impediments generated by patriarchy since time immemorial? Questions like these and many more regarding the position of woman in Indian society often lead to enquiry into the reality of the same. The present paper thus focuses on these questions through a reading of Shashi Deshpande's novel "*The Dark Holds No Terror*" published in 1980.

The novel depicts the trauma and fear of Sarita, a married woman who faces incessant sexual abuses inflicted upon her every night by her husband. What is more startling is the fact that she is a doctor, an independent woman yet as a wife fails to fight back against the brutal tortures. The novel thus highlights the plight of working women who in spite of their financial independence fell prey to the abuses and social obligations as women. Just like Sarita, there are many women in our society who continue to face severe discrimination and injustice which often go unnoticed. One would often come across cases of oppression and abuse against women in different societies. India is still fighting against crimes such as rape, dowry, honour-killing, witch-hunting etc. in spite of several measures for women's safety. It is the patriarchal society that lays the foundation of such violence against women.

Chowdhury and Patnaik thus write, "In Indian families, gender roles are well differentiated and influence the socialization process from birth onwards. From early in life, children begin to experience gender based differentiation in their relationship with others, in distribution of family resources and in entitlement to family membership like nutrition health care and education etc. Both boys and girls grow with the knowledge of the special value attached to the male child" (Chowdhury and Patnaik 61). Furthermore, it has always been taught to the girls that they are temporary members of their natal homes and thus their ultimate goal is to get married and settle down and adjust themselves in that new home in a new environment.

Of various social practices in Indian societies, marriage is one of the fundamental and important practices portraying the cultural and traditional norms. It is an indispensable part of Indian societies which however differs in terms of rituals and practices depending upon the cultural variations. Contemporary Indian society however has witnessed a huge transformation in the practices of marriages. While child marriages have been considered illegal, arranged marriages too have undergone changes. A girl's opinion now- a- days is considered important in case of an arranged marriage. Yet, not every woman enjoys such privileges. There are certain gendered practices which prevail even today. Majority of the patriarchal societies uphold certain norms and practices often oppressive towards women. While marriage is often considered a source of financial support for many women, there are women who in spite of being financially independent consider marriage as an important factor that will provide them a social identity. As Chowdhury and Patnaik wrote, " Marriage is regarded as the ultimate goal of a girl's life when she will break her relationship with her natal family and enter a new home that might be unfriendly and harsh . With this attitude the girl grows in her natal home and prepares herself for her marital home: to be uprooted and replanted again." ( Chowdhury and Patnaik 61). In the process of growing, thus a girl often internalizes the norms and expectations of the society and thus cultivates the ideas of tolerance, adjustment, sacrifice and service, self-restraint that she will maintain in her husband's home. (Chowdhury)

It is therefore, the social upbringing of a girl that determines her role and actions in the face of any form of violence. As mentioned above, various cases of domestic oppression are still prevalent in the societies. Marital rape is one such heinous crime that many women have been facing silently. However, in terms of criminal justice system, the concept of marital rape does not actually exist. As stated by Richard J. Gelles in " Power, Sex, and Violence : The Cases of Marital Rape", " Since forced sexual relations between a husband and wife are not legally considered cases of " rape" , the question arises whether or not a wife herself views the incident as a "rape"." (Gelles 340). Thus, a married woman in most cases prefers to remain silent about the forceful sexual intercourse as this act though violent is expected to be normative between spouses.(Gelles). Gelles further states, "Because the law views rape as an act of sexual penetration of the body of a woman *not one's wife*, there are virtually no official statistics available on the subject of marital rape" ( Gelles 341). Moreover, it has also been evident that women who complain against it and seek justice are often mistreated or ignored by the police or lawyers and judges (Gelles). These factors ultimately lead many women to suffer silently the oppres-

sion inflicted upon them inside their 'home'.

With the growth of feminist writings in India, issues related to women gained prominence in the literary works of many Indian English writers, especially, female writers. As India experiences great socio-political and economic transformation during the 1980s, the literary writings of women writers seem to be incorporated with new ideas and issues concerning woman and her position in the society. Women novelists and poets form a significant part of Indian English literature in post-independence era. Writers like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal, Shobha De and many more seemed to have gained immense popularity in literature through their groundbreaking writings. Shashi Deshpande is one of the prominent figures in the field of Indian novels. With her typical Indian subjects, she tries to portray the plight of middle class women and their struggle in the contemporary traditional Indian society. As stated by M.R. Harru, "The strong point about her novels is her delineation of the woman's inner world. Her female protagonists struggle to find their own voice and are continuously in search to define themselves." ( Agarwal, 64).

### **Analysis**

Published in 1980, *The Dark Holds No Terror* traces the journey of an Indian middle class woman who constantly suffers from an unutterable fear. However, the most striking factor here is that the protagonist is not a typical Indian housewife; rather she is an economically independent woman with an identity of her own. Born in a conventional Marathi family, Sarita commonly referred to as Saru in the novel, experiences the patriarchal restraints right from her childhood. Neglected and ignored in her childhood especially by her mother, Saru faces an inexpressible torture even after her marriage. Married to a person of her own choice, Saru's dream of a happy married life shatters completely when her husband starts torturing her sexually every night. The sexual act turns out to be so painful and brutal on the part of her husband that she sees her husband transforming into a horrible monster.

The marital rapes every night have traumatized her so much that she escapes her 'home' to her parents' 'home' which she deserted years ago promising not to visit again. Visiting her widowed father after years, Saru can feel the lack of attachment and ties even in her childhood home but she continues to stay there leaving behind her children and husband. It was during this period that Saru finds a space to think and introspects her past as well as present. While she remembers her children staying far away

from her, the fear of confronting her husband and his tortures refrains her from going back to her children. Despite her financial stability, she is always at a loss to take a bold decision like divorce for she is a wife and a mother of two children. It can be considered to a great extent that the social upbringing in a patriarchal set up has prevented Saru from thinking of separation from her husband and adjust in that vicious setting of an unhappy marriage. Shashi Deshpande has beautifully narrated the course of Saru's struggle and her realization of her own self as an individual. The research paper thus attempts to analyze Saru's dilemma as a wife in the novel *The Dark Holds No Terror*.

Often neglected and ill-treated by her domineering mother, Saru's small-town childhood has never been a happier one. Her dark skin is another factor that makes her feel inferior to her brother as well as other fair girls around during her childhood as well as adolescence. Saru says, "I was an ugly girl. At least, my mother told me so. I can remember her eyeing me dispassionately, saying... You will never be good looking. You are too dark for that." (Deshpande, 61). Moreover, she has always been haunted by a sense of guilt for failing to save her brother Dhruv from drowning which is further intensified by her mother who always blames her for Dhruv's death. Her mother's words "she killed her brother" abuse her mentally throughout her life. Life is not easy even in the present day when she is a successful doctor and has married the man she has loved. From outside, Saru seems to be happier both personally and professionally. She is happily married with two children and has been a successful doctor. But as a wife she suffers every night when her husband, Manohar or Manu rapes her.

The novel begins with a nightmarish description of violent scene where a woman's body is abused sexually by a man who transforms into a monster during the act hurting the female body cruelly. Saru describes, "The beginning was abrupt. There had been no preparation for it. There were no preliminaries, either. At first it was a nightmare of hands. Questing hands that left a trail of pain. Hurting hands that brought me out of cocoon of a blessed unreality" (Deshpande, 11) She further describes, "The dream, the nightmare, whatever it was, continued. Changing now, like some protean monster, into the horror of rape. This was not a death by strangulation; it was a monstrous invasion of my body". (Deshpande, 12) Even after all these painful and oppressive nights, Saru continues to live with Manohar as a wife. She could have easily got separated from her abusive husband for she was an educated and independent woman but she has not taken any such steps. What prevents her from taking such steps lies

at the very core of Indian patriarchal social system which constructs the gender roles of a man and a woman. The primary factor can be the fact that she is a wife and this abusive man is her husband. It is customary in a typical Indian society that a girl is always brought up with certain conventional ideas. One such idea is that a wife should adhere to the needs or choices of her husband. Defying a husband is like defying the societal norms. (Chowdhury et al) Saru, after the painful scene turns towards the monster and realizes that the latter is "no more a stranger, but my husband" (Deshpande, 12). And thus suffers from a dilemma between her individuality and her role as a wife. M.R Harru in his essay "Psycho-analytical Study of the Characters of S. Deshpande" writes about Saru,

"Through her character the novelist wants to project the post-modern dilemma of a woman who strongly resents the onslaught on her individuality and identity. The antagonism is faced mainly from two person – Saru's mother and Manohar, Saru's husband. Both of them represent the values and norms established by the patriarchal society" (Agarwal, 65)

Thus, despaired and muddled by her married life, Saru decides to re-visit her maternal home after her mother's death. And it is in this home that she finds a space to contemplate over her life as an individual. Even though the father-daughter relationship seems to be devoid of the usual bonding, yet she finds a sense of security and safety from the brutalities of nights with her husband. She is no more afraid of going to bed and the old bruise and pains have disappeared. Her new abode though temporary, helps her introspect her life so far, making her long for a space of her own. Yet the pain and restlessness never leaves her. Her inability to disclose the terrible reality of her married life with Manohar constantly makes her suffer more and more. Recalling her mother's warning before her marriage with Manohar, she is now compelled to believe in the same and thus starts thinking that "it was as if a kind of disease had attacked their marriage.

A disease like syphilis or leprosy, something that could not be admitted to others. This very concealment made it even more gruesomely disgusting, so that she was dirty and so was he and was their marriage." (Deshpande, 70). No matter how worse her life becomes with Manohar, Saru is bound to continue the same for the sake of her children which is "enough to make the word divorce a frightening one" (Deshpande, 70). At the same time she is totally against the idea of accepting such a life as her 'fate' just like her predecessors. There has been constant struggle in her mind between

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her choices of being a free individual or a devoted wife and a mother.

Years after her marriage, Saru's professional status is left as the only means of her survival in the face of marital disharmony. Yet, this very disposition of hers is also a cause of all those terrible nights when she gradually understands that her husband is a sadist. She says, "It is because I am something more than his wife that he has become what he is. If I can go back to being nothing but his wife...and yet was I ever that? ... he may no longer resent me." ( Deshpande, 78) The horrors of nights even made her once think of quitting her job in the hope of a peaceful life.

Manohar has become such a frightening name that even his letters and handwriting disturb her. What is more surprising is that there is a vast difference between the man at night and the man during the day. "She has almost given up trying to put the two men together, the fearful stranger of the night, and the rather pathetic Manu of other times. But it never ceased to frighten her, this dichotomy". ( Deshpande, 96) This kind of confusion and dilemma often hold her back from talking about it freely. The more she suffers from the marital rapes, the more she keeps on silencing the issue. She has always been prevented by some unknown force whenever the thought of taking any action comes to her. She finds no words to describe her husband's cruelty in front of the world. Moreover, the thought of her children coming to know about their parents is totally upsetting for her. Deshpande writes, "There was no more she could say. Bed, the one she shared with her husband, was to her an intensely private place. She could not, would not, draw aside the curtain that hid it from the world." ( Deshpande, 97) She further thinks of her children again who will surely come to know about it after the divorce. And then she won't be able to look into their eyes.

Marital rapes are most common form of oppression inflicted upon women which has always been veiled with a sense of shame. Women hesitate to disclose the bedroom privacy moreoften even if it is full of pain and agony. Moreover, the fact that the concept of marital rapes do not really exists in the criminal justice system of India is the primary reason for the silence. Instead of speaking up the shameful reality, most women prefer to suffer in silence or remain in a state of dilemma whether to unveil it or hide it from the world who they know will never readily respond to it in a positive manner. Saru , a modern, independent woman too is not an exception. " It was strange that after all these years of having been in full control of her life, she now has this great desire to let go. To put herself in another's hand." ( Deshpande, 97). Struggling constantly for all those days

in her father's place, she ultimately gathers courage to unveil the dirty reality of her life. She says, " My husband is sadist" ( Deshpande, 199). Her outburst releases her from the dilemma that she has been stuck for long. Yet, the thought of confronting her husband disturbs her so much that she decides to run away before he arrives. It is at this crucial moment that she begins to feel liberated from the fear that has been haunting her for so many years. She identifies herself as an individual rather than a mere wife sexually tortured by her husband. Her act of running away to help the little patient and asking her father to tell Manohar to wait is indicative of her reawakening in a wider world free from all the societal confines.

Apart from Saru, there are two other woman characters or wives in the novel, namely her mother and her school friend, Smita. Both these women have completely contrasting characters from each other as well as from that of Saru. While Saru's mother is the domineering matriarch who controls the entire household including her husband and takes all the decisions, Smita ,on the other hand has ended up being a housewife and a mother of three children. She is dependent on her husband who appears to be quite dominating and calculative in terms of giving any money to his wife. Her identity is what her husband has given her by changing her name from Smita to Anju or Geetanjali. In spite of this, Smita is happier than Saru because she has no fear like the latter. While Saru is ashamed and hesitant of disclosing the dark truth of her life, Smita succumbs to the patriarchal domination readily and thus seems to talk freely about her married life.

**Conclusion:** The paper aimed at looking into the dilemmas that an Indian woman suffers from in matters of decision making as an individual. It is inferred from the discussion that a woman's role as a wife and a mother acquires greater importance for her than being an independent individual. Saru's financial independence is not fully instrumental in providing her a secured life for she is also a victim of the male chauvinism. Throughout the novel the protagonist constantly suffers from a sense of dilemma and restlessness at not being able to talk freely about the rapes every night. It can be concluded that women in modern India do suffer physical and mental oppression despite a number of measures taken for the safety and security of their rights while their role as working woman is often sidelined. The painful journey of a young wife and her consequent reawakening as a free individual assures the reader of a positive beginning, yet what took her so long to do the same is what one needs to ponder upon. The novel thus highlights the reality that there is a long way to go for the society to be considered gender neutral.

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