



## A Study of Feminism in the Novel of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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### Abstract

*Shashi Deshpande's novels are mainly concerned with the self-assertion and loneliness of woman. Her chief concern is human relations, not the traditional but the new redefined human relations especially the relationship between man and woman. She portrays the new Indian woman and her dilemma. She concerns herself with the plight of the modern Indian woman trying to understand herself and to preserve her identity as wife, mother, and professional and above all as human being. Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a tremendously powerful portrayal of a woman's fight to survive in a world that offers no easy way out. Sarita, the protagonist uses her profession to overcome her dilemma.*

**Key words:** Character, Personality, Profession, Realization, Society

The Indian English women novelists present women as stragglers to break out from the traditional patterns of sexuality and sensuality and to discover themselves as human beings capable of playing a positive role in the development of society. Different writers opt for different strategies to cope with the situation in which their women characters are caught. Shashi Deshpande possesses a deep insight into the female psyche. Though Shashi Deshpande does not want to be labelled as a "feminist", she admits that her writings emerge from her "own intense and long suppressed feelings about what it is to be woman in our society." She further adds, "My writing comes out of my consciousness of the conflict between my idea of myself as a human being and the idea that the society has of me as a woman."

Her characters also face the same conflict between the new emerging self confident, educated women and the old tradition bound, submissive women. The characters try to resolve this conflict through self-realization emerging out of the trapped

situation through reconciling both i.e. her own identity along with the family. She has been influenced by the Western feminists like Simon de Beauvoir, Betty Freidan and Germaine Greer but she knows her limits and does not go far to defy marriage. In an interview with Vanamala Vishwanath, she says that these feminists have not influenced her directly, but they "helped to place ... confusion and put them in order."

She is 'pro-woman' but not 'anti-man' in her outlook. She raises the issue of supremacy of male over female but does not believe in the separatist stance. She brings out the real picture of the sufferings and tortures of Indian women who are educated, professional, sensitive and well aware of her legal, social and conjugal rights. She reflects the household conflicts between husband and wife operating at emotional, intellectual and sexual levels where husbands want to dominate to satisfy their ego. Deshpande is fully aware of the traditional Indian society so does not surpass the socio-cultural limits. She admits that her writings are about women and for the women.

Her characters are born out of a typical Indian middle-class situation. Her characters seek freedom and self-identity in conformity with the society they live in and without moving away from one's culture. Hence, it is appropriately said about Deshpande that she, "moves between two types of value-systems, one that questions and the other that accepts. Her characters seem to fall into acceptance mode, even as she excels in the Platonic method of looking for answer."

The protagonist, Saru's attempt to fight for her existence reaffirms her personal identity which is in danger of vanishing under the clouds of patriarchy. Saru's main weapon in this fight is her profession. Since childhood Saru had faced the reality of gender disparity and this causes a hatred for womanhood in her. For her, growing into a woman is "something shameful". She hates her femininity. It is her medical profession which gives



her self-reliance and a purpose in life. She does not like the idea of complete submission to her husband. Her thinking is reflected through her patients who are the victims of loneliness, neglect at home, and sexual-abuse and physical violence. She hates the women who become martyrs, "Going on with their tasks, and destroying themselves in the bargain, for nothing but a meaningless modesty" (The Dark 107). This questioning of women's inferior and subordinate position as wife at home forms the basic theme of the novel.

Saru fascinated by the Manu's personality did not take notice of his professional failure and lower caste. She defies her mother's traditional thinking and marries him. She was very much satisfied with her married life in her a room in a chawl and happy of being the wife of a "superior male". The problem started the day her neighbours came to know about her profession. The respect that Saru gets disturbs the traditional balance of superior husband and inferior wife. She recalls,

... it was there it began...this terrible thing that has destroyed our marriage...the same thing that made me inches taller made him inches shorter. He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband (The Dark 42).

Saru's profession seems to be the binding factor in her marriage, as there is no love and caring present in their relationship. At the same time, Saru's profession gives her superiority over her husband. Like a typical male, Manu cant tolerate the superior wife and in his frustration to show superiority over his wife, he starts assaulting her sexually at night. His continuous tortures reduced this reputed lady doctor into a "terrified trapped animal."

Her married life crumbles as she attains heights in her professional career. The rift deepens when a reporter from a women's magazine who is interviewing Saru asks Manu, "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?"(200) That night Manu assaulted her in bed to show his male superiority and later it becomes his habit. He fails in his traditional role as a provider to the family. Wife is the "provider and protector" which is not acceptable in Indian society as it hurts the male-ego. Her feelings are reflected in a talk to the young girls,

A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband.If he's an M.A., you should be B.A. 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. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy

marriage... .No partnership can be equal... .If the scales tilt in your favour, God help you, both of you (137).

It is the profession which takes her away from her family, her children and the social conventions. She even thinks of sacrificing her job as she was aware of the fact that her profession is the cause of Manu's frustrations but that would not help her as she earns most of the money for the family. Saru, thus, depicts the duality deeply entrenched into the psyche of educated middle class woman. In Saru's case there is a role reversal. Saru's life focuses on the plight of working woman. She gets divided between the two selves and gets lost in between. She reflects, "... my mother had no room of her own She slept in her bed like any overnight guest in a strange place. And I have so much my mother lacked. But neither she nor I have that thing 'a room of one's own'" (135- 136).

In spite of economically independent, she finds herself no better than her mother. Saru's search for a space in her parent's home, in Dhurva, in her husband, Manu, and in her children is useless. It lies inside her. And this self-realization diffuses all her terrors and fears which is reflected through the prologue, The Dhammapada:

***You are your own refuge.  
There is no other refuge.  
This refuge is hard to achieve.***

She now realizes that to be free from all bondages is not the way to solve the problems. In order to dispel the darkness of her mind, she has to light the candle of truth of self -realization. With this truth and self-realization she is able to find a place in the society. The darkness ceases to be terrible the moment she decides to face the situation. K.R.S Iyengar very aptly remarks, "In this unpredictable world, even total despair can open up a new spring of elemental self-confidence" (Iyengar 758).

So, Deshpande's woman has come out of the cocooned existence and goes beyond the established role of woman. She realizes her strength and uses this not to defy man or society rather uses her strength in becoming a responsible human being who accepts the basic human values like motherhood and responsibility of the family along with her autonomy. Deshpande's aim is not the female-autonomy and destruction or subjugation of the male but to create a platform where both are equal and indispensable for each other. She uses her feminism to create a transformed society where both tradition and modernity co-exist. She does not



transgress the limits of Indian socio-cultural reality and so does not favour any confrontation between man and woman, between husband and wife. Saru represents the problematic of the life, of the modern Indian woman who is trying to balance her role as a mother, daughter and wife and as a professional and above all as a human being.

This shows that profession cannot bridge the gap between men and women. And this equality can be maintained only by the realization by both. Man should have the courage to accept their wife's profession with dignity and, on the other hand, women should fulfill the social duties as wife and mother along with their profession. At the end of the novel, we see Saru in complete peace with her profession. It is the profession which saves her from self-annihilation. She is able to acknowledge her strength and succeeds in regaining her mental peace and individuality. In the words of Shubha Dwivedi, "Deshpande assesses and reassesses what exactly the Indian woman wants, and stresses that through education and self-dependence Indian women can come out of the servility- syndrome."

Her profession helps Saru in overcoming her terrors of darkness and brings the light of self-identity and self-assessment in her life. With her education and profession, she wants to throw off the burden of past oppression and bear the aspirations of the future of her own. She also cares for family relationships but she is different from "full-time home-maker" and a self-effacing wife. Thus Deshpande by contrasting her strong-willed, educated, independent protagonist with the self-effacing characters achieves the desired affirmative result. Their profession and education leads to self-analysis through the phases of "limitation, protest and self-discovery." The novel presents a realistic plight of a middle-class Indian woman torn between two roles- traditional and modern, between inner duties and outer duties, between family and profession.

But the integration in her life can only take place when she creates a balanced view of the two sets of values. She has to accept both. She has to accept her children, her husband and her profession, her duty towards society. In the end, she realizes this and so succeeds in leading a life of her choice. Escaping from the problem is not the solution as the real solution lies within her. She decides to assert her and readies herself to face the reality. Her profession helps her in overcoming the guilt of others' failures. She finds peace and solace in her profession. Kiran Bedi is very apt when she says in her article, Tough Choices Become Tougher:

... a professional woman has multiple roles

in her life. One important dimension is her professional life. She needs to contribute to the vision of her profession and allow her awareness of being a "woman" to submerge her identity as a "professional". She has to formulate her personal vision, and needs to ask herself; what do I want? What can I achieve and contribute constructively to a gender vision of higher status for women and a mutually and socially beneficial partnership with men.

Thus the novel goes beyond the limits of feminism and touch the more important predicament of human existence. Saru chooses "the compromising attitude" in the end but the whole novel deals with the existential dilemma of a typical modern middle-class woman Sam's anxiety regarding her existence is, "there is this strange new fear of disintegration. A terrified consciousness of non-existing" (22). This existential dilemma, trauma and anguish faced by Saru can be ascribed to any woman in the society. Sam's inner-psyche is presented through this dilemma. The novel depicts through Saru not a woman who wants to throw away her womanhood and motherhood but a woman who is redefining her existential situation in her own terms like a self-aware individual.

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