
**ALIENATION OF WOMEN IN SHASHI DESPANDE'S THE DARK
HOLDS NO TERRORS**

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Abstract:

The Dark Holds No Terrors is an Indian fiction by Shashi Deshpande that talks about the protagonist of the novel, Sarita. The female character Sarita suppresses her dreams and desires in the name of upholding the values and ideals of the traditional customs. She is trapped between tradition and modernity. As a result, she is alienated and loses herself in her own life. This research aims to analyze how Sarita finds self-identity through her agony.

Keywords: Alienation, Self-identity, Discrimination, Longingness

Introduction

The Dark Holds No Terrors, a novel by Shashi Deshpande, was published in 1980. She is an acclaimed novelist and short story writer with eleven novels, two crime novellas, numerous short story collections, a book of essays, and four children's books. Among her creative accomplishments, three books have won awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Award for *That Long Silence* in 1990. Her writings have been translated into several Indian and European languages, and she has translated works from Kannada and Marathi into English. *Listen to Me* (2018) is the title of her most recent book. In 2009, she received the Padma Shri in recognition of her literary accomplishments. Some critics have called her the Female Tolstoy of modern Indian fiction because she portrays her female characters from an insider's perspective, revealing their conflicts and fractured identities. Indira Nityananadam correctly remarks about Shashi Deshpande: "Being trapped in the women's world of experience, Deshpande hopes to emerge as a kind of female Tolstoy who can create real, rounded characters and not merely women characters created for men."

Alienation is one of the greatest problems of the twentieth century. The post-world war period has been an age of great spiritual crisis causing a sense of rootlessness, isolation, and meaninglessness in the modern mind. Edmund Fuller has observed that in present age: Man

suffers not only from war, persecution, famine, and ruin but also from inner problems, a conviction of isolation, randomness, and meaninglessness in his way of existence.

Alienation as a predicament of modern man presents man's separation from society and from the larger cosmos. Man has forgotten that what has been created by scientific advancement does not give individuals ample time or opportunity to establish a close and personal relationship with other individuals and their surroundings. Consequently, the individual has lost his identity and has become an unfortunate victim of alienation and loneliness. The phenomenon of alienation has become a distressing trait of contemporary life. Man has become an isolated entity and is doomed to live an artificial life. The fountains that nourished life and gave meaning to it are gradually drying up, and consequently, man is becoming more and more alienated. The decline of values and standards is a prominent issue of the contemporary mode of life. Although the idea of alienation can be traced back to many precursors, the true philosophical history of alienation begins with Hegel. Alienation, thus Hegel, is a process of both self-differentiation and self-identification. (Hegel 27)

Life of Sarita

The Dark Holds No Terrors explores the struggles of Sarita, an educated and professional woman. After fifteen years, Sarita returns to her father's home following the death of her mother. This visit allows her to reflect on her relationships with her parents, brother, husband, and children. She recalls her past, including the challenges she faced in pursuing her education. Despite her mother's strong opposition, Sarita enrolls in medical school. Her mother consistently tried to confine her to traditional domestic roles. While in medical college, Sarita fell in love with Manohar, a fellow student, and eventually married him despite her mother's disapproval. Sarita became a successful doctor, while Manohar ended up teaching at a college. Over time, their marriage began to deteriorate. As Sarita gained recognition and respect in her profession, Manohar's insecurities grew, and he sought to assert control. His wounded ego led him to mistreat her, turning their relationship into a source of fear and pain. Sarita found herself living a dual existence—respected and accomplished during the day, yet trapped and tormented at night. Ultimately, at some point in time, she resolved to confront her reality and seek a balance. She worked towards finding a way to reconcile with her circumstances, leaving a glimmer of hope for renewal and acceptance. Philip Stevick in *'Theory of the Novel'* states that "the novel records the passage from a state of innocence to a state of experience. The Protagonist of the novel follows a pattern of disillusionment from potential fulfillment to actual accomplishment, from a hopeful naivete to a resigned wisdom." (Stevick, 14-15). The novel follows a similar trajectory. The central character, Sarita, initially finds herself in a state of uncertainty. As the narrative unfolds, she engages in introspection and deep reflection, ultimately achieving self-awareness. By the end of her journey, she transforms into an independent, self-reliant individual who shapes her life according to her own choices.

Sarita's childhood and her mother's attitude towards her

At the beginning of the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru visits her father's house upon learning of her mother's death. This visit triggers painful memories of her mother's harsh treatment. The first part of the novel explores Saru's strained relationship

with her mother, whose cold and oppressive behavior is rooted in patriarchal values. Her mother, deeply influenced by societal norms, holds Saru responsible for her younger brother Dhruva's accidental drowning.

“Why didn’t you die? Why are you alive and he dead?”(DHNT 191).

Her words haunt Saru, highlighting the deep-seated gender bias that plagued her childhood. Saru’s experiences of discrimination within her own home resulted from her mother's obvious favoritism toward her son, leaving Saru feeling isolated and insecure. Sarita's mother's excessive concern for her son can be described with Anandalakshmi's opines in her work *The Female Child in a Family Setting* states, "The birth of a son gives a woman status and she invests herself in her son's future, creating a deep symbiotic bond."(Anandalakshmi 31)

“Don’t go out in the sun. You’ll get even darker.

Who cares?

We have to care if you don’t. We have to get you married.

I don't want to get married. Will you live with us all your life?

Why not?

You can’t

And Dhruva? (DHNT 45).

Saru, as a young girl, faced not only gender-based bias but also discrimination due to her dark complexion. These prejudices deeply impacted her life, starting within her own home, which is a place meant to nurture and support a child's growth. Her mother consistently applied a double standard for treating her son and daughter differently. The above lines clearly portray the discrimination faced by Sarita in this novel.

“But of my birth, my mother had said to me once . . . ‘It rained heavily the day you were born. It was terrible.’ And somehow, it seemed to me that it was my birth that was terrible for her, not the rains” (DHNT 169).

From childhood, Saru longed for love and care, but her arrival in the family is regarded as a sign of misfortune. Individual and existential feminists emphasize the importance of women's autonomy, focusing on personal freedom and fundamental human rights while rejecting traditional social roles. Thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir encourage women to strive for self-actualization in their daily lives rather than accepting a subordinate identity as "the other" sex. She remarks, "One of the primal and seminal concerns of feminism is to announce that a woman is an individual being. She is neither the —other nor an addition to man. She is an autonomous being, capable of finding her own way to salvation" (the second sex, 48)

Discrimination to Sarita after her marriage

The second half of the novel shifts focus to Saru’s married life, where she faces a different form of gender-based oppression. Her husband, Manohar, inflicts emotional and physical pain, believing his gender grants him unchecked authority over her.

."The human personality has an infinite capacity for growth. And so the esteem with which I was surrounded made me inches taller. But perhaps the same thing that made me inches

taller made him inches shorter. He had been the young man, and I was his bride. Now I was the lady doctor, and he was my husband.” (DHNT 42).

In Indian society, the notion of male superiority often persists. Saru was busy with household chores at that time a stranger knocked the door. Manohar answered, and the visitor had brought a patient seeking treatment from Saru. This became a recurring event, and it began to affect Manohar's usual demeanor. The primary issue was that Saru, as a doctor, received greater respect and recognition from people than Manu had. This disparity frustrated Manu, who felt diminished in comparison.

Saru gained prominence through her work as a doctor, earning admiration for her compassion towards patients. Her growing reputation as a remarkable woman made her husband, Manohar, feel insecure. As a conventional professor at a modest college, he felt overshadowed by her achievements. Manohar struggled to accept her success and prominence, as he wanted to maintain a dominant role within their family. Sarabjit Sandhu makes a relevant comment: " The ideal man-woman relationship in the Indian context (as the dominant man and submissive woman) is so prominent that even the most brilliant and so-called forward male is incapable of looking at the woman in terms of equality. " (14) Through self-reflection, Saru realizes that the resolution to her struggles lies in her own hands. She understands that she must confront her feelings and assert herself to reclaim her sense of identity and agency.

The primary challenge that destabilizes Saru is not the loss of her brother, her mother's affection, the traumatic memories of her husband, or the bitterness of a loveless marriage, but rather the erosion of her self-image. As an unloved and unwanted child trapped in unhappy relationships with her parents and a sadistic husband, Saru yearns for a fresh start, a new identity, and a purpose that resonates with her authentic self. Her journey revolves around finding her own voice and pursuing her dreams. The novel emphasizes a woman's awakening to her struggles, her desire to be recognized as an individual rather than merely a woman, and her determination to establish an independent social identity. As admitted by Pramila Paul, *The Dark Holds No Terror* by Shashi Deshpande is a totally different novel in the sense that it explodes the myth of man's unquestionable superiority and the myth of woman being a martyr and a paragon of all virtues. It is based on the problems faced by a career woman, a refreshingly new phenomenon in Indian English Fiction (Paul 30). Though it can be labeled as a feminist work, it also delves into the painful quest for self-identity within the context of a traditional Indian society shaped by gender inequality, fractured familial relationships, and the protagonist's troubled marriage, ultimately portraying her anguished search for self-discovery.

Conclusion

The novel *The Dark Houses No Terrors* describes the story of a woman, Sarita, who faces many problems throughout the novel. Based on the description of the story, this novel explores the self-realization of the female character, Sarita. Shashi Deshpande ultimately conveys that women's liberation does not lie passively in enduring hardships like a fatalist

nor in completely rejecting the responsibilities of family and society like a rebel. Instead, a woman must harness the inner strength derived from her education and knowledge to strike a balance between tradition and modernity, which preserves her individuality.

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