

**EXPLORING WOMEN’S INNER WORLDS IN SHASHI DESHPANDE *THE DARK HOLDS NO TERROR* AND *THE BINDING VINE***

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**Article Received:** 02/12/2025

**Article Accepted:** 02/01/2026

**Published Online:** 03/01/2026

**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.8.01.12

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**Abstract**

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most significant voices in Indian English literature, known for her sensitive portrayal of women’s psychological and emotional struggles within a patriarchal social framework. This paper explores the inner worlds of women in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *The Binding Vine*, focusing on how Deshpande represents female consciousness, silence, trauma, and self-realization. Through the protagonists Sarita and Urmi, the novels examine the conflicts between personal desires and social expectations imposed on women as daughters, wives, and mothers. The study analyzes how fear, guilt, suppressed emotions, and memory shape the inner lives of these women and influence their relationships and identities. Deshpande’s narrative technique, marked by introspection and fragmented storytelling, allows a deep psychological exploration of women’s experiences of marital oppression, emotional neglect, and the search for autonomy. The paper also highlights the theme of breaking silence as a means of empowerment, where confronting past trauma becomes essential for self-understanding and healing. By comparing the two novels, the study reveals Deshpande’s consistent concern with women’s inner struggles and her critique of gender roles in Indian society. The analysis underscores how Deshpande gives voice to women’s muted experiences and presents inner awakening as a path toward selfhood and liberation.

**Keywords:** Women’s Inner World; Female Consciousness; Patriarchy; Silence and Trauma; Self-Identity; gender roles

**Introduction:**

Shashi Deshpande is a prominent Indian English novelist and short story writer, born in 1938 in Dharwad, Karnataka, renowned for her explorations of women's lives within patriarchal Indian society. She began her literary career with a collection of short stories in 1978 and her debut novel, *The Dark Holds No Terror* in 1980, followed by acclaimed works like *That Long Silence*, which won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990. Deshpande has

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authored over a dozen novels, short story collections, essays, and children's books, earning the Padma Shri in 2009 for her contributions to literature.

The processes of industrialization, urbanization, and secularization have brought about significant changes in India's tradition-oriented society. One of the most notable transformations has been the socio-economic emancipation of women. Concepts of love, marriage, and sexuality have undergone considerable redefinition. Women, long constrained by restrictive cultural and sexual roles imposed by a deeply rooted patriarchal order, have gradually gained the strength to challenge socio-cultural oppression. However, this rebellion is not a complete rejection of tradition. Instead, contemporary Indian women continue to negotiate their cultural inheritance while embracing modern values. As a result, they try to stand at the crossroads between tradition and modernity.

Shashi Deshpande has consistently addressed the problems faced by the "new woman" in her novels. She focuses particularly on the themes of meaninglessness, emotional alienation, and sexual confusion experienced by women within traditional social institutions. The reality of the modern Indian woman is that, even in relation to the most basic human needs—such as love, marriage, and sexual fulfillment—she often finds herself in a state of profound confusion. While many Indian women novelists portray these dilemmas with sensitivity, they do not always offer clear resolutions. Shashi Deshpande, however, goes a step further by suggesting a constructive path that enables modern, emancipated, educated, and intelligent middle-class working women to achieve a balanced and fulfilling life.

*The Dark Holds No Terror* is about the quest for self by an eager, ambitious and anxious woman, Sarita, who has suffered terribly all her life and then finds the courage to take control of her life. She is the protagonist who feels the crisis of identity. In her childhood Sarita faced humiliation even from her mother, after the accidental drowning of Sarita's younger brother, Dhruva. Instead of offering comfort, the mother projects her grief and rage onto Sarita, making the child feels responsible for the tragedy. Sarita mother says, "Why are you still alive, why don't you die?" (11) Psychologically, this moment becomes the foundation of Sarita's lifelong guilt and fear. The cruelty of the statement shows how maternal love in the novel is conditional, influenced by patriarchal values that prefer sons over daughters. Sarita internalizes the idea that her existence itself is a mistake, which later affects her self-esteem, relationships, and marriage. From a feminist perspective, the line exposes how women themselves become agents of patriarchy, inflicting emotional violence on their daughters.

Sarita was unable to bear the nightmarish brutality that her husband inflicts on her every night, she returns to her father's house where she recalls her past life. This helps her attain self-realization and self-awareness. As she battles with her emotions and anxieties, she gradually comes to realize that life extends beyond dependence on marriage, parents, and other traditional institutions. By the end of her journey, she confronts reality with renewed strength and courage, achieving a sense of self-awareness and emotional independence. This novel can be considered as a psychological novel.

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Sarita, the protagonist, faces psychological trauma. She passes through a hard, bitter and long journey in her mind where she tries to seek answer for the present dilemma by remembering the past. Being a girl in the patriarchal society, Sarita becomes acutely aware that she is regarded as a transitory member of the family. In a male-dominated society, women are conditioned into emotional and cognitive patterns of subordination and dependence. In the novel, Sarita, even as a young girl, is discouraged from developing her individuality, as she is repeatedly reminded by her mother that the ultimate purpose of a woman's life is to please a man. She is advised to preserve her physical appearance in order to attract a suitable husband, reinforcing the societal belief that a woman's worth lies primarily in her ability to fulfill male expectations.

Sarita is disinherited by her parents after her runaway marriage with Manohar who belongs to the lower caste. The concept of marriage in ancient Indian middle-class families, especially like the orthodox Brahmin family in the novel, was spiritual and considered sacred. A girl choosing her partner was regarded as an offense committed against the interest of religion, culture and tradition. Sarita breaks away from the traditional concept of marriage and shatters the barriers of marital distinctions. Though there are financial difficulties in the initial stage, Sarita emerges as a successful professional who begins to earn, "not only the butter, but the bread as well. (42) " The novelist also exposes the crude form of patriarchy through Manohar who turns vicious when he finds that his career is crashing while his wife has overtaken him professionally. The metaphor of "bread" and "butter" powerfully exposes gender expectations within marriage. By earning "not only the butter, but the bread as well," Sarita crosses the invisible boundary set for women. Financial independence, instead of bringing harmony, creates tension and insecurity in her marital relationship. Manu's ego is threatened because his masculinity is culturally tied to being the provider. Sarita's success reverses power dynamics, leading to emotional resentment and psychological cruelty. Thus, the line highlights how female empowerment can provoke male insecurity in a patriarchal setup. The statement also reflects Sarita's growing awareness that economic independence does not guarantee emotional freedom. Though she contributes everything materially, she continues to suffer emotionally within the marriage.

Sarita realizes that marriage has thwarted her identity and has hampered her pursuit of self-realisation and self actualization. She yearns to be recognized as a complete individual in her own right. Though Sarita has to undergo a host of problems we find her coping with and adjusting herself to most of the problems. Finally she is found to be mentally prepared for reconciliation with Manohar. She cannot forget her children or the sick needing her expert attention. She realizes that escapism has no meaning in life. She comes to terms with the fact that one can never opt out or relieve oneself of the burden of belonging to human race. The first step in the healing process Sarita undergoes, starts when she unconsciously tries to imitate her mother by her style of dressing and behaviour and by doing the household works in the way her mother did. Regretfully Sarita realizes that she had been a guilty sister, undutiful daughter and the unloving wife. She understands that she has to accept these facts to become whole again.

Another novel *The Binding Vine* reflects the central theme of human endurance, grief, and the quiet struggle of daily life. It is reflected in “This is how life is for most of us, most of the time: We are absorbed in the daily routine of living. The main urge is always to survive.” (203) Urmila, the narrator who is a college teacher, dealing with her private grief over the loss of a baby daughter, gradually uncovers the stories of the other two. Urmila pieces together the secret life of her mother-in-law, Mira who died at childbirth, more than thirty years before the story begins. She collects the story through the poems that Mira wrote in Kannada. It is Urmila who connects the nature of Mira’s sufferings with that of Kalpana, a young Marathi girl, victim of a horrific act of violence and rape. Kalpana lies in a coma in the hospital, where Urmila’s friend and sister-in-law Vaana works. As Urmila wades through the labyrinth of relationships, she witnesses, experiences and analyses the confusion and guilt, the pain and anger, the joy and suffering.

The individual plots are strongly developed with different emphasis at different times on the sharply particularized portraits of the three protagonists. The only self discovery that the novelist successfully attains in the novel is that of Urmila. But she takes the risks of suggesting others as well - that of Mira and the mute Kalpana. The mode of narration is such that there is a genuine suspense by the ending. The two central ideas that lead the protagonist into an analysis of women’s issues are death and rape. The sufferings of the female consciousness by such external events usually suppress her into roles that are traditional and submissive. But Shashi Deshpande shows the emergence of the modern woman who is individualistic and confident preparing herself to face relationships that are healthy and satisfying that which is based on love and readiness to help. Through the perspective of the protagonist Urmila, Shashi Deshpande brings to light the innermost recesses of a woman’s heart. As a feminist writer, Deshpande does not advocate violent upheavals or radical revolutions; instead, she seeks gradual transformations that bring about change without resentment or further oppression.

The characters of Vanna and Urmi represent two contrasting types of women. Vanna—educated, cheerful, and optimistic—is a social worker who remains submissive and willingly aligns herself with her husband’s wishes. She is caring and nurturing, embodying the traditional image of womanhood as a symbol of love and self-sacrifice. Urmi refers to her as a ‘Superwoman.’ In contrast, Urmi herself represents the educated, liberated woman endowed with social awareness, confidence, and independence. She emerges as a role model in whom women place their hopes, as she seeks to assert her identity and refuses to submit unquestioningly to male dominance. At the same time, she is portrayed as a deeply human figure—rebellious, questioning, and ultimately adjusting herself to the emotional bondage of love. “Just as the utter fertility of living overwhelms me, I am terrified by the thought of dying, of ceasing to be.”(203) *shows* Urmi’s existential reflection; life is beautiful and terrifying is central to the novel’s introspective tone.

Priti symbolizes the shallow and opportunistic woman who lacks moral integrity. She represents those who are obsessed with success, recognition, and public acclaim, dreaming of achievements and awards rather than meaningful relationships. On the other

hand, Inni and Shakuntai stand as representatives of traditional Indian womanhood, burdened by their inability to protect their loved ones. Among all the women in *The Binding Vine*, Shakuntai emerges as the most tragic figure. Deserted by her husband and condemned to a life of poverty, she embodies the plight of the completely oppressed woman within a patriarchal society.

Another area of female concern, that is marriage, figures prominently in this novel. The traditional mode of arranged marriage did not work for Meera. Her husband was obsessed with her, but there had been no room for Mira's feelings. As a consequence, her encounters with her husband become rape within the institution of marriage. Through her poems, Mira becomes to Urmi, a symbol of oppression. At the same time, Shashi Deshpande shows that Mira is a model of female survival. The novelist also shows that male sexuality and female sexuality differ in the Indian context. The male characters are treated as pleasure seeking, whereas the female characters are confined for the development of their family irrespective of the freedom given to them. This factor is clear by Urmi's friendship with Bhaskar. Shakuntai and Sulu want Kalpana to marry her "Mausaji". While men often succumb to their impulses, women, even in their liberated state, tend to discipline themselves in the interest of family and social harmony. This restraint is evident in Urmi's relationship with Bhaskar, where she consciously maintains emotional and moral boundaries. Patriarchal oppression is further exposed through the episode involving Kalpana. Shakuntai and Sulu attempt to force her into marriage with her *Mausaji*, and when she refuses, she is subjected not only to emotional pressure from the two women but also to sexual violence by the man she has rejected. Sulu, who embodies love, submission, and self-effacement, returns home to complete her domestic responsibilities before ending her life, underscoring the unbearable emotional burden imposed on women within oppressive social structures. Through her female characters, Shashi Deshpande probes the very roots of human existence. Human nature, she suggests, is "the hardest to bridge, the hardest to accept, to break." Both living and dying are equally terrifying, and this terror can be overcome only through the healing power of love—the force symbolized by the "binding vine."

Premila Paul observes: "Shashi Deshpande does not glorify women's sufferings. Though she enlists a sufficient amount of sympathy for her protagonists, it is not on the ground of her being a female sufferer (Paul 67). Many women in her novels embark on a journey of self-realization: some grow weary and falter, while others endure, survive, and discover the complex socio-psychological and existential dimensions of life. The loss of identity and the eventual attainment of self-awareness—leading to emotional, sexual, and intellectual freedom—are portrayed through Deshpande's characters with remarkable sensitivity and depth.

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