

**Negotiating Identity and Trauma:
A Feminist-Psychological Reading of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors***

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Abstract

This analysis offers a feminist-psychological perspective on Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, focusing on the novel's examination of gendered oppression, difficulties in marriage, and the search for selfhood. The story centres on Saru, a woman with both education and financial independence. Her life, however, is deeply shaped by the scars of childhood trauma, a lack of emotional support, and the limitations imposed by a patriarchal world. Deshpande uses a stream-of-consciousness style to explore Saru's fragmented psychological state. This state is categorised by feelings of guilt, a sense of isolation, and a constant search for self-understanding. This paper explores the impact of early gender bias on Saru's psychological development, specifically focusing on maternal rejection and the preference for male children. Saru's marriage, which initially appeared to be a source of affection and satisfaction, eventually devolves into a dynamic characterized by violence, control, and emotional distance, thereby illustrating the crisis of masculinity and the power disparities inherent in marital unions. Furthermore, the study explores Saru's dual identity as both a thriving professional and a victim of violence, emphasising the tension between her personal agency and societal pressures. Ultimately, the novel portrays self-discovery as a process of facing inner fears and breaking down externally imposed identities. Saru's return is not a sign of weakness; instead, it is a deliberate act of claiming control and demonstrating inner strength. The paper argues that Deshpande redefines feminist discourse by highlighting self-awareness, resilience, and the negotiation of identity within, rather than outside, the framework of social relationships.

Keywords: feminist-psychological perspective, gendered oppression, patriarchal society, masculinity, feminist discourse.

1. Introduction

Shashi Deshpande's debut novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, presents a compelling narrative. It follows a well-educated woman, financially secure, as she navigates landscape of challenges. The story revolves around Saru (Saritha) and her connections with her parents and partner, alongside her difficult quest for self-discovery. It's the story of a woman acutely conscious of her gender from a young age, and a marriage on the brink of collapse. As Saru navigates her struggles, she seeks out the hidden resilience in those around her.

In this way, the layers of the past are unfolded to the readers with the simultaneous knowledge of the present. The stream of consciousness makes Saru recall her childhood experiences, her estranged relationship with her mother, her marriage with the handsome, versatile-looking young poet, Manohar and the suffering which follows, and her relationship with her daughter Renu and son Abhi.

The novel offers a critical perspective on the widespread influence of patriarchy, extending beyond overt male control to encompass internalized gender prejudices within family dynamics. Saru's formative years are characterized by emotional deprivation and bias, as her mother demonstrates a preference for her son, thereby upholding the cultural bias favouring male offspring. This initial marginalization engenders profound psychological wounds, which subsequently mould Saru's feelings of isolation and self-doubt. As noted by literary scholars, Deshpande's work is fundamentally dedicated to "an exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the protagonist's place in life," thereby emphasizing the interplay between individual experience and societal influence.

From a feminist standpoint, the novel critiques the inherent inconsistencies within the institution of marriage, demonstrating that a woman's financial self-sufficiency does not automatically guarantee emotional or psychological liberation. Saru's union with Manohar, initially perceived as a means of escaping parental control, gradually transfers into a situation characterized by violence and subjugation, mirroring Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as the "Other" within a patriarchal framework. Saru feels the weight of conflicting expectations. Publicly, she's a paragon of success, a woman who seems to have it all. But privately, she's ensnared, feeling the strain of her role as a wife. This conflict lays bare the complex interplay between the freedom to choose and the constraints of obligation.

This study, consequently, endeavours to analyze *The Dark Holds No Terrors* employing a feminist-psychological perspective, concentrating on three interconnected themes: identity, trauma, and patriarchy. The central argument posits that Saru's fractured

sense of self stems from societal frameworks and internalized subjugation, and that her path to self-actualization necessitates engagement with and navigation of these influences. Employing feminist theory and psychological viewpoints, this analysis demonstrates that Deshpande's conception of empowerment does not mandate a total repudiation of social bonds.

1. Literature Review

Shashi Deshpande's literary works have garnered considerable scholarly interest, primarily due to their nuanced depiction of women's internal experiences and their examination of the socio-cultural context of the Indian middle class. Her impact on Indian feminist literature is widely recognized, especially in her analysis of gender dynamics, selfhood, and the intricate psychological dimensions of women's lives. Deshpande's novels mainly explore "the exploration of the female psyche and the protagonist's place in life," thus highlighting the conflict between personal goals and societal expectations.

Feminist interpretations of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* underscore the widespread impact of patriarchal structures and the internalization of gendered expectations. Elaine Showalter, for instance, has observed that women's literature frequently mirrors a progression from subjugation to self-recognition, a pattern that is apparent in Saru's evolution from silence to self-advocacy. Likewise, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasizes the necessity of scrutinizing how women internalize patriarchal ideologies, a concept that aligns with Saru's ingrained feelings of guilt and self-doubt. Deshpande's novel offers a different perspective than radical feminist critiques of society. Many researchers have explored the psychological aspects of Deshpande's storytelling methods.

The employment of stream of consciousness facilitates a profound examination of memory, trauma, and the construction of identity. Saru's recollections of childhood neglect, specifically her mother's biased affection towards her brother, illustrate how formative experiences mould her fragmented self-image and emotional vulnerability. Therefore, trauma theory provides a useful way to understand how unresolved past experiences affect current behaviours and relationships. Conversely, critics have examined the portrayal of marriage in Deshpande's work, viewing it as a source of conflict instead of harmony.

Scholars have observed that Deshpande avoids idealizing liberation, presenting it instead as a prolonged process of self-exploration, rooted in introspection and resilience. Scholarly investigations into *The Dark Holds No Terrors* have established its significance as a feminist and psychological text, examining the interplay of gender, trauma, and the formation of personal identity. However, a more integrated feminist-psychological approach

is possible, one that considers both external societal structures and internal psychological struggles. This study aims to fill this void by providing a thorough analysis of Saru's experience, focusing on her process of identity formation within the limitations imposed by a patriarchal society.

2. Theoretical Framework

The patriarchal structure presented in the story functions not merely through explicit male control; rather, it also manifests through internalised conventions, wherein women contribute to the perpetuation of gendered prejudices. Furthermore, this investigation employs Elaine Showalter's feminist critical approach, specifically her gynocritical methodology, which prioritizes the examination of women's experiences, perspectives, and literary contributions. Deshpande's narrative serves as a prime example of this methodology, focusing on female subjectivity and illuminating the previously overlooked realities of domestic violence, marital discord, and emotional estrangement. Saru's evolution from silence to self-awareness mirrors Showalter's concept of the progression from subjugation to self-fulfilment within the context of women's literature. Moreover, Saru's psychological state is significantly shaped by unresolved childhood trauma, especially the guilt stemming from her brother's death and the emotional deprivation she suffered from her mother. According to trauma theory, the ill effects of trauma in the past are carried in the present and appear repeatedly in the form of behaviour, attitude and emotional responses.

Saru's memories, which blend past and present, highlight the fragmented nature of her identity. Therefore, understanding Saru's dual identity requires recognizing the concept of an identity crisis, which includes both her professional success and her experiences of victimization within her marriage. The idea of her as a "two-in-one woman" highlights the psychological conflict between her public independence and her private struggles. This inherent duality highlights the conflict between personal identity and societal expectations, thereby demonstrating how patriarchal systems limit individual identity, even amidst economic self-sufficiency. Therefore, this study examines how Saru's fragmented self is shaped by the combination of patriarchal societal structures and her personal experiences of trauma. The analysis, drawing on both feminist and psychological perspectives, shows that identity in Deshpande's novel is not fixed but dynamic, shaped by self-reflection.

3. Gender Discrimination and Childhood Trauma

Saru's formative years in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* are profoundly impacted by gender-based discrimination and emotional neglect within her familial environment.

Ideally, the home

should be a place that supports growth and safety. However, it can also become a place of isolation, where patriarchal values are both accepted and maintained.

The story demonstrates how Saru's self-perception is consistently eroded, primarily due to her mother's clear favouritism towards her brother, Dhruva. This pattern reflects the societal preference for male children that is prevalent in Indian culture. Saru's awareness of her societal standing began early in her life. Her mother's admonitions— "Don't go out in the sun"—and the subsequent statement, "You'll get even darker... We need to find you a husband... He is different," exemplify the pervasive impact of gender-based prejudices. This highlights that a girl's value is intrinsically linked with marriage; as a result, Saru experiences emotional insecurity. Saru feels, "I just did not exist for her." The phrase "I died long before I left home" illustrates the psychological erasure she experiences within her family. After Dhruva's death, Saru further becomes the direct victim of her mother's unfair treatment. Saru was constantly belittled by her mother: "Why didn't you die? Why are you alive when he is dead?" his accusation transforms into a chronic psychological injury, becoming ingrained in Saru's psyche.

Saru's miseries exacerbate during her puberty. She is ashamed of her body and womanhood. This discrimination and the idea of impurity associated with menstruation lead Saru to develop a negative idea towards her own femininity. Consequently, Saru harbours deep-seated animosity toward her mother, and by extension, the patriarchal structures that govern her life. Saru's early life, then, is crucial for understanding the origins of her fractured identity. The convergence of gender-based prejudice, maternal absence, and recollections of trauma fosters the emergence of insecurity and alienation, which endure throughout her adulthood. These formative experiences shape her psychological constitution, subsequently influencing her interpersonal relationships, especially her troubled marriage.

4. Marriage, Power and Patriarchal Violence

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, marriage is portrayed not as a wellspring of emotional satisfaction but rather as a multifaceted dynamic marked by imbalances of power, discord, and subjugation. Initially, during the early years of their union, a period characterised by affection and intimacy, Saru perceives Manohar as a provider of both love and security. But this apparent harmony is short-lived. Underneath, strains start to show, exposing the delicate foundation of their connection. Saru and Manohar's marital problems largely stem from changing power dynamics, particularly concerning Saru's career achievements. Saru's status as a successful physician affords her economic

autonomy and societal acknowledgement, thereby undermining conventional gender expectations within their marriage. Manohar's feelings of inadequacy become apparent when he faces questions about his wife's higher income, which directly challenges his sense of control and self-worth. As a result, this difference creates a psychological distance, which then reshapes their relationship into one marked by hostility and a need for control. Manohar's fractured sense of self finds expression in sexual violence, a behaviour most evident during the dark hours of the night. Saru underscores, "He attacked me like an animal...using his hands, his teeth, and his whole body." What began as an ostensibly caring act transformed into a harmful assault, wherein intimacy was exploited for control. his teeth, and his whole body." What began as an ostensibly caring act transformed into a harmful assault, wherein intimacy was exploited for control.

Saru's silence, her unwillingness to resist or even articulate her suffering, amplifies her distress. "I could do nothing... I just endure it." This highlights how this cruelty has been internalised within the private space of marriage. Saru's self-perception reflects the metamorphosis of marriage into a tool of subjugation. She represents a "two-in-one woman," managing a dual life as a confident professional during the day and a frightened victim at night. This dichotomy underscores the fundamental discord between external empowerment and internal oppression. Instead of helping her develop, marriage becomes a limiting force, suppressing her sense of self and independence. Saru's self-perception reflects the metamorphosis of marriage into a tool of subjugation. She represents a "two-in-one woman," managing a dual life as a confident professional during the day and a frightened victim at night. This dichotomy underscores the fundamental discord between external empowerment and internal oppression. Marriage, rather than fostering personal development, functions as a constraint, impeding her autonomy and self-articulation. Saru ultimately views marriage as a "dark room where terror awaits," a metaphor for the suppression of individual freedom and the subordination of women within a patriarchal societal framework.

5. Fragmented Identity and Psychological Conflict

Saru's fragmented identity arises from the interaction of her outward accomplishments and her internal psychological distress. Deshpande characterises Saru as a "two-in-one woman," a potent metaphor that captures her dual existence—"a successful doctor" during the day and "a terrified trapped animal" at night, subject to her husband's control. This duality underscores the disparity between her public persona as an empowered professional and her private reality as a victim of marital violence, thereby demonstrating the insufficiency of

economic independence in securing emotional and psychological liberation. Saru's distress springs from the conflict between her successful career and her personal happiness, which creates difficulties in her marriage. She thinks, now that I'm a lady doctor, and he is my husband. Her married life, which was once blissful, has now become painful. Lacking the capacity to articulate her suffering or confront her husband's mistreatment, she retreats into herself, thereby constructing a "wall of silence" that she perceives as separating them. Each instance of suffering reinforces this separation, resulting in emotional isolation and a feeling of being trapped: "Perhaps one day I will be walled alive within it and die a slow, painful death." This silence is not solely a personal phenomenon; it is also shaped by cultural norms, mirroring the expectation that women should endure hardship to maintain family unity.

Saru's silence connects directly to the guilt and inner conflict that seem to define her. The combination of trauma and the difficulties within the marriage leads to a deeply fractured psychological state. She assumes culpability for the shortcomings in her relationships, convinced that she has transgressed against her mother, spouse, and, by extension, herself. This internalised blame exacerbates her psychological suffering, thereby establishing a recurring pattern of anxiety, bewilderment, and emotional immobility. As a result, Saru becomes "a creature only half alive," caught between her desire for selfhood and her inability to fully express it.

Consequently, Saru's fragmented identity transcends individual experience, mirroring the wider socio-cultural limitations placed upon women. Deshpande's work effectively illustrates how the interplay of patriarchal structures, traumatic experiences, and enforced silence contributes to psychological distress, resulting in a fragmented self, torn apart by the pressures of societal expectations and conflicting personal identities. The "two-in-one woman" serves as a powerful symbol of this divided state, thereby emphasizing the importance of self-awareness and expression as crucial elements in the processes of healing and integration.

6. Search for Selfhood and Assertion of Identity

Saru's homecoming is a turning point, a return to the place where her story began. It provides her with a haven, a physical space that also fosters the kind of introspection she desperately needs. Removed from the constraints of her marriage, she reflects on her past, revisiting memories that expose her childhood trauma, her difficult relationship with her mother, and the dissolution of her marriage, thereby facilitating a more profound comprehension of her fractured identity. This process of introspection compels Saru to confront her anxieties, her feelings of culpability, and her emotional struggles, rather than

attempting to evade them. Importantly, her father acts as a transformative influence, providing the empathy and direction that had previously been absent. His counsel to "turn around and look at them" prompts Saru to break her silence and confront reality with fortitude. So, going home isn't a retreat. It's a deliberate choice, a way of embracing her authentic self. Saru begins to shape her identity by acknowledging her history and seizing control of her own destiny.

7. From Trauma to Self-realisation

Saru's evolution from trauma to self-actualisation is characterised by her progressive abandonment of silence, a state that had previously perpetuated her distress. Her disclosure of marital violence to her father represents a pivotal instance of psychological liberation, thereby converting silence from a survival strategy into a form of defiance. This confrontation facilitates her engagement with the deeply ingrained guilt stemming from her formative years and unsuccessful relationships, thereby enabling her to extricate herself from the weight of self-reproach. Saru tried to untangle the tension and decided to face the situation boldly. She grasped, at last, that true healing could only come from facing herself. The story's ending focuses on her regaining control, which is achieved not by ending her relationships but by changing how she interacts within them. Her choice to confront her husband, now armed with a heightened understanding, signifies a departure from passive victimhood and a move toward deliberate self-assertion. Consequently, Deshpande portrays self-realisation as an internal metamorphosis, wherein the act of confronting trauma serves as the bedrock for identity reconstruction and the reclamation of life control.

8. Conclusion

The present analysis has shown that *The Dark Holds No Terrors* provides a significant examination of identity, trauma, and patriarchal structures, as experienced by the character Saru. The study traces Saru's trajectory, beginning with childhood discrimination and culminating in marital oppression, thereby illustrating how ingrained gender prejudices and unaddressed trauma contribute to the disintegration of the female self. Simultaneously, Saru's progression from silence to self-expression emphasizes the potential for psychological recovery and self-understanding. Shashi Deshpande's work significantly enriches feminist discourse through her intricate depictions of women's experiences amidst the socio-cultural context of Indian middle-class society. Deshpande's work doesn't advocate for a complete rejection of established institutions like marriage or family. Instead, it emphasizes the complex process of identity formation that happens within these structures.

Her feminist perspective is grounded in self-reflection, perseverance, and the affirmation of individual identity, all while maintaining existing interpersonal connections. The novel, in its concluding analysis, presents identity not as a static or mutually exclusive concept, but rather as an ongoing interplay between the individual and the societal context. Saru's evolution demonstrates that empowerment is achieved not through withdrawal but through the active engagement with both internal and external limitations, thus enabling the reclamation of agency and the reconfiguration of one's position within established structures.

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