

Gender Expectations and Identity Crisis in Shashi Deshpande's
The Dark Holds No Terrors

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Abstract:

Shashi Deshpande is a well-known Indian English novelist. Shashi Deshpande adroitly explores the complications of mortal connections, especially between men and women, as Arundhati Roy does. Her jotting effectively highlights women's studies and the challenges they face, making her novels unique and perceptive. Deshpande's work primarily focuses on the predicaments of middle-class women. "The Dark Holds No Terrors" analyses Saru's feminine consciousness and uncovers the root of her silent suffering and passive resistance. It illustrates how her internal conflict reflects societal gender expectations." Saru's arduous journey in this novel is an initiation into the mystery of human existence. Saru realizes that her parental home offers neither refuge nor shelter, and that her parents cannot provide her with either. The protagonist's understanding of life's complexities begins with their family home. "The novel is a story of a simple, self-righteous middle-class woman who is a lady doctor." Her ambitions, the simplicity of nature, and her eagerness to meet life in all its facets have been portrayed beautifully. She has the desire to be 'somebody', to have a purpose in life, to understand the meaning of life. The link between her love for life and her inability to find happiness is lost in the darkness. The novelist has deftly manipulated the identity crisis with its origins through this narrative. [217 words]

Keywords: consciousness, crisis, feminine, love, marriage, tradition, quest

Introduction:

Shashi Deshpande intricately weaves the lives of middle-class educated women into her narratives, highlighting their crucial role in contemporary Indian society. Her characters

embody the struggle between traditional values and the push for modernity, making them relatable to many readers. The journeys for her fictional characters reveal the challenges and intricacies that society presents. The emotional stances of these women expose their inner struggles and hopes. These women's cultural heritage renders the stories deeper and more relevant.

Shashi Deshpande intricately weaves the lives of middle-class educated women into her narratives, highlighting their crucial role in contemporary Indian society. Her characters embody the struggle between traditional values and the push for modernity, making them relatable to many readers. Through their journeys, she explores the complexities of identity and the challenges posed by societal expectations. Deshpande's storytelling delves into the emotional nuances of these women, revealing their internal conflicts and aspirations. The tension between heritage and progress serves as a backdrop, enriching her tales with depth and relevance. Ultimately, Deshpande's work reflects the evolving nature of women's roles in a changing cultural landscape.

Deshpande's women face significant challenges. They find themselves torn between family prospects like marriage and obedience — and their own solicitations for independence and identity. They rebel against these pressures and question the status quo, creating relatable stories filled with emotional struggles. It's not simply a clash of tradition versus modernity; it's about holding on to important aspects of their Indian heritage while rejecting societal limitations. This internal struggle is a crucial part of the narrative, encouraging the readers to connect with their characters.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita—Saru to everyone—lives a life many women will recognize: lonely, blamed, cornered. From childhood she's starved of love. "Her mother, lost in her own pain, makes no secret of her preferences—the son receives her affection while Saru endures anger. "Then her brother drowns, and her mother turns on her: 'You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive when he's not?' "That one line says it all. In that house, a girl's life counts for less. She marries Manu, thinking things will change. For a while, she hopes. But the marriage turns flat, then cruel. She earns the money, keeps the house running — yet at home she's kicked around, body and mind. Manu's viciousness isn't hidden; it shows up in the bedroom too, where love should be. So, the wife who pays the bills also endures beatings and rape. When Saru looks back now, it's with an ache — part memory, part grief: "They had named him Dhruva. Saru faintly remembers the joyous excitement on his naming day, the smell of flowers, and the black grindstone. The past, juxtaposed with the sad present, leaves her with the feeling that innocence and joy are lost forever.

Saru married Manu to hit back at her family. Her mother ran the house with rules and threats, and Saru was done with it. She chose a boy from a less privileged caste, fully aware that her parents would disapprove. That choice was her way of saying “my life, my rules.” At first, the marriage looked like a way out. Home had no love, so she went looking for it with Manu. She wanted someone to see her, to choose her. She really thought marrying him would give her both love and a bit of breathing room.

Their wedding flips once Saru becomes a doctor. She sees it clearly: He was a young man; I was his bride. Now I’m the lady doctor, and he’s, my husband." That change eats at Manu. He can’t handle her doing well. His pride cracks, and he turns mean. The violence starts — in bed, in words, in the way he looks at her. Saru realizes her success makes him more jealous. His ego, his need to be the man, poisons everything between them. That’s their marriage now. She goes quiet. Takes it. She writes about it later — says she’s adding “another brick in the wall of silence between us.” The gap between them keeps getting wider. It scares her. She thinks, “Maybe one day I’ll be walled in alive here and die slowly.” She’s torn. Doctor by day, housewife by night. It breaks her. “At one point, she cracks and tells Manu, ‘I want to stop. I want to quit — my practice, the hospital, everything.’ “No changes are needed! She’s weighing her own dreams against what a wife is supposed to do, against what he demands.

When Saru’s mother dies, she returns to her mother’s home, only to be met with an unwelcoming atmosphere from her family. She feels like an unwelcome guest. Many women in similar situations often choose not to share their experiences because it bruises their ego, leaving them feeling ashamed to talk about it. Unfortunately, this is a reality that many women face but seldom disclose. The main issue is that no one actually talks about it, but she feels the tension in the quiet moments and notices how people regard her, as though she’s an annoyance. It is not just losing her mother; she realizes she can’t return here and truly feel like she belongs. It’s the chance that eluded her a long time ago, a reality she’s only just beginning to grasp. She came here seeking solace.

All she found was proof she’d outgrown the place. Or maybe it outgrew her. Lots of women know that feeling — you leave, you change, you come back, and the door’s still open, but you don’t belong. That’s what *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is really about. It shows how heavy family can be, how love turns to blame, and how hard women have to fight to feel like themselves. Saru’s pain isn’t just hers. You see it in other women’s eyes — the push and pull of love, betrayal, and trying to find some peace. The book follows Saru, a middle-class woman with her feet on the ground. She’s a doctor. Works hard. Wants to do good. Deshpande doesn’t make her a saint — she’s stubborn, honest, sometimes lost. She throws herself at life, job, and home, both, trying to figure out what she’s here for. But Something

still troubles Saru, as unrelenting questions about women's predicament plague her. She questions why women have to endure such hardships and wonders about the purpose of living such a life. The more she reflects, the wearier she becomes. Accepting that this is her reality causes her pain. There are questions with no answers; it feels like the sins of previous lives haunt her. Like any woman, Saru loves life and wishes to pursue her dreams. Yet, the weight of her questions overwhelms her and keeps her awake at night.

This struggle all the time does very much undermine her health. Among her most gut-wrenching pains is her mother's rejection, which echoes through her own life. Her mother's love is not a source of healing or sustenance but feels cold and unattainable. Similarly, there is no encouragement from her father, who remains silent and never expresses pride in her accomplishments. As a result, she feels lost and unsupported in her search for herself.

As the narrative moves to the third part, things get worse for Saru. She looks at her friends and sees it: they've made peace with their lives and gotten used to it. She hasn't. That hits her hard. Suddenly, she realizes she's the only one still angry, still stuck. And it isn't just bad luck. She starts to see how much being a woman has shaped what happened to her — stuff she never even noticed before. It's a gut-punch moment. The rules she was supposed to follow, the roles she was handed, all of it comes into focus at once.

Throughout the story, the novelist skilfully navigates the themes of identity and belonging, tracing their origins back to Saru's tumultuous childhood. Her relationship with her mother, who shows little interest in Saru's education and personal growth, leaves a void—a stark absence of love and affection — that haunts her development. As a girl, Saru hated what she saw in the mirror. Too dark, too skinny — and people made sure she knew it. That's where the feeling started: she wasn't enough. Didn't belong. Happiness, for her, was always for someone else, like a kite too high to catch. She could see it, but never held it. And that ache never really left her. Alienated from her husband, she deliberately tries to reconcile herself to the present fateful situation, believing that nothing has changed in her father's house. In her parents' room, when she finds male clothes, Saru feels that her mother has “managed to eliminate her personality from the room.”

Saru is pulled in two directions. Part of her wants to stand on her own — to be her own person, make her own choices. But she's also a woman, and that comes with rules. People expect her to act a certain way, be a certain kind of daughter, wife. The book builds toward a moment when these two sides must meet. For Saru, figuring out who she is isn't a side quest. It's the whole point. Deshpande shows Saru stuck between what the world wants and what she feels inside. She feels lost a lot. Like she doesn't belong anywhere. No one really looked out for her as a kid — no love, no safety net. So now she walks around with

this hole inside. She calls her life pathetic sometimes. The more she thinks, the worse it gets. All she wants is answers—someone to get it.

The story is about a woman's journey to discover her true self while facing the daunting pressure from family and society at large. She is under constant pressure to do well in her roles as a daughter, wife, and doctor, and, with little time to explore who she really is, she may be limited in who she can truly be. This struggle all the time does very much undermine her health. Among her most gut-wrenching pains is her mother's rejection, which echoes through her own life. Her mother's love is not a source of healing or sustenance, but feels cold and unattainable. Similarly, there is no encouragement from her father, who remains silent and never expresses pride in her accomplishments. As a result, she feels lost and unsupported in her search for herself.

He just let the world tell her who to be. So, she grew up unsure. Second-guessing everything. That's the hole she's trying to fill now. For the first time, Saru feels adored and worshipped in Manu's hands. That is only the beginning. The knowledge that Manu has married her for money breaks the woman down completely. Just like a 'prized possession', he wants to exhibit her.

Now, for Saru, the problem is as clear as daylight. She has been a prized possession for Manohar. Manohar does not want her to leave the job. She really wants to run away from this male domination & physical assaults, but she is unable to muster up the courage to put the condition as plainly as her mind experiences it. She herself does not want to be a partner in a sexual act. But Manu fails in the act, and she feels dejected. He has become a sadist. She cannot do anything for him. When she narrates her sad story to her father, her father asks her only that she could have told this to Manu. Saru analyses his behaviour, noting that he does not know it himself because "he was so normal — at all other times What could I say?"

Saru's helplessness and her fear that others would call her crazy are always there. She has become the captive of her own fear. With her mind full of confusion, she runs for sympathy to her friend Booze, then even to Madhav. Her conscience inhibits her. The tussle between morality and freedom of self creates a void in her psyche. The childish grief of rejection and physical attacks of adulthood cripple her. She describes her husband as a sadist. - "My husband is a sadist."

Saru's parents keep a proper distance from each other in the presence of their children. The father, for example, never addresses his wife by name when the children are around, and when Saru hears it from her father's mouth for the first time, it seems to her "like a caress in public: something indecent."

To Saru, her mother's suffering is more of an idea than a reality. Since she has not seen it with her own eyes, she cannot believe in it entirely. It is her neighbour, Mai Kaki, who brings the reality of her mother's illness home to her. According to Mai Kaki, Saru's mother was a brave, courageous woman. She never told anyone about what was happening to her: "She was immensely strong. There are not many women like her now. For the slightest pain, they rush off, squealing, to doctors. Tonics and injections and whatnot. But not your mother. She lost so much weight; her cholis were hanging on her. And her bangles came up to here [the elbow]." Despite her illness, the mother did not want to consult a doctor. And then it was too late. She went to Tata Hospital in Bombay to die there, never to come back.

In a traditional Indian household, the will of man reigns supreme. While cleaning her mother's cupboard, Saru finds several saris in good condition. She does not know what to do with them. She offers these to Madhav for his mother. Madhav is shocked at this offer and feebly protests.

Saru's life in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* knocks her down hard. And that's how she learns. She goes back to her parents' house, thinking maybe this time they'll see her, help her. They don't. Her father can't. Her mother won't. The place she grew up in gives her nothing — no comfort, no answers. That's when it hits her: if she wants peace, she has to find it herself. No one's coming to save her. The house she thought would be safe shows her how alone she really is. Family isn't always shelter. So, she sits with it. With the hurt, there are questions without answers. She thinks about life — how messy it is, how lonely. And piece by piece, she figures out who she is when no one else is there to tell her:

Saru woke up and looked life squarely in the eye. There was no hesitation or pretence. Women of her generation had moved past the need to smile and say, "It's fine." They had stopped being polite in an effort to keep the peace. They were tired of hearing the same old claims: "Men and women are equal now." Really? Equal in what way? At home? In the workplace? In whose perspective? The entire system had been designed without their involvement from the beginning. They were no longer asking for a spot at the table; a simple chair was no longer enough. They wanted to turn the table over, shatter it, and set it on fire. They aimed to start fresh, to create something new with their own effort. This was not just about rights written on paper.

The underlying concept was to help eliminate the barriers that stymied women's development for so long. And each time a woman dared to say "no," it set off a chain reaction of movement – and suddenly, these small actions added up to change. Women began reclaiming their identities and seeing the possibilities of what they could become. In various areas from business and politics to the arts and sciences, their contributions became indispensable, and they came to realize their power. When one woman raised her voice,

others would respond as well, and so, collectively, they began to develop. Women achieved, but spoke of their struggles. They leaned on one another, recognizing that working through problems on their own was usually inadequate. The real progress was being able to stand up with others, a lesson Saru and countless others learned through the power of group struggle; they felt as strong as their own. Focusing on womanhood was no longer a burden but a source of pride. The girls who came of age after her instilled in them a sense of power to both express themselves more audaciously and to reshape the dialogue around women's responsibilities and lives, too.

Conclusion:

Shashi Deshpande writes more than you might imagine, not only noticing life but also delving into broader social issues that demand systemic change. Her female characters are powerful and multi-dimensional, rejecting standard narrative types. Her work authentically represents women: women's aspirations sometimes become ones seen as contradictory to the norms of the society in which they exist. These characters experience frustration and exhaustion like anyone else, yet they survive. Deshpande gives women's everyday lives the lens above, rather than celebrities; her subject matter captures their day-to-day lives and centres on inner endurance and perseverance. In these representations, she shows how determination is needed, especially during trying times. When she's able to come up, though, she says, these women are facing their challenges in private, with themselves, and not for a good reason. Their hardships are borne patiently; they hope to begin again; they prove they, too, are heroes, not pawns in life's game. Their resilience is notable because they are strong and tenacious.

Deshpande can't fix everything by herself. Though the rules are old and hard to break, she does something different in her books. Her works raise questions but provide answers; that is the way. To live through bad marriages, almost draining themselves out. While it is all real to read, nobody talks about the. Like a mirror, they show the stuff these women make their way through. Deshpande is not just telling stories; she's making them look at what they call "normal" and say, "No." Her books convey that women can pick their jobs, pick their partners, and speak up even if their voices shake; that's how things move slowly and steadily forward.

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