

**OVERCOMING EMOTIONAL TRAUMA  
THROUGH SELF-REALIZATION BY THE  
PROTAGONIST OF SHASHI DESHPANE'S  
NOVEL 'THE DARK HOLDS  
NO TERRORS'**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The aim of this paper is to show how self-realization helps Saru, the protagonist of Shashi Deshpande's novel 'The Dark Holds No Terrors' to overcome the barriers and conditioning in her marital life. In general, the novelist probes into the psyche of her women characters that are torn on account of the tensions generated by various forces in the patriarchal set up. The years of societal and cultural conditioning teaches the Indian women to be self-effacing, submissive and subordinate to man, suffering of a patriarchal society in silence. This results in the emotional trauma which further creates fear and uncertainty in the lives of women. The novelist, by making her protagonists undergo stages of self-introspection and self-reflection, makes them evolve themselves into more liberated individuals. Her protagonists learn to silence their ego and keep it under control through self-negation. This realization for the protagonists at the end of the novel enables them to return to their family fold without any perplexity.*

**Keywords – Emotional trauma, Self-realization, Shashi Deshpande, Silence, Women characters**

## INTRODUCTION

Among Indian women English novelists, Shashi Deshpande occupies an outstanding position. A careful study of the novels of Shashi Deshpande reveals that her main concern is to describe the lives of Indian women who have their untold miseries and problems in their marital lives. . In the words of Y.S. Sunita Reddy, “She gives us a peep into the state and condition of the present day woman who is intelligent and articulate, aware of her capabilities, but thwarted under the weight of male chauvinism” (146). Deshpande’s women maintain silence in their marital life as they believe in compromise as the strategy for withholding of domestic harmony rather revolt to avoid disturbance of their family relationships. Their emotional dependency on their family makes them vulnerable and they invariably become victims of gender discrimination in performing their roles as daughter and wife. They always use silence as their strategy to express their disapproval and dissatisfaction. The novelist portrays the resulting confusions and desperations of women’s role in their marital life in most of her novels. The female characters in her novels know their rights and they raise their voice against the male dominance and women oppression only after a long silence. These women strive hard to overcome the barriers and conditioning they face in their marital life only through self-realization. Before this realization they tend to be silent to avoid arguments with a feeling of insecurity or lack of concern or love. They finally understand that discussing the issue would foster love, respect and concern rather remaining silent. Growth, wisdom and healing come to them only when they undergo self analysis and gain strength to confront life as it comes. Self realization helps them to realize their mistakes and to be satisfied with their way of living. They learn from their past and this enlightenment creates a new awareness within them to look for new solutions.

If the relationship between the daughter and the mother is not cordial, the relationship between the wife and husband in the novels of Shashi Deshpande is not also smooth. There is always a serious misunderstanding between the couples that affects their marital happiness and domestic harmony. Subjugation of women in the patriarchal set up is shown by the novelist through the husbands of the protagonists. Either they are male chauvinists and sadists or men suffering from inferiority complex. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* explodes the myth of man’s unquestionable superiority and the myth of woman being a mute slave. This novel narrates the story of Saritha (Saru) and deals with her quest for life and search for her place in the world of complex reality of life. The self is central to the venture; the purpose is to know herself not in isolation but in relation to her family and society. Shashi Deshpande narrates the agony and misery of Saru who in the day time is a successful doctor and a terrified trapped animal at night in the hands of her husband. The novel begins with Saru’s return to her father’s house after fifteen years. This is the place where she had once sworn never to return. Unable to bear the sexual sadism of her husband, she returns to her father’s house for



consolation. The rest of the novel is a remembrance of things of the past and a confession to her father whom she had hardly communicated before. She remains silent about her agony all along. Having stepped across the threshold as a young woman to marry a young teacher Manu, against the wishes of her mother, Saru re-enters the home and re-crosses the threshold. There is always a misunderstanding between Saru and her mother and Saru determines not to return to her mother's house. The sudden return of Saru to her father's house, a central trope in Deshpande's novels, facilitates a re-examination of her past relationships. The short stay in her father's house gives Saru a chance to review her relationship with her husband. Darkness is the symbol of terror and fear. It symbolizes the authoritarian outlook and ill-treatment of Saru by Manu. Terror subdues, hurts, affects one's emotions and it seriously affects Saru, the most sensible woman in the novel. She regains courage in the end to face darkness and struggles for her freedom. She is a symbol of a progressive woman who tries to exercise her influence over whatever she does and wherever she goes. She states that, "That the terrors are inside us all the time, we carry them within us, and like traitors they spring out, when least expect them, to scratch and maul" (DNT 85).

The initial period of Saru's married life with the person of her own choice was bliss for the couples even in their stay at a small untidy flat that seems to be heaven for them. When Manu manages to get a lecturer job in a private college she feels relieved as she considers it to be a respectable job. However, Manu's wish is to go for journalism in which Saru had no interest. Though their life was like that of "soldiers in the army" they could manage with his salary and her hospital pay (DNT 157). When Saru is not able to fulfill her middle class dreams with their inadequate earning, and she resents for it. Saru develops friendly relationship with his teacher Boozie but it is only a 'teacher-student relationship'. Though Boozie is from a middle-class family he likes the best of everything and demonstrates the 'vener of good living'. He teaches her to dress elegantly, to speak good English with good accent, to enjoy food and to read. Saru later understands that Boozie's interest in her is not as a student but as a 'woman'. In spite of the interest that he shows openly, Saru moves friendly with him ignoring his closeness to her. She says, "If he put his hand on my shoulder, slapped me on my back, held my hand or hugged me . . . that was just his mannerism and meant nothing. It had nothing to do with me and Manu" (DNT 91). This was the time when Saru was craving to satisfy her middle class dreams. She dislikes staying in the dingy two-room flat and woves not to bring up her children with lot of deprivations. To fulfill her desires, she uses Boozie's interest in her for the growth of her career. With his help she passes her MD and within four years she raises to the position of Assistant Honorary at the suburban hospital. As a gratitude for the help rendered by him, Saru invites him for the opening of her new dispensary. Boozie uses this occasion to attract everyone's attention by moving too closely with Saru. He deliberately does this to show his interest in



Saru. Manu intuitively ignores the smiles, looks and talks about the relationship between Saru and Boozie. Saru detests her husband for his silence over this issue and expresses her anger thus: “It was Manu for doing nothing” (DNT 94).

When an explosion occurs in a factory nearby, she renders her service to the needy and earns the appreciation of the people nearby. The explosion establishes her, totally ignoring him. Manu gets hurt with her growing popularity but remains silent revealing nothing to Saru. The lack of communication spoils their married life as Saru states: “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” (DNT 42). For Manu, his wife’s professional success becomes unbearable that he says, “I’m sick of this place. Let’s go out of here soon” (DNT 42). When Saru realizes that her husband has become a sadist she understands that her marriage is only a trap to keep her as a slave under her husband. Her involvement in her work exhausts her and she ignores Manu’s love unintentionally saying, “I am tired” (DNT 80). Saru’s growing popularity and her indifferent attitude towards Manu creates an “affected indifference” (DNT 41) in Manu that he could not tolerate. Adding to his fury, Saru never comforts Manu when he could not reach her physically instead she turns her back and sleeps peacefully consoling herself that, “It was his failure” (DNT 87). Saru’s denial of conjugal relationship makes Manu to consider Saru not as his loving wife but only a lady doctor. Manu’s disappointment makes him a sadist and he behaves brutally to Saru at nights. Saru is traumatized at her husband’s violent act but she too remains silent. Whenever she takes steps to convey this to Manu, she always blurts out resulting in silence. She makes herself responsible for the inarticulation of her problems stating that, “I should have spoken about it the very first day. But I didn’t. And each time it happens and I don’t speak, I put another brick on the wall of silence between us” (DNT 96). She finds herself helpless and this silence breaks their relationship affecting their marital harmony. She makes herself responsible for the blankness in Manu’s face and says: “And, oh god, maybe I’m the one who’s taken it away from him!” (DNT 48). Perhaps she is also dazed by her husband’s diabolic nature who is normal at daytime but becomes a violent stranger at nights. Her husband’s act makes her a terrified animal and Saru never discusses this issue with anybody and never opts for divorce because, “Bed, the one she shared with her husband was to her an intensely private place” (DNT 97). Manu seems to be quite contented in showing off his wife as a valued possession to his friends but inwardly he could not tolerate Saru’s hike in her position. However, Saru determines to sacrifice everything to put an end to the brutality of her husband. When the cruelty of her husband becomes unbearable she declares her decision to quit her job but Manu reacts differently for her decision. He strictly says, “No, Saru, there can be no going back. We have to go on” (DNT 81). He silences her, reasoning that they cannot manage their expenses with his salary and advises her to take



rest with a day off the next day and then to continue her work. He is not ready neither to relieve Saru from her mental pressures nor from her physical sufferings.

Saru is made conscious of her gender with the loveless relationship with her parents and strained relationship with her husband and this leads her to go in search of her identity. Saru is always conscious of her duty as a doctor and takes pride in it. But her marital unhappiness makes her feel thus: “Just a white coat containing nothing. Emptiness” and “dummy in the white coat” (DNT 22-23). She perhaps considers her profession to be a ventriloquist and feels herself real only when she attends her patients. Manu’s inferiority complex misguides him to mistake Saru’s success as his failure. He does not relish anybody praising his doctor- wife for her noble service but terribly hurt when people admire her for her selfless service. One day when a journalist asks him as how he feels when his wife is superior to him in every respect, Manu smiles it away. But his male ego gets deeply hurt and the only way he thinks that he can dominate her is through marital rape. Saru’s experiences a monstrous invasion of her body at the hands of her husband but remains silent. She confesses her fear thus: But at home, sitting in the same room with him, watching the familiar glaze come over his face; at night, waiting for the terror to strike, she became just a terrified animal. Thinking of how she could do nothing against his maniac strength. Of her panic that made her incapable of resisting. Of the children in the next room who pinioned her to a terrified silence. (DNT 99) Saru understands that behind Manu’s silence there was resentment and anger over her rising status. Unfortunately, Saru's status as a doctor in the society complicates her peaceful marital life. In addition, Manu gets irritated by the comments of his friend’s wife, “If you had married a doctor,” “you’d have gone to Ooty too” (DNT 111). Manu dislikes people identifying him as the doctor’s husband. The novelist exposes the diabolic nature of Manu thus: Unable to assert his ‘manliness’ over her (Saru) like a traditional male (that is, in economic terms); he resorts to sexual molestation of her nightly while playing the loving husband during the day. His purpose, though repressed in the subconscious, is to ‘punish’ her for taking on the ‘male’ role, and to assert his superiority and power through physical violence. (Atrey and Viney Kirpal 43)

In course of time, she becomes conspicuous about Manu’s heavy, dull and brooding silence. Saru hates her husband’s rudeness in the bed and it develops a sense of unpleasant things about marriage. “The hurting hands, the savage teeth, and the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar bed”- all this tormented her. She is shocked by the dissemble attitude of her husband and she even hates being touched by Manu and decides thus: “And so once again, silence was the only answer” (DNT 121). She also fears that Manu would call her ‘crazy’ and remains reticent as, “Her feeling that as long as she did not speak, the thing that happened between them remained unreal” (DNT 203). She also thinks that it is of no use to articulate her suffering when Manu is not aware of what he is doing



to her at nights. Saru's stay in her parental home offers her a chance to think over her relationship with her husband, her children, her parents and her dead brother Dhruva. She understands soon that her success as a doctor is the cause of her strained marital relations with her husband Manu. In a retrospective mood she states that she is no more a bridge for a young man but only a lady doctor for her husband. Saru expects that her marriage would bring her happiness and that she could come out of her mother's anger, hatred and from the burden of rejection. When she loses her hope of finding happiness in her marriage, she is terribly upset. In spite of this marital incompatibility and role-reversal, Saru clings on to the tenuous shadow of marriage whose 'substance had long been disintegrated'. Not getting disheartened over this, she takes a bold step, puts an end to this façade by moving

away from home. In due course of time, both Manu and Saru are gradually silenced and many things remain unsaid between them. Saru's contempt for her husband is revealed when she introduces her husband to her father as, "My husband is a sadist" (DNT 199). Her stay with her father helps her introspect and find reason for her sorrows. Saru soon realizes that her decision to come back to her parental home leaving her children, her husband and profession and her stay had no purpose. She in her frustration admits thus: "I don't want him" (DNT 69). However inwardly, she is ready to give up anything to get back the status of Manu's wife. When her father asks the purpose of her silence she accepts it to be their inarticulateness. She says, "I've never spoken to him about it. Nor has he" (DNT 201) also she agrees that, "May be I deserve it after all" DNT 201 & 204). Her father advises her to go with her husband and stay in the family. She in frustration blames her mother thus: "If I have been a puppet it is because I made myself one. I have been clinging to the tenuous shadow of a marriage whose substance has long since disintegrated because I have been afraid of proving my mother right" (DNT 220).

The predicament of Saru is also the predicament of any Indian woman in the patriarchal society. The house in Deshpande's novels is yet another symbol for rehabilitation. Returning to the father's house after a long time makes the protagonists for introspection and enables them to face the future and gives them the courage to confront reality. She gets a better understanding of life now and realizes that neither her father nor her husband can be her refuge and she is her own refuge. As Ravendra Prakash says, "The narrative structure of homecoming has its advantages in offering situations which allow the protagonist to journey back in time to recapitulate childhood experiences, to give voice to silent terrors and secret feelings of guilt, and to relate the present to the past" (186). After gaining the assertion of will and confidence in herself, she learns to trust herself. She had earlier asked her father not to entertain her husband in the house. Now she tells her father to allow Manu inside if he returns and make him wait. She is determined of her course of action and does not want to



be silent this time. She realizes that silence was a delinquent that caused her marital disharmony. In her understanding that her 'silence' is the reason for her failure in her relationships at various levels, she decides to break the long silence to ascertain her individuality. She understands that by remaining silent she will never achieve her freedom. This change in her attitude suggests that she has gained much confidence to face Manu and to assert her rights and individuality. The novelist suggests that a woman should assert herself so that she can overcome the obstacles in her life. Saru's silence prevented her from establishing intimate communication for strengthening the conjugal bond. Her innate silence kept her in a state of despair and dejection. She never cared to sort out her problems with her husband earlier. Saru decides to reconstruct her family life in a meaningful way and this self-realization puts an end to all her problem. She comes to realization thus: "We come into this world alone and go out of it alone. The period in between is short. "And all those ties we cherish as eternal and long lasting are more ephemeral than a dewdrop" (DNT 208). K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar rightly comments, Saru's decision thus: She strips herself of self deceptions, guilt complexes and emotive illusions, and Shashi Deshpande's language itself flickers like a candle. and blobs of remembrance melt and form icicles of furrowing thought. Sarita cannot forget her children or the sick needing her expert attention; and so she decides to face her home again. In this unpredictable world, even total despair can open up a new spring of elemental self-confidence. (758)

Saru returns to her husband later not like a submissive but a dutiful wife with better understanding to face the harsh realities of life with a new ray of hope and determination. She understands that it is her own responsibility to put together her fragmented life. She knows that this process would be hard yet she alone can do it for herself and no one else. She gradually understands that the problem lies as much within as outside. Earlier she considered only Manu's flaws. Now she identifies her own flaws in her inability to maintain relationships and to be dutiful and loving daughter, sister, wife and mother. With the self-realization she acquires strength and decides to confront the problems. Her experiments with life, the challenges, the apparent successes and failures paves way for her final reconciliation with her family.

## CONCLUSION

Shashi Deshpande, through her novels suggests that women should offer resistance and emerge as strong willed individuals to face life, to share responsibilities and not escape from them. She holds the view that the dependency syndrome in women is responsible for her victimization and this is clearly illustrated by the themes and characters of her novels. But in the end there strikes a note of reconciliation. Both the husbands and wives make an attempt to understand each other. The wife gives up her silence and agrees to return to the houses of her husband to start a new life. Saru, return



to her husband with a great understanding of life. She does not seek divorce or go away from her husband. She does not break her family but return to her family fold and this is a common pattern that one can notice in her novels. Saru derive strength from self-realization and introspection and overcomes her emotional trauma. This realization comes to her only after undergoing unpleasant experiences. At the end, Saru gets some enlightenment about life and gains confidence to face life and makes her conjugal life happier.

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