

## The Inner Conflict: A Feminist Analysis of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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### Abstract

This paper provides a feminist analysis of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, emphasizing Sarita's (Saru) psychological disintegration. It looks at how the 'dark' represents childhood trauma, domestic abuse and the silencing of women in patriarchal systems. Saru demonstrates the limitations of economic independence in guaranteeing female liberation by staying in an abusive marriage despite her professional achievement as a doctor. The study emphasizes how Saru's divided identity was shaped by internalized patriarchy, especially through the mother-daughter bond. In order to reach self-realization, she must confront her previous trauma and reject the roles of wife and daughter that society has imposed upon her. In the end, the novel portrays emancipation as an existential awakening based on autonomy and self-awareness. Deshpande criticizes both female complicity and male dominance, arguing that real freedom only arises when women recover their sense of self independent of social approval.

**Key Words:** Dark, Identity, Rejection, Freedom

### Introduction

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* by Shashi Deshpande is a visceral investigation of the broken female identity, with the title's 'dark' serving as a multifaceted metaphor for societal silence of women, marital violence and childhood trauma. Sarita (Saru), the main character, is a contemporary outlier in her middle-class environment of the 1980s—a woman who has attained the highest level of career success as a physician yet is nevertheless essentially unfree. Her journey is characterized by a 'two-in-one' existence: at night, she is reduced to a 'trapped animal', vulnerable to the sexual sadism of her husband, Manohar (Manu), while during the day she exercises the authority of a healer, commanded by logic and respected by the public. Her career success has directly and poisonously led to this domestic slavery. Manu utilizes his physical prowess and sexual domination to reestablish a patriarchal order that the outside world has started to undermine because he cannot reconcile his low social status with his wife's rising fame and higher money. Deshpande thus analyzes the frailty of the male ego, demonstrating how many men in this transitional society view a woman's professional equality as a kind of male emasculation that needs to be 'punished' in the privacy of the bedroom.

### Analysis

The novel's feminism is rooted in Saru's difficult psychological struggle to recover her 'self' from the roles that have been thrust upon her, rather than in overt political engagement.

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The destruction of the mother-daughter bond, which Deshpande depicts as the main location of patriarchal indoctrination, is where this search starts. Saru's mother famously asks,

“Why didn't you die? Why are you  
alive and he dead?” (*TDHNT*, 191).

Saru has a void as a result of her mother's rejection, which prompts her to pursue validation first via academic success and then through a defiant marriage. But she finds that her union with Manu is only another cage. After fifteen years, she returns to her father's home in a last-ditch effort to locate a room of her own, a place where she isn't defined as a wife, mother, or daughter. Deshpande shows how Saru's unresolved childhood pain is intricately related to her current victimhood through a storytelling method that employs quick cuts between past and present. The novel implies that genuine emancipation for Indian women is existential rather than just pecuniary. Facing the dark—the knowledge that one is ultimately alone in the world—requires bravery. As Saru considers,

“We are all alone. We come into  
this world alone and we go out of it  
alone” (*TDHNT*, 232).

This insight is the cornerstone of her liberation rather than a call to despair. Saru's choice to stand up to Manu and refuse to be a puppet in his monstrous games at the end of the novel marks her transformation from a disjointed object to a coherent subject.

The psychological pain of Sarita's early years, when the shadow of a preferred male sibling casts the fundamental darkness of her life, is intrinsically tied to the feminist arc of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. The household sphere is frequently the first location of gender-based marginalization in the traditional Indian patriarchal system, where a daughter is viewed as a temporary guest or a secondary entity in comparison to a son. Saru's mother, the main patriarchal agent in the home, personifies and weaponizes this social prejudice. Because of the mother's fixation on her son Dhruva, Saru is marginalized and the boy is seen as a symbol of brightness and value. When Dhruva accidentally drowns, this dynamic reaches a catastrophic climax. Instead of finding a common language of grief, the mother directs toxic, murderous resentment toward her surviving daughter. This maternal rejection pushes Saru into a state of bodily and existential alienation, where she internalizes the shame of being female, which is exacerbated by her mother's biological transition into woman. As a result, Saru's choice to study medicine and become a successful physician is a deliberate act of feminist resistance rather than just a career goal. In a society that clearly valued her brother's life over her own, it is a desperate attempt to prove her worth and rebuild her broken identity. She hopes to overcome the liability of her gender and achieve a status that her mother cannot overlook by pursuing a prominent, male-dominated career. Nevertheless, the novel implies that this career achievement is also a double-edged sword; although it gives her the freedom she longs for to leave her mother's home, it also creates the conditions for her husband Manu's uncertainty.

A terrifying dichotomy of the female personality, in which Saru, the protagonist, becomes a victim of her own achievement, is the novel's major feminist conflict. Saru attains the uncommon milestones of financial independence and professional autonomy in the socio-cultural context of 1970s and 1980s India, but these same achievements cause a regression in her home life. According to the novel, although the public had started to embrace the 'New Woman',

the private sector of Indian marriage was still firmly rooted in a strict patriarchal code that saw a wife's superiority—be it financial, social or intellectual—as an outright denigration of the husband. Her spouse, Manohar (Manu), changes from a pleasant literary character to a broken oppressor as a result of this power disparity. The conventional gender roles are reversed as Saru's prominence as a physician increases while Manu continues to be a lousy college instructor. Manu uses sexual violence as a tactic to level the professional playing field in an attempt to 'restore' his perceived lost manhood by establishing a harsh, primitive domination in the bedroom because he is unable to compete with her authority in the public eye.

The sad irony of Saru's life is emphasized by Deshpande's portrayal of this 'Two-in-One' existence. The stark contrast between Saru's private life and her public persona is encapsulated in this metaphor. At night, she is stripped of her humanity and reduced to an object of Manu's misplaced frustration; during the day, she is a woman of agency and expertise, commanding respect from a community that wants her healing touch. The novel serves as a biting indictment on the frailty of the masculine ego, which in Manu's case necessitates the psychological and physical disintegration of a woman in order to feel 'whole'. In addition to being an act of lust, this nighttime sadism is a deliberate, if unconscious, attempt to demolish the self-assured 'doctor' and bring back the obedient wife. The crux of Saru's feminist trauma is her effort to balance these two identities: the violated victim and the authoritative healer. It reveals a culture in which a woman's career advancement is met with domestic regression, making her realize that being a doctor does not save her from being viewed as a possession by a spouse who cannot tolerate her brightness. The disgust of Saru's condition is incarcerated in her incredulity:

“It was a monstrous thing, a thing  
that happened to others, not to me”  
(*TDHNT*, 77).

This insight emphasizes how shocking it is for an educated, upper-caste lady to learn that her knowledge and social standing do not protect her from barbaric domestic abuse. The 'Long Silence' that Deshpande examines throughout her body of work is reflected in her subsequent quiet, which is required by a society that sees a woman's body as her husband's property and her obedience as a marital obligation. The husband feels justified in utilizing the wife's body as a location for his own psychological catharsis, and this monstrosity is a terrifying critique of patriarchal entitlement. The novel implies that the erasing of the woman's personhood, rather than just the physical act, is the most harmful part of this entitlement. Saru's voyage therefore becomes a fight to fracture this stillness and refuse the 'Sati-Savitri' prototype, proving that true feminist freedom cannot happen until the private horrors of the bedroom are recognized as systemic human rights infringements.

The pivotal first step toward feminist reclamation is Saru's choice to leave her husband and kids and go back to her father's home, which is presented as a necessary survival strategy rather than a failure. This departure is seen through the harsh prism of desertion, a social violation that signifies a woman's ultimate failure in her obligations as a wife and mother in the traditional Indian culture. Saru, however, views the act of leaving as a rejection of the 'Sati-Savitri' paradigm, which calls for the gradual elimination of women in order to maintain home peace. Once a place of isolation and maternal oppression, the father's home functions as a place for deep psychological reflection. Saru can now break free from the dark memories of her early years

thanks to her father, who was once a silent, passive witness to the mother's violence. In this silence, she starts to unlearn the terrible guilt that has controlled her life, realizing at once that neither Manohar's ego's failings nor her brother Dhruva's unintentional death were her fault. Her entire identity revolves around this realization, which signifies her dramatic shift from a passive victim to an active agent of her own destiny. She uses the following internal statement to express her newfound independence:

“My life is my own..... I am not  
a puppet” (*TDHNT*, 220).

With this realization, Saru is able to identify the recurring psychological cycle that has kept her bound; she realizes that her desperate attempt to seek Manu's favor was really a reenactment of her early effort to win her mother's denied affection. She removes the emotional bond that allowed Manu's aggression to determine her value by seeing the husband as a stand-in for the mother's rejection. According to the novel, feminist reclaiming entails a shift from a condition of external definition to one of internal authority rather than just going from one home to another. In the end of this voyage, the home of the father is no longer a protection to hide in, but a launching pad for a female who has lastly acknowledged that her value is fundamental and self-determining of the male gaze or affectionate curse.

Saru eventually realizes that her 'Two-in-One' existence was a result of attempting to appease a patriarchal culture that provides no real shelter by placing her career accomplishment within her personal background. She is able to remove the masks of the doctor, the wife and the daughter upon her return to her father's home, revealing only the human being. Because she has finally asserted her right to exist for herself, the dark that she formerly feared—the blackness of her mother's room, the darkness of Manu's bedroom, and the darkness of her own mind—holds no terrors. The transition from being a puppet to becoming the master of one's own strings is at the heart of Shashi Deshpande's feminism.

Beyond the immediate anguish of Saru's marriage, the story closes with a profound existential insight that positions feminism in Shashi Deshpande's perspective as awareness that all people are ultimately alone. This discovery of aloneness is initially frightening but eventually freeing for an Indian woman, who is typically socialized to define her entire existence via her relationships—as a daughter, a wife, or a mother. Saru's journey comes to a conclusion when she no longer needs a savior, rather than when one arrives. She understands that she doesn't have to wait on a man—her father or her spouse—to affirm her value or give her a sense of security. The dark that held the terrors of her early days and the night-time violence of her marriage loses its paralyzing power once she excels the light of self-awareness upon it. By confronting the ghosts of her past in her father's home, she strips the dark of its ambiguity, transforming it from a site of victimhood into a space of clarity. This existential change is summarized in her thoughtful expression:

“We are all alone. We come into  
this world alone and we go out of it  
alone” (*TDHNT*, 232).

This proclamation is the foundation stone of Deshpande's feminist viewpoint in the novel; it implies that a woman is susceptible to the whims and brutality of others as long as she looks to them for her identity. Saru is getting ready to confront Manu at the novel's conclusion,

but the balance of power has completely changed. She returns home as a woman who has taken charge of her own life rather than as a defeated wife or a regretful fugitive. At last, she is prepared to inform him that she will no longer participate in his 'games' or serve as a conduit for his misplaced fears. She has realized her own strength and realized that Manu's control over her was based on her own fear and her need for his acceptance, thus the fear has vanished. By accepting her basic loneliness, Saru becomes unbeatable to the emotional manipulations of the patriarchy, ending the novel as a consistent, self-actualized person who no longer fears the darkness.

### **Conclusion**

Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is regarded as a classic work of psychological realism, because it avoids the easy clichés of romantic or radical escape. Deshpande offers a considerably more rigorous and realistic feminist resolution: the protagonist finds herself, in contrast to many modern tales that offer a fairy-tale conclusion where the protagonist finds a new man or achieves emancipation by totally leaving society. This internal homecoming is portrayed as the only sustainable form of freedom. Saru's journey is a deep case study in sociology and psychology, chiefly demonstrating that economic independence is not a sufficient condition for true emancipation, even though it is a vital tool for survival. Her career as a doctor provides her with the financial means to leave her abusive household, but her medical degree cannot shield her from the nocturnal "terrors" until she conquers the final frontier of psychological independence. Deshpande recommends that as long as a woman's self-esteem is tethered to outer justification—whether from a husband's approval or professional awards—she remains susceptible to the shifting tides of patriarchal self-esteem.

Additionally, by showing that a mother can be just as much a patriarchal agent as a father or a husband, the novel presents a radical critique of domestic roles. Deshpande illustrates how women frequently internalize and uphold the very structures that marginalize them by depicting Saru's mother as the cause of her initial 'darkness', leaving a legacy of gender-based animosity for the following generation. Saru's final recovery shows that the only practical method to dispel the fears of the present is to face this past—the mother curse and the childhood guilt of her brother's death. Because Saru is not a perfect martyr—rather, she is flawed, terrified and severely traumatized—she continues to be one of the most complex female characters in Indian literature. Her resilience stems from her willingness to bear the suffering of introspection. Deshpande gives millions of women living behind a cover of silence a strong voice through Saru's final refusal to stay a puppet, expressing the profound truth that having the guts to speak one's own truth to oneself before speaking it to the world is the first step toward true freedom.

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