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**Trauma and Memory: Revealing the Suppressed Suffering of Sarita (Saru) in  
‘The Dark Holds No Terrors’ by Sashi Deshpandey**

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**Abstract:**

Shashi Deshpande’s ‘The Dark Holds No Terrors’ offers a touching and intricate depiction of a woman's mental battle against entrenched patriarchy, emotional abandonment, and marital pain. This paper investigates the intricate relationship between trauma and memory in the life of the protagonist, Sarita (Saru). It depicts the memories of childhood rejection and domestic violence influence her inner reality. Using a feminist-psychoanalytic perspective, the research analysis reveals that Sarita’s emotional anguish is not consistently expressed openly but rather exists in repressed thoughts, silences, and disjointed memories. Her return to her childhood home serves as a trigger for these hidden memories to emerge, compelling her to face the anguish she has privately endured yet never expressed. The examination centres on how Deshpande employs narrative strategies such as flashbacks, introspection, and symbolic imagery to unveil the depths of Sarita’s unvoiced anguish. It also investigates how memory operates as both a means of confinement and a potential avenue for self-discovery and recovery through Sarita’s psychological journey from suppression to hesitant confrontation. This paper underscores how trauma distorts sense of self and how the process of remembering becomes crucial for regaining autonomy. Ultimately, the novel is viewed as a striking critique of the societal frameworks that sustain female silence and a subtle plea for personal freedom through the recognition of suffering. This research enhances the comprehension of Indian feminist literature as a space of resistance in which inner experiences are illuminated through the narrative of memory and trauma.

**Keywords:** Poignant, Psychoanalytic, Entrapment, Distort, Introspection

**Introduction**

Shashi Deshpande is a consistently prolific writer in contemporary literature. She has received praise and appreciation from her colleagues for her literature. Her characters are

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clearly defined, and her stories are presented with skill. The personalities she brings to life and their scenarios are well depicted. The exploration of a woman's inner life has emerged as a vital theme, especially in narratives that interrogate the intersections of gender, memory, and trauma. Deshpande acknowledges that her writings are a result of her personal profound and long suppressed thoughts about what it is to be a woman in our culture, despite her reluctance to be designated a feminist or woman writer. She acknowledges that her work arises from her experience of the challenges of assuming several roles that society has assigned me, as well as from her understanding that I am more than the sum of these roles. Deshpande comments: "My writing comes out my consciousness of the conflict between my idea of myself as a human being and the idea that society has of me as a woman".

Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* stands as a powerful psychological novel that foregrounds these intersections through the story of Sarita (Saru), a woman caught between societal expectations and personal despair. The novel not only exposes the physical and emotional violence women endure but also delves into the less visible wounds that linger in memory those shaped in childhood and sustained in adult relationships.

Saru's story lies a lifetime of suppressed suffering as her mother's preferential treatment of her brother, the emotional alienation she experiences in her parental home, and the disturbing sexual abuse masked as intimacy in her marriage. These experiences form a web of trauma that Saru carries silently, unable to articulate her pain in a world that expects her to conform, perform, and endure. It is only when she returns to her childhood home, following her father's death. These repressed memories begin to surface, compelling her to confront the layers of unresolved emotional anguish.

This paper seeks to analyse how Deshpande portrays the psychological impact of trauma through the vehicle of memory. Drawing on feminist and psychoanalytic frameworks, the study investigates how Saru's fragmented memories and emotional silence reflect broader themes of female disempowerment, and how remembrance though painful becomes a crucial step toward reclaiming agency and constructing selfhood.

### **The Impact of Trauma on Memory of Sarita**

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, trauma exerts a profound influence on Sarita's memory, shaping not only what she recalls but how she recalls it. Deshpande skilfully portrays memory as fragmented, involuntary, and often triggered by physical spaces, silence, or emotional vulnerability. Sarita's traumatic experiences ranging from childhood neglect to spousal sexual abuse are not stored as coherent, linear recollections but emerge in scattered, often painful flashbacks that disrupt her present. These intrusive memories reflect the psychological truth that trauma often distorts or suppresses memory as a defence mechanism,

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especially when the victim lacks the social or emotional support to process the pain. Sarita's return to her childhood home acts as both a physical and psychological space that unlocks these suppressed memories, forcing her to confront emotions long buried beneath her controlled professional exterior. The novel suggests that memory, while deeply affected by trauma, also becomes a site of confrontation and potential healing. Sarita comments: "Sometimes I don't know whether what I'm remembering really happened or if I only imagined it. It's all so muddled up in my mind." It is through the slow, reluctant acknowledgment of her past that Sarita begins to understand the sources of her emotional paralysis and inch toward self-realization. Thus, Deshpande not only illustrates the corrosive effects of trauma on memory but also highlights the importance of recollection however painful as a step toward empowerment and self-reclamation. Sarita's recollection of her mother's cruel words after her brother's death is described with sensory detail, indicating how deeply those moments are etched into her psyche when she says: "I remember that evening. I remember it so clearly. The stillness, the shadows, the feel of the dark house. The words. The words she said. The chill of them."

### **Silence and Suppression of the Domestic Sphere**

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Shashi Deshpande presents the domestic space not as a haven of comfort, but as a silent battleground where emotional and psychological abuse unfolds behind closed doors. The domestic sphere, traditionally idealized as the woman's domain and a place of security, becomes in Sarita's case a space of isolation, fear, and identity erasure. This section examines how silence operates as both a tool of suppression and a symptom of trauma within Sarita's marriage and home life.

Sarita's relationship with her husband, Manohar, reveals a deeply unsettling dynamic in which love and violence co-exist in silence. By day, Manohar appears as the supportive husband of a successful doctor; by night, he becomes an aggressor, punishing Sarita for her professional achievements through sexual abuse. The violence is not spoken of, not confronted directly by either party. Sarita, conditioned by societal expectations and internalized guilt, does not name the abuse she endures it in silence, rationalizes it, and represses its impact. This suppression mirrors the broader cultural tendency to silence domestic issues, particularly those related to power imbalances and female autonomy. She says: "I've always been afraid of the nights... Not the dark, but the nights. Because the nights belong to him. And I have no place in them, no freedom. No voice. I become someone else, someone I don't know, someone I don't want to be."

Deshpande uses the lack of dialogue and Sarita's internal conflict to highlight how speech itself is denied in oppressive domestic structures. The home becomes a site where silence is weaponized where the inability to speak one's suffering reinforces the cycle of

trauma. This silence is not passive; it is constructed by patriarchal norms that expect women to endure, adjust, and suppress their needs and pain. Sarita realises “We never talked, we never spoke about things that mattered. Only the trivialities. Food, clothes, the weather. Not about what I felt. Not about what she felt.”

Deshpande critiques not only individual relationships but the entire social fabric that sanctifies the domestic space while ignoring the psychological toll it takes on women. The domestic sphere, then, is not neutral it is gendered, policed, and often violent in its expectations. Sarita’s silence is both a survival strategy and a symbol of the emotional entrapment so many women experience within the confines of marriage and home. Sarita’s inner monologue and her inability to express her suffering particularly regarding the abuse in her marriage. The domestic sphere becomes a place where unspoken pain accumulates, deepening her emotional isolation. She feels “There had been words. But they had all been said within my own mind. I had never spoken them aloud. Not to him. Not to anyone.”

### **Unspoken Violence**

What makes the violence in the novel particularly powerful is that it is unspoken never named, never confronted. Saru herself struggles to articulate her suffering, internalizing guilt and shame. Her return to her parental home following her mother's death becomes a metaphorical journey into repressed memories and buried traumas. The silences in conversations, the unsaid truths in relationships, and the lack of open dialogue all contribute to the violence that shapes her life. Shashi Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terrors* powerfully unravels the interior landscape of a woman caught in the throes of societal expectations, emotional neglect, and marital oppression. While overt violence is sparingly described, the novel is saturated with unspoken violence a silent, psychological torment that pervades the protagonist’s life and relationships. The novel reveals Saru’s deeply troubled marriage to Manohar. Though he appears loving and supportive in public, he becomes cruel and sadistic in private, especially in bed. Sarita feels: “The rage of Manohar made him a monster in the darkness of the night”. This sexual violence, rarely acknowledged in Indian literature at the time, is rendered more disturbing by its silence. Saru cannot speak of her trauma; her pain is not only physical but psychological, intensified by her isolation. She says: “He attacked me like an animal that night. I was sleeping and I woke up and there was this... this man hurting me. With his hands, his teeth, his whole body.” The very title of the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* ironically alludes to the nights that bring dread rather than rest. Saru’s trauma extends back to her childhood. Her mother’s emotional violence expressed through preferential treatment of her brother, constant criticism, and lack of affection shapes Saru’s sense of inadequacy. Her mother never physically harms her, but the psychological damage is enduring. The mother's control over Saru’s identity is exercised through silence, subtle manipulation, and withdrawal of love, a particularly insidious form

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of violence. Deshpande critiques the patriarchal structures that normalize women's suffering and suppress their voices. Saru, a successful doctor, finds that professional achievements do not exempt her from gendered expectations of obedience, modesty, and submission. The contradiction between her public success and private suffering underscores the violence of societal norms that invalidate a woman's agency. What makes the violence in the novel particularly powerful is that it is unspoken never named, never confronted. Saru herself struggles to articulate her suffering, internalizing guilt and shame. Her return to her parental home following her mother's death becomes a metaphorical journey into repressed memories and buried traumas. The silences in conversations, the unsaid truths in relationships, and the lack of open dialogue all contribute to the violence that shapes her life. She realises: "My life had already been planned marriage, children, obedience. There was no space for dreams."

### **Reflections of Psychological Distress**

The novel's title, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, is deeply ironic. The psychological suffering of Sarita starts even from her own home when her mother says that Sarita is responsible for her own brother Dhruv's death gives her a deep psychological distress. The house she returns to her parental home offers little refuge. Instead, it becomes a space for introspection, where buried memories and unresolved traumas surface, forcing Saru to confront her past and the choices she has made, Her mother taunts her in such words "Daughter? I don't have any daughter. I had a son and he died. Now I am childless ...". The trauma exists in Saru's external conflicts, but it vividly portrays the intense inner turmoil that defines her existence. Saru's psychological distress emerges as a result of her troubled childhood, societal expectations, gender roles, and a dysfunctional marital relationship, all of which converge to create a fractured identity and profound emotional pain. Saru suffers from the emotional neglect and rejection of her mother. This maternal alienation becomes a foundational trauma, leading to a deep-seated sense of inadequacy and unworthiness. Her mother's preferential treatment of Saru's brother, Dhruva, and the subsequent blame she places on Saru for his accidental death, leave a lasting psychological scar. Saru internalizes this blame, feeling unloved and inherently flawed. This childhood trauma sets the stage for her adult struggles with self-worth and emotional dependency.

Saru's psychological distress is further compounded by her conflicted position within traditional Indian society. As a woman who pursues education and a professional career in medicine, Saru defies conventional gender expectations. While this brings her external success, it also isolates her emotionally. Her achievements, instead of being a source of pride, become a threat to the traditional power dynamic in her marriage. Her husband, Manu, once affectionate and supportive, becomes insecure and abusive as Saru's professional stature grows. This shift in their relationship leads to emotional and sexual violence most notably, marital rape which is a deeply traumatic and isolating experience for Saru. The fear

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and helplessness that she feels at night, when Manu turns violent, contrast painfully with her public image as a competent doctor, highlighting the duality of her existence and the silent suffering she endures.

Ultimately, Saru's psychological distress is portrayed not as an isolated condition but as a result of systemic gender oppression, emotional neglect, and societal hypocrisy. Deshpande offers no simplistic resolution but leaves readers with a sense of Saru's awakening to her own need for self-definition and emotional healing. Her journey is a powerful reflection of the inner battles women often fight in silence against guilt, fear, and the suffocating expectations of a patriarchal world.

### **Personal Despair**

Saru, the protagonist of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, embodies the paradox of outward success and internal suffering. As a competent and respected doctor, she has achieved what many would consider the ideal of professional success. However, beneath this exterior lies a deeply troubled emotional life marked by unresolved trauma and disconnection. Saru's inner despair stems from multiple sources her dysfunctional childhood, marked by her mother's emotional neglect and favouritism toward her brother; the guilt she carries over Dhruva's death; and her strained marriage, which has turned abusive and toxic. Despite her achievements in medicine, she feels alienated in her personal relationships, especially with her husband, who resents her professional authority and success. She thinks: "Why didn't she ever want me? Why was I never good enough?"

The clash between public image and private reality heightens Saru's sense of dislocation. In the hospital, she is in control capable, decisive, and respected. At home, however, she feels powerless, afraid, and emotionally vulnerable. Her husband's nightly sexual violence represents the most terrifying inversion of power where the very space that should provide comfort and safety becomes a site of trauma. Moreover, Saru's professional success is also a source of her suffering, as it violates traditional gender roles that her husband and society expect her to uphold. Rather than being empowered by her achievements, she is punished for them within her marriage. This conflict exacerbates her inner turmoil, leaving her feeling emotionally hollow and detached from both her profession and her sense of self. Saru's personal despair is not caused by her career, but by the lack of emotional support and meaningful connections in her private life. She observes: "No one wants to listen. No one wants to understand." Her success becomes a mask of her identity she wears during the day, while at night, her unresolved trauma surfaces, reminding her that professional competence cannot heal emotional wounds. Her triumphs seem hollow because they are not shared in a spirit of love and support; instead, they highlight the emotional gaps in her life. Inwardly,

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she remains a wanderer, searching for a space both literal and emotional where she can belong without guilt, fear, or compromise.

### **Distressing and Emotional Experience**

Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a poignant exploration of a woman's struggle with identity, societal expectations, and personal trauma. The protagonist, Sarita experiences multiple layers of distress that shape her emotional and psychological state. These distressing experiences arise from her childhood, her troubled marriage, her role as a woman in a patriarchal society, and her inner conflict between personal ambition and traditional gender roles. Deshpande masterfully portrays Sarita's suffering, creating a deeply moving narrative of a woman's quest for selfhood and freedom.

One of the earliest sources of distress in Sarita's life is her childhood experience within a patriarchal family. Her parents, especially her mother, show a clear preference for her younger brother, Dhruva. This gender bias causes emotional trauma in Sarita's formative years. She is constantly reminded that being a girl is a disadvantage, and that she is an unwelcome burden. When her brother tragically drowns, Sarita is blamed by her mother for his death, further deepening her guilt and psychological wounds. Instead of receiving comfort and support, she is alienated and emotionally punished. This rejection haunts Sarita into adulthood, leaving her with a permanent sense of inadequacy and worthlessness.

Sarita's marriage to Manohar (Manu) becomes another source of intense emotional and physical distress. Initially, their relationship seems based on love and companionship. However, as Sarita becomes more professionally successful working as a doctor and her earnings are more than her husband Manohar becomes resentful and insecure. He cannot accept her growing independence and authority, and this inferiority complex manifests in domestic abuse and marital rape. At night, he turns into a violent stranger, asserting his dominance through physical force. This duality of being respected in her professional life and being victimized in her personal life tears Sarita apart.

The sexual violence she faces in her marriage is especially distressing because it is unspoken and unacknowledged. Sarita feels ashamed and confused, unable to share her pain with anyone. The title of the novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, is deeply ironic. For Sarita, the dark does hold terrors the nighttime brings fear, pain, and humiliation. She finds herself caught in a prison of silence, as Indian society often refuses to recognize or talk about marital rape. Her suffering is compounded by the isolation she experiences, with no one to confide in or seek support from.

Moreover, Sarita's distress is intensified by societal expectations placed on her as a woman. She is constantly torn between her role as a dutiful wife and daughter, and her desire to live an independent, self-determined life. Her medical profession brings her neither peace nor respect within her household. Instead, it creates tension and triggers her husband's violence. Society judges her for stepping out of traditional gender roles, while offering no support for the abuse she endures. This double standard is a significant source of frustration and helplessness.

When Sarita ultimately decides to leave her husband and way back to her parental home, she is forced to confront her past. Her childhood home does not bring comfort; instead, it revives memories of neglect, loss, and emotional starvation. She begins to reflect on the many compromises she has made in her life, and the price she has paid for conforming to societal norms. Her stay at her father's house becomes a time of introspection and emotional turmoil. She starts questioning everything her choices, her silence, her responsibilities, and even her identity.

Sarita's life is filled with psychological, emotional, and physical distress. She is a woman caught in the crossfire between tradition and modernity, duty and desire, power and helplessness. Her journey is one of pain and struggle, but also of awakening and transformation. Though she is battered by life's circumstances, she gradually begins to reclaim her voice and seek a life of dignity and freedom. Her story is not just about suffering, but about resilience the courage to face the dark and say it holds no more terror. Her emotion breakdown can be revealed through these lines: "I don't know what I want, what I am, what I should be. There are too many voices in my head my mother, my husband, even my own voice scolding me for being weak. I feel like I'm falling apart. I don't want to go back, but I don't know where else to go."

Shashi Deshpande's portrayal of Sarita is a reflective overview on the condition of women in a male-dominated society. Sarita's distressing experiences are not unique to her they reflect the lived realities of many women who are silenced, marginalized, and abused. Through her story, the novel urges readers to confront the deep-rooted inequalities in society and imagine a future where women can live without fear.

### **Conclusion**

Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* offers a deeply poignant and psychologically intense portrayal of a woman navigating through layers of trauma, memory, and identity. The central character, Sarita (or Saru), becomes the focal point of a larger exploration into the deeply entrenched gender norms, cultural expectations, and silent sufferings that define the lives of many Indian women. Her internalized traumas stemming

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from childhood neglect, parental favouritism, societal condemnation, and marital abuse are intricately woven into the narrative, revealing how memory becomes both a burden and a pathway to healing. Deshpande subtly critiques the patriarchal framework of Indian society, in which women are expected to conform, submit, and silently endure. Sarita, despite being a successful doctor, finds herself emotionally broken and alienated, not because of her professional failures but due to her unresolved personal traumas and emotional dissonance. Memory plays a dual role in the narrative. On one side, it acts as a haunting force, dragging Sarita back into the dark recesses of her childhood the resentment towards her mother, the guilt surrounding her brother death, and the lasting impact of her mother's conditional love. On the other side, memory becomes an instrument of self-realization and catharsis. Sarita's act of remembering is not passive; it gradually becomes an act of reclaiming her voice. The fragmented memories from the architecture of the novel's non-linear narrative, reflecting the fragmented nature of Sarita's own identity. These recollections, though painful, are essential for her psychological reintegration and eventual empowerment.

The Author's treatment of trauma is intimate and restrained, avoiding melodrama and instead focusing on the subtle, often invisible wounds inflicted by emotional neglect, social rejection, and marital violence. The trauma Sarita experiences is not spectacular—it is embedded in the everyday realities of her life. The silence of her mother, the absence of emotional support, the abuse inflicted by her husband Manohar—all these contribute to a gradual erosion of her self-worth. Sarita becomes a symbol of the modern woman caught between tradition and autonomy, expectation and desire, silence and speech.

The title of the novel itself is metaphorical. "The dark" refers not just to literal fear or night but to all that is unspoken, suppressed, and hidden trauma, suffering, and memory. For Sarita, confronting this darkness becomes necessary to overcome it. The novel, through her eyes, emphasizes that true empowerment can only begin when one acknowledges pain and gives voice to suppressed emotions. Sarita's story is, therefore, not only about personal suffering but also about the possibility of healing, however tentative or incomplete.

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a powerful feminist text that intricately maps the psychological landscape of a woman who learns to revisit her past in order to reclaim her future. Deshpande's nuanced portrayal of Sarita serves as a mirror to many women who live lives of quiet despair, whose sufferings are often dismissed or trivialized. By focusing on trauma and memory, the novel compels readers to look beyond surface appearances and understand the invisible emotional struggles that shape women's lives.

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