

## **The Female Identity: Conflict of Gender and Confrontation in Sashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors***

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### **Abstract**

The paper presents a significant study of Sarita's conflicts and how she confronts. She looks back into the past events, which leaves mark on her psyche. Sarita (Saru) is an independent successful doctor who is haunted with emptiness, aching and longing due to the gender discrimination and patriarchy. She strives hard to overcome the agony by looking back into the past and honestly analysing each incident. She rewinds the past and analyses very objectively. She also succeeds by neither surrendering nor escaping from the struggles but by challenging them. Saru is out of all the conflicts once she decides to confront reality. Sashi Deshpande has beautifully made her woman character Saru to be more relatable with the readers, especially the women. She thus gives a solution to the readers to overcome their plight by not letting their dreams and individuality being shattered.

**Key Words:** gender discrimination, patriarchy, confront reality, self-identity, individuality, conflict with past

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Women who occupy half of the world's populace are unexpectedly not treated on par with men in all compasses of human activity. They are oppressed, suppressed and marginalised. This picture of women is not something that's new. It is found all over the globe. Patriarchy dominates universally. It gives the power of authority to men and subjugates women. Socialisation plays an important role in everyone's life. It not only shapes a woman's psyche but also a man's as it begins its influence right from their childhood. Patriarchal institutions burden a woman with its customs, taboos, traditions, doctrines, practices and culture which are exclusively designed for a girl child. It encourages women to believe that they are born to be married. The only aim and achievement of a woman is to get married and live with the man with all her dreams suppressed no matter what.

Sashi Deshpande is a renowned Indian woman writer who mainly focusses on the female protagonists who struggle against all odds. The strains of feminism are obvious in her writings. The concealed and covered up problems of women from all the unnoticed and unexpressed areas are exposed by her. The understanding of woman psychology has helped Deshpande in bringing out her masterpieces. Her novels focus on woman's conflict and self-quest to free herself from the restrictions laid by the society, culture, nature and also from their own fears and guilts. Deshpande's protagonists speak for themselves and other fellow sisters. They are ambitious, independent, respected and identified by all. This is not possible without Deshpande's struggle to give her characters their self-respect, individuality and self-identity.

Deshpande's female protagonists are generally educated, aspiring, hopeful characters imprisoned within the conservative boundaries of the society. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is Deshpande's first novel which exhibits her extreme talent of writing. The novel portrays a natural quandary of a middle-class woman who is torn between tradition and modern, and family and profession. For centuries women are considered to be the man's puppets. She can neither dream nor desire to dream. Even if she dreams its of no use. All her desires, dreams, aspirations, individuality are suppressed and never allowed to be exposed. Gender discrimination by Sarita's mother during her childhood and sexual harassment by her husband during her married life is being explored in the novel. Deshpande makes her protagonists to raise against all these odds. In this process they shatter, struggle, sometimes they even get lost but finally they strive and succeed raising for themselves and for those like them.

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* revolves around a woman, Sarita (Saru) a doctor. She's an independent successful woman who is well educated, had an inter caste marriage against her parents' wish. Though she presents herself to be independent and happy there is a kind of emptiness, aching, longing within her which she strives hard to overcome. She isn't sure if it is because she is not a typical stereotyped daughter, wife or a mother. When she hears about her mother's death, she takes it an opportunity to overcome the pain. She leaves her husband, children and her profession and visits her parental home hoping to escape from a life she had envisioned as a 'happily ever after'. Wherein she is haunted by her mom's death and her father's silence.

Saru's stay extends for months as she comfortably falls into routine with her father and his young student who lives with him. Saru dwells upon the past where her mom had always accused her for being responsible for her brother's death even though she was also a child then. Saru's mother always made her feel inferior to her brother Dhruva. This type of gender description by a mother often results in rivalry among the siblings. Rashmi Sahi rightly spots that "When a mother differentiates between her own children the boy and the girl for whom she has equally suffered and taken equal pains, there is no other torch bearer than for the girl child." (20-21). Saru's childhood was traumatic that she always received a cold shoulder from her mother for being responsible for her brother's death. When she struggles hard to cope with her husband's violent behaviour, she feels remorse for having dreamt of having a beautiful marriage life.

Sarita's character is written intensely frequently making her seem more relatable. Even though she is trapped with a violent jealousy husband she puts up a show of being alright, independent and strong. Her mother's cold attitude and explicit words throughout her childhood had given Saru an immense grief too large for a little girl. This cold past and the guilt of not being able to save her brother from drowning always stays inside her as a baggage.

Poor little scared boy, who never grew up to know that the dark holds no terrors. That the terrors are inside us all the time. We carry them within us, and like traitors they spring out, when we least expect them to scratch and maul. (Deshpande 85)

All right so I am alone. But so's everyone else. Human beings... They are going to fail you. But because there's just us, because there's no one else, we have to go on trying. If we can't believe in ourselves, we are sunk.

The novel presents a significant study of her past events, which leaves mark on her psyche. Looking back at the events bounces her an opportunity to give an honest analysis of each incident. She rewinds the past and analyses very objectively. She explains her father about her brother Dhruva's drowning incident. She tells her father how she was disallowed to go to film with her friend Smita's family. The reason for not allowing was that she was a 'girl'. Sarita also explained that she had no idea of taking Dhruva with her, but he was a headstrong spoilt child who would never compromise on anything just because he was a 'boy'. When he was drowning, Sarita also went into the pond and tried to rescue him but was in vain.

The replaying of her past shows how Sarita had an aversion towards the gender bias which was found at her home. She is always painted as an unwanted child. Shubha Tiwari emphasises on the quandary of the protagonist as being treated an unwanted child and thus "growing hatred, hostility and lovelessness within her." (85).

Deshpande's mastermind picturises the struggle for equality. Sarita, even as a child hated the gender discrimination and always was different from other girl children of her age. Thus, Sarita clears herself of the charge of murder that her mother had laid against her. By this she is able to make peace within.

Sarita further travels down the lane. She remembers how her friend had take her to her room where from she escapes to save herself from the hooligans. Sarita is a smart girl who wanted individuality and freedom. Being juvenile, she gets inspired by the features, gestures and performances of Manohar (Manu). As a result, she yearns for love and tormented by Manu due to her better position than him. Manu's insecurity increases day by day and is worsened when an interviewer questions him "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?" (Deshpande 200). This hurts Manu's ego badly that he expresses his vengeance in the bed. Saru 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.” (Deshpande 201). Being terrified by all this, Saru feels love and romance to be mere illusions. She expressed gloomily that,

Love... how she scorned the word now. There was no such thing between man and woman. There was only a need which both fought against, futilely, the very futility turning into the thing they called ‘love’. Its only a word, she thought. Take away the word, the idea, and the concept will wither away. (Deshpande 72)

The marriage, love and relationship of Saru and Manu starts worsening which she calls a disease. She admits that

Theirs was not a case of love dying, nor even conflicts. Instead, it was as if a kind of disease had attacked... A disease like syphilis or leprosy, something that could not be admitted to others. This very concealment made it even more gruesomely disgusting, so that she was dirty and so was he had so was their marriage. (Deshpande 69-70)

Thus, Deshpande expertly makes her protagonist analyse, solve and make pace with her problems. Her protagonist Saru is an angry young woman who fights for her self-esteem and identity in spite of living in the period and tradition where the men are considered to be the superior. This is evident from the character Nalu, Saru’s childhood friend who advises her students to walk behind the steps of their husbands. She also adds

If he’s an MA, you should be a BA. If he’s 5’4” tall, you shouldn’t be more than 5’3” tall. If he’s earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety-nine rupees. That’s the only rule to follow if you want to a happy marriage. Don’t ever try to reverse the doctor - nurse, executive - secretary, principal - teacher role. It can be traumatic, disastrous. And I assure you, it int worth it. He’ll suffer, you’ll suffer and so will the children. (Deshpande 137)

Saru, being in such society which is filled with backward thoughts, is a rebellion to self-identity and individuality. Towards the end she confronts reality and realises that the dark holds no terrors. In a patriarchal world she neither surrenders nor escapes from the problems but accepts them as a challenge. She agrees to her father’s advice “Don’t turn your back on things again. Turn around and look at them.” (Deshpande 216). Her promise of reconciliation with her husband is not her defeat or submission but her new found clarity and confidence to confront reality. Saru prospers in understanding her selfhood through her profession and proves the world that economically independent women can bring change to the society.

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