

**CONFRONTING THE TERRORS : A PEEP INTO THE NIGHTMARISH WORLD OF
SARITA IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVEL *THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS***

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Abstract

This paper aims to study Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* from feminist as well as psychoanalytic viewpoints. The narrative reinforces problematic traditional views of marriage, exposing the grim realities of marital rape and sexual exploitation. It further delineates the paradox of the educated independent women who, despite their achievements, still struggle to dismantle entrenched patriarchal structures or still collide with the glass walls of patriarchy. By encrypting the female protagonist Sarita's nightmarish world of exhausting, debilitating, physically abusive and psychologically straining marriage with Manu, the paper serves as a critique of the oppressive structures of patriarchy, the institution of marriage as well as the various socio-cultural beliefs of the society which objectifies women, restrict women's autonomy and attempts at silencing women thus ensuring male dominance and superiority. The 'Terrors' is here symbolic of Sarita's horrific sexual onslaught by her husband, the deeply ingrained patriarchy's unseen sickles, fears and guilts which haunts her throughout the novel. The paper analyzes the female body as a battleground where men try to assert their power and dominance by enforcing physical strength, thus controlling both her body and mind, and destroying her sense of self. Therefore Deshpande here accentuates the importance of women raising their voice and taking charge of their own lives in order to reorient themselves as assertive individuals.

Keywords - marriage, patriarchy, gender bias, physical and psychological turmoil.

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande, one of the eminent novelists of contemporary Indian Literature in English, intricately explores the nuanced and complex lives of Indian women. Her writings deeply analyze patriarchal structures, marital relationships, and the persistent conflict between traditional, cultural expectations and modern aspirations. Deshpande also sheds light on the psychological impact of patriarchy, and women's arduous journey toward self-realization and identity in a patriarchal society. In this regard, the present novel selected for this study, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, published in 1980 is also a milestone in analysing the turmoil of women within the constraints of married life, highlighting the various horrors and terrors that turn their lives into nightmares. Here, the turmoil of the protagonist, Sarita, is even doubled : on one hand, being a wife and mother in her personal life and on the other, being a doctor in her professional life, she finds herself between a rock and a hard place, where she had to pay for her achievements, for over performing her husband. Hence her quest to find true sense of self and belonging is a crucial theme of the novel.

However Deshpande here pinpoints the evils of patriarchy such as gender discrimination, which is another mechanism of belittling female worth, highlighting the traditional preference of male child over female child. By analysing Sarita's early life and her relationship with her mother, we can trace the yearning of a girl child's heart, for love and affection of her parents, wishing to be cared, adored and loved equally as the male child. Sarita was a neglected and slighted child overlooked by her parents and specially by her mother, because her mother's world revolved only around her son, where her daughter, Sarita, had no importance or significance. Thus this paper emphasizes on the child-parent relationship, specially mother-daughter relationship and the influence of patriarchal ideologies in moulding these relations.

Illustrating the constricting, suffocating, dull and draining married life of Sarita, which lacks emotional attachment and has excessive sexual abuse by her husband, this study explores the symbolic significance of the female body as a battleground, where patriarchal forces attempt to assert male dominance. Patriarchy enforces physical strength to control both the body and mind of women and defining limits for them. Manu's enforcement of his physical strength over Sarita's body is an attempt of establishing himself as more powerful and compelling. Crushed beneath the weight of his consuming dominance, Sarita found herself stripped of all resistance, acutely aware of her own weakness in front of his physical strength, as she notes -"And I so frozen with terror that I could not move...I tried to call out, to scream. Nothing issued out of me but silence"(13).

Thus, the study delves with the marital power dynamics, exploring the physical as well as psychological toll of a woman, when she out-earns or out-performs her husband. Resulting in the male counterpart's inferiority complex, wounded male chauvinism, insecurity, resentment or withdrawal, which leaves women feeling isolated and lacking emotional reciprocity or validation from their spouse. One of the core reasons behind Sarita's strained relationship with her husband Manu is undoubtedly Sarita's successful career, financial independence and being the primary breadwinner of the household. "He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband".(49). Propelled by fragile masculinity and male chauvinism, Manu couldn't accept this subservient position below his wife, thus choosing her body to reassert his power and dominance.

Thus, the paper attempts to analyse the psychology of Sarita, who has been suppressed and marginalized from her very childhood to her married life; being the victim of various terrors of patriarchal society, its exploitation, gender discrimination, subjugation, physical assault and oppression. Throughout the novel, she suffers from psychological turmoil, tries to resolve the anxiety, inner turbulence and her wounded psyche and wounded body which created a restlessness in her life and has snatched away the very sight of peace and bliss. She tries to analyse each and every aspect of her life to search out the meaning of her existence, her true identity, her sense of self and at least to find some peace and serenity.

It further critiques the functioning of patriarchy which has used the institution of marriage as a tool or weapon to have control over the lives of women, to regulate reproduction, and institutionalize male dominance over women's autonomy, labor, and sexuality. Sarita's repeated requests to quit her job, and living a stress-free life of a housewife, and Manu's strict denial and rejection of this idea, explicitly show the power dynamics of a marital relationship, where the power and control is always held in the hand of the male counterpart. However, Sarita throughout the narrative compromises with her true desires, feelings and emotional longings and continues to live the constricted, suffocating life with Manu and her job. Yet, towards the end of the novel she finds an escape from her nightmarish world and sexual assault of Manu in her parental house. There with the help of her father she finally recovers the courage to face the terrors or challenges of her life, to raise her voice in firm resolve in order to reclaim her rights, true identity, autonomy and liberty.

All in all this study delineates the plight of Indian women being the victim of male oppression and despotism which routinely restricts women's autonomy, denies equality and self-identity. Thus this paper accentuates the importance of women considering their own self as their first priority and taking the charge of their own life and standing firmly against the violence and exploitation.

Statement of the problem

This study analyses the marginalization of Indian women within the institution of marriage. It specially delineates the plight and struggle of the educated middle-class women to break out the constraints of patriarchy, to break out the silence, in order to claim their own identity. Thus, the

study critiques the patriarchal structures which routinely restricts women's autonomy and liberty, enforcing women's secondary and submissive position in the society.

Objectives

- i) The aim of this paper is to study the role of patriarchy in the subjugation and marginalization of women.
- ii) To make an in depth study of the physical and psychological impact of living in a sexually abusive and mentally harassing marriage.
- iii) To analyse the silent battles every woman fights in their lives being a daughter, sister, wife and mother.
- iv) To encrypt Sarita's arduous journey for autonomy, identity, equality and liberty.
- v) To emphasize the importance of women raising their voice and claiming their rights.

Review of Literature

This novel has been studied by various scholars from different standpoint across the years. Uniyal B.P. (2015) talks about the quest for identity and recognition in the character of Sarita, and the hardships she has to endure on her journey to reclaim self-identity.

Mishra, Divya (2017) studies the novel as a picture of feminism from Indian context, highlighting the importance of marriage, motherhood and family in Indian society.

M., Sakthiradha (2020) explores in the novel, the suffering of women within the institution of marriage. It studies marriage as a tool of patriarchy to exploit, and oppress women.

Suthar, Vinod (2009) studies about the family dynamics in the novel. It analyses the role of family in a woman's life, with reference to Sarita's relationship with her family members.

Srivastava Pragya and Shakuntala Misra (2023), studies the novel as a scathing critique of the patriarchal system which restricts women's autonomy, denies equality and sovereignty.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis, emphasising narrative structure, motifs, metaphors, symbols and silences which in their own symbolic manner adds to the thematic exploration of the dilemma of women and the dominance of male in society. It takes account of the Psychoanalytic Theory to study the effect of suppressed desires and physical abuse in one's psyche. On a broader spectrum, it uses psychoanalysis to analyse how adversely one's psyche can be affected by constant exposure to oppressive sexual pressure, living stressful life of excessive mental turmoil, of no autonomy or dignity, peace or happiness. The research further takes under consideration various feminist theories to strengthen the study, such as - Betty Friedan's theory of the 'Feminine Mystique', Judith Butler's theory of 'Gender as Performance', Elaine Showalter's theory of 'Gynocriticism' etc. However for a deeper understanding of Shashi Deshpande's critical portrayal of patriarchy, the study adopts historical and socio-cultural contextualization by investigating how the domain of patriarchy and various institutions such as marriage, religion, culture or family has contributed to the women's oppression and subjugation from time immemorial. The research also takes under consideration the most recent peer-reviewed articles, research papers and scholarly books that critically analyzed the text from various angles. This approach ensures that the study is part of the prevailing academic discourse, yet it also adds on new insights into the existing field.

Analysis

Sarita's Childhood and the Roots of Terror

The reasons for Sarita's fragmented self can be traced to the anguish or trauma caused by emotional neglect from her parents since her childhood. Her distraught relationship with her orthodox mother who wants her to be meek and submissive, deeply engraves in her mind to a point where she feels solitary, unwanted, rejected and lacks paternal love; and this gives birth to a spot of terror in her heart—the terror of being unlucky, of being evil, of not being chosen by her own parents. While her brother Dhruva was the apple of her parents' eye, she found herself neglected, rejected or unloved. Her mother's harsh behaviour towards her and constant reminder that she belongs to the "weaker sex" created a sense of dejection in her.

Her mother enforces the patriarchal idea that sons are superior and valuable, and daughters are a liability, thus Saru is expected to be calm, composed and of a caretaking nature while her brother Dhruva is prioritized, elevated and adored. While Dhruva's birthday was celebrated with a lot of festivity and a special puja performed in the evening, on Saru's birthday there was no such special puja performed. Her mother considered Saru as just a liability and wanted to get rid of her by giving her in a marriage. As she remarks - "Don't go out in the sun. You will get even darker... We have to get you married"(53). And when Saru said that she would rather prefer to be in her parental house, like Dhruva, her mother immediately asserts that "he's different. He's a boy".(53) Here this gender discrimination perpetuated by her mother could be seen as the working of patriarchy's mores, ingrained in her psyche. Her character could be studied as a proper product or proper conditioning of the patriarchal society, whose ideologies, philosophies, doctrines and dogmas are deeply instilled in her psyche. As Deshpande states, "It was so much easier for women in those days to accept, not to struggle, because they believed, they knew, there was nothing else for them. And they called that Fate" (82).

However, Sarita being an educated modern woman finds difficulty in living her life in these suppressive and oppressive philosophies of patriarchy which attempts at keeping women meek and submissive. Thus, she suffers from plethora of pain and torment in every aspect of her life, while coping with the socially accepted so called womanly behaviours and her heart's desire to break through these chains of patriarchy to establish her own identity. She decides to take medicine rather than going for a simple BSc in spite of her mother's disapproval "No, I said. No. In a hostel? What do you think...your father's a millionaire?" (167). But Sarita shows strong determination to pursue medicine as her career and it was as if her battle against the suppression, discrimination and hatred her mother had perpetuated.

Recollecting her scornful attitude towards her mother, Saru says: "I hated her. I wanted to hurt her, wound her, and make her suffer"(62), and the most horrendous incident which deteriorated their relationship to the worst was the accidental death of Dhruva by drowning in a pond. For which her mother holds Saru solely responsible and considers her guilty, as she would accuse Saru "she killed him...she let him drown"(171). This childhood guilt of her brother's accidental drowning, a trauma her mother weaponized against her, terrorized her throughout her life. The mother would have preferred Saru's death instead of her son's death, as she questions Jaya- "why are you still alive – why didn't you die?"(1). Hence, these harsh and derogatory remarks by her own mother made indelible cuts in Saru's heart, which bled throughout her life. She expresses her repugnance or detestation towards her mother by deviating herself from her in every way possible "I can remember walking as stiffly as possible...So that I would be as unlike her as possible...If you are a woman. I don't want to be one"(73). This renders the bitterness that marked the mother daughter relationship, which seemed, they couldn't even bear to withstand each other's shadows. But more than this bitterness of the superficial level, there was an in-depth effect of these derogatory remarks, injustices and inhuman treatments in her psyche, it created a sense of terror - the terror of being rejected, of being unloved, unwanted, neglected and hated which strained her psyche.

Sarita's Marriage and the Explosion of Terror.

Saru's married life with Manu marked the ultimate explosion of 'terror'. Saru's marriage with Manu was marked by love and affection for each other. Manu looked like a romantic hero, a writer, a poet, a charming guy, whom Saru met in her college. Saru recalls the initial days of their conjugal life, when living with him was a heavenly pleasure for her "It was heaven...we were happy"(47). However, over the course of time, Saru becomes a successful doctor while Manohar remains a teacher in a third grade college. Saru's rising financial and professional status becomes the bone of contention between the couple. Saru remarks, "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" (49). This unequal position hurt Manu's self esteem, his fragile masculinity. In front of the society Saru was a successful independent woman, enrolled in a noble profession, thus receiving respect and recognition from people around. "And now when we walked out of our room, there were nods and smiles, murmured greetings and namastes. But they were all for me, only for me. There was nothing for him. He was almost totally ignored"(49). Thus Saru's growth and fame started bothering Manu's male ego and this marked the beginning of the dark phase of their conjugal life as well as the expansion of the horrors ingrained in Saru's psyche from her childhood. Saru discloses "happiness is so evanescent, nothing is left of it"(47).

Manu's machismo was triggered even more by the question of the interview girl - "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?"(238). A sharpened arrow from the taut bow pierced straight through his male chauvinism, yet the real injury was to Saru "He attacked me like an animal that night... this man hurting me. With his hands, his teeth, his whole body...I never knew till then, he had so much strength in him"(238-239). Thus Saru's body was used as a weapon to set limits of her own independence and success. Consequently the roots of the terrors dig deeper into her psyche. It was the terror of the midnight, the nightmare behind the closed doors of the room, which traumatised her whole being. This was the real terror of the darkness, the blood curdling terror.

Manu's abysmal state, failing short of cultural or social standards of manhood, chooses the body of Saru to establish male dominance and superiority. Saru's bed time with Manu at night was no longer a pleasure or proof of love for Saru, it turned into a nightmare, a bizarre, horrendous nightmare. In the light of the sun a veil of sophistication covered Manu's savage enmity or hostility, yet in the darkness of the night the beastly creature hits its stride, and the star of the day Saru, turns into a docile, fragile, helpless diminutive bug, terrorized by the sight of the approaching monster.

At first it was a nightmare of hands. Questing hands that left a trail of pain. Hurting hands that brought me out of a cocoon of blessed unreality. . . Into the savage reality of a monstrous onslaught. And then the nightmare was compounded of lips and teeth as well. . . I could taste blood on my lips. (13)

This evocative delineation is the terror or horror story of not only Saru but also of thousands of women suffering silently each and every night, again and again, in a vicious loop. Yet giving voice to it is an infeasible endeavour to women; as they are brought up with the lessons of an idle women's duty of silently enduring all pain and adjusting with sufferings and torment. "It's all a question of adjustment, really. If you really want to make it work, you can always do it"(140). Yet the adjustment is solely on women's part, on the verge of women's choices, opinions, happiness, self respect, self identity, physical health, mental peace everything. Saru's adjustment with her constricting, suffocating life of sexual assault and psychological strain is nevertheless the conditioning of patriarchy's mores. As Saru mentions "Everything in a girl's life, it seemed, was shaped to that single purpose of pleasing a male" (193). Thus women are supposed to make every kind of adjustment to please the male counterpart and ensure her position as a wife.

However, Saru's precarious position despite her financial independence unveils a stark reality: deeply rooted patriarchal doctrines continue to police and restrict women's autonomy, proving that structural and cultural constraints often eclipse women's economic gains. It highlights that true liberty remains out of reach as long as systemic inequalities dictate a woman's worth and choices. As Saru claims "if Draupadi* had been economically independent, if Sita* had had an independent identity, you think there stories would have been different. No these are things that have been voluntarily surrendered, conciously abandoned, because that is the only way to survive"(162). It discloses the firm grip of patriarchy over the discretion or volition of womenfolk where economic independence makes the suppression no less.

Saru's ultimate declaration regarding the quintessential rule of a happy married life, picturised the core acrid philosophy of patriarchy which always emphasizes women's secondary position below the male counterpart in the family. As Saru mentions "A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he is an M.A., you should be a B.A. If he is five foot four, you shouldn't be more than five three. If he is earning Rs 500, you should never earn more than Rs 499. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage". (162) It's reflective of Saru's own encounters in life being a step ahead of her husband in profession, education, remuneration and respect, and the forfeit she had to pay for her achievements and advancements.

Moreover, silence is here used as a literary and cultural device to convey the experiences and emotional turmoil or terrors of women who are constrained by societal expectations and gender roles. The silence of Saru was representative of her disgust and dissatisfaction with her life, with her toxic relationship with Manu whom she chose herself in spite of her mother's rejection. Infact, she chose him especially to prove her mother wrong, yet now suffering the worst for her own choice. She states about her plight - "May be one day I will be walked alive within it, and die a slow, painful death. Perhaps the process has already begun and what I am is a creature only half alive. And it seems I can do nothing to save myself."(114). It gives a terrorized and deserted soul's utmost acceptance of demise, and surrender in front of the dominant force of patriarchy. Saru's losing self control or sense of self is marked by the dreadful void, existential angst and nihilism perpetuated by the terrors or by her physical as well as psychological turmoil. Saru mentions "Once I found myself cutting a piece of paper, telling myself ... these are bits of my mind falling on the ground"(25). It symbolises Saru's strained psyche and life which is taking her on the verge of psychosis. Her harrowing experiences in the novel makes her think, "My brother died because I heedlessly turned my back on him. My mother died alone because I deserted her. My husband is a failure because I destroyed his manhood."(217). Thus, she started considering herself more than a victim to a culprit. Yet her soul could not bear the pains anymore, nor could continue the suffocating, straining marriage. Hence she choosed her paternal house to take shelter, to get rid of the horrors and the nightmare of Manu's sexual assault.

However, Saru's visit to her father's house towards the end of the novel, marks a significant change in her character as a whole. While so far she was trying to run away from the problems of her life, from the terrors, from the circumstances of exploitation and dominance of Manu, but at the end she decides to face the challenges, and the terrors fiercely. She decides to abandon silence and raise her voice in a firm resolve to retrain peace and happiness in life. From her plea to her father not to open the door for Manu, to her declaration to let Manu come inside and wait for her, it marked a vigorous woman's resurgence to claim her self-identity and autonomy to fight with the terrors which haunted her throughout the novel.

Conclusion

The study serves as a peep to the nightmarish and constricting world of Saru, delineating the strenuous journey of a woman's introspection and identity in a patriarchal society. The study discloses the disparity between male and female world, where the playing field remains unequal for both the sexes. Unlike man, women continue to relentlessly hustle across all aspects of life, to get equality and liberty and dismantle the demeaning barriers of patriarchy. The protagonist Saru's life journey is nonetheless a series of hustle, hustling against the gender based injustices of her mother to hustling against the terror of sexual assault by her husband, she continues to face challenges in every aspect of her life. Furthermore, Saru's sexual onslaught by her husband and her draining psyche highlights the fragility of women's financial independence and the horrendous consequences of women who over performs the male counterpart. Thus, the study asserts that true autonomy of women necessitates both financial as well as socio-cultural liberty. The paper further analyses how the female body is used as a weapon by patriarchy to assert limits on a female's own freedom and liberty. Thus, the 'terrors' here are symbolic of the evils of patriarchy which ultimately works as tools to marginalize women. However, the life cycle of Jaya exposes the life of independent, educated women who are still the subject of male oppression and chooses silence over self identity, independence and authority. The strained relationship of Saru and Manu, indicate the fragility of the institution of marriage where there is only pretensions of a happy family yet underneath it lies distorted heart, wounded psyche, wounded body, compromises and sacrifices. However, sacrifices are on the part of the women to keep the marriage going, to keep the husband and children happy, to keep up her role as an ideal wife and mother, on the expense of stifling her own dreams, desires, happiness, equanimity and contentment. All in all, the study stands out to be a scathing critique of patriarchy which systematically marginalize women, devalue their societal contributions, and limit their personal autonomy and independence.

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