

**GENDER BIASES AND MARGINALIZATION IN  
SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS***

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Shashi Deshpande is one of the leading women novelists on the Indian literary horizon. Her writings concern with women's issues. Her women protagonists undergo great mental trauma in their quest for identity before they affirm themselves. Deshpande's creative talent and ideology have elevated her to a zenith among feminist writers of India. She is a feminist writer but with a broad humanistic outlook. Her novels are a realistic depiction of the anguish and conflict of the modern educated middle class women. Gender biases and marginalization are not exception in her writing. In her second novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, we may identify clearly the gender biases and marginalization. Saru (Sarita), the protagonist, is suffering more regarding of gender discrimination and marginalization. When Saru was in her parents' house, her parents ignored her feelings of love. She was humiliated and isolated. There are two different types of cultural bound laws are followed but meaningless. One type is to Saru and another to Dhruva (her brother). Shashi Deshpande reflects clearly that what is happening in the society and how the women are suffered crucially. The protagonist Saru was marginalized before her marriage in her parental house by her parents. After marriage, she has been marginalized by her husband. She has been dominated by the male chauvinistic society.

Saru is an uneducated, economically independent, middle class wife and who is made conscious of her gender as a child and whose loveless relationship with her parents and strained relations with her husband lead to her agonizing search for herself. The novel opens with Saru's return to her parents' house fifteen years after she left home with a vow never to return. Her relations with her husband become unbearably strained and she returns for some solace. Here she gets a chance to think over her relationships with her husband, her children, her parents and her dead brother, Dhruva.

Saru's relationship with her brother has been given special presentation. She is ignored in favour of her brother, Dhruva. No parental love is showered on her and she is not given any importance. Her brother's birthdays are celebrated with much fanfare and performance of religious rites, whereas her birthdays are not even acknowledged. She even feels that her birth was a horrible experience for her mother, as she later recalls her mother telling her that it had rained heavily the day she was born and it was terrible for her mother. It seemed to Saru that it was her birth that was terrible for her and not the rains. She recalls the joyous excitement in the house on the occasion of his naming ceremony. The idea that she is a liability to her parents is deeply implanted in her mind as a child. Her mother's adoration of her son at her daughter's cost is the rallying point for the novelist to bring her feminist ideas together. The preference for boys over girls can be openly witnessed in most Indian homes, and is inextricably linked to the Indian psyche. Sons bring in dowry could be one reason, but the Indian society steeped in tradition and superstition considers the birth of a son as auspicious as he carries on the family lineage.

Her mother constantly reminds her that she should not go out in the sun as it would worsen her already dark complexion. Saru has been insulted deeply and she recalls her conversation with her mother:

“Don't go out in the sun, you'll get darker.”

“Who cares?”

“We have to care if you don't. We have to get you married.”

“I don't want to get married.”

“Will you live with us all your life?”

“Why not?”

“You can't.”

“And Dhruva?”

“He's different. He's a boy” (40).

This sort of blatant gender discrimination between Saru and her brother leads to a sense of insecurity and hatred towards her parents, especially mother, and her resultant rebellious nature.

The turning point in her life is the accidental death of her brother by drowning. All her life she is haunted by the memories of her mother accusing her of intentionally letting Dhruva to die by drowning: “You did it, you did this, you killed him” (173). Dhruva's death is nature but Saru is victimized. But on her part she has a guilty conscience as she considers herself responsible for having remained a mute spectator to her brother's death by drowning.

Saru's mother's discriminatory behaviour makes Saru feel unloved and unwanted leading to a sense of alienation and estrangement. She is in the grips of insecurity. Irrespective of geographical or chronological space, any Indian girl is a victim of gender discrimination in the Indian social setup. As S. Anandalakshmi opines: “The birth of a son gives a woman status and she invests herself in her son's fixture, creating a deep symbiotic bond.” (5)

Saru's mother could be no exception to this and she loses interest in life after her son's death. She puts the blame for her own wretched lot squarely on Saru's shoulders. She snatches every opportunity to reproach her and takes no interest in education, career or future. She begins to hate her own existence as a girl or woman. On attaining puberty she says scornfully, “If you are a woman, I don't want to be one” (62). The treatment that is meted out to her during her monthly ordeals is inhuman. She is treated like an untouchable, segregated from the other members of the family and made to sleep on a straw mat with a cup and late exclusively meant for her to be served in from a distance. She is engulfed with a sense of shame and prays in desperation for a miracle to put an end to it.

Her hatred towards her mother is so acute that she becomes rebellious just to hurt her, “I hated her, I wanted to hurt her, wound her, make her suffer” (142). This hatred drives her to leave home for Bombay to seek medicine as a career. In the medical college she falls in love with a college mate and marries him against her parents' wishes. Her orthodox mother was dead against her daughter's marrying a man from a lower caste:

“What caste is he?”

“I don't know.”

“A Brahmin?”

“Ofcourse, not.”

Then cruelly... “His father keeps a cycle shop.”

“Oh, so they are low-caste people, are they?”

The word her mother had used, with the disgust, hatred and prejudice of centuries had so enraged her that she had replied... “I hope so” (96). Here Manu (Manohar) is marginalized by her parents. But her marriage with Manu proves disastrous.

Saru considers herself the luckiest woman on earth, as the initial years of her marriage are sheer bliss. Manu is her saviour and the romantic hero who rescues Saru - a damsel in distress. She marries to secure the lost love in her parental home and her identity as an individual. But unfortunately She met disappointment.

Manu is uncomfortable with Saru's steady rise in status, as he feels ignored when people greet and pay attention to Saru. Besides she is unable to spare time enough for Manu and children. He could not

digest the popularity of his wife. Manu and Saru want to move out to some other place for their own reason. While Manu feels humiliated and embarrassed, Saru is no longer happy in that cramped and stinking apartment and wants to move into something more decent. Earlier she was happy and contented to live on Manu's salary but in her new role as career woman she becomes discontented.

Manu does not love her as he used to earlier. The love has been faded. Saru begins to hate this man-woman relationship, which is based on need and attraction and not love. Only the lust plays main role. She scorns the word "love" now. She realizes there was no such thing between man and woman.

Saru's rise in social and financial status in contrast to Manu's status of an underpaid lecturer sets in great discomfort in their conjugal relation. Saru's contentment in her career is no match to her discontentment at home. At night, Manu doesn't behave like a husband, but a rapist. He does not consider the need of his wife. She needs only love and then sex. But Manu wants to take revenge Saru. So he brutally has sex with her. In an interview with Saru when the interviewing girl happens to ask Manu innocently: "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?" (200). The three-Saru, Manu, and the girl merely laughed it off as if it were nothing. This particular incident is very humiliating to him. To gain his masculinity he gives vent to his feelings through his beastly sexual assault on Saru. Although he is a cheerful normal human being and a loving husband during day, he turns into a rapist at night, to assert his manhood. So, Saru is marginalized by her husband in her life path.

On one occasion Saru resents a perfect recipe for a successful marriage. On being asked by her friend Nalu to talk on Medicine as a profession for women, to a group of college students, she says:

A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he is an MA, you should be a BA. If he is 5'4" tall you shouldn't be more than 5'3" tall. If he is earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety, if you want 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 is not worth. He'll suffer. You'll suffer and so will the children. Women's magazines will tell you that a marriage must be an equal partnership. That's nonsense, rubbish. No partnership can ever be equal. It will always be unequal but take care that it's unequal in favour of your husband. If the scales tilt in your favour, god helps you, both of you (137).

So, through Saru's character, gender discrimination and marginalization reflected clearly. Saru suffered much. She is neither the typical western liberated woman nor an orthodox Indian one. Shashi Deshpande does not let herself get overwhelmed by the Western Feminism or its militant concept of emancipation. In contrast the middle class Saru has to tolerate all things.

## References

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