



THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS (1980) BY SHASHI DESHPANDE

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doi: [10.33329/elt.10.1.1](https://doi.org/10.33329/elt.10.1.1)



ABSTRACT

The Dark Holds No Terrors is an autobiographical account of the narrator heroine-- Sarita, her loss of SELF and her consequent struggle to unite with her SELF. She is an unwanted child in her own family. Her dark complexion invites the taunts of her mother, who is worried about her marriage. She is all the more hated by her mother as she is made guilty of neglecting her little brother, who died accidentally by drowning. During her student days, she opted for medicine as subject -the father supported her this time but the mother was again uncomfortable with her decision. In the college she fell in love with Manu -a journalist .Marriage was a ticket to enjoy a new life for saru but to her utter shock , her husband too starting tormenting her (though unknowingly) at nights. Her life became a trauma until she found a way to solve her problem on her own. She is able to disperse the darkness engulfing herself successfully.

Keywords: The Dark Holds No Terrors, Childhood Experiences, Terror, Nightmare, Fatigue, Memories, Relationships, Collapse

For the first time, she found herself, wavering hesitantly, making her way back to real self. I, as I would like myself to be. But hunting for that real self-had become rather like a dog scrabbling for a long buried bone. Piles of earth flew up, but where the hell was bone? or, had there never been a bone at all.

The Dark Holds No Terrors (1980) by Shashi Deshpande is her first novel, though not her first book. It is an autobiographical account of the narrator heroine Sarita (Saru) about her childhood experiences; about the wrongs done to her by her parents, especially by her mother, when she was a girl-child; about her love-marriage with Manohar turning into a nightmare and her nights becoming a symbol of terror; and about her life as a doctor. Underlying the whole narrative is Sarita's sense of loss of her real 'self' and her constant struggle to achieve it. Not only does Sarita feel herself estranged from her 'self', she has also lost control over her body, as she has to bear the physical assaults by her husband every night:

I am a dark, damp, smelly hole, she often thought when the pains of the night came back to her in the day, shaming her as if they were evidence of her wrong doing. I am like a house full of unclean things, never cleaned, never opened. Sometimes I don't know how I can bear myself. (29)

Thus fatigued mentally and physically, Sarita turns back to her parental house after an elongated gap of fifteen years due to her love-marriage with Manohar and her successive disinheritance by her mother.

She enters as an 'unwelcome guest' in her father's house. Each plant, each stain, each fragrance discloses vistas of past experiences and memories. The tranquillizing surroundings of the house persuade Saru to brood over



her past. Saru's stream-of-thought depicts her bitterness towards her mother; her relationship with her husband, Manohar, and the children, Abhi and Renu; her brother's, Dhruva's, death for which she was held responsible by her mother. To her great surprise, she finds herself a totally different person from what she was in the past.

Changed ? Yes, may be, I'm more elegant, more sophisticated, I know how to dress, how to carry myself. All just a veneer. Behind this there's nothing. (24)

Sarita nurtures a deep grudge against her mother (who is now dead) for hampering the development of her 'self' and personality. She could not invite her friends at home, nor could she go out with them after school, and if she did "there was always a scene" (170).

The relations between the mother and the daughter became even more strained, when her only brother, Dhruva, died accidentally. Sarita was blamed by her mother for the accident, without perceiving the facts in the matter. She recalls the accusation of her mother against her.

Sarita is left alienated, lonesome and yoked with guilts which are not hers at all. She recollects the incident of Dhruva's death thus : "I never had that pure joy of childhood ever again, I became all at once a sombre girl, frightened of many things, most of all joys" (188). Her sentiments meant nothing to her mother. After the death of Dhruva, her birthday ceased to be celebrated.

Sarita's whole being seemed to be on the verge of collapse. Her simmering rage provoked her to rebel. She studied hard and got a first class in Science in the Intermediate examination, after which she declared that she would go to Bombay to take up Medicine for her course and would live in a hostel. Her mother protested against her wish to join Medicine for a career, but her father supported her: "I hated her, I wanted to hurt her, wound her. And this time, I won. I wouldn't have but for Baba's help" (143).

During her stay in a hostel in Bombay, Saru fell in love with Manohar (Manu), who was then one of the famous personalities of his college. It was "like having a crush on a movie star" (54). It was still a one-sided love. She adored Manu "for his effortless control over others", and was prepared to shed her own identity in an effort to acquire the love of Manohar. She retrospects her feelings at a time when she was neck-deep in love with Manohar:

There was no 'I' then, not as yet, craving for recognition, Satisfaction, The craving, which when it came was always to be accompanied by a feeling of guilt if the 'I' dared to overreach a male, as if I was doing something that took away shreds of my femininity. That came later. (53)

Manohar also responded her love in a positive way. To Saru, who wanted security along with love, marriage was an 'open sesame' (40) for the enjoyments of life. They decided to get tied in a nuptial bond. Sarita presently felt flattered like a 'fisherman's daughter', who was proposed by a king. She sought her parents' permission to marry Manohar, but her mother once again denied it sternly on account of his low birth. Dejected at heart by the strong opposition of her mother, Sarita chose to leave the parental house and marry Manohar:

I had come away from my parents in a fever of excitement after the last battle. The die was cast the decision taken, My boats burnt there could be no turning back. (37)

The chastisement meted out to Sarita for exercising her freewill was severe, and she was disowned by her mother.

Inspired by her educational success, Saru decided to enter the profession of a doctor. She thought that this profession would make her "smart, beautiful, rich and above all beloved" (145). She worked hard to achieve



her goal and succeeded in it laudably. But her role as a doctor shattered her hitherto-happy married life. "The life that they begin together eventually became a power race of two egoistic people in which she overtakes him (her husband) effortlessly" due to her profession. After her marriage with Manohar, she was in high spirits even in the little dingy room, and became a physically aroused woman, with an infinite capacity for loving and giving, with a passionate desire to be absorbed by the man, she loved. Sarita acquired the love she had pined for all these years. She fondly cherished the happy days of her married life.

Sarita's inflated ego dwarfed the 'male ego' of Manohar. His male 'self' began to wear out in the huge cover of Sarita's increasing popularity. And "her marriage began to crumble under the burden of success in her profession."

Sarita's own shattered 'self' and 'inflated ego' acted as a stimulus to the smouldering rage of Manu (who never expressed it openly) and he tried to possess Saru physically. But for Sarita, it was a shocking experience.

Not only had Sarita lost control of her own 'self' but also she had lost claims on her body. In the heart of her heart, Sarita knew that it was because of her that Manu had become a psychic case.

To revitalise her ruined married life, Sarita tried her hand at various tactics, i.e. she started keeping fasts and 'pujas'. But none of these tactics or schemes worked. She felt that she was "a fraud, an actress acting out a role she didn't believe in". (43)

At such a critical juncture, Sarita received the news of her mother's death, and she found a route opened for her escape. Kamini Dinesh comments on this as follows: "The crisis in marriage at the beginning of the novels arises from a gradual erosion of ties. The interdicting environment created by superstition, myth, traditions, gender biases and social norms works upon the woman causing bitterness and frustration". Sarita was preparing to leave for her father's home on the pretext of consoling her berieved father. No, it was not for this that she was leaving home, but it was for her own consolation that she I was going away. Manohar thought that she was leaving for her parental house perhaps because she wanted to be forgiven for her act of disobedience fifteen years before, i.e. running away from the house for her love-marriage with Manohar. But on the contrary, Sarita thought:

Forgiven? I want nothing so complicated. My wants are simpler. To sleep peacefully the night through. To wake up without pain. To go through tomorrow without apprehension. Not to think, not to dream. Just to live. (27)

She wanted an escape from her husband's nocturnal tortures.

Sarita's father was shocked to know about her misery, but he was still confound. Sarita explained further: "He's cruel to me in bed" (200). She laid bare each and every detail about her torture and anguish. She told her father how a journalist girl's comment about her husband had hurt Manohar's male ego, and thereafter-

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. (201)

Hesitatingly, her father listened to her woeful tale of pain and misery. The urge to convey her remorse was so strong in Sarita that she was not letting her father to move without hearing the detailed account of her sufferings. She said:

I must tell you and you've got to listen. Who else is there? There's no one else. No one at all. You've got to listen. She seemed so frantic that he said soothingly, 'I'm listening, Saru. Go on, I'm listening'. (201)

The urge to communicate gains an added momentum when it comes to the unfolding of 'self' by any of the characters in Shashi Deshpande's writings, as in case of Sarita.

International Journal of ELT, Linguistics and Comparative Literature*(Old Title-Journal of ELT & Poetry)*<http://journalofelt.kypublications.com>**Vol.10.Issue.1. 2022(Jan-Mar)****ISSN:2455-0302**

Her father asked her why she had not spoken about the incident to Manohar. She elucidated, "He was so normal at all other times...what could I say ? Each time I tried to speak, to open my mouth, my heart failed me" (203). Reasoning like a professional doctor, she had already guessed the real cause of the abnormal behaviour of Manohar at nights. She diagnosed his utter ignorance about his sadistic conduct in the night as a 'black out about certain actions', but like all the readers Saru's father was curious to know as to why Sarita had not taken Manohar to a clinic for his medical and psychic treatment.

Umpteen coats of plaster that Sarita had put on her 'self' to cover her innermost emotions and passions cracked and dropped with a tremendous thud, and she uttered in the following manner:

He needs treatment...? Her voice grew shrill. 'It's not so easy, Baba. They'll say... I need treatment too. They'll go on and on about things that happened long ago'. And once again I'll have to hear the words... you did it. You did it. (203)

Mrs. Deshpande, who is married to a neuro-pathologist, certainly has an authentic insight into the neurotic world where we might find so many sadistic patients like Manu. But Deshpande does not delve deep in clinical details unnecessarily and imparts us only the important and relevant ones. Herein lies her critical bent of mind. All the wounds on Saru's soul, which she has veiled so carefully from the public view were now bared before her father. Sarita was filled with great remorse about her misbehaviour, which had left its mark on everyone. She admitted : "Maybe I deserve it after all. Look what I've done to him (Manu). Look what I did to Dhruva. And to my mother. Perhaps If I go on suffering ..." (204).

Sarita's conversation with her father proved to be "cathartic", since it released her pent-up emotions and rekindled her dying spirits. The twitching sensation of happiness that Sarita experienced after shedding tons of weight by sharing her sorrow with another person (say with her father) rekindled her dying spirits.

Saru realizes that she has to peel off her superimposed "roles and show her real 'self' to her husband and her family. She should not expect any outside help for the emancipation of her 'self', since the untapped sources are within one's own 'self'.

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International Journal of ELT, Linguistics and Comparative Literature*(Old Title-Journal of ELT & Poetry)*<http://journalofelt.kypublications.com>**Vol.10.Issue.1. 2022(Jan-Mar)****ISSN:2455-0302**

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