



**SOCIETY, THE MOTHER OF ALL TERRORS:
A BRIEF STUDY OF SHASHI DESHPANDE'S
*THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS***

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how society functions as an entity in controlling the lives of individuals in Shashi Deshpande's The Dark Holds No Terrors. It also cites various other instances from the book which make the characters appear no more than puppets of society.

Keywords: *Two-faced Society, Gender Discrimination, Inequality, Recognition.*

INTRODUCTION

*You are your own refuge;
there is no other refuge.
This refuge is hard to achieve.*

- Dhammapada

The dark as suggested in the title is not more terrorizing than the society and its norms portrayed in Shashi Deshpande's novel. The characters in this most promising debut novel of Shashi Deshpande are more of victims of society and its double standards. The novel deals with the life of Sarita (a doctor) who is married to Manohar (lecturer) and has two children. She has had a troubled past with her being cited as the reason for her brother's (Dhruva) death by her mother. Her present is more troublesome with her husband Manohar sexually harassing her which is no more than marital rape. Sarita visits her birthplace after a gap of fifteen years for her mother's death who she has not been in good terms with from the day she can remember. It also functions as welcome news to escape from Manohar who has been sexually tormenting her every night with his sadistic behavior. Sarita left her birthplace to

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marry Manohar as her parents were against her for choosing a person outside their caste. The marriage life is all bliss in the beginning and as time goes on Sarita's stature in the society raises but Manohar remains the not-much-earning lecturer. How Sarita battles against the norms laid out by the society and how she comes with an evasive action forms the core of the novel. The following are some of the instances carefully chosen from the novel to substantiate this research paper;

"Why didn't you die? Why are you alive and he dead", says Sarita's mother. Sarita is ultimately held responsible for the death of her brother even though she was helpless and could do nothing but shiver when she saw her brother (Dhruva) drowning while they were playing. Her helpless situation as a little girl couldn't be realized by Sarita's mother. To Sarita's mother, it's all about Dhruva, who she considers as her prized possession. It is a similar sentiment all around India where boys are considered heir and girls are raised for the sole aim of to get married. Boys are seen as the future breadwinners of the house whereas girls are restrained to the kitchen. Sarita's mother cannot accept the fact that her son is dead and wants her daughter instead.

"Don't go out in the sun. You'll get even 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."

Sarita isn't ready to give ears to her parent's cries of warning her not to go out in the sun. They don't want her to go out in the sun because they don't want her to get dark as darker girls stand lesser chances of getting favored by prospective grooms. This is universal as there is discrimination in terms of color all around the globe. And India is no different as there is widespread notion that something fair is considered as something good. The ultimate aim of a parent is to see their girl married and there is this dowry system which plays its role when it comes to marrying off a girl child. A boy brings in dowry and earns for the family and it's natural for the parents to shower all the affection on him. The girl is domesticated, not given much education, silenced, taught to be modest in behavior, given strict dress codes, and adhere to all the rules and regulations laid out from time to time. A girl is deemed as someone who will eventually go out of the house and the boy is seen as the caretaker of the parents during their old age.



"Things fell, with a miraculours exact exactness, into place. I was a female. I was born that way, that was the way my body had to be, those were the things that had to happen to me. And that was that." A woman has to submit to the needs of a man and has to remain under his control forever. That is what which is expected of a female body, it has to submit, and it has to lie down under a man's body without complaining. Copulation is considered a natural thing and a woman is considered complete only when she copulates with her man and bears him children. Without bearing children she is considered unfit to be a woman and cannot lead a peaceful life in this patriarchal society.

"The hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horrible familiar body. And above me a face I could not recognise." This is the phase where Sarita undergoes tremendous psychological trauma and bodily tortures. She has to encounter all these every night silently and cannot say this to everyone as she cannot claim that her husband is raping her daily. Sex is a natural thing between married couple but this is non-consensual but she is not in a state to raise her voice against all this. She is married to Manohar and has two children; she feels nothing can be done now. At daybreak Manohar becomes his usual self enquiring about Sarita's wellbeing and the wound she bears on her body due to horrible things that happen to her during the night. Sarita cannot decipher the things that go around her and cannot recognize if it's the same Manohar who she has married does all those terrible things to her body during night.

"After that day he was a figure I fantasised about, the person round whom I wove my foolish dreams. No, not dreams, just one dream really. Always the age old feminine dream of a superior conquering male." A man is born to win over a woman's heart. A woman has to pursued (even stalked), wooed, and she has to fall for his charms. To a woman it's all about finding a man who can take care of her, live under his shadow forever, consider it a happy life and live happily ever after. Sarita has had her dreams of Manohar and saw him as a potential person who she can marry and lead a peaceful life with.

"and that he, a man set apart from others, above the others...should love me seemed even more incredible. The fisherman's daughter couldn't have been more surprised when the king asked her to marry him, than I was by Manu's love for me." Sarita all through the phase when in love with Manohar saw herself as inferior to him. And she is more surprised with Manohar as he had chosen to be with her instead of all the girls who were flocking around him. She feels that he is of a stature of a king and she considers herself so lucky to be around him. A woman getting married to a person above her social stature is a requisite norm, a man has to earn more and be more recognized by the society than his wife. This is something which is expected by a society.



“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.” This is a phase where everything goes haywire in the life of Sarita. Sarita during a fire accident in her locality gets the publicity of being a doctor. She gets more recognition than her husband Manohar who is a lecturer; she is also most sought after in the vicinity. Everyone recognize Sarita and greet her with a warm welcome whereas Manohar’s existence is rarely noticed. She is not a lecturer’s wife anymore to the society; she is a doctor who has married a lecturer according to the society.

“Open it, Saru, it must be for you.” Manohar’s anger is very much visible with this. He is no more wanted by anyone. People come knocking for Sarita, either for treatment or for thanking her. This also shows the growing distance between the lead pair. It is with disgust Manohar goes through all this, he cannot play the subordinate’s role.

“And so the esteem with which I was surrounded made me inches taller. But perhaps the same thing made him inches shorter. He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband.” She is no more a lecturer’s wife, she is now a doctor. She has climbed the social ladder and is more recognized than her husband. Now the table has turned which makes Manohar feel inferior and he is now a doctor’s husband which is not a good sign for their married life.

“ $a+b$ they told us in mathematics is equal to $b+a$. But here $a+b$ was not definitely not equal to $b+a$. It became a monstrously unbalanced equation, lopsided, unequal, impossible.” Equality may exist theoretically but it doesn’t apply to practical life. It is impossible to achieve that fine balance in real life. And when it comes to gender, women can never on par with men as it is the societies design which everyone falls under.

“How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?” This question by the woman interviewer to Manohar earns the wrath of Sarita as the question adds oil to Manohar’s already burning ego. It hurts his ego more which results in him hurting his wife more physically during intercourse. The sexual sadism is his way of keeping Sarita under his control overpowering her physically.

“The bitch. Why did she have to say that? It was the day that it began.” Sarita considers the woman interviewer’s questions as the reason for her husband’s beastly behavior during night. Sarita fails to realize that it has started long ago from the day of fire accident where she was in need the most.



“I struggled to utter the usual words of protest, to say, No, not now, stop it. But the words were strangled in my throat. The face above mine was the face of a stranger. Blank, set and rigid, it was a face I had never seen. A man I did not know.” What happens to Sarita is nothing short of a marital rape, she encounters it day after day. She cannot open up about it to anyone or ask him to stop as satisfying one’s husband is considered the most important duty of a wife. Sarita sees a stranger in him during intercourse, the man so different from the man she loved during her college days.

“and each time it happened and I don’t speak. I put another brick on the wall of silence between us. Maybe one day I will be walled alive within it and die a slow, painful death.” Sarita suffers a painful death at the hands of Manohar with each passing day; she cannot speak about it to him, she cannot explain how painful it is to her, to her body, and how much he hurts her physically and psychologically on a daily basis. There is this distance growing between them after every disastrous night.

“She Had Lost Forever...The Eternal Female Dream Of Finding Happiness Through A Man, It Would Never Come Alive For Her Again.” This comes after all the pain Sarita has suffered at the hands of men. During her childhood she was accused of murdering her brother by her mother. Her father was no more than a puppet under her mother’s control. She married Manohar against all odds, now after some years Manohar has also changed because of her growing popularity. Sarita gives up all her hopes of finding happiness and peace through men as she considers it would bear her no fruit.

“And I? Now, I knew it was not just the consequence I feared and hated, but also the thing itself. When had I imagined? Love? Romance? Both, I knew too well were illusions, and not relevant to my life any way. And the code word of our age is neither love nor romance, but sex. Fulfilment and happiness came, not through love Alone but sex. And for me sex was now a dirty word.” Everything appears fake to Sarita now, love, romance which were once Godly to her hold no meaning at this point of time. Those are all illusions which one encounters during their teens. She figures it out that everything around is purely physical and it is all about sex. It is not about mental compatibility but physical compatibility which matters a lot in this material world. And to Sarita who enjoyed physical union with her husband considers sex a dirty words as she has been gone through a lot because of his sexual sadism.

“I had met him, smiled at him, listened to him. And now I knew it had not been thoughtless on my part. I had done it deliberately, coolly, with calculation, because, foolishly perhaps, I had imagined it would give me an escape route, something that would leave me out of my loveless trap.” Sarita didn’t feel loved when she was with her family, her parents interest lay

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with her only brother Dhruva. He got all the love from them; she was always an outcaste of sorts in her home. Sarita felt marrying Manohar for love would turn the tide for her, but it went the other way for her even though she enjoyed marital bliss yet it was ephemeral.

“Oh Shakespeare... But Shall I tell you men one thing? He has a limited vision....I ‘m saying is that his is a typical man’s view of life-the man at the centre, the woman always on the periphery.” These are the words of Manohar’s female friend in the theatre group who was a rebel of sorts in her views of men. She has these sophisticated ideas of how men always occupy the central position and women are sidelined. Women are not more than mute spectators according to her. She speaks of a great artist like Shakespeare and calls he is no more of a misogynist who gives women not much importance in his works.

“Ashwin doesn’t like the idea of my going on the stage. His family disapproves too. They don’t mind my associating with the theatre occasionally but no acting, directing or anything like that.” Manohar’s female friend goes through a sea change from her college days. After her marriage to a guy named Ashwin she is restricted to the four walls of her in-laws house as they don’t like her associating with the theatre, especially they don’t approve and don’t want to see her as an actor, director or someone who hogs the limelight.

“But that would be as stupid as calling me fulfilled because I got married and I have borne two children.” Fulfillment is a space where one feels content of what he or she has achieved. The society lays out a norm that a woman is complete only when she is married and bears children. That’s as foolish as it can get and Sarita wonders how stupid the society to view a woman like that.

“The boy flushed and she wondered why until she realised that it was perhaps the fact that she has said her husband’s name. To him it was, may be, like a revelation of some intimacy of marriage. She knew that in his home, his mother would never call his father by name. It would be... “your father”.” Women in the house are not allowed to address their husband by their name, it is seen as an act of disrespect. Women are not allowed to sit; sit with legs crossed or to speak against, should only eat after the men eat to their fill and so on. A woman calling her husband by his name might well be a sign of intimacy but it is taken as an act of disrespect.

“stupid, silly, martyrs...idiotic heroines. Going on with their tasks, and destroying themselves in the bargain, for nothing but a meaningless modesty” Women go lengths to save their image amidst others. They burn and sacrifice themselves for the wellbeing of their family and Sarita sees no point in doing all these in exchange of a tag of a good woman which is gifted in return for spoiling her life for the selfish society.

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“The *tulsi* had been the only spot of green. But that had gone as well. Of course, it had served its purpose. She had died before her husband. Wasn’t that what all women prayed to the *tulsi* for?” The only aim of a woman’s life is to serve her husband and to die a peaceful and content death of fulfilling that aim. She also needs to die well before her husband as there’s society is no peaceful place for a widow.

“But she’s a girl...And don’t forget, medicine or no medicine, doctor or no doctor, you still have to get her married. Spend money on her wedding. Can you do both?” The ultimate aim of raising a girl is to get her married. It is not about finding a suitable bride, getting her a formal education, but to get her married as soon as possible once she attains puberty and is of a marriageable age.

“Her refusal to be reconciled to you. Even then, when she was dying, she said the same thing, ...what daughter? I have no daughter” Sarita’s mother never forgave Sarita, as she held Sarita responsible for Dhruva’s death. She refused to accept the fact that Sarita was her daughter and adamant about that till she breathed her last.

“Not just the three days when I could not enter the kitchen or the puja room. Not just the sleeping on a straw mat covered with the thin sheet. Not just the feeling of being the pariah with my special cup and plate by my side in which I was served from a distance, for my touch was, it seemed, pollution.” Attaining puberty is a natural process which one cannot put hold to. A girl is considered polluted during her menstruation days. She isn’t allowed anywhere near to puja room and she is ostracized from even getting near to her family members.

“You should be careful now about how you behave. Don’t come out in your petticoat like that. Not even if it’s only your father who’s around.” A girl is expected to behave when she attains puberty, the way she walks, what she speaks, how she dresses with, who she’s around with and everything she does matters. If she shows symptoms of being rebellious in her attitude she is called as lacking morality.

“Forgiven? I began to laugh while he stared at me in astonishment. 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.” When Manohar comes to Sarita to beg forgiveness and to take her back she has nothing to say but laugh so hard, she doesn’t want a happy life but a peaceful night’s sleep. Sarita wants to wake up the next day with no dream, no hope, and no pain. She merely wants to live her days out.



Society plays a huge role in controlling the lives and actions of individuals. Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* serves as a classic example in pointing out how the two-faced society and the norms it has laid out plays spoilsport in the lives of individuals and tears them apart. Through this work Shashi Deshpande takes a dig at society for its discrimination of people and their lives at various levels.

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