



# Breaking the Silence: A Quest for Self in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror*

Israt Jahan Nimni<sup>1\*</sup>, Refat Sultana Jahan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English, Comilla University, Kotbari, Cumilla-3506, Bangladesh  
israt.jahan@cou.ac.bd

<sup>2</sup>Department of English, Noakhali Science and Technology University, Noakhali-3814, Bangladesh  
refatsultanar304@gmail.com

\*Corresponding Author: israt.jahan@cou.ac.bd

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**Abstract**— Shashi Deshpande, one of the prominent Indo-Anglian writers, captures tension, trauma, and turmoil of the post-colonial Indian women in her writings. Her novels, especially, deal with the struggles, and daily battles of the middle-class female characters whose stories remain neglected, unheard, and silent in the patriarchal society. Though Deshpande's female characters remain in confinement, subjugation, and silence in the male-controlled society, but they attempt to show resistance by confronting the difficulties, breaking silence, and learning to speak. Thus, they contest their subaltern conditions. Deshpande uses consciousness of the protagonists as the site to challenge the repressive forces that dominate, and control women in the Indian society. The rise of awareness and self-consciousness enable the protagonists to search for self-fulfillment, and self-identity. Thus, this paper aims to show the protagonist, Saru's pursuit to attain selfhood, and subjectivity against gender stereotyping in a male-dominated society in *The Dark Holds No Terror* through feminist, psychoanalytic, and post-colonial perspectives.



**Keywords**— middle-class women, silence, subjugation, consciousness, selfhood

## I. INTRODUCTION

Writers consider writing as a medium of expressing unspeakable thoughts, and revealing inner conflicts and turmoil. For them, writing is like having a conversation with one's (an)other self. Notable Indo-Anglian writer and novelist Shashi Deshpande (2012) opines, "the novelist is impelled into writing by something deep within her, something she can't explain" (381). So, writing is "a kind of self-revelation" to her (Choudhury, 1995, 20). She further believes, "the writing self is another self" (2012, 381). Her writings, especially, novels, capture "the tensions and fears" of the inner psyche of the female protagonists which remain insignificant, neglected and unheard in the patriarchal society (Gopal, 2009, 151). Her stories deal with the middle-class female characters, their struggles, conflicts and problematic relationships— lack of communication, silences in marriage. However, Deshpande firmly believes

that, women's tales are not only about "victimization", rather they are also celebrations of liberation and "liberated woman" (Choudhury, 1995, 15). Though faced by many hardships in their lives, women in her novels show "resistance towards gender stereotyping" (Nair, 2010, 177). The novelist uses consciousness of the protagonists as the site to challenge the repressive forces that subjugate, and dominate women in the Indian conventional society. The objective of this paper is to portray the protagonist, Saru's confrontation with the obstacles in the course of her life as well the eventual realization of the new meaning of (her)self and subjectivity in a male-dominated society in *The Dark Holds No Terror* (henceforth, *The Dark*).

## II. DISCUSSION

Deshpande is well known for her close understanding and keen observation of the middle-class female characters in

domestic sphere in post-independent India. Rosemary Marangoly George (1996) asserts that, in a new independent nation, women are able to lead luxurious life, but their individual stories and experiences lack “sense of fulfilment” (170). In her novels, Deshpande represents the emptiness that the middle-class women experience after marriage. Elizabeth Jackson (2010) opines, in India, the popular and cultural narratives, e.g., Bollywood films and songs, daily soaps, etc. uphold the structures of marriage. Similarly, Jasbir Jain points out “there are no role models available for managing life without a husband” (2003, 84). She further comments that “husband lessness, in any form, is perceived as personal failure to attract a husband [if a woman is single], or keep him [if separated], or failure to look after him [if widowed]” (84). The protagonists of Deshpande’s novels, normally married women, face personal crisis in their lives, which result their withdrawal from public and private responsibilities to reflect on their past and present lives, conditions and situations. In the process, they excavate painful past, reimagine their failed or dysfunctional relationship with a parent or spouse and seek to understand the meaning of self and relationship anew. Finally, the resolution generally happens with a new attitude towards the seemingly situation.

In her significant work, *The Dark*, Deshpande deals with the unacknowledged and often considered ridiculous subject matter in a stereotypical patriarchal society but a grim reality in Indian society: marital rape. The story revolves around an educated woman named Sarita or Saru, who is successful in her career as a doctor in the public sphere, but suffers from traumatic experiences in her personal sphere, everyday, at home. Her fickle conjugal life along with her bitter childhood experiences cause acute psychological trauma that later influence her, eventually, to self-query. Though at first, she runs away from her husband, her children, her past memories, but later her decision to encounter with these “darkness” of her life assert her quest for identity.

Though Saru is an educated woman, her gendered (constructed) identity leads to her psychological and physical repression in her married life. In fact, her relationship with her husband, Manohar or Manu, at some point turns into hellish experience for her that she escapes from it and comes to her parent’s house. The initial stage of Saru’s conjugal life is full of love and passion for each other. There existed a peaceful and harmonious atmosphere between the husband and the wife. Saru enjoyed the exhilaration of a blissful married life: “The initial stage of Saru’s conjugal life is full of love and passion for each other. There existed a peaceful and harmonious atmosphere between the husband and the wife. Saru enjoyed the exhilaration of a blissful married life, “I became in an

instant a physically aroused woman, with an infinite capacity for loving and giving, with a passionate desire to be absorbed by the man I loved” (40). Her unwanted and previously deprived self finds its solace in Manu. Physical intercourse became the ‘triumphant assertion’ of their love. Saru reminisces that Manu’s love has made her feel “being wanted”, the feeling that she has craved for a long time (40). But soon, her world crumples down and she comes out from the ‘illusion’ of a beautiful dream. In a stereotypical Indian Hindu society, which runs on the terms and conditions of a man, a married woman is regarded as the socially, economically and religiously sanctioned property of her husband. Ancient Hindu religious books also decline women’s rights in marriage. The Hindu lawmaker, Manu proclaims that:

No act is to be done according to her own will by a young girl, a young woman, though she is in her own house. In her childhood a girl should be under the will of her father, in her youth under that of her husband; her husband being dead, under the will of her sons. A woman should never enjoy her own will. Though of bad conduct or debauched, a husband must always be worshipped like a god by a good wife (Briffault, 1952, 345).

In this traditional society, woman is considered as the receiver and man as the provider/ bread earner which asserts man’s superiority and supremacy over the other sex. It is this idea of role-playing that signify his masculinity. In this stereotypical society, whenever, man fails to provide adequate financial support to his family, it is considered as a matter of ignominy and humiliation to his masculinity. This is what happened with Saru’s husband Manu. Saru’s rise in the professional life as a doctor casts a shadow in her personal life. The more Saru gets recognition, the more Manu thinks him inferior to her. Saru’s dignity and financial success hurts Manu’s male ego. In a traditional Indian society, it is expected that “A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. 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 and ninety-nine rupees” (*The Dark* 137). The smiles and greetings that Saru receives from other people make Manu jealous and almost invisible to other’s eyes. Saru’s growing self-esteem makes her “inches taller” and her husband “inches shorter” in Manu’s eyes (42). In a society dominated by males, the relationship between a husband-wife is always like the mathematical equation of ‘a+b’, where the husband stands for ‘a’ and wife for ‘b’. Though in mathematical term ‘a+b’ is equal to ‘b+a’, Saru considers that in their relationship ‘a+b’ is in no way equal

to 'b+a'. This equation is "a monstrously unbalanced equation, lopsided, unequal, and impossible" from Manu's perspective (42). His sense of (in)security disturbs the equilibrium of the family. The situation aggravates with the question of a journalist in an interview. The interviewer asked him about his feeling of his wife "earning not only the butter but most of the bread" (200). Though he acted cool before the interviewer and laughed it out, at night he vented his anger and frustration out on bed for the first time. He attacked her "like an animal" hurting her with "his hands, his teeth, his whole body" (201). Since then, it became a routine for him. The novel raises frustration against such social restriction theory which compelled a woman to stay, always, few steps behind her husband. The novelist foregrounds an environment of the psychological repression created through a male supremacist ideology where women's financial solvency does not provide or guarantee emancipation and freedom rather it destroys women's selfhood. In the novel, marital rape is represented as a form of violence, a tool of patriarchal violence. Ulaka Anjaria (2012) considers, in the novel, "marital rape is represented as a desire to express violence (toward Saru), rather than as motivated by sexual desire" (330). Her observation echoes Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's opinion: "rape as phenomenon in contemporary India is more properly understood as the expression of (male) violence — sanctioned by various models of social power— rather than of sexual desire" (1993, 78). In the novel, violence towards Saru emerges out of Manu's resentment at Saru's success as a doctor. Her success and prosperity hurt his male ego and its supremacy. Feeling inferior in public sphere, Manu, like Pappachi in *The God of Small Things*, asserts his supremacy as a husband/lord, in Saru's private sphere.

Saru's traumatic experience in her conjugal life leads her to silence. In *The Dark*, silence symbolizes the negation of the self and it casts a diabolical shadow on Saru's life. Her continuous hesitation in confronting Manu only increases her miseries. She fails to comprehend Manu's dual personality, his sadism and immediate forgetfulness of his deed. She also cannot put together "the fearful stranger of the night and the rather pathetic Manu of other times" (96). Her inability of understanding her husband leads her to maintain silence. To some extent, Manu, got encouragement from her silence to act violently against her day by day. She also fathoms the consequence of her dilemma:

I should have spoken about it the very first day. But I didn't. And each time it happens 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 (96).

Saru tries to open up with professor Kulkarni about Manu's sadist behaviour, the fact that "he's a wreck, a ruin, a sadist" but holds herself (97). She also makes her mind to talk to her friend Nalu about her problems, but again gets struck by the thought that Nalu would take her problems as "part of women's problems" (121). And again, she maintains silence and let herself immerse in her own agony. Saru's distress leads her to decide to divorce Manu. But once again, her thinking of her children and the world leads to maintain further silence.

Silence works as a metaphor in Deshpande's work that carries significant meanings. The protagonist of Deshpande's another ground breaking novel *That Long Silence* (1989) also suffers from the excruciating pain of silence. Silence acts as suppressive tool against women. In the novel, Jaya negates herself and engages herself in the socially assigned roles of dutiful wife, mother, and partner. She remains silent in order to maintain a peaceful ambivalence in her domestic life. Jaya's husband Mohan takes her silence to be granted and transforms her into a mere puppet of his wishes. Silence never permits her to express her frustration and anger of her life. Anjaria (2012) considers Deshpande's female protagonists are compelled to silence by "both their husband, and their own sense of acceptability within society" (330). In *The Dark*, there also grows a "sense of acceptability" within her. Saru blames herself for her wretched relationship with her husband. Her self-loathing is reflected when she says, "My husband is a failure because I destroyed his manhood" (217). Guilt absorbs Saru's psyche. Her fear of losing in the oblivion, makes her a refugee who flees from one place to another. Saru's psychological dilemma can be connected to that of Doris Lessing's protagonist Susan Rawling in the short story titled "To Room Nineteen". Like Saru, Susan suffered from the psychological problem that stems from the expectations of the patriarchal society towards a woman. Susan, previously a successful woman, left her job for her husband Matthew and became engaged with domestic affairs sacrificing her personal aspirations. Burdened by her responsibility as a good housewife and good mother, Susan started to feel suffocated like a prisoner. An emotionally and psychologically exhausted Susan found her much needed space in the quiet atmosphere of Room Number 19 of Fred's hotel. This room or space symbolizes Susan's search for her inner self that is distinguished from the socially and culturally constructed self. Like Susan, Saru leaves her husband, children, and looks for a space so that she can have time to ponder over her conjugal life.

Leaving her husband and two children, Sarita retreats to her ancestral home for a quest of self-identity. Returning to her ancestral home gives her opportunity to interact with the past and regain integrity. Ancestral home and family



relationship always have importance in Indian subcontinent. The ancestral homes are considered as the places where family members reunite together either in joy, e.g. social and religious festivals, or in sufferings, e.g., death. In Deshpande's writings, home serves special purpose. Nair (2010) comments, "In the novels of Shashi Deshpande, the characters come to life when they are set against the background of these structures, which are places associated with nostalgic memories of sounds and smells" (175). In Deshpande's novels, material culture of home plays a significant role which evokes memory, nostalgia and a hope of re-living the past in the present. Saru thinks about her past memories, her bitter relationships with her mother and the death of her brother Druva. The terrible guilt of not being able to save her brother from drowning and ultimately losing him causes a permanent scar and guilt in Saru's consciousness. In her dream, she used to have nightmare in a form of dialogue of self-blaming between the conscious and the unconscious self:

You killed your brother.

I didn't. truly I didn't. It was an accident.

I loved him, my little brother. I tried to save him truly.

Truly I tried. But I couldn't. And I ran away. I admit that. But I didn't kill him. How do you know you didn't kill him? How do you know? (177)

She was always fearful of dark. Dhruva's face always comes to her dream in the dark. She observes, "When the light comes on, it goes away. When the dark comes, it returns" (205). So, darkness always means a space of fear and terror to her.

While re-living her childhood memories and experiences, Saru finds a reflection of Druva on Madhav, a student who lives with her father in their house, and through him she once again goes through her traumatic experience. Saru nurses Madhav in his high fever, recovers him from illness and death. This recreates to do the thing that was not possible for her to do for Druva. Thus, it releases her from guilt and self-blame. Moreover, returning to her childhood fantasy and later accepting that Dhruva is dead and she can "never bring him back" helps her to redeem from the guilt in the past (212). This assists in getting rid of the terrors of the darkness. Through her narrative technique Deshpande uses past as an important element in the present, utilizes memory as an integral component in analysing present circumstances and activities. In order to overcome her present turmoil and conflicts Saru needs to turn inward. In focusing inward, on her inner agony, pain and conflict, and revisiting her traumatic memory of the death of Druva contributes to the healing process. Her settlement and

confrontation with the guilt of the past prepares her to settle the present tension and turmoil.

Another chapter of Saru's distressing memory of the past is related to her mother which has a great impact on Saru and her negation of life in the present. From her childhood, Saru does not have a good relationship with her mother. There remains a gap between mother and daughter. Her mother internalized the patriarchal gender norms and considered expenditure in girls' education as an unnecessary thing. She believed that girls are destined to be married off to another family. So, spending money on women's education is waste of money and wealth. Therefore, she was against Saru's education in the medical college. Moreover, after, Dhruva's death, she held Saru responsible for the death of her son, "Why are you still alive when he is dead?" (77). Later, Saru's love affair and consequently her marriage to lower caste Manu was considered as an act of betrayal to her mother. Till her death, Saru's mother denied her as a daughter. "Silence had become a habit" in mother-daughter's relationship (199). It is only after the news of her mother's death that Saru can return to her ancestral home. She considers that her marital hardship results from her mother's curse. This continuous self-blaming causes her self-negation and self-renunciation. Deshpande, analyses Saru's return to her ancestral house, after her mother's death from Jungian interpretation and considers this returning, as "a dialogue between the conscious and the unconscious" symbolically (qtd in Nair, 178). Her healing process starts with sympathizing with her mother after death. After homecoming to her house, she wore her mother's dresses, dressed like her mother. Forgetting the bitter memories of their relationship, Saru identified with her mother and this caused to get rid of her guilt and psychological distress.

Saru's retreating to her ancestral home helps not only to release her haunting past memories but also helps to break the silences that she carries within her due to hardship in the conjugal life. Her guilt and traumatic memories in the childhood doubles with her marital hardship which together makes her troubled and silent person. She kept her marital difficulties within herself finding no possibility to share it with anyone else. This acts as a burden to her mind and consciousness. Bonnie Zare (2004) argues, "Deshpande's characters experience revelations via two modes: conversing with others or writing to an imaginary listener" (86). Her conversation with her father serves as a way of revealing her inner turmoil. Her father's curiosity to know "What's wrong? Is something wrong between you and your husband?" paves Saru's way of expressing her tensions and fear (198). Saru understands the accomplishment of her coming home lies in the act of speaking and telling her affliction to her father. This is for the first time she releases her pain and agony to someone. Her father's sympathetic

invitation, "What is it, Saru? Why don't you tell me what it is" gives her courage and offers an atmosphere of empathy and support to open her heart (198). Through using a medium of listener Deshpande allows her protagonist to speak. According to philosopher Kelly Oliver, for asserting subjectivity it is important to re-present one's reality. For this it is necessary to speak or write to an actual person or an imaginary listener. Oliver thinks, "Subjectivity is dependent on a sympathetic listener, an interlocutor" who begins the "internal dialogue that makes subjective experience possible" (1998, 176). In *The Dark*, Saru's father acts "a sympathetic listener". His willingness to know the problems as well as his interest to listen to her ordeals help to break her silence. She shares for the first time of her husband Manu's sadism, love for cruelty, to someone. The act of speaking gives Saru an opportunity to break stillness to the world and most importantly, to herself. Rajan opines, Deshpande's protagonists break silence "at one level through the act of writing itself, at another level through renegotiating interpersonal relations within the family" (1993, 87-88). She shares the traumatic experiences of Manu's cruelty with the only surviving member of her family, her father: "I was sleeping and I woke up and there was this...this man hurting me" (*The Dark*, 201). Through sharing with her father, Saru exerts out of her anger, frustration, pain and agony which helps her to reduce her torment, anguish and suffering. The way, Saru finds relief and shelter to her ancestral home, her father also acts, metaphorically, as a home, where she finds refuge and support.

Saru's father works as an instrument for attaining Saru's self-realization. It is her father who advises her to forget her traumatic past, to accept the reality of the death of her mother and brother and to live in the present. He said, "I told you ... they're dead. They can do nothing. Why do you torture yourself with other?" (217) He asked her to stop reproaching herself and stop thinking about the past. Moreover, after getting the news of Manu's visit to Saru's parental home to return her, Saru became perplexed and wanted to escape and withdraw from there. Here again her father suggests to confront the problem, rather than running away from it. Through her father's voice, probably we find an echo Deshpande's voice: "Don't go without meeting your husband. Talk to him. Tell him what's wrong" (217). He encourages her to break the silence and communicate. He asks for communication for resolution. Furthermore, he advised to think about her life, to give importance to her life: "Are you not sufficient for yourself? It's your life, isn't it?" (217). It is her father who first talks about that Saru should think about her life first, and later about other people. From her father's guidance, Saru learns to reflect on her selfhood. In her *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf

opines a personal room, a particular space is vital for a woman to reflect, rethink on her selfhood and identity construction. In Deshpande's novels, domestic space plays a very significant role for awakening her consciousness and sense of self. Deshpande affirms, "I think for women understanding her world begin with the domestic sphere" (24). It is with her family members in her ancestral house that Saru discovers her selfhood and re-evaluates her identity: "My life is my own" (220). Through her authorial point of view, Deshpande comments that, her parental home works as "the connecting link" where Saru "had found" the meaning of her life (220). She learns to recognize her shortcomings and emphasizes to take the responsibility for her life. She realizes it is she who is responsible for her suffering to some extent also; it is her thinking that make her to blame herself: "If I have been a puppet, it is because I made myself one" (220). When Deshpande was asked about "who stops Saru from speaking" the novelist answers, "One answer is Saru herself. She has learned to gag herself" (1995, 20) Her lack of courage has made her fearful: "I have been my own enemy" (*The Dark*, 221). Saru's discovery of her true self occurs in the domestic sphere and in connection with the family members.

At the end of the novel, we meet a new Saru, who recognizes the new meaning of her life. She finds that apart from her role as a woman, she is a human being. Apart from her familial role as a daughter, a sister, a wife and a mother, she realizes has a professional role as a doctor. Josna Rege (2003) comments, "Her social role as a doctor gives her ... the recognition that she has a public identity in addition to her private role of daughter, wife, and mother" (55). She embodies all of these familial roles but she has much more things to do. At the end, we see her visiting to a sick child as a doctor. She emphasizes her social role as doctor to serve the people, serve the community. The novel ends with Saru's positive thinking: "there were no thoughts in her, except those of the child she was going to help" (*The Dark*, 221). Moreover, she is willing to take the challenge to talk to Manu. She asks her father to tell Manu to wait for her return from attending a sick child. She is willing to confront to Manu, and is ready to talk to him. The novel ends with her courage to talk, rather than keeping silence. Deshpande enables her protagonist to speak. Hence, a subaltern can speak here. At the end, we find a picture of a courageous and liberated woman through Saru who does not have any terror for darkness, any kind of fear, rather "her mind ranged over all the possibilities" (222).

### III. CONCLUSION

As a feminist writer, Shashi Deshpande delineates the multiple experiences of women, especially middle-class

women in her writings. Rooted in Indian tradition and culture, her novels capture the new complexities and challenges women face in their daily life in a post-colonial Indian society. Through her writings, on the one hand, Deshpande portrays the dilemmas, complexities and gender inequality of the stereotypical Indian society, on the other hand, she does not negate the significance of the values, customs of traditional Indian society. For seeking the solution of the problem, she takes shelter in age-old ancient ethos and ethics. While searching for subjectivity, agency and selfhood for women, Deshpande does not rely on Western feminism, rather she believes in Indian tradition institutions- family and family relationship, ancestral home, marriage etc. She does not believe that identity can be developed in isolation and alienation, rather identity can be constructed through communication. Like her other novels, the story of Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror* revolves around a middle-class woman who faces difficulties and emptiness in her married life, still she finds a way for resolution. Through her protagonist, Saru, Deshpande portrays a strong female character who learns to confront the difficulties and finds her way for liberation.

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