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'TERROR' Analysis in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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ABSTRACT

The Dark Holds No Terrors is the first novel written by Shashi Deshpande in 1980. The disharmony and disillusionment experienced by an educated lady raised in a conventional, conservative home are major themes in the book. Shashi Deshpande significantly brings out the protagonist's inner struggles, finally leading towards emancipation. The present study breaks down the title into three sections that allude to the "darkness" in Sarita's (Saru) life by instilling "terror" in her: terror brought on by nightmares of hands brutally involved in rape, terror brought on by her sibling's premature death, and terror brought on by her mother's accusations and rejection.

Keywords: Darkness, nightmares, terror, guilt.

The Dark Holds No Terrors is a captivating novel by Shashi Deshpande. It depicts a woman's struggle to make it in a society that doesn't have any simple answers for her social, psychological, and physical issues. At the very outset, the novel's title suggests a darkened, murky, terrifying, enclosed space. The study analyses the title by categorising the novel into three sections which refer to the 'darkness' in the life of the protagonist Sarita (Saru) by creating 'terror' in her - the terror caused by nightmares of hands brutally involved in rape, terror caused by the untimely death of her brother Dhruv and terror caused by the allegations and rejection of mother. The issues of a career woman whose marriage is about to fall apart are the focus of the book. The novel tells the story in the form of introspection by the protagonist and hence the story doesn't adopt a simple sequential order but moves between the present and the memories of the past.

I. Terror of being "trapped animal"

The novel begins with the nightmare experience of rape, a nightmare of hands.

The beginning was abrupt. There had been no preparations for it. Preliminaries did not exist either. It was a nightmare of hands at first. Hurting hands that left a trail of pain. Hurting hands that brought me out of a cocoon of a blessed unreality... I'm dreaming – this - is - not real... into the savage reality of a monstrous onslaught. And then the nightmare included teeth and lips together. Hands and teeth? No, hammers and pincers. I could taste blood on my lips...

The familiarity of the sensation suddenly broke the shell of silent terror that had enclosed me (p.11)

[Shashi Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* India Penguin Books, 1990] [Further references are to this edition, and are incorporated in the body of the text itself.]

Sarita realizes that the terror in the darkness was not a stranger but Manohar her husband. She says,

This was him, the stranger who had come into my dreams for a few nights, leaving behind a fear that invaded even my waking hours... Panic and terror mounted in me as the hands, deliberately with a kind of casual cruelty, gradually tightened round my throat. Oh god, I was going to die (p.11)

She was so terrified by her husband's monstrous actions that she was unable to speak out in response. She remembers back to her grandmother, who was left as a woman with two small daughters, one of whom was her mother, when her husband left her a few years after they were married. He had disappeared... had taken *sanyas*... obviously, there was the burden of being undesirable, of being reliant. Still, her grandma had never expressed dissatisfaction (p.70) and had accepted her plight by saying, "It's my luck... my fate it was written on my forehead" (p.70). Hence, she felt choked... suffocated.

When she returned home in the evening after her consulting hour, she found that Manu, her husband whom she chose to marry as a protest against her unloving mother, was quite normal - he talked about their children and his students. They went to bed. Manu was reading while Saru dropped off to sleep. Suddenly he became abnormal, and acted wildly. She was tormented by his strange behaviour:

I woke up to darkness and an awareness of fear. Panic. Then pain... the hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of horribly familiar body. And above me, a face I could not recognize.

Total non-comprehension, complete bewilderment, paralysed me... I began to struggle... my body hurt and painful... (p. 111-112)

In the morning, he asked Saru like a normal man whether she slept well. Saru was completely stunned. She was unable to recover from the trauma she had experienced. "I felt a deadly fear. As if I was isolated from everyone, from the whole world, by what was happening to me, that I was doomed to watch happiness, watch it recede from me, doomed never

to participate in it, never experience it myself." (p.112)

Saru could not comprehend Manu's contradictory attitude, as he was friendly and cheerful during the day and aggressive at night. The terrifying stranger of the night and the somewhat pitiful Manu of other times, she had nearly given up trying to fit the two men together. However, this contradiction never stopped frightening her (p. 112). She realized she ought to get legal advice, but she reasoned that doing so would be equivalent to disclosing her personal information to the world once more. Hence Saru felt that she suffered mainly because of social codes and masculine ego.

In spite of being hurt by her husband Saru was aware of the fact that her husband was being ignored and dominated by her, which was fatal to the personality of a man. Sarita while at medical college, meets and marries Manohar a budding poet during his college years, who 'was to take the literary world by storm. But Manohar's confidence is weakened rather early after their marriage. When he observes that Sarita's status as a doctor brings her dignity and importance, after marriage, his presence is totally disregarded. As Sarita's success begins to highlight Manohar's failure, a sense of insecurity begins to creep into Manohar. It reaches its zenith when an interviewer asks Manu, "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?" (p.20).

This so damaged Manu's ego that he assaulted Saru like an animal that evening. Saru tells her dad.

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 (p 201). (p. 201)

She felt helpless to protect herself in bed because Manu was so harsh and dishonest to her. She was unable to cry even for fear of upsetting the children in the next room. She becomes a prisoner of her fears and confusions. After a fifteen-year gap in her married life and the death of her mother, she desperately returns to her father's house when things get out of control and asks him "I know you're my father and I'm your daughter and... you're a man and

"I'm a woman. Can we talk of such things?" (p.199). It was known to her father that Saru could only disclose her thoughts to him. He therefore immediately promised to hear her out and, if he could, assist her. She informs her father about her husband's sadistic and loving cruelty. In bed, he was a bully to her. Manu did this every day for a long time

"Yes, again and again and yet again. I've lost count of it" (p.201).

But the surprising thing was that he was his usual self in the morning. She thought that Manu himself did not know because he would ask her innocently in the morning "God, Saru have you hurt yourself? Look at that!" He was genuinely concerned. (p.203). Manu had become a psychopathic, needed treatment. But she will not do all that because once again she'll have to hear the words.... "You did it. You did it." (p-203)

Saru also tells her father about the terror caused by nightmares after Renu's birth.

It was a man in a brown scarf trying to strangle me in that nightmare. And I could do nothing then, either... I thought this was again that kind of nightmare. But it couldn't have been because there were the bruises. (p. 203)

Saru feels that the cause of these nightmares was according to the custom her first child should have been born at her parent's house. She believes that she wouldn't have those nightmares if she had come to her parents at that time.

II. Terror caused by guilt ridden mind

The second cause of terror is Sarita's guilt ridden mind which keeps disturbing her is the death of her younger brother Dhruva. Her feeling of guilt makes her suffer acutely. She is constantly disturbed by her misinterpretations. This is mainly because her mother blames her for her brother's death. She kept taunting by her mother.

You killed him, why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead? (p.191)

It was deeply engraved in the mother's mind that Saru was accountable for the death of Dhruva. Saru was hurt and even disturbed by this allegation. She had love for Dhruva. She saw him in her dreams even

when she had become a doctor. She felt the presence of Dhruva beside her, calling her 'Sarutai'. She saw in her dream that,

I was fighting against the cloying sticky heaviness that was pulling me down, choking me, drowning me. And Dhruva was swiftly, silently going away from me ... wait for me ... wait for me, I ... I am coming (p. 145 – 146)

Saru gets such dreams because of her affection towards her brother. But her mother's accusation, makes her feel guilty. She begins to experience Dhruva's dreams as a consequence of her mother's rage, hatred, and rejection pain. Saru says,

"I could do nothing with the sorrow but bear it. It was mine and mine alone. I could share it with none" (p.146).

Saru believed that she was being blamed for death of Dhruva without any justification. It was very essential for her to free herself from the feeling of guilt that had engulfed her so strongly. Hence, in order to retrieve from that morass, she "went back into that time, that state of mind, trying to be definite about what I did and why" (p. 186). Saru remembered that she was angry that day with her parents for not allowing her to go to see the film Rani of Jhansi with her friend. She then made the decision to go out of the house in protest, worrying her parents, particularly her mother. This was just a child's plan to make herself important in the eyes of her parents. As Saru was about to go out that day Dhruva came out and insisted on going with her. She tried her best to dissuade him, but he was a stubborn and pampered child. He went following her near a small pool of water and Sarita forgot all about her anger as she enjoyed playing with Dhruva. When it was time to return home Dhruva did not agree. Dhruva was building a fort with wet sand. In order to scare him she said that she would go away leaving him alone and went a few steps alone. When she turned around, she was shocked to see no traces of Dhruva. He had drowned in the water. She too got into the water searching for him. She couldn't succeed. She was sobbing. She entered the house through the backdoor and changed into dry clothes. When her father asked her about Dhruva, she said she didn't

know anything about him. When they found him and brought his dead body home Saru's mother said,

You did it, you did this. You killed him [.....] And then it began the hysteria, the screaming. the words that followed me for... all my life. You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive when he is dead? (p. 191).

She was certain she had not acted strangely or with criminal intent after recalling the incident. She'd done everything she could to stop him from following her, talked him into coming home with her, waded into the river to get him, and then been devastated when she couldn't locate him. Her mother still called her a murderer.

III. Terror caused by nightmares of her mother

The third cause of terror which haunted Saru and brought nightmares in darkness was the thoughts of her mother. Sarita hated her mother so much that she referred to her as 'She' and not 'Ai'. When Dhruva was still alive, Saru had witnessed his mother discriminate against the two when they were younger. It was her mother who had made her feel inferior just because she was a girl. Sarita's mother had a strong bond with her son, much like other orthodox mothers do. Her attitude was a typical one; she believed that a son would propagate family lineage. She believed that a son is capable of offering Agni to his dead parents, and their soul would get *moksha*. Hence, the mother was very partial. After Dhruva's death, she alienated herself from Saru forever and opposed Saru at every level. There are many incidents that justify the bitterness between Sarita and her mother.

Saru was upset to learn that her mother, who was a cancer patient, died peacefully because she couldn't imagine that a mother who did not reconcile with her daughter would die peacefully. Prof. Kulkarni, who had come to get her some financial help from her parents to complete her graduation, reported to her that her mother cursed her addressing,

I will pray for her unhappiness. Let her know more sorrow than she has given me. (p.197)

Saru believes that even though she hadn't intentionally hurt anyone, she was to blame for all of the misfortune. Manu became psychotic without her own fault and was forced to leave her mother behind, whereas Dhruva accompanied her willingly. Mother died quietly, and Dhruva passed away. Manu turned into a psychopath, yet she never lost awareness that she was at the centre of all. Therefore, she feels that she has to bear the arrows, the nightmares, and the 'terror' of the darkness. Thus, the title *The Dark Holds no Terrors* is bold, assertive, suggestive and emblematic. The title indicates Sarita's final freedom and realisation from the 'dark' images that haunted her for a long time.

Note: Textual references to Shashi. Deshpande's novel has been given parenthetically. The edition used is *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. Penguin Books Ltd., New Delhi, 1990.

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