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Research Article



Women in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *Roots and Shadows*: A Critical Study

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Email Id: ashikbsmrstu@gmail.com <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0170-0669> <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2022.7.6.15>**Pages:** 139-149**Abstract**

Patriarchal domination and female submissiveness are common phenomena in almost all societies and cultures. Shashi Deshpande, an Indian female novelist, describes all kinds of visible and invisible physical, psychological, and ideological oppression caused by patriarchy in microscopic details in her novels *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *Roots and Shadows*. Deshpande celebrates the freedom of women by creating two strong female characters, Sarita and Indu, who pay attention to their inner consciences, celebrating female emancipation and feminine identity. The patriarchy controls a notable proportion of female characters in English literature who remain silent, passive, and inactive. William Shakespeare's Desdemona, Ophelia, Thomas Hardy's Tess, Emily Bronte's Catherine, Isabella, Charlotte Bronte's Bertha Mason, and D. H. Lawrence's Miriam are all depicted as being helpless, frail, and feeble at the hands of patriarchy. Deshpande, on the other hand, is successful in showing how her female protagonists transform and become more aware of their place in society. Through these two selected novels, she depicts patriarchal dominance and the frustration that women encounter in marital relationships. Therefore, the general objective of this paper is to portray the lifelong struggle of women to find their genuine identities and a position for themselves in families, societies, and cultures. This study attempts to unravel the true nature of patriarchy, which persists in society in different shapes and forms to confine women by despising their inner strength and individuality.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Feminism, Identity, Emancipation, Society, Consciousness, Dilemma**Introduction**

In Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita portrays societal discrimination in the case of nurturing a male and a female child. She also portrays a picture of domestic violence and the inferiority complex of men when their women surpass them in education and profession. The novel explores a number of dilemmas, issues, and obstacles that women need to overcome in order to establish their individual identities, detesting everything that restricts them. In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu represents a freedom loving girl who progressively surrenders herself by becoming a docile wife. Deshpande is successful in capturing the

subjugation that women experience such as the social double standard, female submissiveness, attempts at emancipation, the superiority-inferiority complex that exists between husband and wife, the privilege of the son, the negligence of the daughter, et cetera.

Women have been observed to follow century-old family customs in which they consistently play a secondary or passive role to their male counterparts. Men have presumed that they belong to a superior class than women, and with that assumption in mind, they have designed everything according to their wishes. They have created a world where they rule as lords, and women serve as their subjects. As civilization advanced, women started to become aware of their own identities as well as their human rights, and they started to protest against male oppression. These protests came out in different forms, including writing a literature of their own. Women writers, through their writing, started narrating their real experiences about unjust social practices and the picture of women's suppression.

Traditional Indian society still tolerates and supports the suppression of women. It can be found in religious doctrines, social customs, human codes of conduct, education, the legal system, and even within families. Women suffer from being caught in a web of apparatuses that prevent them from generally violating the codes. Patriarchy and traditional rules bound society's practices gradually shatter the innocent world of women. Many female writers first express their opposition to unjust social doctrines and patriarchy through their writing. Deshpande, being an Indian writer, portrays the social reality of India for women in these two selected novels.

Review of literature

Women are expected to be ideal wives, sisters, mothers, daughters, and homemakers in a society, where men predominate. They hardly have opportunities to assert themselves outside of their domestic identities and "There would always have been that assertion – you cannot do this, you are incapable of doing that – to protest against, to overcome" (Woolf 61). They had little access to read and write literature, receive education, and find a job in earlier times. Women began to become aware of their individual selves, but impositions on them persist in new shapes and forms, as Deshpande's protagonists Sarita and Indu demonstrate. In the play *A Doll's House* (1879), Henrik Ibsen depicts a similar kind of picture to what Deshpande wishes to present in these two selected novels. Nora succeeds in opening a new door for her identity by shutting the door of patriarchal society. Sarita, Indu, and Nora's endeavor at emancipation runs counter to the established double standards of society, religion, law, family, and culture. Our so-called patriarchal society establishes men as the master and dominant class, whereas women are the subservient and oppressed class. Motherhood, wifedom, religious doctrine, family tradition, customs, and the social binary structure become hindrances to establishing the individuality of women. Through Nora's voice, Ibsen illustrates how a girl used to be the 'doll girl' in her father's hand before marriage, and the 'doll wife' in her husband's hand afterwards (201). Deshpande, however, creates her female characters Sarita and Indu with different vigor and enthusiasm, and these characters continue their struggle to shape and reshape their identities.

Gezari analyzes Sandra M. Gilbert, and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Two prominent words 'angel' and 'monster' are used to portray feminine attributes in the text. Women should remain silent and accept all forms of injustice in order to be the angels in the house. On the other hand, women who protest against all kinds of oppressions and restrictions imposed on them and work to carve out their own identities in society are viewed as monsters (Gezari 265). They also advocate for women to protest against all forms of tyranny they face in both family and society and to free themselves from the coffin to which they have been confined since the beginning of human civilization (Gezari 278). Deshpande, in her two selected novels, effectively presents the success of Sarita and Indu, who listen to their inner voice and give priority to their inner wishes and strengths to move forward, smashing all obstacles.

Most of the male characters in Deshpande's novels are presented as less powerful and weaker compared to her female protagonists, who are portrayed as strong characters (Sowmya 35). Deshpande's female protagonists possess the courage to rebel against the stereotypical customs and doctrines of patriarchal society. Women have to struggle a lot for their self-identity in order to be liberated from all kinds of constraints, just as Sarita struggles throughout her life (Geetha 57). Indu and Sarita portray the picture of a male-dominated society in which women are perpetually considered to be imprisoned in a limbo devoid of desire, ambition, freedom, or free will. It is, therefore, the conventional belief that women should consequently be inferior to men, but Deshpande presents the situation in a different way, where she gives primary freedom and free will to women (Geetha 129). One of the recurrent themes in Deshpande's novels is that most of her female characters are fearless enough to sail their lives according to their own wishes and free will, violating all social taboos (Dr. Shuchi 13). Woolf talks about the importance of the freedom of the female mind by uttering the words, ". . . there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind" (Woolf 82). Nothing can create obstacles in the way of a woman who really wants to achieve freedom and identity for herself; nothing can enter her mind to obstruct her thoughts.

Subjugation of women

In the past, women accepted everything silently and tolerated all oppression without protest. Later, in the modern era, things started to change, and women became aware of their financial stability and individual identity. It also causes issues for women who are trying to establish their own identity and position within the family and society. If women get a superior job position compared to their husbands, their marital happiness is also hampered. The situation is such that society restricts women in every possible way to hinder their success. If in any way women achieve success, surpassing all obstacles, new kinds of problems will arise before them to disrupt their flow of life. Sarita faces similar obstacles and sufferings in her conjugal life as Manohar is professionally inferior to her position, and the husband/wife binary changes: "Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 49). Manohar cannot digest the question asked by a journalist, "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 238). Though their

marriage is a love marriage, Manohar cannot tolerate the superiority of Sarita in society. Similar issues are depicted in Mohit Suri's Bollywood film *Aashiqui 2* (2013), in which the husband Rahul (Aditya Roy Kapur) and wife Aarohi (Shraddha Kapoor) are both singers. Conflicts begin when Aarohi gains more fame compared to Rahul. Rahul accepts his death but cannot accept Aarohi's fame and prosperity over his own. Thus, in a South Asian setting, the male cannot tolerate the prosperity of the female, as can be found in the relationship between Sarita and Manohar.

Through the character of Akka, *Roots and Shadows* exposes how women themselves are harmful to other women. In her married life, she had to tolerate all kinds of dominance, and later, she herself turned into an oppressor. Indu, a very independent-minded girl, left the house in order to escape Akka's dictatorship. Though Indu chooses to marry according to her own choice so that she can enjoy her self-respect and freedom of behavior after marriage, she gradually discovers that the only way to retain peace and harmony in the family is to be submissive and mute. Geethamala rightly observes, "Jayant represents those educated men who accept the idea of the equality of sex at the intellectual level, but when it comes to practicing it, their roots instinctively shadow their behaviour" (Geethamala 95). Deshpande depicts the true picture of Indian women, where the condition of women is almost the same irrespective of class, caste, education, and job. According to the customs and laws of society, women are supposed to be inferior to men in all aspects. By observing this discriminatory treatment, Woolf raises a crucial question: "Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor?" (34). Our man-made society is somewhat responsible for this kind of psychological pressure on men by backbiting, snubbing, or pinching with words. Sarita's economic solvency is the main fear of Manohar. Whenever someone is economically solvent, it's difficult to dominate him or her. Manu feels insecure due to the independence of his wife, Sarita. The feeling of inferiority hurts their male ego, and one kind of fear grows in their mind that their domination is over. These same men like to establish domination over their women but cannot tolerate women being in a superior position. Hossain shows the reverse situation of men and women in society in *Sultana's Dream* (2013) in which women hold power. Female emancipation is a mere utopia because female domination still exists in society, either mentally or physically.

Women deal with numerous challenges in their daily lives. The conventional responsibilities of women as mother, wife, daughter, et cetera. are only taken into account and valued by our society. A woman might also have a professional identity, self-respect, and passion for her own individuality. Sarita is searching for that individual identity for herself and wants to establish harmony while maintaining all her roles as a woman. Deshpande is very successful in her portrayal of the conflict and crisis a middle-class woman goes through in her familial and professional life just to have an identity for herself. Sarita represents contemporary women who are willing to face anything to create an identity for themselves. They no longer adhere to the idea of the traditional silent woman and do not want to be subjugated by their men. They now understand that marriage should be based on mutual understanding, not on subjugation and domination. Sarita gathers the courage to face any challenge that is put in front

of her, and together with Manu, she stands as a courageous lady who can overcome all crises as the dark holds no terrors. She is no longer afraid or remorseful about her dark complexion; instead, she gives importance to her career and identity.

Women sometimes have to conceal their genuine intelligence and wisdom just to show that their men are superior to them. This patriarchal society cannot easily accept the superiority and good position of women. Thus, women are accustomed to viewing their husbands' roles and contributions through magnifying glasses to satisfy their egos. Woolf utters: "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (44). In traditional Indian society, women should be there to praise the achievements of their men, but in terms of their own identity, they remain the property of their husbands. In the case of Indu, she tries to enjoy her family life with mutual respect and understanding, but she discovers that it is not possible in conjugal life. Indu is being engulfed by patriarchal superiority and matriarchal submissiveness on a daily basis. She can relate to Akka's perspective; she once was dominated and is now trying to subjugate others rather than make their lives easier. Whatever women experienced in their earlier lives, they try to impose in their later lives when they get the opportunity to hold some kind of power. The situation goes like this in a tradition-bound society. Women encounter barriers in the areas of education, employment, marriage, individual identity, liberty, and freedom of speech. They hardly get a room, personal space, or financial stability to explore themselves. Their desires and wishes can hardly be exposed in this patriarchal, superstitious society. Women are subjugated and treated as property in their fathers' houses and later in their husbands' families as well.

Social double standard

Women have been oppressed and dominated since the dawn of human civilization, and most women never speak out against those dominations. There are always different standards for women to survive in this society. Deshpande states, "It was so much easier for women in those days to accept, not to struggle, because they believed, they knew, there was nothing else for them. And they called that Fate" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 82).

Women have tolerated everything for centuries, accepting abhorrent dominations as their destiny, but with time, their awareness has awakened. Women develop the ability to rise above all forms of domination. The stereotypical society and its customs, rules, and regulations are responsible for creating problems in the adjustment of husband and wife. Society teaches that men should be men, that men should be superior, and a variety of other things. Whenever a man thinks of a woman, he must think of a very pure, chaste, angelic woman who is full of positive qualities and inferior to him in position. Hardy's (2012) Tess is unchaste in the eyes of patriarchy, despite the fact that the same patriarchy is responsible for her seduction. Tess has to undergo negligence due to her chastity complex; though she herself is naive and free of sin, it is Alec who is the true sinner. Ironically, her husband Angel abandoned her even though he is not at all pure or innocent. The chastity belt and the religious importance of virginity are imposed upon women in most cases. Men therefore have complete freedom in all spheres of

life- economical, social, and sexual, whereas restrictions go to women's basket. Indu's intercourse with Naren is treated as illegal by many critics, but Indu feels liberated from the social double standard. She accepts it as her courageous stand against the patriarchy which always controls a woman's body and soul. Indu declares, "in a fit of bravado" (168), that "I had committed no crime" (169), and "I don't need to erase anything I have done" (*Roots and Shadows* 168). Men always maintain a chastity belt to justify women's actions, whereas in their case, everything is justified. Indu rebels against this so-called pseudo doctrine and social injustice.

A woman has to tolerate negligence and oppression as a housewife while also having to endure sexual and mental domination as a superior professional. Previously, women could not shout at anything, but now they are conscious of their self-respect. The main problem is created by the society in which traditional dogmas and unnecessary customs make women's existence vulnerable. Saru and her brother, Dhruvha, are treated differently by their parents only because she is a girl child in the family. Later, she is tortured psychologically and physically by Manohar since she receives more prestigious social recognition as a doctor than her husband. It is not easy for Manohar to accept his lower wages and values as a teacher compared to his wife, who is a doctor. In the case of educated and self-sufficient women, these restrictions create more problems and conflicts. These women cannot easily accept all dominations, which makes conjugal life problematic. No conflicts may arise if Manohar pursues a career as a doctor and Saru develops into a teacher and a submissive, careful wife. Saru's superior professional identity and positive social recognition more than her husband's create an inferiority complex in him and hurt his male ego.

Not only in Indian society but also in most South Asian countries, males enjoy privileges over females. Sarita had to deal with this as a child, when her brother always had the upper hand. Sarita wants to come out of her dark childhood experience and break the inequality between men and women. In her conjugal life, she again encounters similar inequality and discrimination. Men cannot accept the inferior position either in the family or in society, as if women are born inferior and have to die inferior. They feel humiliated when people say their wives are more capable than them. Sarita and Manohar undergo crises in their relationship just because of this social and psychological framework. Instead of complimenting their wives, giving them room, creating scope for them to flourish, or feeling proud of their wives, they end up with mental trauma and sexual sadness like Manohar. Deshpande's spokesperson, Sarita, says:

A wife should always be a few feet behind her husband. If he's an M.A., you should be a B.A. If he's five foot four, you shouldn't be more than five three. If he's earning Rs 500, you should never earn more than Rs 499. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage. . . No partnership can ever be equal. It will always be unequal, but take care that it's unequal in favor of the husband. (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 162).

Society always sets standards and imposes pressures on human psychology. It generates a feeling of inferiority in the human brain that continuously disturbs one's psychology. Manohar

is the victim of this society's dogmatic standards. He experiences a feeling of discomfort and insecurity as a result of his lower income and lesser professional standing compared to his wife. When people respect his wife more, he feels inferior, as if women have no right to hold a superior position over males. A wife can feel pride in her husband's fame, achievements, and good standing, but a husband can never feel the same way about his wife's success and fame. It is the typical sentiment of Indian society. Sarita's professional success and social respect make Manohar sexually frustrated, and he tortures her sexually in order to assert his manhood over her. Sarita's reputation and flourishing is insulting for him, which is why he behaves more like an animal in lovemaking than as a lover. Saru's reputation and honor cannot be tarnished, so he torments her to prove his patriarchal power. Deshpande sheds light on this issue of the husband-wife relationship, in which there is ego complex and a dual standard in the family and society. Indu also gets married hoping to be happy with her lover and husband, Jayant, but she fails to be so. She discovers that it is impossible to receive liberty, space, and honor from her male counterpart after marriage. Everyone turns into an oppressor, as if wives are mere objects devoid of hope or life.

Sarita has experienced exploitation, discrimination, and hatred in her own family since she was a little girl. Her mother loves her son, and being a daughter, she is deprived. Her mother even rebukes her for the death of her brother Dhrubha: "Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead?" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 226). These harsh words hurt Sarita a lot, and she is thinking about her own identity in the future within society and her surroundings. Sarita is like an unexpected child to her mother, who wishes for her death instead of her son's death. Sarita wants to establish her identity to breach the taboos of society and wants to prove her worth by being a reputed doctor. However, while doing so, she becomes alienated from her husband and her family. Thus, Deshpande portrays the restrictions and hardships of a woman's journey toward maturity quite effectively. A woman has to fight with a lot of impediments throughout her entire life. Both Sarita and Indu want emancipation, peace, and harmony in life, but all of their struggles seem to fall short in the face of the patriarchy. As a result, they become dissatisfied, and they start to lead their lives in their own way without bothering much about fate. They try to be happy in their conjugal lives, but the traditional and century-old patriarchal superiority complex does not allow them to be so. Thus, they end up engaging in extramarital relationships because of their sexual and familial sadism.

Women submissiveness

In Indian society, it's not always possible to deny the importance of a man in a woman's life and Deshpande keeps that in mind. Sarita overcomes all obstacles from her childhood and strives for a harmonious conjugal life, but after marriage, she faces new challenges. She surrenders to society's male ego, as family peace is also important to her. She considers going back to her husband, Manu, and thinks of being silent and submissive in order to resolve conflicts between them and maintain adjustment. Her condition echoes Ram Mohan's words in Deshpande's novel *Ships That Pass*:

“...Marriage is a very strange thing. It’s a very public institution,... At the same time, marriage is an intensely private affair, No outsider will know the state of some one else’s marriage. It’s a closed room, a locked room...” (*Ships That Pass* 60-61)

In the locked and private room, women suffer in married life as a result of being trapped in the web of domination.

Lots of complexities arise there between men and women, like marital rape, inferiority complexes, psychological oppression, and so on. One of Deshpande’s protagonists, Jaya, in *That Long Silence* reflects: “A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated” (*That Long Silence* 147). In the cage and web of a disharmonious family, very silently, they continuously suffer due to their feminine gender. Women sometimes try to ignore those in their conscious mind, but most of the time they fail. Men desire extraordinarily qualified and educated women, but at the same time, they also expect submissiveness from them. Sarita utters:

And so, you must pretend that you're not as smart as you really are, not as competent as you are, not as rational as you are, and not as strong either. You can nag, complain, henpeck, whine, moan, but you can never be strong. That's a wrong which will never be forgiven. (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 162)

Sarita tries to find peace with other men to get out of her frustration, but she fails and decides to come back to Manu. She discovers that the problem is within the family and society itself, so the solution should come from the inside; no amount of force and struggle is going to be enough to change the situation. Similarly, Indu can understand that she wholeheartedly submitted herself to Jayant. Out of her excessive love and passion for Jayant, she almost loses her own self. Her husband, though educated, took it for granted that his wife, like other women in society, would be meek, submissive, and passive. So, to keep peace in her married life, she starts behaving like other women. Her only concern becomes keeping her husband happy: “When I look in the mirror, I think of Jayant. When I dress, I think of Jayant. When I undress, I think of him. Always what he wants. What he would like. What would please him.” (*Roots and Shadows* 54). Still, she cannot imagine her life complete without her husband, Jayant. Indu starts to hate herself for her excessive care and submissiveness towards her husband, but she cannot get out of it.

Thus, besides social doctrine and patriarchal dictatorship, love also compels women to remain submissive. After all, Indian women value family relations a lot, and that is why they cannot easily break any bond showing protest against oppression and violence. Both Sarita and Indu become physically, mentally, and sexually vulnerable, but they eventually return to their partners, hoping for a fresh start and a happy family life.

Women Emancipation

Women today are coming out of the confined door of their families to forge their own identities. Here also, they become victims of social superiority and inferiority complex. Still, women are bold enough now to challenge society and fulfill their own free will. Sarita marries according to her own decision and choice, despising her parents' opinion. Indu goes away from

her paternal home just to enjoy her free will and establish her identity as a woman in society. Throughout the whole world, lots of women are now in a superior position over men. This emancipation is not so easy and smooth for Indian women like Sarita and Indu. Familial and social impediments are always there to slow down their way of life. Woolf focuses on the importance of female emancipation, and to talk about patriarchal domination, she opines: “The history of men's opposition to women's emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself” (Woolf 62). Economic solvency is the most crucial criterion for a woman to be strong and important in the family and society. To feed her well, to express her inner desire, to fulfill her hidden wishes, and most of all, to get honor and prestige from society, economic independence and self-identity are essential. When this identity flourishes and women prove their worth over men, the patriarchy cannot accept that success positively. A similar kind of conflict arises between Saru and Manohar.

Saru has no complexity in herself, but her husband's ignorance and torture compel her to think in another way. Tortured and oppressed, Saru questions the virility of Manohar. Beauvoir opines, “No one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility” (Beauvoir 24). The patriarchal society fails to ensure a balanced and mature gender relationship by overcoming the masculine ego. There always remains a lack of mutual understanding and respect for each other that leads to a disturbed, disappointed, and unhealthy husband-wife relationship. Women’s emancipation is difficult with such traumatic inner psyches as those of Sarita and Manohar, and this kind of relationship leads to isolation. Saru is an educated, independent, and economically solvent woman but is unable to solve her domestic or conjugal life's problems. Balancing both family life and professional life hinders the real emancipation of women, depriving them of a happy and peaceful life. Similarly, from her family, Indu learns to be silent, calm, docile, and submissive by being a girl in her society. She wants freedom, and as a sign of her revolt, she marries Jayant, a man from a different caste.

Though the caste complex is very prevalent in Indian society, Indu shows her courage to violate this century-old tradition. Indu protests against her orthodox family just to be free from the life of a caged bird. Her simple dream of liberty is shattered as she will never be free because women’s lives are always entangled in a whirlpool of chains, which Indu learns later. In the name of love, she has to surrender to Jayant, and she discovers that emancipation for women is a mere dream. Deshpande portrays the physical and emotional dissatisfaction of her female protagonists, as they are compelled to submit to their male counterparts, dishonoring their self-respect.

Conclusion

Deshpande’s female protagonists attempt to enjoy freedom and equality alongside their male partners, but they realize that the problem lies in the human brain for a long time. It is quite challenging to uproot discrimination from society overnight. Sarita somehow manages her familial and professional roles and is thus able to break the typical social taboo. Her mother's ignorance, her dark complexion, her feminine features, her husband's indifference and

animalistic behavior- nothing can prevent her success as a woman. Thus, she turns into a strong woman to break the traditional customs of society regarding gender roles. Several discriminatory incidents compelled her to embark on an agonizing search for her true self. Despite her revolt, courage, and passion for individual self, she decides to reform her relationship with Manohar. Indu fled her home to experience independence but ran into the harsh realities of life. Though she is aware of her true nature, she is helpless in front of her family obligations. Indu approaches everything with confidence, but her outrage is unable to protect her from bowing down before patriarchy. Most women cannot even realize that they are subjugated; in that sense, Deshpande's characters are distinct, as they are able to recognize their enslavement. They are aware of their inner sufferings and make an effort to overcome all difficulties. Both Sarita and Indu try to combat masculinity, but end up discovering that this century-old tradition can only be eradicated with the establishment of enlightened souls.

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