



Sarita's voice: Modern Indian Feminist Figure in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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Abstract: *This research paper explores Sarita, the principal character in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* by Shashi Deshpande, and also her focus on modern Indian feminism. It concentrates on her inner strife, women's sufferings, her search for identity, and how this patriarchal society tries to pull women down. In this novel, Deshpande has portrayed Sarita as one of the most prominent and brave women of feminist creations, showing how she wanted women not to be submissive. She does not discuss radical feminist philosophies but stands for Indian-style feminism in the way she stands up for herself, self-examination, opposition, and how she copes with her family's and society's expectations. Using feminist literary criticism, this research delves into how Sarita deals with gender-based violence, conflicts in her married life, profession, sovereignty, parenthood, and remorse. Sarita rigorously explores the small details of hegemony and dominant attitudes toward women who are ill-treated and oppressed every day. She wants women to overcome all these struggles from society so that they can become alternative women rather than submissive ones. In the long run, this paper proclaims that Sarita's experiences reflect the challenges of Indian women and also suggests that the motifs and central ideas of Shashi Deshpande's feminism remain applicable and noteworthy in contemporary times.*

Keywords: *Feminist identity, patriarchy, self-realization, gendered trauma, modern Indian womanhood*

Shashi Deshpande is one of India's most powerful contemporary novelists writing in English. She has received many significant awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Award (1990) for *That Long Silence*. Some of her major works are *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *Come Up and Be Dead* (1983), *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Strangers to Ourselves* (2015), *If I Die Today* (1982), and *Shadow Play* (2013). Her feminism is quiet, introspective, and connected with day-to-day experiences. Most of her works deal with the themes of struggles in marriage, quarrels between society's expectations and one's personal desires, sanity, and anxiety.

Indian English literature deeply explores the intricate lives of women, mainly in societies whose minds are seized between old customs and modern ideas. Shashi Deshpande is an exceptional writer among contemporary authors as she concentrates more on issues faced by women in our society with compassion and honesty, without pulling back from the brutal truth, and also on how women go in search of self-discovery and emerge from the restrictions imposed on them by society. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), one of her most eminent



novels, rightly draws us into the responsive and psychological battles faced by women in Indian society when they attempt to stand up for themselves in their families, workplaces, and systems run by a strict patriarchal structure. In the midst of this narrative is Sarita, often referred to as Saru, a victorious doctor whose personal life is flooded with deep trauma, unhealed childhood guilt, and a distressed marriage.

This article argues that Sarita's character represents the modern Indian feminist. She is seized by what society expects from women and by her own needs and self-satisfaction. This piece shows her inner struggle, the challenges she faced at home, and how changes took place within herself over time. Through the character of Sarita, Deshpande adds something factual and influential to the conversation about Indian feminist writing.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Shashi Deshpande introduces the character Sarita as both narrator and protagonist, who is considered one of the most influential portraits of a modern Indian woman confined between old rituals and self-determination. Through Sarita's shattered memories and broken family life, Deshpande is not just talking about Sarita's life; she is addressing and highlighting all the important matters related to feminism that have affected many women in India's middle class. She wants people to realize and discuss the issues in our society that affect women, such as inequality, stereotypes, and biases. She focuses on the 'big picture' problems that affect women's lives. Sarita faces many struggles in her life, dealing with both society's expectations and fulfilling her own desires. She never calls herself a feminist, but she refuses to play her role; challenging conventions, she fights for herself. Her transformation happens in a very subtle way rather than being obvious. Deshpande does not state everything but rather allows the audience to conclude and connect with Sarita's feelings. Sarita's story connects with anyone who has been caught by societal expectations and family struggles. Her journey coincides with what Chandra Talpade Mohanty said: "The localized feminist subject whose resistance emerges within her specific sociocultural boundaries" (Mohanty 73). Thus, Deshpande examines Indian womanliness and its contradictions through the protagonist Sarita.

Sarita's childhood memories are completely shaped by the rules, regulations, and expectations of her Brahmin family. From the beginning, she was not given much importance in her family. Sarita lives in a family that tells her how she should act and behave in life. Her mother gives high priority to Sarita's brother, Dhruva, because of his disability which makes Sarita feel guilty about her own achievements. Of course, she receives love and care from her mother, but she always feels alone. When her brother died by drowning, everyone started blaming Sarita, and that had a huge impact throughout her adulthood. Feminist critic Meera Shirwadkar mentions that "Deshpande's protagonists often internalize guilt as a mechanism through which the patriarchal system perpetuates female submission" (Shirwadkar 51). Sarita's mother's guilt trips have made her feel sad and responsible for others' happiness. This has made her a people-pleaser, which she also carried into her married life, pleasing everybody and prioritizing everyone in her family. She is forced to give attention to others' needs rather than her own. She has come to believe that this is what makes her a good woman. She has always wanted to obey others and put them first. For her, this doesn't feel like family values or ethics but a cage. Until now, she cannot overcome the childhood traumas she faced.



Sarita wanted to become a doctor, which was a huge deal. She didn't want to become the woman her mother wanted and started choosing her own path, one she was interested in. She concentrated more on her career and realized it was her own life and not something given to her by someone else, so she began to live for herself. But as days passed, her job turned out to make her married life worse. Society expects women to do more, but in the end, the same society punishes them for it. Here, her husband Mano cannot accept her being successful in her career, as he feels insecure about her success. To make her feel submissive and to overcome his insecurities, he took violence as a weapon, thinking that he could control her and everything. She did not come out of her abusive marital life. She clearly notes the cruel behaviour of her husband, Mano, when she reflects, "The nights became something I dreaded. The man I had trusted became a stranger" (Deshpande 142). Through this line, she tells us what she has faced from him. Sarita fears the night because her husband tries to control her even in their private moments. She is experiencing all the trauma, but still, she did not give up her feminism, and it grows stronger day by day. She did not remain silent; instead, she started to voice out against the injustice caused to her, turning all her suffering and pain into strength.

Though Sarita fights for her independence, she is still stuck with the society's expectations from her—getting married, having kids, and playing the perfect wife role. The novel studies how these patriarchal structures force women to do all the caretaker work not only for their kids but also to satisfy men's fragile egos too. Sarita balances both her personal and professional life and tells us how impossible it is to be the "superwoman" at her workplace and an obedient woman at home. Jasbir Jain says, "Deshpande's women suffer because they are caught between tradition and modernity, unable to fulfill contradictory demands" (Jain 84). Her marriage life becomes very hard for her, not only because Manu is arrogant and violent, but also because the society wants women to keep quiet at any cost, regardless of their pain. Sarita cannot voice out what's happening to her about her sexual violence, a silence kept by so many Indian women. When Sarita goes back to her childhood home, it's not just escaping from the reality, but it's also her style of facing the roots of all this silence, even if it's scary.

Sarita's babyhood isn't a secure haven for her. Her father stays quiet, not involving himself in anything but her mother completely takes care of the house with heavy hands. Though Sarita speaks feminism, she feels like where ever she looks, she is surrounded by the unwritten rules made by the society. Sarita is becoming free from her mother's control but still she can't come out of her childhood traumas. Here, Deshpande gives Sarita a chance to express her feminist ideas - mother's refusal, Manu's brutality and even the guilt she carried within herself - not a mischance. It all comes from a vast system that has been constructed to control the choices of women. Elaine Showalter said that "a phase of self - rediscovery where they reinterpret their past through a new lens of autonomy"(Showalter 201). This is what happens to Sarita. She is remembering and recalling her old stories not to heal from her traumas but to repel against the old rules that attempted to shape her.

Sarita's story represents how Indian society treats women. Deshpande doesn't portray Sarita as a perfect feminist figure. Instead, she also gets hurt, doubts herself, has second thoughts not knowing what to choose, but she never gives up on herself; she never refuses to speak out about what is happening around her. It is never simple for Sarita to take back her life and live it the way she wants. Patriarchy is not only present in society as outside pressure, but it is also taught



to individuals, the way they raise their children, the way they teach them what to believe and what not to. She is hurt, but she keeps questioning herself and searching for meaning in her life. Through Deshpande's story, we come to know that Sarita is not only a victim but one who fights for her own life to be independent and find her strength. This story stands as an example of how women are still fighting for their freedom, equality, and the right to realize their selfworth, yet they are refused by society.

Through Sarita's story we can clearly understand that women were not given much importance. They live in a patriarchal society where their pains were silenced and also it has been a place where resistance begins. In 'The Dark Holds No Terrors' Deshpande portrays the sufferings Sarita cope with her mother, husband and even with herself. She was completely silenced in her marriage life though she underwent violence because the society wants women to adjust and consider violence in marriage as a part of life. Initially, Sarita wakes up to the reality and starts addressing what's happening to her at least within her, if she cannot express it outwardly. Sarita fights for women's empowerment and she doesn't want women to be silent and voiceless in Indian literature. In the end Sarita's act of voicing out became a form of resistance even if it's just within herself.

Sarita is noticeable as a modern Indian feminist because she did not give up; instead, she breaks the chain of patriarchy which the society has put on her. By the end of the novel, she did not get complete freedom from the male- dominated society, but she has the guts to face all the struggles on her own. She has the nerve to face it. Deshpande wants to let us know that feminism or equality is not something that one can attain in a day or overnight, but it is a process one must continue working on. This becomes an act of resistance because women were taught to ignore their dreams and own needs. The real feminism is not about pushing back; it's about voicing out and speaking up for ourselves. This is the reason that Sarita still matters in the Indian literature.

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