

**Body of Evidence: Sexual Violence and the Search for Justice in  
Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors***

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**Abstract**

The women's body have been represented as mother, seductive material, sexual and procreative in accordance with feminist critic. Sex is biological, but the values and meanings associated with the female and male body are socially ascribed. Gender is the system of values and meaning. Indian women, unlike their western counterparts have always been socially and psychologically oppressed, sexually colonise and biologically subjugated against a male dominant social set-up. The novel of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* speaks for those women who are the victims in the hands male power where the protagonists of this novel is meek and submissive. Marital Rape, which is also known as spousal rape, is non- consensual sex in which the executor is the victim's spouse. On the other side, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* explores the problems of women in terms of illiteracy, ideological brainwashing in patriarchal societal structures, the problem of dowry, the complexity of the issue of caste and economic status. The characters of women in the novel long for their recognition from the male dominated society. They need their freedom and fight for their Justice. The present work is thus an attempt at bringing to light the subversive reactions of women across different cultures, of different environments and the oppression of all kinds.

**Keywords:** *Women, Male, Sex, Violence, Justice, Dark Hold No Terrors.*

Simone de Beauvoir says that history of humanity is a history of systematic attempts to silence the female. She states: “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine.” (Beauvoir 273) This research paper aims to find out the causes of exploitation, oppression and subjugation experienced by the women character justice of Shashi Deshpande fiction. The study also analyses the greatest contribution of feminist theory to give a voice (power) and justice to women in the fields of familial and social relations.

The women’s body have been represented as mother, seductive material, sexual and procreative by the feminist critic. Patriarchal society attributes particular value to the women body, and the woman assimilates these values. Sex is biological, but the values and meanings associated with the female and male body are socially ascribed. Gender is the system of values and meaning. If sex and biology is nature, then gender is about the social and, therefore, culture (Nayar 89). Indian women, unlike their western counterparts have always been socially and psychologically oppressed, sexually colonizes and biologically subjugated against a male dominant social set-up. There is a major insight by De Beauvoirr, “there is no ‘essence’ of a woman; a woman is constructed as such by men and society. As she puts it: ‘One is not born a woman but becomes one’ (1984: 267). Her main argument focuses on the biological sex and social gender which are not accidental: Patriarchy makes use of sexual difference so as to maintain equality between men and women. De Beauvoir argues that while sexual difference is real and unalterable, it cannot be the grounds for injustice and inequality. She proposed that women must take charge of their own choice and be Subjects in their own right.

According to bell hooks, “Feminism is a struggle to end the sexist oppression. Its purpose is not to give advantage to a particular group of women, or a particular race or class of women. Actually, it does not privilege woman over man but it talks about equality among male and female” (qtd in Hooks 28).

According to Onimhawo, feminists believe that women should have the right and freedom to choose what happen to their bodies. They should have equal rights like men in the society. For this reason, Saru in the novel *The Dark Hold No Terrors* do not let their bodies become procreating systems.

Indian writing in English entered a new phase with the rise of the women novelist like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, Githa Hariharan, Rama

Mehta, and Nayantara sahal, who mirrored, in their works, the protest of the women against the patriarchal social structure of India. According to Sayar Singh Chopra research paper “Dignity and Suffering: A Comparative Study of Mulkraj Anand” Untouchable and M.K. Indira’s Phaniyamma” Women are not free from marriage life and widow life from our society, they are margin in male dominant society:

Phaniyamma is a very lovely character....She becomes a widow at a very young age, and as was the custom, at nine years when she hadn’t even realized the meaning of self, she has to face the brunt of the tradition; her head is shaved off, the bangles so dear to a little girl are broken, her kumkum wiped ...experiences mixed feelings of love reverence and sympathy for her... whole of her life as a widow and did not have any feelings of revolt against the society that restricted her avenues because she was a widow and could not experience all those things that a woman is supposed to experience, like, the joy of motherhood, the pleasure of wifehood, all because a widow was not allowed to remarry, frustrates (quoted Chopra, 15-16).

The socialization process in patriarchal societies desexualizes not only the body of a woman but also her mind and feeling. Shashi Deshpande is one of the most significant Indian women novelists in English who has made a bold attempt to raise the voice against the frustrations and disappointment of women in the patriarchal society. Shashi Deshpande seems to follow her advice closely and prepares her protagonist to claim their right over their body and sexuality and paves the paths of emancipation. Shashi Deshpande also focuses her affection on all those women who are destined to suffer silently the nightly assaults by their husbands through the protagonist of the liberated woman. She takes up for discussion some crucial aspects of a woman life such as sex, sexuality and women body: "Things fell, with a miraculous 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." (Deshpande 63) She basically writes about the situation of women and their failures in the first changing socio-economic milieu of India. She wrote about women of middle class society.

Deshpande’s all literary texts plead for justice for the women against the traditional and ethnical codes. In a similar vein, citing another example of Arundhati Roy’s *God of Small Things*, the protagonist Ammu, also suffers this gender discrimination. Her brother says to her: “What is yours is mine and what is mine is also mine” (57). *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a story of a girl finding her inner self life. Protagonist of the novel Sarita was ten years old. Her younger brother Dhruva was drowned and killed in pond of muddy water. At

that time her mother Kamalatayi accused that Sarita killed him. "----- Daughter? I don't have any daughter. I had a son and he died. Now I am childless." (196) this sense of her guilt haunted her mind throughout her life. Long-time back, Sarita still remembers her mother's bitter words uttered when as a little girl she was unable to save her younger brother from drowning. After that, she becomes a doctor and marries with an upper middle class college teacher Manu, but unable to feel better with him. Now Sarita's mother is dead and Sarita returns to the native home, seemingly to take care of her old father. Sarita tells her father about her husband who loves cruelty in sex but it is something beyond the understanding of poor Father and her husband maintains distance and reserve her as his wife. The root of this problem also seems to lie in the social attitude. This problem is psychological but her husband and father are not able to understand this symptoms of Sarita's unconscious dilemma of his dead brother. "God, Saru! Have you hurt yourself? Look at that". (203) But as a matter of fact she wants to escape the nightmarish brutality her husband imposes on her every night. On the other side her father doesn't accept. Sarita is suffering with a kind of marital rape, marital frustration, domestic violence and sexual abuse in marital life. Now she is considered as victim of society in the frame of degrading, humiliating, which is unwanted and painful throughout her life. "The hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horrible familiar body. And above me a face I could not recognise" (112). In this way the entire novel is full of incidents showing disparity and injustice towards a woman in *The Dark Hold No Terrors* though it is considered that equality for women with man can be achieved by education and economic independence.

She feels "----- because there's no one else, we have to go on trying. If we can't believe in ourselves, we're sunk" (220). But according to Shashi Deshpande, it is false in society. It is possible when both the gender i.e, Men and Women develop themselves politically and religiously in equal status. According to Kate Millet, "The essence of politics is power and the most fundamental and pervasive concept of power in our society is male dominance". The novel of Shashi Deshpande speaks for those females who are the victims in the hands male power where the protagonists of this novel is meek and submissive. Marital Rape, which is also known as spousal rape, is non- consensual sex in which the executor is the victim's spouse. "Gender-role stereotyping, women's oppressed position in the family and work place, the political significance of lesbianism and critiques of male violence in terms of power" (rape, battery, pornography etc.). (Carden 12)

On the other side novel explores the problems of women in terms of illiteracy, ideological brainwashing in patriarchal societal structures, the problem of dowry, the complexity of the issue of caste and economic status. Sarita is a 'New Woman', who is educated intelligent and economically independent, she could not accept her destiny as fate written on her forehead. "Feminism asks for sexual equality that includes sexual difference. It aims for individual freedom by mobilizing sex solidarity. It posits that women recognize their unity while it stands for diversity among women. It requires gender consciousness for its basis yet calls for the elimination of prescribed gender roles". (qtd. in Becker 103)

Generally the purpose of feminism is to identify the inequalities and injustices in the way girls and women are treated in particular societies and the disabilities and disadvantages which result from these. Feminism also asserts the worth of women and also the distinctive contributions that women make to their culture. Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* accordingly delineates the sufferings of women in the inhuman conditions of patriarchal mind set. They have yet to embrace the 'power' where they will not be merely a complaining victim. They have yet to achieve – in the words of Lynne Segal – the radical feminist movement's goal: "A world which is a better place not just for some women, but for all women. In what I still call a socialist feminist vision that would be a far better world for boys and men, as well". (qtd. in Walters 139)

In a middle class society, marriage is considered to be a license of security for a woman. But in reality, after marriage she generally becomes a silent sufferer who never does anything for her own self but always tries to satisfy the biological, emotional senses of male etc. The characters of women in the novel long for their recognition from the male dominated society. They need their freedom and fight for their Justice. They wish mutual love from their men and not mere lust. The present work is thus an attempt at bringing to light the subversive reactions of women across different cultures, of different environments and the oppression of all kinds.

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