

## THE IMPACT OF WOMEN'S AGENCY ON THEIR WELL-BEING: REPRESENTATION OF SARITA IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THE DARK HOLDS NO TERROR*

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### ABSTRACT

Authors always shed light on the darker facets of daily existence, acting as an expression of reform and uplifting their readers' consciences. Shashi Deshpande, an Indian women novelist, explores the confrontations that an Indian woman experiences. Her novels are about women's self-discovery and strive to liberate themselves from the constraints created by social, cultural identity, and nature. The novels of Shashi Deshpande uncover the daily struggles of Sarita, a female character in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. She is represented as an ordinary middle-class working woman who expresses her failures, tensions, miseries, difficulties, loss and overcomes these through self-reflection. Sarita is always on the lookout for ways to recognize the importance of asserting one's individuality. She represents how women's agency plays a crucial role in removing the iniquities that depress the well-being of women. The paper uses the between "well-being" and "agency" put forward by Amartya Sen in his books, *The Argumentative Indian and Development as Freedom*, as points of reference to analyze the novel *The Dark Holds No Terror*.

**Keywords:** Shashi Deshpande, Agency, Well-being, Gender Inequality

*The Dark Holds No Terrors*, written and published by Shashi Deshpande in 1980, reflects the position of Indian women in during the 1970s and 1980s. The present paper analyses the novel from a feminist perspective based on the arguments of "agency" and "well-being" put forward by Amartya Sen. In his books, *The Argumentative Indian and Development as Freedom*, he put forward that women's agency can remove the inequalities that hinder the well-being of women. This paper argues that Sarita is a feminist character who aims to overcome for herself "the iniquities that depress the well-being of women" (Sen, *The Argumentative* 190).

The novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* is about the female protagonist Sarita, who has to contend with various struggles as a doctor and a wife. As it deals with women's identity issues, this novel can be viewed from a feminist perspective. Showalter, in her "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," aimed to set a conceptual framework for studying "the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women, the psychodynamics of female creativity" (184). This wilderness zone is a haven for the revolutionary language of women's suppressed emotions and feminine writing through which women can write their way out of the "crammed confines of patriarchal space." Shashi Deshpande is important among today's female novelists of India among Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, and others who have chronicled the female resilience against the patriarchally-dominated Indian society. In her novels, she represents the new Indian woman and

highlights the female predicament. She portrays the 'New Woman,' who is confident and aware of her uniqueness and resists the beliefs imposed by the patriarchal order. As a result, she investigates the characters' states of mind, their socio-cultural and interpersonal associations. She also develops her moral framework, against which she analyses societal standards.

The idyllic representation of women based on mythic models such as Sita, Savitri, and Gandhari - the passive sufferers - the stereotype of Hindu femininity does not resonate with her. Shashi Deshpande, deeply rooted in her cultural values, appears attentive to daily existence, powerfully rendering the mundane with her intellectual ability and depth of understanding. Shashi Deshpande's novels centre on women as the leading figure and bring to the fore the vulnerable female disturbed and constrained by social shackles that blind her to conventional expectations and perceptions. Her women protagonists suffer due to the prevalent disturbing gender inequality, first as daughters and then as women later on, as wives. They are aware of the enormous social implications, inequality, and injustice towards them, and they struggle in opposition to the unjust and unfair nature of the cultural standards and regulations that constrain their prospects. Her women characters question the subservience society has bestowed upon them.

Furthermore, she portrays the strife and dissatisfaction in married life caused by men's traditional views. Her works have received a great deal of critical acclaim for her realistic portrayal of Indian middle-class women. Her novels and short stories express the human emotions, anxieties, and insecurities of human beings, specifically women.

Deshpande, in an interview, expressed, "it was the thought of what it is to be a woman in our society, in this world, which propelled my writing". Shashi Deshpande acknowledges this influence of being liberated through the works of Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. In an interview, she comments how these texts impacted her: "Once I read it, I knew my life would never be the same again. Her sentence, One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman, seemed to answer most of my questions, my doubts, my concerns. I must have been just about 30 then. About a decade later, I read Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* which I still consider the book which has made the greatest impact on me. I would never see myself, or my writing, in the same way again".

In his *Argumentative Indian*, Amartya Sen comments that "Inequality between women and men can appear in many different forms - it has many faces. Gender disparity is, in fact, not one affliction but a multitude of problems" (Amartya Sen, 220). Sen studies these inequalities under six headings: survival inequality, natality inequality; unequal facilities; ownership inequality; unequal household benefits and chores; and domestic violence and physical victimization. This paper finds traces of Sarita's suffering due to unequal facilities, household benefits and chores, domestic violence, and physical victimization.

However, as Sen further comments, "Women's movements as well as the growing volume of feminist literature have both been involved, in recent decades, in this broadening of focus of women" as "active agents of change." As a consequence, the new agenda has tended to transcend the view of women as patient solicitors of social equity, and see women as harbingers of significant social change, in making the world a more liveable place for all" (223). However, it is Sarita as an "active agent of change" that helps her decide at the end of the novel. This brings forward that "the most immediate

argument for focusing on women's agency may be precisely the role that such an agency can play in removing the iniquities that depress the well-being of women" (Sen, *The Argumentative* 238) as it does for Sarita in the novel.

The paper uses the above arguments as points of reference to analyse the novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* as although Sarita's life is representative of the multitude of the problems she suffers from in her childhood and marriage, her education represents a hope- a hope of women as facilitators of social change. This is professed in Shashi Deshpande's writings and her personal opinion that she expresses in her interviews. Shashi Deshpande rejects the age-old belief in which the woman must be kept in subordination to the male. In an interview, she said: "I strongly react against any kind of cruelty or oppression against women or any kind of denial opportunities to women. We are all human beings and we should all have the rights to our lives'. According to her" a woman is also an individual like man with lot of capabilities and potentials. She has every right to develop all that. She is a female like man she also has her own qualities. She has every right to live her life, to develop her qualities, to take her decision, to be independent and to take charge of her own destiny" (Sree 145).

Sarita, the central protagonist of the novel, dealt with unfortunate encounters during her childhood, and as an adult, she experienced tensions in her complicated relationship with her partner. Sarita was distressed and emotionally broken because of painful life experiences, which ignite her aspiration to be independent and re-establish her individuality. Sarita has been traumatised by frustrations and humiliations since childhood, which impacts her psychologically. She has frequent nightmares due to her mother's chastisement. The words "Why are you still alive...why didn't you die? Why are you alive when he is dead? (173) "torment her as she believes that she was the reason for her younger brother Dhruva's death due to drowning. Frequently, she has nightmares of her brother yelling, "Hey Saru, wait for me, I'm also coming (131)." Sarita intensifies her contemplation by recalling her childhood memories and cannot cherish any present moment because of her remorse for her inability to save her younger brother.

Females in Indian society are essentially forced to live the life of a housekeeper. Sarita contemplated her mother's life, who had to dress up in the kitchen and go to a dimly lit room to comb her hair and apply kumkum as she had no private room. The possession of "a room of one's own" to write fiction to express herself, as Woolf recommends, is a far-fetched ambition for the woman who do not have a room for their day-to-day activities. Although Sarita had accomplished for herself a social standing and financial stability through her endeavors, she still did not have a room of her own. She comments, "And I have somuch my mother lacked. But neither she nor I have that thing, 'a room of our own" (136).

Sarita is able to forgive herself that she was not responsible for her brother's death only towards the end after having heard from her father that she is responsible for Dhruva's death. Sarita was relieved by this acknowledgment and answered back to her father in a restful tone, "A Poor little boy who never grow up to know the Dark holds, no terrors...The terror is always present inside us (226)." She is able to overcome her guilt by accepting herself. Sarita also endured a great deal of adversity as a child. She has faced gender inequality and a lack of support, affection, and compassion from her parents. Moreover, she received admonishing utterances from the mother, and her father did not take an interest in her education or her well-being.

On the other hand, her parents bestowed extravagant affection on her brother Dhruva. Her mother's resounding words stung her deeply: "Will you live with us all your life? Why not? You can't? And Dhruva? He's different. He's a boy" (45). These words are representative of the "common family tradition in many parts of the world by which men tend to own much of the assets of the household can also be an important factor in the inequality of power within the family" (Sen, *The Argumentative* 235). Her parents imposed heavy restrictions on her, not allowing her to go to her friends' houses, movie theaters, or outdoors. These restraints were enforced through harsh beatings, and reprimanding hurt her both emotionally and physically. As Sen says, "There are often enough, basic inequalities in gender relations within the family or the household, which can take many different forms". (Sen, *The Argumentative* 235) Sarita's emotions were suppressed, and her passions were denied as she could not dress up or style her hair as she preferred. This illustrates that she was subjected to the hegemonic structure of the male-dominated society Sarita despises her mother and feels that her father kept neutral throughout her humiliation as a child. Only in the final chapter, her father assists in relieving her of the fears and anxieties regarding her mother. The constant unpleasantness from her family disconnected her, and she starts looking for happiness, care, love, and complete independence.

To escape her isolation, she focused more on academic achievement and was accepted to a medical college. This focus of Sarita towards her academic achievement presents, as Amartya Sen comments, "the active role of women as agents in doing things, assessing priorities, scrutinizing values, formulating policies and carrying out programmes". This active role of Sarita represents that she plays an active role towards her well-being as she held the belief that obtaining the best academic career would enable her to be recognised by society, allowing her to assert her individuality as a doctor. Undoubtedly, female education strengthens women's agency" as Sarita was content with her life as a well-known doctor in the community.

Amartya Sen in his *Development as Freedom*, puts forward the views of Mary Wollstonecraft's classic book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that "the rights she spoke about included not only some that particularly related to the well-being of women (and the entitlements that were directly geared to promote that well-being), but also rights that were aimed mainly at the free agency of women" (189). Sarita's role as a doctor and wife represents the pitiful state of an accomplished professional who grapples in the 1980s to live between the conventional societal norms.

She finds fulfilment in giving back to the community but had no idea that her professional life would ruin her married life, despite it being a love marriage. However, her busy career made it impossible for Sarita to look after her spouse and children. She again feels guilty of not being a mother and wife as she finds it exhausting to balance her personal and professional lives. Her husband, who had developed an inferiority complex, bestowed vengeance on Sarita during the night. Sarita was dissatisfied and wanted to end her marriage but was concerned about and her reputation in society. Sen comments:

"One of the most brutal features of gender inequality takes the form of physical violence against women. The incidence of such violence is remarkably high in poorer and less developed economies and in wealthy and modern societies. Turning to India, it must be acknowledged first that the frequency of assault on women is high in the country" (236).

She was afraid that if she ended the marriage, her individuality would be destroyed. The social standards or make a woman subservient and reliant on a man. Sarita is constantly subjected to her family members, husband, and social conventions throughout her life. Sarita is one of the best examples of women of the 1980s who tried to find themselves and break free from tradition by fighting against social conventions and the dominance of men. She tries to free herself from suffering, hardship, and power and control of men at each stage of her life. She says, "In this world, no partnership can ever be equal (137)."

In Indian society, it is believed that women should not be more powerful than their husbands to establish a successful family. Manu, her husband, raped her to express his frustration as she has outpaced him professionally and monetarily. She was powerless to stop Manu because she was entangled in the social norms that necessitated wives to keep silent in front of their husbands. On the other hand, Sarita had asked herself probing questions when she came back home as to why she came back and she was trying to escape from her husband. The torture was unbearable as she thought if it was it really necessary to go back home. She despises her husband for sexually torturing her and feels like a trapped animal throughout the night. Sarita could not speak up against her husband at first because she was worried about society and her child, which troubled her both physically and psychologically. When she flows from Bombay to her home after a series of horrific experiences, she reflects and examines herself as time passed, discovering that to her, it was her life, and she wanted to live her life her "own way." This expression denotes that women are not "passive recipients of welfare-enhancing help brought about by society," but active promoters and facilitators of social transformations. Such transformations influence, of course, the lives and well-being of women and those of men and all children - boys and girls. This is a significant enrichment of the reach of women's movements. Sarita is prepared to address her husband and returns to Bombay. The novel concludes on a hopeful note, with the possibility of change that despite all her trials and tribulations, Sarita recognises her potential to overcome all obstacles. She says to her father, "Baba if Manu comes, tells him to wait. I'll be back as soon as I can" (221). With this, she demonstrates that financially independent women can significantly change society. These words demonstrate her self-identity and individuality, and as a result, she is brave enough to deal with reality. Society needs to have, as Sen comments, "a fuller cognizance of the power and reach of women's enlightened and constructive agency and an adequate appreciation of the fact that women's power and initiative can uplift the lives of all human beings- women, men and children."

Sen comments that "empirical investigations have brought out the way in which women's working outside the home and earning an independent income tends to have a powerful impact on enhancing women's standing and voice in decision-making within the house hold and more broadly in society" (238). In accordance with this, it can be concluded that it is indeed the enhancement of her education, social standing, and independent income that empowers Sarita to decide to lead her life her "own way". The novel's ending denotes a possibility of Sarita taking hold of her life without letting the societal standards govern her decision making. It is her "agency" that contributes to a hope of a better future. Sen made a notable commentary in this regard. He says, "The differences between such distinct characteristics as women's earning power, an economic role outside the family, literacy and education, property rights and so on may, at first sight, appear to be quite separate and not linked with

each other. What they all have in common, however, is the positive contribution of each in adding force to women's agency - through making women more independent and Empowered" (Sen, *The Argumentative* 238).

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