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The Search of Women's Refuge: A Study on Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror*

O. Minu Agnus, M.A., M.Phil., MBA (HR), Ph.D. Candidate



Courtesy: <http://hemapen.wordpress.com/2010/07/22/shashi-deshpande/>

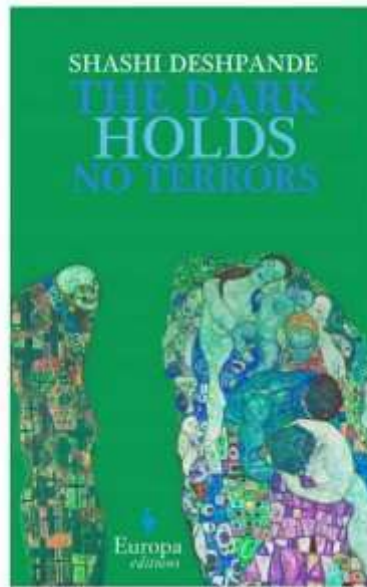
Marriage as a Refuge

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Sashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror* is about a successful and leading doctor, Saritha. In order to achieve her freedom from the bondage of gender discrimination created by her parental family, she seeks **refuge** in the social institution called marriage. But this expectation of her gets shattered when she overtakes her husband, Manohar in profession. This forces her egoistic husband to impose sexual cruelties upon her.

To escape from this dark nightmarish brutality, she tries to take **refuge** in her parental home. This turns to be a curse in disguise because it brings her the cruel childhood memories. She continues the search for the refuge and finally discovers that the real refuge is in the self and not in the social institutions like marriage or parental care. It leads to the further realization that the self is not metaphysical but psychological.

Self-alienation and Self-identification

She starts her journey of searching her **refuge** with **self-alienation** but ends it with **self-identification**.

This problem faced by Saritha is the problem of hundreds of such learned and professional women who become the victim of the social institutions. These institutions victimize them to the extent that they alienate themselves from the world which may

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result in psychological disaster. The only way out is, they should realize their **self** which is part of their psyche and should take refuge in it.

A Silent Sufferer

The Indian woman for several years has been a silent sufferer. Even though she plays the different roles like daughter, sister, wife and mother, she has never been able to claim her own identity. Consequently, more and more woman writers are expressing their anxieties and concerns focusing on woman's issues. The literary world of the Indian English fiction has spread red carpet for woman writers.

Shashi Deshpande is one such noted award winning Indian novelists who has shown a serious concern in the depiction of women in literature. Her novels usually have women as the protagonists who are modern and educated. Their search for freedom and self identity within the relationships mark the recurring themes in her novels.

The First Novel of Shashi Deshpande

The Dark Holds No Terror is the first and very important novel of Shashi Deshpande which can be called as noteworthy milestone in her writing career. It depicts a journey of a woman from self alienation to self identification through different phases of her life: childhood, youth and adulthood.

The story revolves around a successful and leading doctor, Saritha. In order to achieve her freedom from the traditional parental home, she elopes with a charismatic young poet, Manohar who later takes up the profession of teaching English in a small college.

The initial stage of their married life is filled with love and happiness but the love and happiness starts declining when her popularity as a doctor gets increasing day by day. This makes her husband turns vicious against her. Since he could not overtake her in profession, he tries to dominate her on the bed by imposing sexual cruelties against her. In the day time, she moves as a confident doctor but during the night, she gets treated as a poor terrified animal trapped by her brutal husband.

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The Trauma

The following lines will give a clear picture of her trauma.

“Changing now, like some protean monster, into the horror of rape. This was not to be death by strangulation; it was a monstrous invasion of my body. I tried to move, twisting my body, wriggling under the weight that pinned to a position of an abject surrender of my **self**.” (pg 11-12)

Saritha thinks that the social institution marriage, the promised end in the traditional society which as a commitment will give more space for her to grow as an individual. But to her shock, her husband Manohar does not want the traditional equilibrium of the superior husband and inferior wife to get disturbed. He does not want his wife to grow as an individual. He wants her to have only the domestic identities such as wife and mother and not the professional identity as doctor. Thus the institution marriage which seems to be a blessing in the beginning becomes a mirage as it gives another enclosure which restricts her growth, independency and perception.

Male Ego – Resultant Rape

Manohar’s male ego tries to dominate Saritha which ultimately brings disintegration in their matrimonial relationship. She visualizes her husband as a monster when he is on the bed. She considers the act of physical union as rape and she describes the act by saying, “it was a monstrous invasion of my body”.

Rape can be defined as the sexual relationship which forces the woman to involve in the act against her will. Here the relationship between Saritha and Manohar can be called as rape because the husband himself forces his wife into the relationship against her will. The physical union within the wedlock should give pleasure for both the partners but it renders only pain, trauma and physical bruises for Saritha. In the act of lovemaking, she is forced to submit her **self**. Even though it happens within the wedlock, it involves enforcement. So the act can be rightly termed as rape.

Universal Experience in India

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This experience of Saritha is universal. This is prevalent in many Indian families. Just like Manohar, the husbands of Indian families think that they are the masters of their wife's body, mind and soul. They strongly believe that they own their wives. They do not see their wives as the human beings just like them instead they consider them as the sexual being through whom they can fulfill their bodily desires.

Simone De Beauvoir in her master piece "The Second Sex" has reflected upon the same idea in the following quote:

"She appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him, she is sex ... absolutely sex, no less. She is the inessential as opposed to the essential."

Introspection about the Past

Saritha returns to the family home, seemingly to take care of her father. But as a matter of fact she wants to escape from the nightmarish brutality her husband imposes on her every night. There she reflects on the events of her life: her childhood, her domineering biased mother and her fruitless marriage.

She starts to introspect about her past. Earlier, in order to achieve her freedom from the traditionally bounded social institution called parental family, Saritha seeks **refuge** in another social institution called marriage. Days later, this so called refuge also turns into a curse when she overtakes her husband in profession which ends up with sexual cruelties and physical shame.

Refuge in Paternal Family

To escape from this dark nightmarish brutality of her husband, she once again tries to take **refuge** in her parental family. Even this time, her indifferent father fails to comfort her bruised heart. She feels that she is alienated by everyone. As a daughter she is alienated by her parents and as a wife she is alienated by her husband.

Saritha's long hours of introspection into her marriage makes her realize that her professional success has killed Manohar's spirit. Truly speaking, her introspection helps her to free herself from the feelings of guilt. She continues the search for the refuge and

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finally discovers that the real refuge is in the self and not in the social institutions like marriage or family. It leads to the further realization that the self is not a metaphysical object which everyone can see but it is psychological which lies within.

Determination to Assert Herself

She decides to assert herself and to fight her own battle. She explores herself in search of the woman to fulfill herself as a human being independent of the patriarchal world. She creates a world of her own where is not subdued to any man. She realizes that she is no longer the property of her father or her husband. She becomes her own master. She resolves to use her new found truths to make a better life for herself.

Thus, Saritha neither surrenders to nor does escape from the problems but with a greater strength accepts the challenge of her own. She realizes that the parental home, her father or her husband cannot be a refuge. She understands that she is her own refuge. With this mind, she confidently waits to confront her husband and decides to go back to Mumbai. She starts her **journey** of searching her **refuge** with **self-alienation** but ends it with **self-identification**. She arrives at a conclusion that the permanent solution comes from within (**self**) and not from outside. This proclamation makes her a redeemed wife rather than a rebellious wife.

You are your own refuge
there is no other refuge.
This refuge is hard to achieve.
-The Dhammapada

Saritha's Experience Common in India

This problem faced by Saritha is the problem of hundreds of such learned and professional women who become the victim of the social institutions. These institutions victimize them to the extent that they alienate themselves from the world which may result in psychological disaster. The people may boast theoretically that husband and wife are two wheels of a cart, two aspects of the same coin but the practical truth is that the man is always considered superior to woman

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If the husband is superior to her in position wise, she has to serve him but unfortunately if the husband is inferior to her, she is bound to face the sadism and ego of her husband just like saritha. The only way out is, they should realize their **self** which is a part of their psyche and should take refuge in it.

Thus, Shashi Deshpande defines freedom for the Indian woman within the Indian socio-cultural value system and institutions. The novels of Deshpande come to an end with a note of compromise rather than the revolt and revenge which is the basic attribute of Indian Feminism.

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