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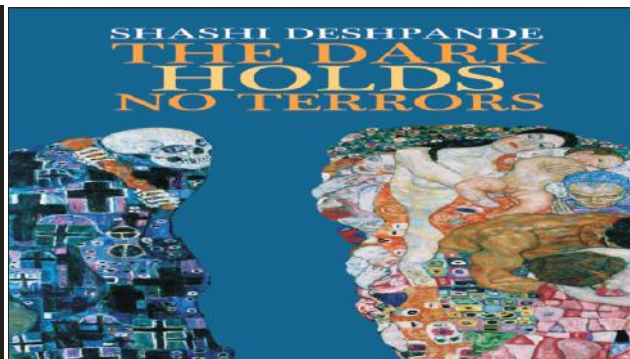
## REFLECTION OF INDIAN BELIEFS, MYTHS AND CULTURE IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S 'THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS'

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### ABSTRACT

**S**hashi Deshpande, a popular Indian woman writer in English, has ten novels, two novellas, four books for children and a large number of short stories to her credit. She has been writing about issues and problems of middle-class Indian women caught in the trap of Indian patriarchy with its beliefs, superstitions, customs, conventions, mythology, philosophy and culture. Her novels are deeply rooted in Indian soil, context and society. Society is an organization which guides and controls the internal and external behaviour of its members in a variety of ways. Individuals and society depend, interact and cooperate with one another. They are complementary to each other. Indian culture, too, plays a constructive role in moulding the life of the individual. Her women protagonists, by and large, find themselves to be the victims of



unjust customs, conventions and traditions which are in favour of men and also of age-old beliefs and superstitions which shape their lives. Since the beginning of her career as a short story writer, she has been writhing about educated and career-oriented middle-class Indian women who are shaped and developed by everything that is Indian - Indian beliefs, superstitions, customs, conventions, traditions, philosophy and culture. The present article attempts to explore the role Indian beliefs, superstitions, customs, conventions, traditions, philosophy and culture play in shaping the life of the woman in Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No*

*Terrors*.

**KEYWORDS:** diversity, heritage, multilingualism, orthodox, pilgrimages, superstitions.

### INTRODUCTION :

Shashi Deshpande's novels are deeply rooted in Indian, soil, milieu and context. They are an authentic representation of the life of educated and job-oriented middle-class Indian women shaped and developed in a particular way, rather suppressed and subjugated, in a conventional and orthodox Indian society with its beliefs, superstitions, values, films, myths, legends, epics, fairy tales, customs, conventions, traditions, culture and

philosophy. We can not deny the fact everything that constitutes Indian-ness has a deep impact on Indian way of life. A sincere and thoughtful projection of the female world controlled by men is one of the thematic concerns of her novels. Middle-class Indian women with their sorrows and sufferings, pain and agony, plight and predicament, suppression and exploitation in a conventional and conservative male-dominated society are the very core of her novels. Her novels, to a large extent, are woman-oriented.

Society is a group, an organization which shapes, moulds, guides and controls the behaviour of its members in a variety of ways. It not only liberates but also checks and controls the actions and activities of men and women, sets up certain norms and standards for them to be followed, practised and maintained. It is a flexible, ever-changing

and dynamic as well as an intricate and complex system. According to MacIver R. M. and Page Charles H, it is "the web of social relationships". (MacIver and Page 5). It is a network of maintaining, establishing, strengthening and preserving human relationships. Human relationships, the core of human society, are established, shaped, determined, guided, controlled and strengthened by mutual awareness, recognition, trust, and understanding without which society cannot exist and survive. They depend upon a sense of community, a sense of attachment, a sense of relatedness, a sense of belonging together or a sense of something shared in common. Interaction is the very breath of human relationships while silence affects the very health of these relationships.

Indian society has its own traits and peculiarities, norms and beliefs, values and principles, strengths and weaknesses, merits and demerits. It, in a sense, is unique in itself. It has its customs, conventions, traditions and culture. What do we mean by 'culture'? According to C. Kluckhohn and W. H. Kelly, 'culture' signifies the social heritage of a particular people. (Kluckhohn and Kelly 78). There has been an intimate relationship between an individual and culture. The relationship between an individual's personality and culture involves the total social heritage available to the individual and to which he consciously or unconsciously responds. Personality of the individual implies the integral character of the individual. Personality and culture interact and sustain each other. Culture refers to a kind of force that influences, controls, conditions and moderates the growth and development of a human being. Compared to other beings, a man is considered a cultured and civilized human being. According to MacIver and Page, "By civilization, then, we mean the whole mechanism and organization which man has devised in his endeavour to control the conditions of his life. It would include not only our systems of social organization but also our techniques and our material instruments". (MacIver and Page 498). It can be treated as a technique and a force directed to the shaping and regulating of the behaviour of human beings.

MacIver highlights the relationship between 'culture' and 'civilization'. He writes: "Culture, then, is the antithesis of civilization. It is the expression of our nature in our modes of living and of thinking, in our everyday intercourse, in art, in literature, in religion, in recreation and enjoyment". (MacIver and Page 499). It is possible for us to conceive all the unities to which we belong, the unity of people and nation, the unity of family and society, and the unity of civilization itself in the light of culture. Indian culture is rich, diverse and unique in its own way. Our manners, etiquettes, ways of communicating with one another, the way we behave, the way we live in the company of one another, our attitudes, our ideas, our beliefs are some of the components of Indian culture. It signifies our morals and values which generally remain unchanged as they are deeply rooted in our inner life. Love and respect for the elders as well as for the guests, respect for one another, hospitality, helpful and cooperative nature, patriarchal attitude to women, beliefs, superstitions, customs, conventions, traditions, feminine sensibility, male-oriented focus, are a few of the striking features of Indian culture.

Gandhian philosophy rooted in truth and non-violence, tolerance and sacrifice, and unity in diversity in India are the essential foundations of Indian culture and civilization. Tolerance and sacrifice, the essentials of Indianness stand on the principle of non-violence. Mahatma Gandhiji, the father of our nation, in his speech on 20th December, 1926, said: "There is nothing on the earth I would not give up for the sake of the country, excepting of course, two things and two only, namely, Truth and *Ahimsa* (Non-violence). I would not sacrifice these two for the entire world. For, to me, Truth is god and there is no way to find Truth except by the way of non-violence. I do not seek to serve India at the sacrifice of Truth or God. I know that a man who forsakes Truth can forsake his country and his nearest and dearest ones". (Gandhi 1926). In addition to Truth and non-violence, multilingualism, secularism, sense of fraternity, dance forms, attires, rites and rituals, festivals, family structure, even the caste-system are inseparable parts of Indian culture. Indian culture has made our roots strong despite westernization and unbelievable progress that India has made in the field of science and technology. Indians, irrespective of their language, class, caste and religion, come together to celebrate festivals like Diwali, Christmas, Id. Ganesh festival, in the State of Maharashtra, is celebrated with great excitement and enthusiasm by all, irrespective of their class and status, caste and creed. This proves that Indians are really secular and united in diversity.

India is a secular nation which allows complete freedom of worship according to beliefs and faith of the people from different religions. Indian religions have some common festivals, rituals and practices and all of them have faith in God. They spend their time in the pursuit of religion and god in their own way. They get

involved in religious practices like prayers, rituals, pilgrimages, fasts, discourses, sermons and the like. Indian tradition is deeply rooted in beliefs and values that transcend space and time. Indians change and modify their false beliefs, norms and values depending on the needs and requirements of society. Indians are highly and surprisingly tolerant and flexible in the sense that they accept changes dictated by western influence and yet clearly and strongly stick to their belief in their tradition and culture, and above all, to love, respect, patience, co-operation, compromise and adjustability. It is one of the wonders of Indian culture that a girl gets married into a new family and adjusts herself to the routine and rituals of that family and becomes an inseparable part of that family culture. Indian women and Indian families are flexible and accommodating and are always willing to accept change. To observe fasts on different occasions, the *Hartalika*, the *Karva Chauth*, the *Raksha Bandhan*, has been very common in Indian culture.

Indianness, Indian myths and legends, rites and rituals, beliefs and superstitions, conventions and traditions, philosophy and culture have been realistically projected in Deshpande's novels. It is true that she is concerned about Indian reality with special focus on the life of a middle-class Indian woman caught between tradition and modernity. She is crushed between her desires and aspirations on one side and compulsions and restrictions imposed on her by orthodox conventions and traditions on the other side. Her move towards liberty and modernity is hampered by the rules and regulations, norms and values of Indian society. She wants to see herself liberated from the shackles of age-old conventions and traditions. Superstitions, too, play a negative role in the life of women. Superstitions, social ills, refer to any belief or practice which is not explained by any logic. Any faith or practice which is not questioned and challenged on the basis of facts or truth is a superstition. Though, Indian society is fast progressing, there are many Indians who nurture superstitions. Superstitions, obstacles in the way of progress and development, are deeply rooted in Indian society.

Indians, who believe in God, like Saru's mother in Deshpande's novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and many other Indian women regularly visit temples, churches and other religious places to pray and worship God with the hope and belief that God will help them to realize their worldly requirements. It is believed that if an unmarried girl worships and prays the '*tulsi*', she gets a good husband and that if a married woman does so, the '*tulsi*' will keep her husband safe and sound. Indian life, to a large extent, has been moulded by the two great epics - The Mahabharata and The Ramayana, Indian legends and myths, Indian films, and the thoughts, principles and teachings of Indian thinkers and philosophers. Indian children are being told the stories from Indian myths and epics. Indian way of life has been shaped and moulded by beliefs and superstitions, customs and conventions, norms and values, myths and epics, philosophy and culture. The present paper is an attempt to assess Deshpande's novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* as a mirror of Indian beliefs, superstitions, customs, conventions, traditions, philosophy and culture.

Deshpande's first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, is a mirror of Indianness, Indian myths, legends, rites, rituals, beliefs, superstitions, conventions, traditions and culture. Sarita, the protagonist of the novel, on her return to her parental home to set herself free from her sadist husband, Manohar, standing at the door of her parental home, remembers a 'Krishna-Sudama' story from the epic, *The Mahabharata*, a story in which Krishna and his queen Rukmini run happily to greet a poor, rugged Sudama standing at the gate of the palace. Though, Saru is not poor Sudama in rags, the story comes to her mind when she knocks on the door of her ancestral home. For a moment she remembers her mother, her dead mother standing in front of the '*tulsi*', with her eyes closed, hands folded, lips moving, as if praying to the '*tulsi*' for her death before her husband. Indian woman desires to die as a '*Suhasini*' with her husband still alive when she dies. She prefers wifehood to widowhood.

Indians are inspired by the mythological characters as well as by great Indian heroes and leaders. She sees: "A faded photograph of her grandfather whom she had never seen. One of a smiling Gandhi and Nehru put up some time, perhaps, in a burst of patriotism. And a framed picture of Krishna as a crawling infant, chubby, solemn, with a hint of a smile in the eyes. The whole done in finely stitched embroidery, with a real peacock's feather stuck on the infant's head". (16-17). The photographs of Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru and Krishna as a crawling infant take her back into her childhood. She remembers her younger brother named after Dhruva, a mythological character, the child, as per the myth, who was pushed off his father's lap by his step-mother, and who, full of anger, sorrow and humiliation, became the constant North Star by giving himself up to a steadfast

meditation. Saru, a victim of gender-discrimination before her marriage, is aware that she is not a loving daughter rushing home to comfort her afflicted father, but to comfort herself by talking to her father of her plight and predicament in her marital life. She has a strong urge to talk to him about her unhappy marriage deeply rooted in marital violence imposed on her by her husband. But she believes that no one, even god can not comfort her.

Saru's is a typical Indian middle-class family having full trust in gods, *pujas*, prayers and fasts. As a child, she was a regular visitor of the temples. She, following the footsteps of her mother, had gone for *pujas*, fasts, rituals and mumbled prayers with the hope that these would help her to succeed in her life. She used to go to the temple every Friday with her mother who carried the brass tray with flowers, coconut and the *haldi* and *kumkum* containers. She was never allowed to carry the brass tray with Devi's offerings for the fear of her dropping it. Dropping the Devi's offerings was believed to be a heinous crime, a sacrilege and a catastrophe. It was also believed that the woman, who dropped the tray with Devi's offerings, would be cursed by Devi Mother. Saru was uneasily fascinated to hear this about the *Devi*. However, in spite of her uneasiness about the *Devi*, she never missed Friday and went there every week. She enjoyed the ringing sound of the temple bell, the fascinating echoes of the sound of the bell, the smell of oil, camphor and flowers, the cheerful babble of the female talk in the temple. She could feel and experience the sameness of women's talk, their attitudes, their responses, their sensibilities which could be easily predictable.

She had a frightening but memorable experience in the temple. She saw a middle-aged woman worshipping the *Devi* with holding her tray of offerings in one hand, and applying *kumkum* to the *Devi's* forehead with the other. Suddenly the tray fell out of her hands, and the woman looked like a creature with a frightening mask-like face and popping eyes that stared at the *Devi*. She then began to gyrate, turning round in a slow and peculiar motion. She went on with her feet thumping, hands flailing, sari loosening, and hair flying round the awful face with frightful eyes. One of the women from the temple moved forward to apply *kumkum* to the rotating woman's forehead. Other women including Saru's mother did the same thing. With *kumkum* and sweat mixing together, her face became bloody red. Saru, as a child, was terrified by her appearance and ran out to the open courtyard where women used to gather in the evenings to listen to the man in the red shawl reciting the '*puranas*' in a singing tone. She sat by the black stone bull in the centre and touched the tiny stone bells round his neck. The bull, too, was applied *kumkum* and offered flowers between his dainty feet. After some time, her mother came out and gave '*prasad*' to her. Saru saw the same woman again, leaning against the pillar, her legs stretched out in front of her, her face relaxed and empty, the *kumkum*, a symbol of wifhood on her forehead wiped away except for the usual mark between the brows. She was given rock sugar as '*prasad*' by that woman now with a gentle and smiling face. She was confused as she failed to understand the woman, who, according to her, was divided into two different beings. She even could not understand what her mother meant when she said: "The *Devi* entered into her". (103). It was very difficult for Saru to accept the belief that the *Devi* enters into the woman.

She remembers, as a growing girl, she had looked at herself in the mirror on the door of the almirah, hoping to see herself to be pretty and attractive. As she opens the almirah now, there are all those things which were splendid treasures to her as a child. She finds a few glasses, one water container, small bowls, the '*attar*' tray, the rose-water sprinkler which had been regularly taken out each and every year on the special occasion of '*haldi-kumkums*'. This was the occasion when she became more important than her brother; Dhruva. It was the occasion when she was the daughter of the house who could apply *attar* to the backs of women's hand. She also finds the Benaras sari her mother used to wear for *haldi-kumkums*, weddings and thread ceremonies. Her mother had a strong desire to have the *chanderi* sari for Dhruva's thread ceremony. However, after Dhruva's death, there was neither the thread ceremony nor the *chanderi* sari. There were no *pujas*, no *haldi-kumkums* or weddings.

Saru's mother stopped celebrating *Ganesh* festival after Dhruva's death, but she retained other gods in the *puja* room and performed her *puja* in the morning regularly. She had full trust in her *puja* which was a kind of religion for her. There is no society in human history which does not believe in religion in one form or the other. Man's belief in gods and goddesses, his worshipping god in the form of *puja*, his participation in religious

activities and functions lead him towards peace of mind, inspiration and motivation. Religion has always played a very important role in Indian society. Indian people believe in religion and to worship gods and goddesses is a kind of religion for them. Religion is something that controls and governs human life. R. M. MacIver and Charles H. Page write: "Religion, as we understand the term, implies a relationship not merely between man and man but also between man and some higher power. Hence it normally invokes a sanction which may be called 'suprasocial', whether it be primitive ghost fear or the present 'wrath of God' or the penalties of an afterlife of torture in hell or merely the sense of being 'out of tune with the infinite' when its supposed laws are disobeyed". (MacIver and Page 168).

She finds another bundle of squares of cotton and silk which were used as traditional token of auspicious gifts given to married women on ceremonial occasions deeply rooted in Indian culture. She remembers being invited by a friend to a ceremony held in the eighth month of her pregnancy. The mother had done all the traditionally prescribed rituals for the pregnant daughter, ending up with the gifts of sari and blouse piece, given to the girl along with a coconut, *paan-supari* and grains of rice. Saru had tears in her eyes to see the mother and daughter so close and intimate to each other. She never had this experience. She had so many deprivations as a result of her strained relationship with her mother. It has been an Indian tradition that newly married girls are invited with their husbands to their parental homes during the Diwali festival. Sarita who married against the wish of her parents, was not fortunate enough to be invited to her parental home during festivals.

Celebration of various festivals such as *Diwali* festival, *Dussehra*, *Ganapati* festival, *Gudi Padwa*, *Makar Sankranti*, *Holi* and many others have been an inseparable part of Indian culture. Diwali festival is the festival of lights. Holi is a popular festival of colours. Gudi Padwa is celebrated as the New Year's first day. The day of Dussehra is considered the auspicious day. The formal opening of Saru's consulting room took place on the auspicious day of *Dussehra*. She remembered little processions of *Ganapati* immersion going past their house, accompanied by the ringing of a brass bell and children's vociferous cries: "*Ganapati bappa morya, Pudchya varshi lavkar ya*". (Deshpande 147). Saru's family, too, celebrated this festival. After *Ganapati* immersion, there was puran-poli and a light still burning in front of Ganapati's niche where a coconut took the place of the idol until the next morning. All these are the social festivals which bring and connect people together.

Indians are interested not only in various festivals but also in casual meetings. Casual meeting are a part and parcel of Indian way of life. Indians casually meet one another with no specific purpose or intention. Saru remembers one of such casual meetings with a colleague of Manu's and his wife. About a casual meeting Saru, often, thinks: "It's like a ballet or Bharat Natyam dance, these meetings between couples, between families; not with the beauty and rhythm of the dance, but all its rigidity. It's as if we move on chalked lines, no deviations allowed at all. The men slap each other on the back, feigning a greater intimacy than there really is. The females smile and simper, talk of children and servants, and, if the children are there, coo at them. And then, saying to one another with equal insincerity . . . Do visit us, you must come . . . we part, the smiles falling off our faces with remarkable rapidity, the women slipping smoothly into criticism and invective". (Deshpande 111). However, though, stupid and idiotic drama, such casual and harmless meetings have been an Indian way of life.

Madhav, the first year college student, has been staying with Saru's father for more than two years. Her father asks her to lie down for a while in the puja room, which is an inseparable part of a typical Hindu home. She lies down there with her eyes closed, enjoying smells of oil and camphor, incense and flowers. The room is bare now, but the pale ghosts of the old odours, the tarnished silver mango leaves hanging from the top of the doorway are the only indications that this had been a *puja* room once. She is surprised to see mealtime rituals very strictly followed by *Madhav*. She curiously observes: "He had removed his shirt and sat down on the plank, legs crossed, sacred thread prominent on his chest. Before starting on his food, he did all the things she had almost forgotten. Water in the cupped palm, the drops around the plate, bits of rice on one side of it". (Deshpande 30). She has a negative approach towards, almost a sense of hatred for these meaningless rites and rituals, customs and conventions.

Indian movies, songs, poems, literature and other arts seem to be deeply rooted in Indian life thereby shaping and developing Indian sensibility both positively and negatively. There are many Indians who believe in Mythological stories and parables. They are religion-oriented people. They learn a lot from fables and parables.

They believe in their teachings and morals. The parable of the Buddha, for example, highlights the certainty of death. The grieving and mourning mother of a dead child, seeking Buddha's help was told: "Get me a handful of mustard seeds from a house that has not known death . . . Learn the truth and be comforted. Death is an inescapable human condition". (77). The mother was comforted not to see the house that doesn't know death. 'Death is certain and inevitable' is the message of the story. We need to move on until we take our last breath. We need to go on living until there is time to go. Saru, too, believes that she has to go on living until it is time for her to go.

Mavshi, who carries on a perennial warfare against Sudhir, her son; and her daughter-in-law, who sees the world only in black and white, considers Saru's mother a lucky woman because she died as a '*Suhasini*' and because her death gave a full stop to her plight and predicament. Saru begins to hate her with her complaints, her indifference to everything but her own concerns, the loss of everything that made her a warm and sensible human being. However, Mavshi, who is not happy, says: "You're telling me nothing new, Saru, I know all of it. But tell me, you're a doctor and know all about dying and living . . . and tell me this, Saru. Why am I, a fat, old, unwanted woman left alive when he, so useful, so much wanted was taken away? Why am I alive when he is dead?" (Deshpande 77). She feels lonely and incomplete without her husband. She considers herself an unlucky woman who is destined to live the life of a widow.

Indian epics, *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*, literature of power, have the capacity to console, to move and to soothe the suffering and afflicted. When Saru's mother was on her death bed, she had accepted the fact that she was certainly going to die. In connection with her miserable life and her love for these epics, Saru's father said: "In the last few months, she almost stopped speaking. She liked me to read to her, though, *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*. It seemed to comfort and soothe her. She used to lie listening quietly, sometimes falling asleep in the middle of a sentence, a word. She had become very weak. And there were all those drugs. But one day I saw that she was listening very intently. When I finished reading, she said . . . Read it again. It was that episode of Duryodhana in the *Mahabharata*, Duryodhana at the very end of the battle . . . When the Kauravas are defeated and when Duryodhana finds he is almost the only one of them left, he leaves the battlefield and goes into a lake. He waits there for the Pandavas to come and kill him . . . Your mother made me read that part a second time. And then she said . . . Yes, that's what all of us have to face at the end". (Deshpande 194). She wanted him to read the episode of Duryodhana waiting for the Pandavas to come and kill him. The episode gave her the courage to face her death with courage. Saru, too, believes that we are alone, we are born and destined to be alone, and we take our last exit alone.

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