

## An Ecofeminist Reading of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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### Ecofeminism

The concept of connecting women with the nature dates back to the times of ancient classical mythology. Nature is feminized because it is seen as possessing the same qualities as women at the time when most of the romantic writing was produced. Women were seen as being domestic, pious, moral, pure, gentle, kind, graceful and beautiful; this was according to the nature of separate spheres: men and women were fundamentally different in terms of their characteristics as men were seen as hard-working, industrial, rational, strong, assertive, independent and proud; none of which is easily connected with nature. Therefore, nature was seen as the embodiment of all the characteristics that women possess and there are frequent references to this in literature.

There are many types of feminism. Ecofeminism is one of the types of Feminism. Gender-based commitments and movement such as feminism have reached to a new approach through the combination of feminism and environmentalism called Ecofeminism. Ecofeminism or ecological feminism combines eco-anarchism or bio regional democracy with a strong deal of feminism. It is emerged in the 1970s. This movement leads many feminist researchers to study roles and relationships between women and nature in various fields, including literature. The first person who used the word 'ecofeminist' is Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. She used it to call upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet (Merchant 184). Ecofeminists are referred to all women who bring together feminist and ecological concerns in both formal and informal movements and do not necessarily identify themselves explicitly (Mellor, Feminism & Ecology 4).

"Ecofeminism is also a biocentric environmental movement, which concerns with cultural and social aspects. This movement believes that a relationship exists between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature." Consequently, it is better understood this, as a movement working against the interconnected oppressions of gender, race, class and nature.

Feminism had little concern for the nature. It almost paid little or no attention to women, animals or ecology. Whereas, ecofeminism emphasize the importance of interrelationships between humans, non-human others (eg: animals) and the earth. Ecofeminists argue that a strong parallel exists between the male domination and subordination or oppression of women in families and society and the degradation of nature by similarly masculine attitudes and methods. As Catherine Roach observes, "Women are perceived to merge with nature, to be part of the non human, Surround and only semi human. Similarly, nature is perceived as female, as virgin resource to be exploited or raped, as sharing in woman's semi human quality..."

Ecofeminists, or ecological feminists, are those feminists who analyze the interconnections between the status of women and the status of non-human nature. At the heart of this analysis are four central claims: (1) the oppression of women and the oppression of nature are interconnected; (2) these connections must be uncovered in order to understand both the oppression of women and the oppression of nature; (3) feminist analysis must include ecological insights; and (4) a feminist perspective must be a part of any proposed ecological solutions (Warren, 4). A closer look at each of these claims will illuminate the concerns of ecofeminism.

### **The Oppression of Women and the Oppression of Nature Are Interconnected**

One way to talk about the connections between women and nature is to describe the parallel ways they have been treated in Western patriarchal society. First, the traditional role of both women and nature has been instrumental (Plumwood, 120). Women's role has been to serve the needs and desires of men. Traditionally, women were not considered to have a life except in relation to a man, whether father, brother, husband, or son. Likewise, nonhuman nature has provided the resources to meet human needs for food, shelter, and recreation. Nature had no purpose except to provide for human wants. In both cases the instrumental role led to instrumental value. Women were valued to the extent that they fulfilled their role. Nature was valued in relation to human interests either in the present or the future. Women and nature had little or no meaning independent of men.

A second parallel in the treatment of women and nature lies in the way the dominant thought has attempted "to impose sharp separation on a natural continuum" in order to maximize difference (Plumwood, 120). In other words, men are identified as strong and rational while women are seen as weak and emotional. In this division of traits those men who are sensitive and those women who are intellectually or athletically inclined are marginalized. They are overlooked in the typical (stereotypical) description of men as opposed to women. The same holds true for distinctions between what is human and what is not. The human being is conscious, the nonhuman plant or animal is not; the human is able to plan for the future, to understand a present predicament, the nonhuman simply reacts to a situation out of instinct. These distinctions are drawn sharply in order to protect the privilege and place of those thought to be more important.

Ecofeminism, then, involves a thoroughgoing analysis of the dualisms that structure patriarchal culture. In particular ecofeminists analyze the link between the oppression of women and of nature by focusing on the hierarchies established by mind/body, nature/culture, male/female, and human/nonhuman dualisms. The goal is to reconceptualize these relationships in nonhierarchical, non patriarchal ways. In this way, ecofeminists envision a new way of seeing the world and strive toward a new way of living in the world as co-members of the ecological community.

"In childhood a women should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's and when her husband is dead, under her sons, she should not have independence..."

**(The laws of Manu 5.148)**

Traditionally Indian women have been treated as marginalized figures. They were represented as a spineless, wooden creature, subjected to male domination. The laws of Manu dictated the position of women in the family and society. Women were never allowed to be independent and had to spend life under the authority of a man. The sublimation and suppression of natural desires and aspirations creates a deep struggle in women. The society which praises and adores the classic legends or epic like “Kannagi”, “Savitri”, “Sita” and so on, does not give a necessary respect to womanhood. In reality, a woman is always adopted as a daughter, sister, mother and wife. She is not viewed as an individual or human beings.

In “The Second Sex”, Simon de Beavoir, analysis of women subordination proceeded from the assumption, that men viewed women as fundamentally different from themselves. In being defined as “the other” women were reduced to the status of “the second sex”. In spite, of the impact of western culture, these women remain stable with Indian sensibility and sentimentality. They are normally caged or confined to the traditional codes. They attempt to deviate or set free from the codes or set rules. But at last, they regain the position of the new typical Indian woman not of compulsion surrender, but of their own will of individuality. The position of woman has always reflected in the novels written by Indian women writers in English. They capture the intricacies of the problems of women caught between the two worlds of tradition and modernity. Mostly, they deal with women’s suffering and the pathetic plight of women under male domination.

### **Shashi Deshpande’s The Dark Holds No Terrors**

Shashi Deshpande, an Indian women writer portrays the universal experience of family relationships in her novels. Through, the protagonist’s relationship with other characters, especially with their family members, she emphasizes her attitudes and approaches to women and nature, Thereby, conceptualizing female identity. “The Dark Holds No Terrors”, is a novel about a well-educated, economically independent woman’s search for identity which leads to uncover the dormant strength in human beings. It tells the harrowing tale of Sarita, who often referred to as Saru. Deprived of parental care and affection, she lives a pale, loveless life. Her mother loves her brother Dhruva but hates Saru. When he is drowned, she blames her for no fault of her own. Then, Saru receives education inspite of her mother’s prevention. Her education makes her see the difference in treatment of a son and daughter by the same parents. So she rejects the role of a daughter and looks forward to the role of a wife with the hope, that it will give her a relief and freedom from the oppression of her mother. But this decision proves to be wrong. Her second home becomes the very prison or cage she had escaped. She is soon disappointed with her husband. Her husband is a sadist, who bullies her while she provides bread and butter to the family. He feeds on her earning and tortures her, both physically and mentally. As she struggles with her emotions and anxieties, Saru gradually realizes that there is no life than dependency on marriage, parents or other such institution and she resolves to use her found truths to make a better life for herself.

“Darkness”, implies incapability to see things clearly and objectively. It is a source of constant fear from outside. It affects the outlook of the inside, but it holds no terrors in itself. This novel deals with the theme of identity in the real sense and also the “dark” symbolically, the darkness of mind ceases to the terrible moment one is ready to face the situation. Sarita’s quest for identity in this novel, leads her into the past, in the course of which she comes to terms with a traumatic childhood experience and a problematic marital relationship. When the woman tries to

realize her individual needs and aspirations, she finds that she cannot “free” herself from her domestic commitments because, Indian society is based on patriarchy. Such is her socialization that she cannot easily walk out of a marriage even though, a bad one. She tries to achieve freedom by compromising between her essentially feminine roles and the “masculine” identity that a profession gives her.

Thus, she has to learn to purge herself from the patriarchal values that define her as a sex-object or as a wife and mother alone and should learn to value herself as a person and a human being.

### **Relation between women and nature:**

God has created human beings and nature without any bias. Due to various factors man made this discrimination. In the existing industrial development, women and nature are both subordinated by men. They are seen as inherent in the market economy which uses them both as possessions and resources. The concept of connecting women with the nature dates back to the times of ancient classical mythology. Nature is feminized because it is seen as possessing the same qualities as women at the time when most of the romantic writing was produced. According to sex-role theory women were seen as being domestic, pious, moral, pure, gentle, kind, graceful and beautiful; this was according to the nature of separate spheres: men and women were fundamentally different in terms of their characteristics as men were seen as hard-working, industrial, rational, strong, assertive, independent and proud; none of which is easily connected with nature. Therefore, nature was seen as the embodiment of all the characteristics that women possess and there are frequent references to this in literature.

Emotions play an important role in human mental life. These emotions represent a critical part of mental process, and human emotions are merely one particular manifestation of a more general phenomenon – which must be manifested in some way in the mind. There are a few universal emotions – including happiness, sadness and spiritual joy – which any intelligent system with finite computational resources is bound to experience, to an extent. And then there are many species-specific emotions, which in the case of humans include rage, joy and lust and other related feelings. Roger Fowler coined the term ‘mind style’ in 1977 and he says “mind style refers to any distinctive linguistic presentation of an individual mental self”. (1977:103). In these novels the authors used various metaphors and similes to reflect the minds of the characters. In this chapter, we see how natural elements are used as an object to reflect the minds or the attitudes of Sarita’s mother, Sarita and Renu to the readers. This clearly shows the relationship between women and nature.

**Sarita’s mother:** For instance, we find, the mother in “The Dark Holds No Terrors”, expressed her anguish and the gender-bias through the natural element, sunlight which she feels as a barrier for women’s beauty or for their fair complexion. Right from the beginning Sarita is made to understand that she is a girl and she is inferior to her brother, in every way. The sole purpose of a woman’s existence is to please her man. She has just remained a ‘thing’ to be passed on from parents to husband. As for her behaviour she always kept two different measuring yards, one for the son and other for the daughter.

Here is one example to prove it-

“Don’t go out in the sun you’ll get even darker.

Who cares?  
 We have to care if you don't; we have to get you married,  
 I don't want to get married.  
 Will you live with us all your life?  
 Why not?  
 You can't  
 And Dhruva?  
 He's different. He's a boy". (The Dark Holds No Terrors, 45)

In this way a traditional woman thinks that it is their duty to remind their daughter that she is a girl and she should behave accordingly. The socio-cultural conditioning of a girl is still a part of Indian culture. Hence Saru's lively, full of life, is gradually suffocated by her mother's constant criticism and fault finding. Saru is always made to feel ugly, unwanted and undesirable. "I was an ugly girl, At least, my mother told me so". (The Dark Holds No Terrors, 61). Winnie Cott in his paper 'Mirror Role of mother and Family in child development'-writes about the importune of mother's role in reflecting back to her child, the child's own self. When the child looks at its mother, it sees itself. The child has to be seen in a way that makes it feel that it exists. Poor Sarita gets back from her mother a picture of ugliness.

If a mother cannot empathise with her own child then who would the child turn to? Was it her fault that she was dark and ugly? These are the questions this novel arises. Saru's defiance towards her mother awakens her careeristic ambitions. At the initial stage, her mother had moulded her psyche to accept drudgery and self-negation as a norm of routine existence for a married woman and to treat herself as an undesirable person in a subconscious manner. Thomas Hardy in *Far from the Madding Crowd* in 1874, says, "It is hard for a woman to define her feelings in language, which is chiefly made by men to express theirs".

**Sarita:** Sarita during her childhood finds peace and comfort in the mango grove. It is a secret place and also a comfortable place for her. On the other hand, Dhruva finds nothing interesting there. This is because, Dhruva, who as a boy enjoyed maternal preferment that Sarita did not. So, she feels a kind of solace in this secret place, where she spends most of the time.

"I stood there and sniffed like a dog, trying to orient myself. There was only one mango orchard in that area, and that not far from home....the strange place, the darkness that enfolded me in an unusual solitude, the fragrance of the blossoms, the sticky crunchiness of the leaves under my feet...I took it all in with delight". (The Dark Holds No Terrors , 185)

This novel also shows the close relation between women and nature. Even though, as a girl, sarita could able to associated with all creatures and the surrounding natural features in the mango grove. Walking from the grove to her house, Sarita acts as if she were a regular member of the groves.

"And suddenly, as I tortured myself with fears, the fragrance of the mango blossoms was wafted to me on the breeze...". (The Dark Holds No Terrors , 185)

Within a day, as a little girl, Sarita has proven that she can easily become harmonious and familiar with nature. In spite of the fact that both Saru and nature are quickly harmonious, they do not feel they are forced to be; on the contrary, nature gives her a very warm welcome to become a valuable part of the land. Sarita's appreciation of the surrounding nature demonstrates that Sarita can deeply absorb and comprehend nature through the five senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. First, while Sarita is going to meet her friend Smita, she absorbs nature through her sense of sight. She notices strange place filled with mango blossoms. Then, her senses of smell and taste are required when she inhales the air in the orchid which is not only smells, but also sweet. Lastly, while she is standing still and letting her bare feet in the land, mango leaves struck softly against her. This shows that her sense of touch is employed to absorb nature. This scene, in short, beautifully demonstrates that women use their senses to profoundly absorb nature.

After her brother's death, she feels that the trees didn't serve its purpose of protection. This shows, like a tree, she also forgets to protect her only brother. Sarita feels guilty for the death of her brother; her mother holds her responsible for the accident, though the poor girl was hardly eight years old at the time.

"I went in to the deserted mango grove, and sat there under the trees. It began to rain. I had no thought of sheltering myself. Nor did the trees give me any protection".  
(The Dark Holds No Terrors, 191)

Coming home, after fifteen years, getting into the routines that her mother did, transforming herself into her mother, young Madhav's presence in the house and his addressing her "Saruthai" as Dhruva did, all these are mechanisms that help her towards healing herself. Sarita, before she could start off again with her life, executes one last act of restoration. She says Madhav's life, the surrogate Dhruva, who returns home late at night from his home as his bus breaks down on the way. This time, Sarita does not fail, Madhav is suffering and his feverish, trembling body is calmly held by her throughout the night, and as the crisis gradually blows over, the rain comes crushing down, and the memory of another rain and wind swept night comes to Sarita's tired old mind but this time a confident voice within her tells that there was nothing to fear, and that Madhav was going to be all right. Now, Saru after reliving memories of her brother's death is able to confront deeper problems. She received comfort from her father who advises her to forget about her role in the death in accident of her brother and her mother. She could also able to admire the nature and rain as she had done before the death of her brother.

"There was a smell of wet earth and rotting leaves. The trees, their dusty, dirty leaves, washed by the rains to a tender sparkling green, were like symbols of renewal".  
(The Dark Holds No Terrors, 211)

In the morning she has a bath, and feels a sensuous pleasure with the warm water and the smell of soap, a pleasure she hadn't felt for months. Thus, Nature also helps to turn her away from the past- which is now dead, having served its function-and helps her to meet the present complex realities of her life.

**Renu:** Once, Sarita finds her daughter, Renu draw a picture with black crayons. It is like a dark deep forest trees are almost tall and straight. On looking at her drawing Sarita feels, that



unlike other children Renu draws not a colourful picture, but a dark one. Thus, child's psychology is shown or expressed through the picture. The children of Renu's age usually draw only colourful pictures, but Renu draws a frightful one.

We can infer this picture in different ways. On the one hand, the child in the picture may be considered as Renu. Through her drawing she reflected her loneliness or uncaring child's attitude, longing for Mother's love. So this picture clearly shows her mind or sense of loneliness. This kind of utter loneliness a human being faces in life stands as the core of 'The Dark Holds No Terrors.'

On the other hand, we can infer the girl in the picture as Sarita. Because, Sarita often doubts whether her children are aware of her sufferings and tortures that she has experienced every night. She says,

“... but they knew nothing. That was her only comfort. That the children knew nothing.

(what about that guarded watchful look in Renu's eyes as she looks at us? What about Abhi's hostility to me recently?)” (The Dark Holds No Terrors,78).

Renu's picture creates a sense of brooding darkness in her mind. Sarita also feels lonely because she has not received any love all through her life. As a child, as a young girl, she felt rejected by her mother, who preferred Dhruva, her younger brother. She felt miserable when her mother had blamed her for the death of Dhruva, who died by drowning when he was just seven. Everyone has failed her. She lived her life with the guilt, which was inflicted on her, but her mother. Later when she begins to think that she has found someone in Manu, who would cherish her forever; she goes through traumatic experience when he rapes her. Suddenly, she is alone again. Thus, Saru is the symbol of many a woman, who live their lives in loneliness, in one form or the other. Thus, the author clearly shows the conditions of Renu and Sarita through the picture and the deep, dark forest reflects that they are encompassed by the lonely feelings.

### **Violence against Nature-the root cause for the sufferings of women:**

Although, many have defined ecofeminism, most ecofeminist would agree with the core concept that the oppression or domination of women and the degradation or domination of nature are fundamentally connected. Both women and nature, as a result, are the victims of this male-dominated society. This relationship has been shown in many literary works with different perspectives.

Globalization creates an elusive relationship between women and Nature. Many Women have now become a part of an industrialized economic system. In other words, they have become a part of the system that heavily exploits natural resources. Consequently, our ecosystem seems to have become worse day-by-day. The warming of the Earth is not the only environmental problem we find these days; air pollution, acid rain, and loss of species can be included in the long list. All these occur as a result of industrialization, which has rapidly exploited the amount of natural resources for two hundred years (Guterl and Underhill 48). However, in the structure of capitalism, women are extremely exploited in the same way as the natural resources. Although many have defined ecofeminism, most ecofeminists would agree with the concept that the

oppression or domination of women and the degradation of nature are fundamentally interconnected. Both are the victims of patriarchal society. So in this novel there is one important incident, which shows the parallel relationship between the violence against nature and women.

Sarita in “The Dark Holds No Terrors”, the explosion of the factory is the root cause of her problems, because of this incident, her neighbours aware of her professional identity. This results in superior position to her husband and becomes the bread winner of her family. Her husband’s sense of inferiority changes him in to a sadist.

Violence against nature = deforestation = construction of buildings, factories etc.,  
=environmental problems.

Violence against women = Sarita’s successful career (factory explosion-people aware of her career identity) = her husband’s ego = sadist tortures

The explosion of factory is the root cause of Sarita’s problem. Construction of factories and industries is actually violence against nature. Here, in this novel Sarita, as a Doctor treated the people caught in the factory explosion. Because of this incident her neighbors become aware of her professional identity, the day she walks back in a blood stained coat, after treating victims of an accident. Instantly her profession achieves for her a position superior to Manu’s. She is recognized and respected by the neighbours who came frequently to consult her. The respect that Saru gets disturbs the traditional equilibrium of the superior husband and inferior wife. Chapter VIII of the novel informs us about Saru’s sexual tortures by Manu. Thereby, globalization creates an elusive relationship between Sarita and nature.

The more popular she becomes, family happiness declines, and Sarita’s financial strength turns Manohar into a rapist at night, only to assert his potency and masculinity. His action humiliates Saru. The Indian society basically being the male-dominated society does not allow tolerance for a better woman even within a marriage. Manohar’s sense of inferiority changes him into a sadist, who gets pleasure by insulting his wife, harassing and, hurting her sexually. From outside it might seem like a successful marriage, as Saru says, but it might not be so really, like her own! But her case is not only a case of marital rape but there is complexity in understanding the psyche of Saru. The ‘rape’ she endures every night with her husband, is the way she punishes herself, again brought on with a lot of guilt from her past and now combined with her doubts about her love for Manu, even her being ashamed of him. No matter how much love the man claims for his wife, when it comes to difference in earnings and status, he always expects that he has to be superior to her.

Thus the relationship between the women characters and natural elements resonate in this novel. It was found that Sashi deshpande’s “The Dark Holds No Terrors” could be profoundly reviewed and analyzed through ecofeminist perspective. This notion is clearly presented through the female character – Sarita, she illustrates that women and nature can be harmonious. It also shows a strong relationship between the oppression of women and the degradation of the environment. Thus, the main aim of the paper is not only in nurturing the environment and depicting how the environment is degraded but also to create awareness among the people about the violence against the nature and also human beings (especially women).



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