

**How Free Is A Free Woman: A Study through Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror* and Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*.**

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**Smutee Sandhya**, a Research scholar, Department of Language and Literature  
(English Department), Fakir Mohan University, Balasore, Odisha

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**Abstract:**

This dissertation explores the psychological entrapment of seemingly liberated women within patriarchal societies through the lens of two prominent Indian authors, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair. Through an in-depth analysis of Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and Nair's *Ladies Coupe*, the study illuminates female characters' internal struggles despite outward appearances of freedom. Drawing on themes of societal expectations, gender norms, and the quest for autonomy, the dissertation reveals the profound psychological impact of patriarchal constraints on women's sense of self and agency. By delving into the complex interplay between external pressures and internal conflicts, the research sheds light on the intricate dynamics shaping the psyche of modern women in India.

**Keywords:** psychological entrapment, liberated women, female psyche, patriarchal societies, familial expectations, psychological impact

In the intricate web of societal expectations, women find themselves ensnared, grappling with silent struggles and enduring relentless judgment at every turn. Despite proclamations of freedom, they remain shackled mentally, constrained by the rigid confines of gender norms and muted voices. Even in the modern era, marriage continues to wield immense influence, dictating a woman's value and perpetuating her subjugation. Following marriage, control often shifts to husbands, subjecting women to various forms of violence and trapping them in cycles of dependency and fear. True liberation remains a distant dream as women tirelessly strive for autonomy and equality.

Within the seemingly progressive facade of today's educated society, the illusion of modernity veils ongoing struggles, perpetuating a form of mental slavery. Despite their strength and independence, women often find themselves seeking validation and support from men, hemmed in by the weight of societal expectations. Genuine freedom, however, demands emancipation from all forms of oppression.

Every woman must recognize her inherent worth, embrace her imperfections, and boldly chart her course toward authentic liberation – unapologetically.

Shashi Deshpande, the acclaimed Indian novelist, unveils the layers of urban society through her characters. Navigating the intricacies of Indian women's lives, her works like *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* spotlight societal challenges. Awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990 and the Padma Shri in 2009, Deshpande boldly addresses taboo subjects like marital rape, blending traditional family values with the pursuit of self-expression. Breaking the silence, her narratives resonate with the pulse of Indian English Literature.

Shashi Deshpande's modern and financially independent heroines navigate the clash between patriarchy and tradition, seeking self-expression. In tales like *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Deshpande delves into the psychological suffering of women at life's crossroads. Her stories capture the struggle for liberation against entrenched social norms, revealing the harsh reality that even successful, modern women in India face.

In a quaint Maharashtra town, Shashi Deshpande's novel unveils Sarita's struggle unfolds within the confines of a traditional middle-class setting. Despite being a renowned lady doctor by day, she becomes a captive to her English teacher husband, Manohar, by night. Sarita, considered unwanted since birth, confronts gender bias and neglect.

Growing up, she internalizes a sense of inferiority within her family, feeling predetermined in her fate. As Adesh Pal finds out: "For Saru, the very word 'Mother' stands for old customs and rituals, for her mother sets up a bad model, which distorts her growth as a free woman." Treated as a burden, she constantly feels out of place. Adhering to traditional views, her mother believes in the importance of physical beauty for a girl's worldly success, leading to constant criticism of Saru's appearance:

**"Do not go out in the sun. You will get even darker; we have to get you married. Will you live with us all your life?" (45)**

This perpetual criticism of her appearance reflects the societal constraints that hinder her from genuinely embracing freedom as a woman.

Her mother, a symbol of authority, restricts her freedom, emphasizing societal gender limitations. Constantly reminded of her perceived lack of attractiveness, Saru sees marriage as an escape from parental constraints. Resenting her daughter's role, she eagerly anticipates the freedom marriage may bring. Mastering the art of dressing to captivate male attention, she hides her secret sense of pride behind outward calm.

**"But she is a girl, and do not forget, medicine or no medicine, doctor or no doctor; you still have to get her married, spend money on her wedding" (144)**

Saru's clash with her mother hits its climax when she chooses to marry outside her caste. Manohar becomes her savior, bringing love into her life. The early days of their marriage feel like a slice of heaven on earth, just like any other newlywed couple. Influenced by her mother's words, Saru embraces the eternal female dream of finding happiness through a man's post-marriage. In her view, the husband takes precedence, with his likes and dislikes becoming the primary focus. As a newlywed,

she readily surrenders, adhering to the patriarchal notion that a woman should not dominate a man.

**"when she got married, she had sworn I will never dominate over my husband" (86)**

Saru's peaceful life with Manu as the breadwinner turns tumultuous when her growing popularity becomes a source of humiliation for him. Her economic independence triggers Manu's insecurity, casting a shadow on their marriage. Their social and economic standing contrast disrupts the traditional man-woman relationship pattern.

Frustrations from his job lead to the heinous act of 'marital rape,' cooling the warmth between them. Even willing to quit her job, Saru faces Manu's disapproval, highlighting the strain on their relationship.

**"Everything in a girl's life, it seemed, was shaped to that single purpose of pleasing a male." (163)**

Manu's wounded ego from Saru's success leads him to view her as a mere trophy to showcase to his friends. His inferiority complex intensifies when a magazine interviewer questions him about his wife's financial dominance.

This triggers a sadistic transformation in him, evident in his nighttime actions of terrorizing and humiliating Saru, who resigns herself to her fate. Post-marriage, societal norms, and laws grant men a license for intimacy, even if brutal, asserting ownership over women's bodies. Saru, a successful doctor by day, becomes a terrified captive by night, unable to seek help due to societal constraints. Despite wanting to escape, fear of social conventions and reputation traps her with her sadistic husband. After fifteen years, she returns to her father's house, seeking freedom, but finds her room occupied. Reduced to sleeping in the puja room, she turns to spirituality to cope with trauma.

Saru's introspective journey reveals that her prized economic independence has become a curse, crushing her dreams of love and passion. She reluctantly embraces traditional beliefs, conceding to the idea that women should always be inferior to men in marriage. In her mother's words, a woman should live as if she never existed.

**"If he is M.A, you should be a B.A. You must pretend that you are not as smart as you are, not competent as you are." (137)**

The wife's submission is ingrained through lifelong socialization, starting in childhood and extending into adulthood. In this mindset, a woman is essential to a man's self-realization. Initially drawn to the idea of traditional gender roles with men working outside and women managing domestic tasks, Saru finds a perceived harmony. However, she realizes that her self has been the source of her misery. She realizes she cannot escape the established wife-husband dynamic despite enduring trials. Escaping is not the answer; she must accept life with her husband, children, and duties.

Similarly, Anita Nair's exploration of women's experiences in *Ladies Coupe* resonates with Saru's struggles in Deshpande's narrative. Through characters like Akhila, Janaki, Margaret, and Prabha Devi, Nair illustrates how societal conditioning

ingrains the notion of women as essential objects to fulfill men's needs and aspirations. Despite their strengths and aspirations, these women find themselves constrained by the patriarchal norms that dictate their roles and relationships.

Anita Nair, a determined and sincere Indian English writer, spans novels, stories, poems, essays, plays, and travelogues with boldness. From tender compassion to sensuality to raging hatred, she skillfully navigates diverse emotions. Known for her masterful storytelling, Nair delves deep into the human psyche, presenting absorbing stories with colorful characters. Notable works like *The Better Man* (1999) and *Ladies Coupe* (2001) reveal the impact of social conditioning on women. *Ladies Coupe* stands out as a masterpiece, unraveling the lives of six women in a patriarchal society, offering a unique glimpse into the female psyche and experience.

*Ladies Coupe* exposes the paradox of economically independent yet powerless women in modern India. Despite education, women like Akhila lack control. The transformative train journey introduces six diverse characters who find solace in the Lady's Coupe. Each shares their struggles, fostering courage and strength. The narrative seamlessly unveils layers of oppression in a patriarchal society.

The first woman to narrate her story is Akhila. Akhilandeswari (Akhila) is a forty-five-year-old income-tax clerk through whose voice the stories unfold.

Set in south India, in a traditional middle-class Brahmin family, Akhila resides with her father, mother, two younger brothers, and a sister. Despite completing her pre-university course with top honors, her parents abruptly halt her education, deeming it complete. Instead, they insist she learns household chores, disregarding her desires.

**"Her parents considered her education complete, and she was expected to fine-tune all her housekeeping abilities in preparation for the day she would be married." (48).**

Thus begins Akhila's education on becoming a 'good wife,' as portrayed by Anita Nair. Through characters like Akhila's mother, Nair highlights how women often uphold the patriarchal structure, reinforcing strict social, political, and economic limitations. The women's identity is compared to a Kolam, a traditional art form, signifying their role in the family. A sloppily drawn Kolam implies carelessness, while an elaborate one suggests self-absorption and an inability to prioritize others' needs.

***"Your kolam should reflect who you are: a good housewife" (Nair 50)***

Akhila's mother, a devoted yet conservative woman, upholds traditional values. Believing in women's subordination and inferior status, she staunchly supports the idea that decision-making is solely a man's domain. She teaches Akhila,

***"A good wife learned to put her husband's interests before anyone else's, even her father's. It is so much easier and simpler to accept one's station in life and live accordingly" (14)***

At nineteen, following her father's passing, Akhila assumes the responsibility of providing for her family, taking on her father's clerical position at the income tax

department without complaint. Despite her sacrifices, her family, including her mother, overlooks her needs and aspirations, treating her more like a spinster than a woman.

Even after witnessing her siblings' marriages, her desire for matrimony remains unacknowledged and unexplored by her family.

Akhila wrestles with the despair of remaining unmarried, feeling a void in her life without the prospect of marriage, motherhood, or raising children. Despite her independence, she cautiously seeks emotional fulfillment through discreet encounters, fearing societal judgment. Her connection with Hari briefly alleviates her turmoil. However, societal norms and their age difference remind her of her restricted freedom—Padma's adherence to traditional gender roles further confines Akhila, even within marriage. Contemplating liberation, Akhila journeys to Kanyakumari, where she shares her story in the lady's Coupe, igniting discussions on women's dependence on men and the pursuit of genuine freedom.

Janaki, the eldest among them, is trapped in the traditional roles of daughter, wife, and mother, with her individuality overshadowed. Her permanent secondary position is a result of societal patriarchal norms, where men throughout her life have looked after her.

***"First there was father and brother; then my husband. When my husband is gone, there will be my son, waiting to take off from where his father left off. Our men treat as like Princess" (22-23)***

Despite legal advancements and the wave of women's empowerment, the harsh reality is that societal expectations still bind Indian women. Limited by familial and marital controls, they struggle to achieve true independence, facing emotional, physical, and intellectual constraints.

Sheela, the next narrator in Ladies Coupe, is a perceptive 14-year-old shaped by patriarchal influences. Her conversations reflect maturity and carry the wisdom of three generations of women—her mother's, grandmother's, and her own. She learns about the darker side of male dominance from her grandmother. Constantly scolded by her father for her language, interactions with boys, and perceived rudeness, Sheela's journey unfolds amidst societal expectations.

The next character, Margaret Shanti, emerges as a poignant symbol of a woman ensnared in the web of male dominance, grappling with physical, mental, and spiritual turmoil within her marriage to Ebenezer Paulraj, the principal of her school. Despite her initial choice to marry him, Margaret is trapped in an unhappy union where her desires and aspirations are disregarded. Ebenezer's domineering nature stifles Margaret's individuality, coercing her into submissive compliance with his wishes. Her academic talents are undermined as he dictates her career path and physical appearance to suit his preferences. Margaret's once vibrant personality is eclipsed as she becomes a passive observer, silently enduring societal expectations of marriage. Anita Nair's portrayal of Margaret sheds light on the plight of women entrapped by traditional gender roles and societal norms, illustrating the arduous journey toward true freedom amidst societal constraints and patriarchal dominance.

The social status of women is evident in their homes, where they are often

treated as objects meant solely to satisfy men's sexual desires. Before Margaret's marriage to Ebe, her parents imparted traditional wisdom, emphasizing the woman's responsibility to exert more significant effort to ensure the success of the marriage. This reflects the deeply ingrained gender roles and expectations placed upon women in society.

***"She told me how divorce was very often the result when a woman did not make an extra effort" (102)***

When problems start to creep up between the couple and Margaret thinks of divorcing him, instead of providing parental support to her, they avoid seeing and hearing her point of view. Instead, they advised her,

***It is a woman's responsibility to keep the marriage happy. You, with all your numerous faults, overweight and barren, ought to go down on your knees every day and thank the heavens that he is still stuck to you. (112)***

Despite her desire to divorce him, she is paralyzed by fear of societal judgment. Margaret's state, hand-tied freedom, is excellently portrayed by Anita Nair.

Prabha Devi, born into a wealthy family with four brothers, faced her father's preference for a son to inherit the family business, dismissing daughters as burdensome. Despite her mother's initial joy at having a daughter, she too held traditional views, anticipating Prabha would carry recipes and family jewelry to her marital home. In a society where girls are often steered towards domestic roles, Prabha's childhood play was expected to revolve around cooking and caregiving, preparing her for her future life,

***A kitchen was set up for her to play house and mother games. Sometimes, Prabha Devi's mother joined her daughter's games, pretending to be an adult child while her daughter tried hard to be a child adult (Nair 169 - 170).***

Prabha Devi's mother ingrained in her the belief that women should be subservient to men, using her compliance with her husband as a model for Prabha to follow. She warned Prabha that speaking against male family members would result in being shunned, likening it to an unpleasant odor that nobody wants around.

***She had discovered that a woman with an opinion was treated like a bad smell, to be shunned (Nair 170).***

At the age of eighteen, Prabha Devi was married to Jagdeesh. Her father and her elder brother decided her future. Following her marriage, Prabha's life becomes monotonous, revolving around household chores and waiting for her husband's return, followed by the expectation of starting a family. Despite her desire to learn to swim, her husband, Jagdeesh, refuses to allow it, wanting her to remain submissive.

Prabha Devi's narrative underscores the challenges faced by women striving for freedom within patriarchal structures. Despite her desires, her life becomes a cycle of domestic servitude, highlighting the limitations imposed on women's autonomy.

In conclusion, Both Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair delve into the psychological constraints that bind seemingly liberated women within patriarchal societies, illuminating the internal struggles faced despite outward appearances of freedom.

In Deshpande's narrative, Saru from *The Dark Holds No Terrors* embodies

the paradox of a woman who appears strong and independent yet is psychologically shackled by societal expectations and gender norms. Despite her professional success, Saru's sense of self-worth is tied to her husband's approval, leading her to suppress her desires and endure abuse silently. Her internal conflict reflects the psychological toll of conforming to patriarchal ideals, wherein even empowered women may feel trapped by ingrained societal roles.

Similarly, in *Ladies Coupe*, Nair's protagonist, Akhila, grapples with internalized beliefs and societal conditioning that undermine her sense of agency and fulfillment. Despite her economic independence, Akhila's psyche is burdened by familial expectations and cultural norms dictating her role as a dutiful daughter and potential wife. Her inner turmoil mirrors the psychological entrapment experienced by many women who navigate the tension between personal aspirations and societal pressures.

Through the experiences of Saru and Akhila, both authors reveal the profound psychological impact of patriarchal norms on women's sense of self and agency. Despite outward appearances of freedom and success, these women are chained by internalized beliefs and societal expectations, underscoring the complex interplay between external constraints and internal struggles within the psyche of seemingly liberated women.

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