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## MEMORY, TRAUMA AND IDENTITY IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S FICTION

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### Abstract

Shashi Deshpande, a prominent voice in Indian English literature, intricately weaves the complex interplay of memory, trauma, and identity in her novels. Her works delve into the inner lives of women navigating a patriarchal society, where past experiences, often traumatic, significantly shape their present identities and their struggle for selfhood. Deshpande masterfully employs narrative techniques that foreground the subjective experience of her protagonists, revealing how deeply buried memories and unresolved traumas impact their sense of self, their relationships, and their ability to forge independent identities. Memory in Deshpande's fiction is not merely a recollection of the past but an active force that continuously shapes the present. Her characters often grapple with fragmented and unreliable memories, reflecting the psychological impact of trauma. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita's traumatic childhood, marked by her brother's accidental death and her mother's subsequent rejection, resurfaces in her troubled marriage. Her present anxieties and insecurities are inextricably linked to these past wounds, demonstrating how trauma can leave indelible marks on the psyche, influencing present perceptions and behaviors. The act of remembering, often triggered by present circumstances, becomes a crucial process for Deshpande's characters to confront their past and begin the journey towards healing and self-understanding. As one study notes about Sarita's narrative, "Sarita reflecting her memory by contemplating at her father's home helps her rebuild a new meaning towards her awful relationships from the past."

### Keywords:

Memory, Trauma, Identity, Childhood

## Introduction

Trauma, in Deshpande's novels, manifests in various forms, ranging from childhood neglect and emotional abuse to marital discord and societal oppression. These traumatic experiences often lead to a sense of fragmentation and displacement in the protagonists. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya's silence becomes a metaphor for the unacknowledged trauma of societal expectations and marital disappointments that have stifled her identity as a writer and an individual. The weight of unspoken words and suppressed emotions creates a barrier to self-discovery. Similarly, in *The Binding Vine*, the aftermath of sexual violence and the loss of a child create deep-seated trauma that the characters must confront to reclaim their lives. Deshpande portrays trauma not as a singular event but as a pervasive force that can erode an individual's sense of self-worth and agency. (Jain, 2021)

The exploration of identity is central to Deshpande's fictional world, and it is invariably intertwined with the themes of memory and trauma. Her female protagonists often find their identities shaped by patriarchal structures and familial expectations, leaving little room for individual expression. Trauma further complicates this struggle, leading to a crisis of self where the past overshadows the present and hinders the formation of an authentic identity. Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* battles with guilt and a damaged sense of self stemming from her childhood trauma and abusive marriage, making her journey towards reclaiming her selfhood a difficult one. Jaya in *That Long Silence* must break free from the "long silence" imposed upon her by societal norms and her own internalized fears to rediscover her voice and her identity as a writer.

Deshpande's narrative style often mirrors the fragmented nature of memory and the internal turmoil caused by trauma. The use of first-person narration and flashbacks allows readers to access the protagonists' inner worlds, witnessing their struggles with memory and their attempts to piece together a coherent sense of self from the fragments of their past. This technique emphasizes the subjective nature of experience and the way trauma can distort one's perception of reality and identity. The journey towards self-discovery in Deshpande's novels is rarely linear; it is a process

of confronting painful memories, acknowledging trauma, and gradually piecing together a new understanding of oneself. (Marangoly, 2022)

Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a powerful exploration of a woman's struggle to confront the multifaceted traumas that have shaped her life. At the heart of Sarita's present-day anxieties and marital discord lies a deeply scarred childhood, marked by parental favoritism, a tragic loss, and the crushing weight of guilt and blame. Deshpande masterfully weaves together Sarita's past and present, revealing how the unhealed wounds of her early years continue to fester, casting a long shadow over her adult relationships and sense of self.

Sarita's childhood is immediately established as one defined by a stark gendered disparity in parental affection. Her brother, Dhruva, is unequivocally favored by their mother, receiving attention, praise, and opportunities that are consistently denied to Sarita. This blatant partiality breeds in Sarita a deep-seated feeling of being unwanted and inferior. Her very existence as a girl seems to be a disappointment to her mother, setting the stage for a childhood characterized by neglect and emotional deprivation. This early experience of being devalued based on her gender forms a foundational trauma, instilling in her a persistent insecurity and a yearning for acceptance that remains largely unfulfilled.

The idyllic backdrop of childhood is shattered by the accidental drowning of Dhruva. This pivotal event becomes the catalyst for a profound and enduring trauma in Sarita's life. Instead of offering comfort and support to their surviving child, Sarita's parents, particularly her mother, heap the blame squarely upon her young shoulders. The mother's devastating words, "You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive when he's dead?" become a recurring nightmare for Sarita, a constant reminder of her perceived culpability in the loss of her brother. This accusation, devoid of any understanding of the childhood accident, instills in Sarita a crippling sense of guilt and self-loathing. She internalizes the blame, forever associating herself with tragedy and loss. (Nair, 2022)

## Literature Review

Anjaria et al. (2022): The emotional landscape of Sarita's childhood is further darkened by the absence of a nurturing maternal figure. Her mother's grief over Dhruva's death transforms into a bitter resentment towards Sarita, poisoning their relationship beyond repair.

Jain et al. (2021): The lack of maternal love and understanding leaves Sarita emotionally isolated and unable to process the trauma of her brother's death in a healthy way. The home, which should have been a sanctuary, becomes a space filled with unspoken accusations and palpable coldness. This emotional neglect compounds the trauma of the accident, leaving Sarita with a profound sense of loneliness and a lack of secure attachment.

Briffault et al. (2021): The consequences of Sarita's traumatic childhood are far-reaching. Her adult life is marked by a persistent need for validation and a tendency towards self-blame. Her marriage to Manohar is fraught with difficulties, exacerbated by his own insecurities and the power dynamics that emerge from Sarita's professional success.

Richard et al. (2019): Beneath the surface of their troubled relationship lie the unaddressed traumas of Sarita's past. Her difficulty in asserting herself, her ingrained sense of guilt, and her struggle with intimacy can all be traced back to the emotional wounds inflicted during her formative years.

Choudhury et al. (2020): Deshpande skillfully uses Sarita's return to her parental home after her mother's death as a catalyst for confronting these buried traumas. The familiar setting triggers a flood of painful memories, forcing Sarita to revisit the events that have shaped her.

Marangoly et al. (2022): Through introspection and fragmented recollections, the reader gains a deeper understanding of the profound impact of her childhood experiences on her present psyche. The process is not easy; Sarita grapples with denial, anger, and a deep-seated fear of confronting the truth.

Nair et al. (2022): The absence of a warm and supportive mother figure leaves a significant void in Jaya's emotional landscape. She poignantly remembers, "I longed for a soft, motherly breast to cry on. And then I had to smile, I had never gone to her for comfort." This lack of maternal

nurturing deprives Jaya of a crucial source of emotional security and the development of healthy emotional expression.

Jackson et al. (2020): Growing up without the consistent reassurance and empathy of a mother likely contributes to her later inability to articulate her feelings and her tendency to internalize her struggles. The silence she adopts in her marriage can be seen, in part, as a continuation of this childhood pattern of unspoken needs and unexpressed emotions.

### **Research Objectives:**

In this paper we examine the Memory, Trauma and Identity in Shashi Deshpande's Fiction

### **Research Methodology:**

This paper is based on resources available in articles, research papers, news and institution website

### **Memory, Trauma and Identity in Shashi Deshpande's Fiction**

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is a poignant exploration of a woman's inner world as she grapples with a personal crisis and the long-accumulated weight of societal expectations. While the narrative primarily focuses on Jaya's present predicament and her reflections on her seventeen years of marriage, the undercurrent of a traumatic childhood significantly shapes her adult psyche and her propensity for silence. The early experiences of neglect, gender discrimination, and the absence of a nurturing maternal figure cast long shadows, contributing to her feelings of inadequacy, her difficulty in expressing herself, and her eventual retreat into a self-imposed silence.

One of the most striking aspects of Jaya's childhood is the evident preference for her brothers. She vividly recalls the stark contrast in her mother's affection, noting, "When I had passionately wanted her love, she had ignored me and concentrated on her sons...the smarming had never been for me." This early experience of being relegated to a secondary position, simply by virtue of her gender, instills in Jaya a deep-seated feeling of being less valued. The societal norm of prioritizing male children in India during that era is internalized by Jaya, creating a foundational wound that impacts her self-worth and her expectations from relationships later in life.

The patriarchal environment of her upbringing further reinforces the silencing of female voices. Jaya's recollections of her childhood are interspersed with subtle yet powerful instances of gender bias. The implicit understanding that girls must be demure, obedient, and eventually mold themselves to their husband's expectations is ingrained from a young age. This societal conditioning discourages the development of an assertive identity and the free expression of thoughts and feelings. The "waiting game" that Deshpande highlights as a common experience for women in Indian society begins in childhood, where girls are taught to wait for marriage and their husband's arrival, effectively postponing their own desires and ambitions.

Even seemingly innocuous childhood games, like "keeping house," subtly indoctrinate girls into their future roles as subservient wives waiting upon their husbands. This early immersion in a patriarchal framework normalizes the suppression of female agency and contributes to Jaya's later acceptance of a largely passive role in her marriage. The contrast between her father's encouragement of her intellectual pursuits and the overarching societal expectations creates an internal conflict that Jaya struggles to resolve.

The trauma of a childhood where her worth was diminished due to her gender and where emotional nurturing was absent manifests in Jaya's adult life as a deep-seated insecurity and a learned pattern of silence. Her inability to communicate openly with her husband, Mohan, and her tendency to retreat into herself during times of crisis can be traced back to these early experiences. The "long silence" that defines her married life is not merely a reaction to her marital frustrations but is also a continuation of a lifelong habit of suppressing her true self, a habit born from the unaddressed wounds of her childhood.

While *That Long Silence* primarily deals with Jaya's marital struggles, the subtle yet pervasive trauma of her childhood forms a crucial backdrop to her present predicament. The neglect, gender discrimination, and the absence of a nurturing maternal figure create deep emotional scars that contribute significantly to her silence and her struggle for self-identity. Deshpande masterfully weaves these threads of the past into the fabric of the present, illustrating how the unresolved traumas of childhood can continue to shape and constrain a woman's life, leading to a "long silence" that needs to be broken for true self-discovery and liberation.

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a testament to the enduring power of childhood trauma and the arduous journey towards healing. Sarita's story highlights how early experiences of neglect, blame, and loss can create deep psychological scars that affect an individual's sense of self and their ability to form healthy relationships. Deshpande's nuanced portrayal of Sarita's traumatic childhood serves as a powerful reminder of the lasting impact of familial dynamics and the urgent need for empathy and understanding in navigating the complexities of human experience. While the darkness of her past may linger, Sarita's eventual recognition of her own strength and resilience offers a glimmer of hope for a future where the terrors of the past no longer hold absolute sway.

Urmi, the narrator of "The Binding Vine," is grappling with the recent loss of her infant daughter, a tragedy that throws her into a state of profound grief and introspection. While the immediate trauma is the death of her child, the narrative hints at a more distant, yet equally impactful, source of pain: her relationship with her own mother. Urmi's memories of her childhood are fragmented, tinged with a sense of emotional distance and a lack of genuine understanding from her mother. She recalls her mother's preoccupation with societal expectations and her seeming inability to truly connect with Urmi's inner world. This emotional neglect, though perhaps not overtly abusive, constitutes a significant childhood trauma, leaving Urmi with a sense of unresolved pain and a difficulty in fully processing her grief. Her sharp-tongued nature and her initial resistance to the comforting gestures of her sister-in-law, Vanaa, can be interpreted as defense mechanisms stemming from a childhood where her emotional needs were perhaps unmet.

Furthermore, Urmi's journey of empathy and connection with other women, particularly Shakutai, the mother of a rape victim, Kalpana, is partly fueled by her own underlying sense of vulnerability and the recognition of shared female experiences of pain. While Urmi's childhood trauma is one of emotional absence, Kalpana's is one of brutal violation, and Mira's, revealed through her poignant poems, speaks of the trauma of a stifling marriage and the suppression of her artistic spirit. These varied experiences of trauma, woven together in the narrative, highlight Deshpande's understanding of how early wounds, in their different forms, can cripple an individual's sense of self and their ability to navigate the complexities of adult life.

The character of Mira, though deceased before the events of the novel unfold, provides another powerful lens through which to examine the impact of a traumatic childhood. Through her discovered poems and diary entries, Urmi pieces together the life of a young woman forced into a marriage that stifled her intellectual and emotional growth. Mira's mother's advice to "obey, never utter a 'no', submit and your life will be a paradise" reveals a childhood where her individuality and voice were actively suppressed. This emotional constraint, the denial of her own desires and aspirations, constitutes a significant trauma that manifests in her poignant and often melancholic poetry. Her fear of losing her own identity within the confines of marriage speaks volumes about the lasting damage inflicted by a childhood that failed to nurture her true self.

Deshpande masterfully uses the motif of silence to underscore the lingering effects of childhood trauma. Urmi's initial silence in the face of her grief mirrors the enforced silence of Mira's childhood and the societal silence surrounding Kalpana's rape. This silence is not merely an absence of words; it is a manifestation of internalized pain, a difficulty in articulating deeply felt wounds that often originate in the formative years. The process of breaking this silence, of Urmi finding her voice through empathy and connection with other women, becomes a crucial step towards healing, both for herself and for those whose stories she comes to understand.

While "The Binding Vine" addresses a multitude of complex issues, the subtle yet persistent presence of traumatic childhood experiences forms a crucial undercurrent in the narrative. Through Urmi's emotional struggles and the revealed history of Mira, Shashi Deshpande demonstrates how early wounds, whether inflicted through neglect, suppression, or overt abuse, can leave enduring scars on the adult psyche. The novel suggests that true healing and connection can only begin when these buried traumas are acknowledged, articulated, and ultimately, confronted with empathy and solidarity. The binding vine of female connection, in this context, becomes not only a source of strength in the face of present-day suffering but also a means of collectively addressing the lingering pain of past wounds.

## Conclusion



Shashi Deshpande's fiction offers a profound exploration of the intricate relationship between memory, trauma, and identity. Through her nuanced portrayal of female protagonists grappling with personal and societal traumas, she reveals how the past can shape and, at times, distort the present sense of self. The act of remembering becomes a crucial step towards healing and self-discovery, enabling her characters to confront their traumas and forge more authentic and independent identities within a patriarchal society. Deshpande's literary contribution lies in her sensitive and insightful depiction of the inner lives of women, highlighting the enduring impact of memory and trauma on their quest for selfhood.

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