



A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF *THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS*

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) presents a powerful narrative that explores the intricacies of gender, identity and silence in the Indian patriarchal society. This research article undertakes a pragmatic analysis of the novel and examines how language, silence and speech acts function as vital pragmatic tools of power, resistance and negotiation in interpersonal relationships. Drawing on the principles of Speech Act Theory, conversational implicature and the pragmatics of silence, the present article investigates the communicative nuances between characters, especially the protagonist Sarita and her family members. The present research article highlights how silence conveys more than spoken words, embodying fear, submission and ultimately self-realization. By situating linguistic choices within their social and cultural contexts, this research article demonstrates that Deshpande's novel not only portrays the struggles of a woman trapped in oppressive structures but also reveals how pragmatic elements of discourse become instruments of identity formation and empowerment.

Keywords

Shashi Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Pragmatics, Speech Act Theory, Silence, Gender and Language, Conversational Implicature, Identity; Power Dynamics, Indian English Novel, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Shashi Deshpande, one of the notable voices in contemporary Indian English literature, has distinguished herself by her portrayal of middle-class women caught between tradition and modernity. Her novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) narrates the story of Sarita (Saru), a doctor whose professional success contrasts with her troubled personal life. At the heart of the narrative lies not only the events that shape Saru's identity but also the subtle and often unspoken modes of communication that structure her existence.

Pragmatics, a branch of linguistics concerned with language in use and the interpretation of utterances in context, provides a useful tool for analyzing Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. By focusing on speech acts, silence, conversational implicatures, and contextual meaning, this research article aims to demonstrate how the novelist employs language not only as a narrative device but also as a means of dramatizing power struggles within familial and marital relationships. Let us begin with the plot summary of the novel.

Plot/Summary of the Novel in Brief:



Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* tells the story of Sarita (often called Saru), a woman doctor who struggles with the contradictions between her professional success and her personal life as a wife and daughter. The novel is structured as both a present narrative and a return to the past, moving back and forth between Saru's childhood memories, her troubled marriage, and her attempts to reconcile with her family.

Saru grows up in a small town in India, in a conservative middle-class family. From childhood, she experiences her mother's partiality towards her younger brother Dhruva. Saru's mother openly favours the son while constantly criticizing and controlling the daughter. This unequal treatment leaves Saru feeling unwanted and unloved. The turning point of Saru's childhood comes when her younger brother Dhruva drowns in the river while playing with her. Although it is an accident, Saru's mother blames her for his death, both through words and an even more devastating silence. This blame becomes an emotional wound that shapes Saru's sense of guilt and alienation throughout her life.

As Saru grows older, she decides to study medicine and becomes a doctor. Against her family's wishes, she marries Manohar (Manu), a man of lower caste and lesser social standing. The marriage begins with love and companionship but gradually problems begin to surface. Saru becomes more successful in her medical profession than Manu in his teaching career. Manu begins to feel inferior, powerless and resentful of her public achievements. His insecurity grows into a silent rage. While he behaves affectionately during the day, he becomes abusive at night, sexually assaulting Saru. This dark double life terrifies her and erodes the foundation of their relationship. Unable to bear the violence and the contradictions in her life, Saru decides to leave Manu and returns to her father's house after her mother's death. Her father, a quiet man, does not interfere much in her life but provides her with the space to reflect.

Back in her childhood home, Saru revisits memories of her mother's coldness, her brother's death, and her mother's indirect accusations. These reflections make her realize how deeply silence, neglect, and unspoken communication have affected her sense of identity. While staying with her father, Saru examines her role as a wife, mother and daughter. She questions the patriarchal expectations that define women's lives, such as the demand for obedience, sacrifice and submission. She realizes that she has lived much of her life according to the dictates of others. Her mother's oppressive silence, Manu's wounded masculinity and society's judgments.

By the end of the novel, Saru has not yet arrived at a final solution but begins to gain courage to face her life. She decides not to run away again but to confront the "darkness" within her personal and social relationships. The title of the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* suggests that once Saru understands her fears and the silence that haunted her, the darkness loses its power to terrify her. The novel does not end with a dramatic resolution but with Saru's introspective realization. It depicts the struggle of a woman caught between professional success and personal oppression, between her desire for independence and the emotional bonds of family and marriage. Through Saru's journey, Deshpande illustrates the subtle ways in which patriarchal norms, silence, and speech control women's lives and how self-awareness becomes the first step toward liberation.

Pragmatic Framework:

The study of pragmatics involves much more than the structural analysis of language. It is primarily concerned with the dynamic relationship between language and its users. Meaning in pragmatics is not treated as a fixed property of words or sentences but as something that emerges in specific contexts of communication. Thus, pragmatics explores how meaning is shaped by speaker intention, hearer interpretation and the situational, cultural and social contexts in which language is used.



A landmark contribution to pragmatics came from J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). Austin argued that when people speak, they do not merely state facts but also perform actions through language. His Speech Act Theory identified three dimensions of every utterance: the locutionary act (the act of producing meaningful linguistic expressions), the illocutionary act (the intended function behind the utterance, such as requesting, warning, or promising), and the perlocutionary act (the actual effect the utterance has on the hearer, such as persuading, frightening, or inspiring). This framework revealed the performative nature of language and emphasized that the meaning of an utterance cannot be fully understood without recognizing its function in interaction.

John Searle, expanding on Austin's ideas, systematized the classification of speech acts by focusing on the illocutionary force of utterances. He distinguished between assertives (statements of fact), directives (commands or requests), commissives (promises or commitments), expressives (expressions of psychological states such as gratitude or apology), and declarations (utterances that bring about a change in the external world, such as pronouncing a marriage or declaring a meeting open). Searle's contribution made it easier to analyze how language performs different functions in everyday life and literary texts, where dialogue and silence often serve layered communicative purposes.

Another major dimension of pragmatics is Paul Grice's theory of conversational implicature (1975). Grice introduced the Cooperative Principle, which assumes that participants in a conversation generally attempt to be cooperative and make their contribution appropriate to the exchange. He further identified four conversational maxims: quantity (be as informative as required), quality (say only what you believe to be true), relation (be relevant), and manner (be clear and orderly). However, speakers frequently violate or flout these maxims, thereby generating implied meanings. For example, irony, metaphor, sarcasm, or polite evasions often work through implicature. This aspect of pragmatics demonstrates that communication extends beyond the literal meaning of words; it depends heavily on inference and shared cultural knowledge.

Together, Austin, Searle and Grice laid the foundations of modern pragmatics. Their theories provide valuable tools not only for linguistics but also for literary criticism, where texts can be examined for how characters use language to assert power, resist authority, conceal emotions or negotiate identities. In the case of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, such a framework becomes especially significant because much of the novel's meaning is conveyed not through explicit statements but through silences, indirect utterances and speech acts that reflect the complexities of gendered relationships.

In the context of Indian English fiction, where characters often operate within hierarchical and gendered structures, pragmatics becomes a vital tool for literary analysis. Unlike purely linguistic studies that focus on grammar or semantics, pragmatics directs attention to how characters use language to establish, contest or resist power relations. In Indian social settings, which are deeply influenced by caste, class and patriarchal norms, communicative exchanges are rarely neutral. Every pause, silence, interruption or indirect remark carries with it cultural weight and pragmatic significance.

Silence, for instance, is not merely an absence of words but an active communicative strategy. A mother's silence may express disapproval, a husband's silence may exert control and a daughter's silence may embody submission or resistance. Interruptions often indicate power struggles, as those in authority assert dominance by breaking into another's speech. Similarly, indirect communication through hints, insinuations or half-spoken sentences functions as a means of maintaining politeness, avoiding confrontation or conveying socially unacceptable judgments without explicit articulation.



In Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, such pragmatic strategies are central to the narrative. The strained silences between Saru and her mother communicate volumes about maternal disapproval, guilt and gendered expectations, even when no direct accusation is voiced. Saru's marital conversations with Manohar reveal how indirect comments and sarcastic remarks conceal deeper insecurities and frustrations. These communicative patterns, when analyzed through the lens of pragmatics, expose the subtle mechanisms by which patriarchy operates not only through overt acts of domination but also through everyday speech and silence.

Thus, approaching the novel through pragmatics allows for a more enriched understanding of Shashi Deshpande's narrative skill. It reveals how meaning in the novel is not confined to what is spoken but emerges from the interplay of utterances, silences and implied meanings. In doing so, pragmatics illuminates the lived realities of women in the Indian society, where communication itself becomes a terrain of negotiation, conflict and survival.

Silence as a Pragmatic Strategy:

Silence is one of the most potent pragmatic tools in the novel. Saru's relationship with her mother is marked by silences that signify disapproval and judgment rather than explicit speech. When Saru's mother blames her for her brother Dhruva's death, she does not articulate her accusations directly but allows silence to convey condemnation. This non-verbal communication exerts a perlocutionary force stronger than words, shaping Saru's sense of guilt and alienation. As Jasbir Jain observes, "Deshpande's women often find themselves silenced not because they lack words but because the social framework denies them a hearing" (Jain, 122).

This silence is not empty but pragmatic. It encodes power relations and operates as a form of speech act in itself. One may argue that silence in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* functions as a performative absence, where the lack of speech communicates judgment and control. Saru's inability to challenge this silence demonstrates how communicative acts are embedded within patriarchal contexts.

Speech Acts in Marital Communication:

Saru's marriage to Manohar (Manu) becomes the site of conflicting speech acts. At the surface level, their communication appears normal. However, at the deeper level, there is struggle for dominance. Manu's words of endearment during the day transform into acts of violence at night, reflecting a perverse illocutionary force that undermines marital intimacy. Here, Shashi Deshpande demonstrates how speech acts are not limited to verbal utterances but extend to gestures and silences. Manu's refusal to discuss his insecurities about Saru's professional success manifests as indirect speech acts. His silence, sarcasm and aggression become communicative strategies to reassert patriarchal authority. Meenakshi Mukherjee (1981) rightly remarks, "The novel dramatizes the gap between what is said and what is meant, between the spoken word and the silences that surround it" (Mukherjee, 87).

This insight highlights the pragmatic tension within marital communication, where utterances often fail to bridge emotional distance but instead reinforce power hierarchies. Following Mukherjee's observation, it is evident that Deshpande consciously employs pragmatic gaps such as unspoken meanings, suppressed dialogues and failed conversations to reflect the disintegration of marital bonds.

One of the most significant moments occurs when Manu says to Saru: "Why do you need to be so successful? Isn't it enough that you are a wife and mother?" This utterance functions as a directive speech act, in which Manu implicitly instructs Saru to restrict her ambitions. The locutionary act is a simple question, but its illocutionary force is a command masked as concern and its perlocutionary effect is to make Saru feel guilty for stepping beyond prescribed roles.



Pragmatically, the utterance demonstrates how a husband asserts control through indirect speech. Rather than issuing a direct prohibition, Manu couches his insecurity in the form of a question, thereby preserving the appearance of dialogue while effectively silencing Saru's agency.

Another striking example is found in Manu's chilling words during their private encounters: "You are my wife, Saru. You belong to me." This utterance operates as a declarative speech act, where the very act of saying constitutes an attempt to establish dominance. The locutionary meaning is a statement of marital possession; the illocutionary act is the assertion of authority; and the perlocutionary effect is Saru's internalization of fear and helplessness. Such utterances are not neutral. They function as instruments of psychological violence. In the context of marital communication, they exemplify how speech acts can cross into force, transforming language into a weapon of subjugation.

Together, these examples demonstrate that in Saru and Manu's marriage, communication is not about mutual understanding but about the enforcement of roles. Directives disguised as questions and declarations asserting ownership highlight how speech acts are deeply embedded in patriarchal expectations. From a pragmatic perspective, these speech acts reveal how language in marriage can enact oppression, turning dialogue into a means of control rather than a space for equality.

Conversational Implicature and Family Relations:

Family conversations in the novel reveal how implicature operates in subtle ways. When Saru's mother questions her choices, she rarely speaks directly but relies on insinuations. For instance, remarks about Saru's attire or behaviour imply nonconformity without explicitly stating it. These conversational implicatures signal expectations of obedience and conformity to patriarchal values. Grice's Cooperative Principle is consistently flouted in such interactions. Saru's mother often violates the maxim of relevance, providing indirect comments that carry moral judgment. Saru, in turn, responds with either silence or withdrawal, which indicates her awareness of the implied meanings even when she refuses to engage verbally.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, family communication is often characterized by indirectness, silences and coded exchanges that reveal the underlying power dynamics of a patriarchal society. Grice's theory of conversational implicature, developed through his Cooperative Principle and the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner, provides an effective framework for examining these interactions. The novel demonstrates that family relations are not merely expressed in what is directly spoken but in what is left unsaid, implied or strategically concealed. Such pragmatic strategies carry significant weight in shaping gendered identities and maintaining familial hierarchies.

The relationship between Saru and her mother is one of the most striking examples of implicature in the novel. When her mother tells her, "*A husband is a shelter, my child. Without him you are nothing,*" the literal meaning appears to be maternal advice about security. Yet pragmatically, the utterance communicates an implicature that Saru must silently endure marital suffering and should not seek independence or resistance against her husband's authority. By cloaking patriarchy in affectionate guidance, the mother avoids overt confrontation but nevertheless reinforces restrictive gender norms. Here, implicature functions as a subtle but powerful tool of socialization, embedding obedience in indirect speech.

Saru's father makes use of implicature through silence. Throughout the novel, he refrains from active involvement in the conflicts between Saru and her mother or in the struggles within her marriage. His refusal to speak often violates the maxim of Quantity, as he does not provide sufficient information or guidance when it is expected. Yet this silence itself becomes meaningful as it implies detachment, avoidance of responsibility and perhaps a quiet acknowledgment of



Saru's suffering. For Saru, her father's silence is open to interpretation. It may suggest passive support but it also reinforces her isolation since even male figures who might have protected her refrain from challenging tradition. Thus, silence operates as a communicative act with deep pragmatic consequences for family relations.

Saru's marriage to Manu shows how conversational implicature sustains power imbalances between husband and wife. At one point, Manu remarks, "Why do you need to be so successful? Isn't it enough that you are a wife and mother?" At the surface level, this appears to be an expression of concern, perhaps a reminder of priorities. Yet the implicature is clear: Saru's professional identity threatens Manu's masculinity and disrupts the expected gender hierarchy. By phrasing his insecurity as a question, Manu indirectly conveys a warning that continued professional success will lead to marital disharmony. The utterance, thus, reflects how indirect communication can serve as a mechanism of control, making Saru constantly decode her husband's words and adjust her behavior accordingly.

Overall, conversational implicature in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* exposes the ways in which family communication operates beneath the surface of explicit speech acts. Mother uses implicature to transmit patriarchal values, father employs silence as a shield of avoidance and husband transforms indirect remarks into strategies of dominance. These patterns reveal that the family, as represented in the novel, is not only a space of emotional ties but also a site where meaning is constantly negotiated through indirect speech acts. For Saru, the recognition of these implicatures becomes a crucial step toward pragmatic resistance. By learning to interpret and ultimately reject the coded messages that restrict her, she begins to redefine her own identity.

Gender, Identity, and Pragmatic Resistance:

Ultimately, the novel demonstrates how pragmatic choices shape identity. Saru's journey is not only about escaping physical violence but also about negotiating communicative spaces. By gradually learning to resist silence and reclaim speech, she moves towards self-assertion. Her final act of staying back in her father's house, contemplating her future, suggests a tentative reclamation of agency. Pragmatically, this moment signifies a refusal to submit to the perlocutionary force of patriarchal silence. Let us consider the following utterances, "You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive when he's dead?" (Deshpande, 45)

This accusation is made by Saru's mother after the accidental drowning of her younger brother Dhruva, functions as more than a literal utterance. Pragmatically, it is both an illocutionary act of blame and a perlocutionary act of condemnation that shapes Saru's identity. The mother's words are not only a statement but a performative act that assigns guilt and imposes lifelong emotional burden.

From a gendered perspective, this speech event proves how daughters are often made scapegoats in patriarchal families. The mother's speech act is a social reinforcement of gender hierarchy, where the son is valued and mourned, while the daughter is accused and silenced. For Saru, this utterance defines her sense of self; she internalizes guilt and alienation, leading to a fractured identity in adulthood.

Nevertheless, the very act of remembering and narrating this incident becomes a form of pragmatic resistance. By revisiting her mother's words, Saru begins to question the legitimacy of such blame. The process of analyzing and interpreting the utterance allows her to reclaim agency, shifting from passive victimhood to self-awareness. Let us analyse the following utterances, "You are a doctor. People look up to you. But when you come home, remember you are my wife" (Deshpande, 137).



The above utterances of Manohar reveal the tension between Saru's professional identity and her role within the patriarchal framework of marriage. Pragmatically, the utterances are directive speech acts as they command Saru to conform to traditional expectations of a submissive wife, regardless of her public achievements. The illocutionary force here is not merely to remind but to control, to demarcate boundaries between Saru's identity in society and her identity at home.

From the perspective of gender, the utterances emphasize how patriarchy resists women's success. Manohar's insecurity about Saru's professional status manifests in his attempt to assert dominance through language. The utterances carry the implicit assumption that marriage supersedes individuality predominantly for women.

However, Saru's eventual recognition of such utterances as mechanisms of control marks the beginning of pragmatic resistance. She comes to realize Manu's words as strategies of silencing and dominance rather than expressions of love or partnership. Her silent refusal to fully submit to this demand and her retreat to her father's house signify an act of resistance not through direct confrontation but through withdrawal and reflection, which in pragmatics can be read as an alternative communicative strategy.

Conclusion:

This pragmatic analysis of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* emphasizes how Shashi Deshpande employs silence, speech acts and implicature to dramatize gendered power struggles. Communication in the novel extends beyond words; it is embodied in silences, insinuations and fragmented conversations that reflect the protagonist's psychological turmoil. By applying the tools of pragmatics, it becomes evident that Shashi Deshpande's narrative strategy mirrors the complex realities of women's communication in a patriarchal society. The novel, thus, validates that meaning is not confined to what is spoken but often lies in what is withheld, implied or silenced.

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