



Guilt Consciousness in Dark Holds no Terror

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Introduction:

The Dark Holds No Terrors, her Third novel, is about Saru an educated, economically independent, middleclass wife-who is made conscious of her gender as a child and whose loveless relationship with her parents and strained relations with her husband lead to her agonizing search for herself. The novel opens with Saru's return to her parents' house fifteen years after she left home with a vow never to return. Her relations for some solace. with her husband, her children, her parents and her dead brother, Dhruva. Saru,s relationship with her brother has been given special presentation. She is ignored in favour of her brother, Dhruva. Na parental love us showered on her and she is not given any importance. Her brother's birthdays are celebrated with much fanfare and performance of religious rites, whereas her birthdays are not even acknowledged. She even feels that her birth was a horrible experience for her mother, as she later recalls her mother telling her that it had rained heavily the day she was born and it was terrible for her mother. It seemed to Saru that it was her birth that was terrible for her and not the rains. She recalls the joyous excitement in the house on the occasion of his naming ceremony. The idea that she is a liability to her parents is deeply implanted in her mind as a child. Her mother's adoration of her son at her daughter's cost is the rallying point for the novelist to bring her feminist ideas together. The preference for boys over girls can be openly witnessed in most Indian homes, and is inextricably linked to the Indian psyche. Sons bring in dowry could be one reason, but the Indian society steeped in tradition and one reason, but the Indian society steeped in tradition and superstition considers the girth of a son as auspicious as he carries on the family lineage. The first Thought that rose in saru's mind at hearing about her mother's death is: "Who lit the pyre? She had no son to do that for her. Dhruva had been seven when he died" (DHT 17).

Her mother constantly reminds her that she should not go out in the sun as it would worsen her already dark complexion Saru recalls her conversation with her mother:

"Don't go out in the sun, you'll get 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" (DHT 40).

This sort of blatant discrimination between Saru and her brother leads to a sense of insecurity and hatred towards her parents especially mother, and her resultant rebellious nature. The turning point in her life is the accidental death of her brother by drowning. All her life she is haunted by the memories of her mother accusing her of intentionally letting Dhruva die by drowning: "You did it, you did this, you killed him" (DHT 173). She too on her part has a guilty conscience as she considers herself responsible for having remained a mute spectator to her brother's death by drowning.

She never refutes the charge leveled against her by her mother. Shashi Deshpande thus reveals the social aspect of keen sibling jealousy born of a mother's undue fondness for the son. Saru' mother's discriminatory behavior makes Saru feel unloved and unwanted leading to a sense of alienation and estrangement. She is in the grips of insecurity. After her brother's death her lot deteriorated from bad to worse. Irrespective of geographical or chronological space, any Indian girl is a victim of gender discrimination in the Indian social setup.

Saru's mother could be no exception to this and she loses interest in life after her son's death. She puts the blame for her own wretched lot squarely on Suru's shoulders. She snatches every opportunity to reproach her and takes no interest in education, career or future. Her feeling of being unwanted is so acute that she begins to hate her own existence as a girl of woman. On attaining puberty she says scornfully, "If you are a woman, I don't want to be one" (DHT 62). The treatment that is meted out to her during her monthly ordeals is inhuman. She is treated like an untouchable, segregated from the other members of the family and made to sleep on a straw mat with a cup and plate exclusively meant for her to be served in from a distance. She is engulfed with a sense of shame

and prays in desperation for a miracle to put an end to it. Thus, unloved and unwanted, she develops hatred towards the traditional practises during her impressionable years. Her hatred towards her mother is so acute that she becomes rebellious just to hurt her, “I hated her, I wanted to hurt her, wound her, make her suffer” (DHT 142). This hatred drives her to leave home for Bombay to seek medicine as a career. In the medical college she falls in love with a college mate and marries him against her parents’ wishes. Her orthodox mother was dead against her daughter’s marrying a man from a lower caste:

“What caste is he?”

“I don’t know.”

“A Brahmin?”

“Of course, not.”

Then cruelly... “His father keeps a cycle shop.”

“Oh, so they are low-caste people, are they?”

The word her mother had used, with the disgust, hatred and prejudice of centuries had so enraged her that she had replied... “I hope so” (DHT 96). Had her mother not been so against him, she would probably not have married him and brought herself to such miserable condition. She later recollects: If you hadn’t fought me so bitterly, if you hadn’t been so against him, perhaps, I would never have married him. And I would not have been here, cringing from the sight of his hand-writing, hating him and yet pitying him too (DHT 96). Devoid of hope and security, she wanted to be loved. When she gets attention from Manu, she wonders, “How could I be anyone’s beloved? I was the redundant, the unwanted, an appendage one could do without” (DHT 66).

The need of the moment was a relation with someone who could give her love and security. She thinks: “the fisherman’s daughter couldn’t have been more surprised when the king asked her to marry him than I was by Manu’s love for me” (DHT 66). Later when her relations become strained with Manu she regrets for having rushed into marriage unconditionally: “The fisherman’s daughter was wiser. She sent the king to her father and it was the father who bargained with him, while I [...] I gave myself up unconditionally. Unreservedly to him, to love him and to be loved” (DHT 66). The circumstances that lead to her taking such a step, are the making of her own parents. Saru considers herself the luckiest woman on earth, as the initial years of her marriage are sheer bliss. Manu is her savior and the romantic hero who rescues Saru—a damsel in distress. She marries to secure the lost love in her parental home and her identity as an individual. As S.P. Swain writes: “her marriage with Manu is an assertion on and affirmation of her feminine sensibility.” Although, Saru refrains from any physical indulgence with Manu but, after

marriage, she revels in it with wild abandon: I became in an instant a physically aroused woman with an infinite capacity for loving and giving, with a passionate desire to be absorbed by the man I loved. All the cliches, I discovered were true, kisses were soft and unbearably sweet, embraces hard and passionate, hands caressing and tender, and loving, as well as being loved was an intense joy. It was as if little nerve ends of pleasure had sprung up all over my body (DHT 40). Her dingy one-room apartment with “the corridors smelling of urine, the rooms with their dark sealed in odours” (DHT 40), is “a heaven on earth” for her. But soon all this proves to be a mere mirage for her. Soon she realizes that happiness is illusory. Saru remembers how a particular incident becomes a turning point in their blissful marital relationship. One night she returns home late in her bloodstained coat as she helped out the victims in a fire accident in a factory nearby. The neighbourhood thus comes to know about her identity, and she gains recognition. People would come to her for medical help and other related matters. In the beginning saru could not realize the change that had come in Manu. Her success as a well-known and reputed doctor becomes the cause of her strained marital relations with Manu. In a retrospective mood she says much later: “He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband” (DHT 42).

Manu is uncomfortable with Saru’s steady rise in status, as he feels ignored when people greet and pay attention to Saru. Besides she is unable to spare time enough for Manu and children. Manu and Saru want to move out to some other place for their own reasons. While Manu feels humiliated and embarrassed, Saru is no longer happy in that cramped and stinking apartment and wants to move into something more decent. Earlier she was happy and contented to live on Manu’s salary but in her new role as career woman she becomes discontented. She resents: For me, things now began to hurt. (...) a frayed saree I could not replace, a movie I could not see, an outing I could not join in. I knew now that without money life became petty and dreary. The thought of going on this way became unbearable (DHT 92). Manu does not love her as he used to earlier. Saru Begins to hate this man-woman relationship, which is based on need and attraction and not love. She scorns the word “love” now. She realizes there was no such thing between man and woman. With the change of circumstances she feels a gradual disappearance of love and attachment towards husband and children, The most solemn duties towards them remain unattended to. The children are denied due love and care as she gets late evenings. While her social and financial status and financial status rises gradually, there is an inverse decline in her conjugal relationship. Her

relations with Manu would have somehow moved on smoothly had she remained contented with treating people in the neighbourhood. But her ambition to move higher in life by furthering her career through Boozie, who is a handsome and efficient doctor. He is flirtations in nature and Saru has no aversion towards flirts. Their relation reaches a stage when Boozie helps her financially to set up her own practice in a posh area. Saru, blind in ambition, is unscrupulous in her relationship with Boozie and consoles herself by treating it as a mere teacher–student relation. She tells herself, “It was just a teacher-student relationship. If he put his hand on my shoulder, slapped me on my back, held my hand or hugged me [...] that was just his mannerism and meant nothing. It had nothing to do with me and Manu” (DHT 91). Both had their own vested interests in sustaining such a relation. Boozie openly flaunts his relationship with Saru to hide his homosexual nature and Saru wanted to exploit him through her feminine wiles to achieve her much coveted goal of becoming an established, reputed doctor. Although there is nothing physical about Saru – Boozie relationship, but this gives rise to a misconception in Manu’s mind. But she had such a loathing towards Manu that she does nothing to placate him, rather lets him believe the obvious.

Even at the inauguration of her consulting room, when Boozie flaunts her by his side openly before the invitees to the programme, she feels resentful towards her husband:

I could feel the stares. Everyone’s except Manu’s who would not look at us. And I should have hated him then. [...] not Manu, for he had done nothing then for which I could hate him, but this attractive, ravishingly masculine man who was doing this deliberately. Attracting attention to the two of us. But funnily enough, it was not him I hated, it was Manu for doing nothing (DHT 94).

But Saru’s rise in social and financial status in contrast to Manu’s status of an underpaid lecturer sets in great discomfort in their conjugal relation. Saru’s contentment in her career is no match to her discontentment at home. And contrary to the claims of, most feminists, she does not achieve fulfillment in life. Betty Friedan asserts: “For woman, as for man, the need for self-fulfilment –autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization, is as important as the sexual need, with as serious consequences, when it is thwarted.” In a reminiscent mood she recalls one particular incident which leads to her loathing towards Manu. It was on the day when they had been watching a TV programme. She recalls: [Manu] had been sitting with his feet up on a stool, [...] soft, white, unmarked and flabby. Like his hands. And his laugh [...] it was rather silly. A kind of bray almost, Why had she never noticed that

before? And had never seen, never seen, never known. [...] now that she knew him, she rather despised (DHT 135). Certain incidents aggravate the already strained relation between the two to the extent that in the privacy of their room at night he doesn’t behave like a husband, but a rapist. In an interview with Saru when the interviewing girl happens to ask Manu innocently: “How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?” (DHT 200). The three---Saru, Manu, and the girl---merely laughed it off as if it were nothing. This particular incident is very humiliating to him and he gives vent to his feelings through his beastly sexual assault on Saru. Although he is a cheerful normal human being and a loving husband during day, he turns into a rapist, to assert his manhood. In yet another incident she undergoes this nightmarish experience. Prior to going on a vacation to Ooty while shopping Manu and Saru happen to meet the former’s college mate and his wife. During the talk Manu tells his colleague that they were going to Ooty. When his colleague expresses his inability and bad luck in affording such a vacation, the colleague’s wife replies that he also could have afforded it had he married a doctor. A humiliated Manu once again victimizes Saru. She expresses her helplessness to her father: “I couldn’t fight back. I couldn’t shout or cry, I was so afraid the children in the next room would hear. I could do nothing. I can never do anything, I just endure” (DHT 201). Although she has achieved economic independence, her plight is miserable, as she has to perform double duties. Besides practicing medicine she has to fulfil the assigned job of a housewife. She expresses her desire to leave her medical practice but Manu dissuades her from doing so, as their standard of living wouldn’t be possible on Manu’s income.

The circumstances seem all the more intolerable as Manu feigns ignorance in the mornings of his beastly behaviour at night. At this juncture she comes to know about her mother’s death. Despite her vow never to return to return home, she does so. She has reasons to do so as she won’t have to undergo the humiliation of her mother’s taunts, and she has an explanation to give to her father for her returning home on account of her mother’s death.

At her father’s house she objectively mulls over the reasons of her disastrous marriage. She blames herself for it as she easily identifies the consequences of the shattered male ego. The novel may be said to be a study in guilt consciousness, as Saru ruminates, “my brother died because I heedlessly turned my back on him. My mother died alone because I deserted her. my husband is a failure because I destroyed his manhood” (DHT 217). But what Shashi Deshpande suggests is the gender discrimination by parents towards their children, and

the compulsion to perpetuate male dominance if the marriage is to be kept going. Thus, she has presented a realistic picture of the gross gender inequality prevailing in our society. Although she returns to her parents' place in a detached frame of mind, she feels strange despite the fact that nothing had changed in the house, not even the seven pairs of large stone slabs leading to the front door on which she had played hopscotch as a child. Her father also sounds strange as he talked like an unwilling host to her as if she were an unwelcome guest. She is in grave need of sympathy but he does nothing to console her. This reminds her of the fate of a sister of her friends who had come home after her disastrous marriage. She remembers how she received care and sympathy from her parents. Because her marriage had been an arranged one, the parents too were party to her misfortune. Since Saru's was not an arranged one, she makes herself solely responsible for her disastrous marriage and is guilty conscious. She is totally confused and feels that she has done great injustice towards her brother, mother, husband, and children.

On one occasion Saru presents a present recipe for a successful marriage. On being asked by her friend Nalu to talk on Medicine as a profession for women, to a group of college students, she says: A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband her husband. If he is an MA, you should be a BA. If he is 5'4" tall you shouldn't be more than 5'3" tall. If he is earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety, if you want a happy marriage. Don't ever try to reverse the doctor-nurse, executive-secretary, principal-teacher role. It can be traumatic, disastrous. And I assure you, it is not worth it, He'll suffer. You'll suffer and so will the children. Women's magazines will tell you that a marriage must be an equal partnership. That's nonsense, rubbish. No partnership can ever be equal. It will always be unequal but take care that it's unequal in favour of your husband. If the scales tilt in your favour, god help you, both of you (DHT 137). Retrospectively she also thinks about her relationship with Padmakar, her classmate in medical college, who she happens to meet years later. After a few meetings Saru dissuades him from attempting to forge a deeper relationship with her. She does so after realizing that such a relationship was no comfort. Now she had no illusions about romances or love for these two had lost relevance in her life: "Love? Romance? Both, I knew too well, were illusions and for me, sex was now a dirty word" (DHT 133). Through her relations with Boozie and Padmakar, she achieves no happiness and fulfilment. These extra-marital relations are no solace and compensation for her tense married life.

Conclusion:

Shashi Deshpande contrasts Saru's life with the lives of her two school friends—Sunita leaves no effort to pose as a happily married woman. All the while she talks about her intimacy with her husband as if she were a non-entity without him, which only invokes pity in the eyes of the reader and hatred of her two friends. Nalu also questions her as to why she let her husband change her name from Sunita to Anju: "Do you have to surrender so easily?" (DHT 117). Nalu is contemptuous of Sunita's constant references to her husband and hates her for her submissive attitude of satisfying every whim of his. She tells her, "Well, I refuse to call you Anju or Gitanjali or whatever. To me you are Sunita and will always be Sunita" (DHT 118). On the other hand is Nalu, a spinster who is a teacher and lives with her brother and his family. Saru contrasts Nalu with the Nalu of her college days who was full of enthusiasm. But now bitterness has crept into her, and Saru does not blame her bitterness on her spinsterhood. Saru feels that it would be wrong to say that Nalu "is bitter because she never married, never bore a child. But that would be as stupid as calling me fulfilled because I got married and I have borne two children" (DHT 121). Shashi Deshpande contrasts the lives of Saru, Sunita and Nalu and shows that a wife, a mother and a spinster had their own share of joys and sorrows, and it is almost difficult to conclude as to who is the happier or the more fulfilled. While the married women are reported to be dissatisfied with their marriage, the unmarried ones are reported to have their own sufferings and anxieties, Betty Friedan observes: "Strangely a number of psychiatrists stated that, in their experience unmarried women patients were happier than married ones." A mature Saru now shuns extremes and takes a practical view of the circumstances. She is neither the typical Western liberated woman nor an orthodox Indian one. Shashi Deshpande does not let herself get overwhelmed by the Western feminism or its militant concept of emancipation. In quest for the wholeness of identity, she does not advocate separation from the spouse but a tactful assertion of one's identity marriage.

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