

Looking at the Light: Saru in the Dark Holds No Terrors

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I. INTRODUCTION

A majority of the Indian novels with feministic content, end up either glorifying or suppressing womanhood in general or through a particular character. All her virtues packed into one might get showered upon her or all the meek, subservient, underprivileged and submissive lot might be showcased. One rare novel which depicts a woman past both these extremes and outstands the regular stereotypic meekness or the ultra modernism is Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. This novel is unique in its content, which shows the dual personality of Sarita (Saru), a lady doctor – a refreshingly new theme in the then Indian fiction.

The Dark Holds No Terrors is not just a story of a married life on thorns. It is the pathetic story of a popular and renowned Pediatrician, who is tortured and utterly degraded, terrorized as 'a trapped animal' through her nights in the very hands of her husband Manohar (Manu).

The outset of the novel presents the reader with the helplessness of Saru, returning to her father's place after fifteen long years, seeking refuge. This had been the place she had once sworn never to return in her life and has challenged that she would prove wrong her mother's curses and grow up to be successful both in professional as well as in personal life. But things take a different course and she is forced to flee from the treacherous paws of her sadistic husband.

The novel begins *in media res* and the past is unfolded through both the nostalgic and haunting memories of Saru. The readers also find Saru's quick confession of her situation to her father, with whom she had barely communicated in all her life. The novel jumps quickly from present to past and vice versa challenging the alertness of the readers.

The lonesome and aimless stay at her father's place gives Saru ample time to review and reason her relationship and her errors in relation to her dead mother and brother, her father, husband and children. Even though adamant and proud to admit her mistakes till the end, one can find a changed Saru, a much bolder and broad minded one – ready to face the consequences of her deeds. Thereby the dark no longer hold any terrors for her.

The novel is special in its treatment of its male characters, and so has sketched the crises and troubled souls of men so well that it leaves the readers awe struck for a female writer to present man so well. To be able to sketch the psychological turmoil of a man is no less a challenge for a writer of the 90's.

Saru has been a self-willed, egoistic, and introverted personality ever since her childhood. Hers was not the type to admit her flaws and correct them. Her mother's behavioural outcome due to the disappointment of bearing a girl as her first offspring has resulted in an outsized egoistic personality of Saru, always wishing to overpower others and stand high and glorious. The craving for appreciation and love has resulted due to the ever harsh treatment of her mother.

As a child, Saru had seen her grandmother leading a dreadful life – living upon the mercy of her relatives, who treated her like an unwanted burden. The importance of financial independence seeped into her young mind ever since that incident. She realized then itself that to gain respect, money is the material.

This seed grew tall and wide – it ultimately became so large as to oust her husband – her love – Manu – out of her 'love life', the life she so longed for. It was Saru's ambition to be loved by a man – loved so much as to forget all the bitterness inflicted throughout her childhood by her mother. The initial days of her marriage were the golden days of her life. He was the master of the house, and she was his bride. Life was full of love – even in the tight and shabby apartments.

Saru's obsession for power and popularity made her allow the sexual advances of her Professor, Boozie. She even allows him to invest all the money required by her to start her own nursing home. Her thirst for recognition and popularity grow so much as to blindfold her towards her husband's career. Manu – a popular stage actor, poet, story writer and heart-throb of all girls around him – had to give up all his aims and aspirations and stick himself to a teaching profession, which even after many years left him where he started, with no hope of betterment. This was due to Saru's selfishness – Manu's passion was insecure and might leave

them penniless, the moment work went out of his hands. Thus she insisted on a job with a steady income. Even after stepping on him like a stone for her successful completion of her Medical degree, Post Doctoral research and setting up her own practice, she did not realize how wilted and lifeless she had left him over the years. Had Manu ignored her needs even for a moment and moved in the path he was meant for – he would have grown much brighter and more popular than Saru, and she would have been cooking and cleaning and tending to the children, like any other woman, sitting at home.

Saru's thoughts have never been broad enough over all her seventeen years of marriage with her husband that she has long ignored giving the importance due for a husband, a lover who had sacrificed his entire career for the sake of his beloved.

Manu had been a sincere lover and a responsible husband. But when Saru's aspirations grew too big swallowing his very existence, belittling him and marginalizing him, it was too much for him to stand and the years of suppressed masculine chauvinism in him erupted like a volcano with no end – it rose too high and too wild that it became too much for Saru to handle. It began to frighten her, all the more. All his submission throughout the day reversed itself into animal like sexual sadism at nights. He used to rape his own wife like a beast, wounding her all over, over-imposing his authority, ignoring her pain and agony – just as she had been doing all those years.

The spark which triggered this angle in Manu was the interview Saru gave once. Manu entered the scene just as the journalist was about to wind up her session and she was tempted to ask him: "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter, but most of the bread as well?" (182) Not being able to digest his gradual failure with the steady success of his wife, Manu lets his wounded male pride manifest itself in the form of sexual violence. Bedroom becomes his only place to assert his power over her. His physical advances become mean and loathsome.

Saru who had once enjoyed Manu's love making and had pined to spend more and more time with him, now finds it unbearable and intolerable to share bed with him. She once lost count of the days and nights which she spent in the arms of her husband, loving him and being loved by him:

After the first moment.... There was, never any withholding in me. 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" (34).

The dirty and shabby apartments seemed so clean and perfect for their love making then. Whereas her rich and comfortable home with all possible amenities seemed filthy and loathsome that her sexual drive was killed totally. She began considering herself as "a dark, damp, smelly hole". Her burden, stress and responsibilities outside make her avoid his love making during the initial days of her career, which he regarded as a withdrawal from Manu, himself.

The second major psychological disturbance Saru suffered was from the news brought by Prof. Kulkarni, Manu's mentor and the man who helped in solemnizing their marriage. He brings in the news of her mother's death – an unnatural and self imposed one. Her hatred towards Saru grew too much that she refused to be treated by any doctor – the term being associated to and reminding her of Saru. Thus her ailment worsens and takes her life. Prof. Kulkarni conveys her mother's last words to Saru, "Daughter? I don't have any daughter. I had a son and he died. Now I am childless... I will pray to god for her unhappiness. Let her know more sorrow than she has given me" (178). It is understood that the constant memories of her mother have been due to both her sense of guilt and her sense of defeat.

Saru's relationship with each and every character in the novel portrays her thirst for power. The authority thrust over the family by her mother had always been a challenge and threat to her individuality. At the time of her marriage with Manu, Saru's mother says, "I know all these 'love marriages'. It's love for a few days, then quarrels all the time. Don't come crying to us then" (62) is a prediction of her future. Saru had thus taken it as a challenge ever since, to keep her marriage intact and her bond with Manu 'alive'. Though she tried hard not to become a photocopied version of her mother, she ends up becoming an educated version of the same.

Saru's attainment of puberty became a dreadful situation for her. It was a state of unending helplessness which engulfed her. She was devastated by her very birth as a woman. "A kind of shame that engulfed me, making me want to rage, to scream against the fact that put me in the same class as my mother... if you're a woman, I don't want to be one." (55). The ultimate rejection in Saru was mainly due to the criticism, stern disapproval, constant observation of her mother. The burning desire to prove her worth to her family overpowered her love for Manu and thus she began rising high and high forgetting to still hold on to Manu – the man who had been instrumental in each and every bit of her success – and take him into the limelight along with her.

Yet another important incident that had a deep psychological impact on Saru is the death of Dhruva. Just like the BC and AD associated with calendar years, Saru's life had an 'After Dhruva' calendar. Her already worse life with her unloving mother grew much more torturous and miserable. She was constantly accused of killing Dhruva. Unintentionally yes. It was her inherent wish to always do away with him. Her mother's love

and affection for the long wanted male child – Dhruva – stung Saru so much that in order to divert all that care towards her, she wished to remove him from the frame. Once upon returning home, Saru takes a different route where they play near a puddle of water, not knowing the seriousness of its depth. As it began to rain, Saru begins rushing home, neglecting Dhruva's call for support. His legs slip and he gets drowned in the bog. Saru is as stubborn in the end, as she had been in the beginning in not disclosing her part in the accident. Throughout the novel, she never confides the actual truth. This was why she always dreamt of Dhruva, her subconscious haunting her for her misdeed.

Saru's mother always insisted that Dhruva, being a boy, had to sleep alone. But he was too scared to sleep in the dark and he used to slide beside Saru as soon as his mother fell asleep. She used to chide him and threaten him of disclosing his secret to their mother and make him dance to her tunes. Saru used to tell him that darkness was only the shutting of the sun and there were no terrors in it. But many nights after Dhruva's death, Saru heard his call "Srutai" in the darkness. Never had she accepted even to herself that she turned her back on him, leading to his death.

Saru's turning back on her home all those years made her father a solitary sufferer. With no one to share his sorrow, he had befriended a paying guest, Madhav and leads a monotonous life – waking, washing, cooking, cleaning, sweeping, sleeping and the cycle continues, mutely, with no dialogues.

Unable to bear with her husband's brutality, Saru runs to her father, leaving behind her two children. She remembers her indispensable necessity and her responsibility towards them now and then. Her daughter needed her all the time she gets ready for school, to be reminded of the things she had to pack in her bag and the work she had to finish. She could not step out of the house without Saru standing at the doorway waving her goodbye. Her son had to be covered with a blanket only by Saru and kissed goodnight, unless which he would refuse to be covered at all. But her self-centeredness gets the better of her, padded up by her ego and she stays back.

A single confrontation with her husband might have cleared all this misunderstanding and her lost life of happiness might have come back to her. Yet again, Saru's stubbornness makes her flee instead of facing the situation.

Saru's psychological development and change in her perspective of understanding things can be noticed in her speech:

Listen, girls...if you want to be happily married, there's one thing to remember... A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he's an M.A., you should be a B.A. If he's 5'4" tall, you shouldn't be more than 5'3" tall. If he's earning Rs. 500, you should never earn more than Rs. 499. That's the only rule to follow 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 isn't worth it. He'll suffer, you'll suffer and so will the children... 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. And so you must pretend that you're not as smart as you really are, not as competent as you are, not as rational as you are, and not as strong either. You can nag, complain, henpeck, whine, moan, but you can never be strong" (124).

The Dark Holds No Terrors is a special novel in the sense that it deals not just with women's issues. It also deals with the problems faced by men, his solitude, his marginalization, underprivilege and so on. As the readers come towards the end of the novel, they find Saru leaving home more than twice. The first was when Saru demands her right for education and joins a hostel in Bombay to study medicine. Next was when she confidently walks out on her family to begin her life with Manu. The next was her escape to her father's place on the pretext of her mother's death, in order to avoid Manu. Towards the close of the novel, the reader finds that Saru steps out of the house yet again, asserting her confidence to face the situation. The readers can find Saru is upright as a doctor, a wife, a mother and a daughter as well. The novel ends on a positive note as Saru turns back to convey her message to Manu that she would be back as soon as possible and he had to wait for her. Her dichotomy ends and she emerges as bold as a sunflower, unhesitant to face the light – the truth – which she had been enveloping, evading and escaping ever since the death of Dhruva.

REFERENCE

- [1]. Deshpande, Shashi. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1980. Print.