

CHAPTER – II

GENDER DISCRIMINATION: THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS

Women's oppression is largely inflicted by the overarching factor of gender. Almost every woman has experienced the feeling of being mistreated, assaulted or discriminated against because of her gender. Every woman finds herself in solidarity with other women for their shared oppression resulting from gender discrimination. From time immemorial gender relation is the root cause of woman's repression and suppression. Gender relation envisages a complex set of social process. People are born with sex but acquire gender. Due to biological factors there is division of sexes. Unlike gender it is not an event of human history.

Gender is not innate or given rather it is constructed by human beings (men).

Gender is the cultural definition of behaviour defined as appropriate to the sexes in a given society at a given time. Gender is a set of cultural roles. It is a costume, a mask, straitjacket in which men and women dance their unequal dances (Lerner 1986: 239).

In the name of eulogizing a woman, different roles are created for women in whom they must fit. At different stages of life a woman performs her ascribed roles of life and at the end becomes a non-entity. Kumkum Sangari has aptly pointed out:

female-ness is not an essential quality. It is constantly made, and redistributed; one has to be able to see the formation of female-ness in each and every form at a given moment or in later interpretations, and see what it is composed of, what its social correlates are, what its ideological potentials are, what its freedoms may be (Sangari 1991: 57).

Our society being patriarchal and gender oriented, the position of women here is an unequal one. Ideologies and taboos of society impose gender on a child after birth. The male child is teased for behaving like girls whereas a female child is admonished for behaving like boys. They are imposed with set patterns of code of conduct which shape them into the desired roles. Patriarchy only upholds male dominance over women in our

society. It wants woman to play her gendered role in the name of motherhood and for the sake of family peace. Gendered role has become habit of women so much so that women too want other women to abide by the expected code of conduct for women. Patriarchy has so ingrained gender in the woman's psyche that even women become female-patriarchs supporting dominance and oppression.

...the law texts which present the place of women in a patriarchal universe, emphasize the women's accessibility to the male,... and her obligation to increase the lineage. The blessings showered by old women to brides (like Dudho nahao, Putao phalo i.e., may you bathe in milk and bear sons) are blessings showered by "*female patriarchs*" for old women may often speak on behalf of men. In fact, if women did not internalize the voices of men and speak like patriarchs themselves, the social order would not be maintained. Coercion and force can never ensure the authority of the rule as an internal voice. (Das 1985 : 13)

Patriarchy transmutes a woman to be docile, frail, timid and emotional. It leads a woman to become almost an object or a thing in the hands of patriarchs. Beauvoir views:

... humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being.... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute-she is the Other. (Beauvoir 1984 : 16)

According to Partha N. Mukherji:

....broadly three processes can be identified with respect to the evolution of the position of women in India in the past. In the spheres of *structural elaboration*, *sex differentiation* gradually but inevitably evolved in a manner such that societal roles which were linked with production, governance and ecclesiastics became more or less exclusive domain of the male sex. Concurrently, the *biological capacity* of the female to reproduce the human species and ensure its survival, led to her being assigned roles which progressively tied her down to the home and withdrew her from the wider economic political and religious arenas of social participation. Paralleling these two processes took place the progressive

elaboration of an *ideology* which rationalized it by means of customs, rituals and religious or social prescriptions. *The present predicament of women in India, therefore arises from the major contradiction between structural inequalities between men and women and cultural rationalizations of them.* (Mukherji 1986 : 8)

This unequal position of male and female in India is poignantly foregrounded by Shashi Deshpande in her novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. The discriminating socio-cultural values, the ingrained ideologies, attitudes and social practices which cripple the personality of a girl child are highlighted in the novel. The protagonist of the novel, Sarita or Saru is a sentient, a strong individual who objects to being held back because of her gender. Saru tried to create her life on her own terms which is an act of survival and resistance in patriarchy. She epitomizes the struggle for the liberation of the self from the shackles of gender injustice which is rampantly present in the society.

Saru suffers from gender discrimination right from her birth. Saru wanted fair treatment along with her brother from childhood but she was denied of that since the birth of her brother. A birth like any other creation should be an event of jubilation. But Saru is being told by her mother about her birth quite in the opposite direction.

‘It rained heavily the day you were born. It was terrible.’ And somehow, it seemed to me that it was my birth that was terrible for her, not the rains. (169)

From her mother’s words it is quite clear that she being a female was unwanted. Saru represents thousands of girl children who are unwanted. Being unwanted in a family left a deep scar on Saru which somehow led her to accept the assault without protest. She had inside her the fear of rejection and of being unwanted. This is how a girl child is shaped into woman who fears protest only to show that everything is normal in life. Being an elder sister Saru ruled over her brother Dhruva but it was finally he who won over her. He had his revenges which brought him moments of triumph, of cruel gloating. He got the knowledge that he could do anything he wanted with their mother. He knew it too that even their father would come out of his shell for him.

It is clear that Saru’s parents treated them unequally. They favoured their son always. Even her father maintained a distance with her. He had conversations with Dhruva. He used to take him out on the bike with him perching him in front of him on the small seat specially set there on the bar. Saru had consoled herself that it may be the result of the old

fashioned attitude that the daughters are their mothers' business. But Saru was never welcome by her mother too. As she says:

But my mother had nothing for me, either. Whose business was I then? (105)

Saru was introduced to the traditional 'dos' and 'don'ts' set down for the female by her mother. Her mother had asked her not to go out in the sun though there was no reserve for Dhruva.

Don't go out in the Sun. You'll get even 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. (45)

Saru is told very steadfastly how she is different from a boy. Every year on the day of haldi-kumkums the daughter used to become more important than Dhruva. It was a ritual for the daughters who could apply attar with tiny attar-drenched swabs of cotton to the backs of women's hand, sprinkle rose-water over them and distribute flowers. Saru's mother took every care that Dhruva being boy does not participate in it. He was not spared as a child.

And Dhruva crying...Let me. I want to. Ai, look, she won't let me.

Sss, Dhruva, let that alone. It's not for you. That's for girls.

So there!

Putting out her tongue, making a face at him. Triumphant

Exultant.

So there! Not for you. Only for girls. (57)

Not only her mother but the likes of her mother e.g. Maikaki has also tried to make her understand the purpose of a girl's life. She had teased her that if she prepared chappatis

every, the palms and fingers of her hands would become so soft that her husband will never let them go.

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

Saru's entry into the beautiful world of womanhood was embittered by her mother. Saru's mother, being guided by menstrual taboos, had been naïve to guide her daughter beautifully in this regard. Rather her dictates made Saru humiliated. She was prohibited from entering the kitchen or the puja room during her periods; she was made to sleep on a straw mat covered with a thin sheet. She was given drink and food in special cup and plate and was served from a distance. All these enraged the adolescent girl who was treated as pollution. She wanted to scream and rage war against her mother so much more for the fact that put her in the same class as her mother.

If you're a woman, I don't want to be one,... (62)

Bigger jolt came in Saru's life with the death of the brother. Instead of getting more importance for being the only surviving daughter, her tortures increased in leaps and bounds. For no reason her mother stick to the fact that Saru was the cause of her brother's death. She accused her time and again without thinking of its terrible effects on a child's psychology. The dead seemed to matter to her parents more than the alive. The household changed drastically. There were no more celebration of Ganesh Chaturthi, no more *haldi kumkums*, no celebration on Saru's birthday. Her parents started fasting on "Dhruva's birthday. Her mother retired in her shell of self-inflicted punishment never attending any ceremony. Her mother couldn't restrain herself from saying Saru.

...why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead? (191)

This accusation haunted Saru so much that even she blamed herself for her brother's drowning.

If only I hadn't gone there that day...

If only he hadn't come with me...

If only I hadn't left him alone... (184)

Thus Saru is tortured after Dhruva's death. Saru has seen her mother's cruelty to other women also which had intensified her hatred towards her. Once a neighbour had been

telling her mother about a woman who had been ill-treated by the in-laws in a grotesque manner. She had been tied to a peg in the cattle shed for ten years and fed on scraps like dog. Finally after ten years of this tortuous life, the woman had died. This cruel story of a woman would leave a cold feeling on anybody. But Saru's mother had reacted:

But how do we know what she had done to be treated that way? May be, she deserved what she got! (87)

Saru's mother and the in-laws of the woman are the perpetrators of torture on young brides. This is the fate of most of the Indian brides who are inflicted inhuman tortures by the in-laws. Saru had hated her mother with a fierce hatred for the cruel and merciless judgment. Saru, a sensitive girl had made up her mind to be a doctor and show her that she too can achieve something in life like any boy. She had worked hard for it and ultimately had secured enough marks to get admission in a medical college in Bombay. When she revealed her mind to her father, he had agreed but her mother opposed it vehemently. The conversations between Saru and her parents are as follows:-

'But she's a girl'

Yes, I'm a girl. But it's more than that. I'm not Dhruva.

'Well, plenty of girls go in for medicine now.'

'Yes, but they're girls whose father have lots of money. You don't belong to that class. And don't forget, medicine or no medicine, doctor or no doctor, you still have to get her married, spend money on her wedding. Can you do both? Make yourself a pauper, and will she look after you in your old age? Medicine! Five, six, seven.... god knows how many years. Let her go for a B. sc... you can get her married in two years and our responsibility will be over. (144)

Her mother's reaction reduced Saru into a responsibility only. She had thought:

'Is that all I am, a responsibility?' (144)

But Saru had finally won. With her father's help she asserted her will which had earlier seemed impossible. Saru could pursue medicine which was her dream.

Saru goes to do medicine in Bombay and falls madly in love with Manu. A girl who was hungry for love and affection responded to Manu's love promptly. Saru had thought

How could I be anyone's beloved? I was the redundant, the unwanted, an appendage one could do without. (66)

Saru who never got unconditional love from her parents wanted fulfillment through Manu's love for her. But when she breaks the news of her love to her parents once again she faces cruel opposition from her mother. Her mother, a representative of traditional, orthodox society, does not want her daughter to get married to a person of 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? (96)

Being a member ^{of} social hierarchy, her mother could not approve the marriage. But Saru recognized romantic love above caste as the only valid basis for marriage—a radical notion which is the result of her education. So she does not hesitate to defy her parents to settle with Manu. But her mother had warned her:

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. (69)

Saru's mother was adamantly against the marriage. When Manu's teacher Prof. Kulkarni had approached her for reconciliation, she had reacted even more viciously.

Daughter? I don't have any daughter. I had a son and he died. Now I am childless. (196)

She did not stop here only; she had cursed Saru as no mother should do.

I will pray for her unhappiness. Let her know more sorrow than she has given me. (197)

When Prof. Kulkarni related all these to Saru, that had only increased her grief for no daughter expects such treatment from her mother. Saru also comes to know about her mother's hatred for all the doctors as her own daughter was a doctor. She refused even

before her death to go to Saru or to any other doctor. Maikaki had narrated to Saru how even before her death she spat venom for Saru.

What daughter? I have no daughter (109)

Thus Saru was snipped off happiness all the time. Such words from a mother's end leave disastrous effect on anyone's mind.

Saru's ordeal does not stop with the maltreatment at parental home. Saru had defied her parents for her love for Manu. The early years of their love and marriage had been an exalting one but then some kind of incurable disease attacked her marriage. She became a victim once again due to the unequal status of men and women in the society. Saru was completely engrossed by the romantic love of Manu who had once claimed:

I long to believe in immortality. If I am destined to be happy with you here....
how short is the longest life. (65)

Saru too seemed to have found her soul mate in him. She was so happy that she turned down Manu's proposal of trying to reconcile with her parents.

But very soon Saru becomes a victim of female sexuality and its social control (here her husband's control over her body). Marital bliss eluded for Saru as soon as her husband turns maniac, and inflicts tortures on her in the dark of their bedroom. Her happiness became evanescent and unreal after the equation did not match for them. Earlier he had been the young man and Saru his bride. But after Saru became the doctor, she was the lady doctor and he was her husband. Everyone in their locality nodded, smiled, and greeted Saru for being the doctor whereas her husband was ignored completely. Frustration started smoldering in Manu. Saru puts the situation of their relation as:

$a + b$ they told us in mathematics is equal to $b + a$. But here $a + b$ was not, definitely not equal to $b + a$. It became a monstrously unbalanced equation, lopsided, unequal, impossible. (42)

Their marriage was caught in the vortex of a whirlpool on the day when a girl who had come to interview Saru asked Manu:

How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but the bread as well?
(36)

This flare of question had just inflamed the volcanic frustration of Manu which erupted at night as 'monstrous invasion' of her body. He became a stranger at night. The face above her seemed to be the face of a stranger. It was blank, set and rigid; it was a face she had never seen. A man she did not know. Saru at first lulled herself into believing that it was just a nightmare and wanted to forget it. But it had happened to her again and yet again. Manu and Saru had gone for shopping for a suitcase and a few other things that they needed for going to Ooty. They met a colleague of Manu and his wife who having come to know about their outing suddenly became jealous and said about their poor situation for which they cannot afford Matheran even. The wife had taunted the man saying tartly if he had married a doctor he would ^{have} gone to Ooty too. That night Manu became a stranger again. But the very next morning he was a changed man. Saru was taken aback by the marital fraud for Manu behaved completely sane during the day time. He even appeared to be a loving and caring husband. He had said Saru looked very tired and strained. She needed to take things easy and relax. He would take the children off her hands and she should relax so that no more dark circles should appear under her eyes. Saru should have spoken to him the very first day. Her middleclass inhibition to keep things alright made her not to speak.

And each time it happens and I don't speak, I put another brick on the wall of silence between us. May be one day I will be walled alive within it and die a slow, painful death. (96)

She accepts her fate at the same time is unable to continue like that. Saru being a female (for she is expected to be timid and accepting her lot) accepts her monstrous onslaught but a man in her stead would have never accepted such sexual assault (for his ego as a male who knows to dominate would have emerged to restore him.) Saru, a devoted wife thought of quitting her work. She reasoned out that perhaps the torture was there for she was something more than his wife that he has become so. If she could go back to her earlier state where she is nothing but his wife he might change. She even imagined herself in the image of just a wife and mother.

I saw myself, the end of my sari tucked into my waist, hair tied into a neat knot, smiling at them all as I served them all as I served them. And all of them smiled back at me. A mother in an ad, in a movie, dressed in a crisply starched, ironed

sari. Wife and mother loving and beloved. A picture of grace, harmony and happiness. Could I not achieve that? (80)

Finally she gathers courage to say him that she wants to quit her job. But there also she could not exercise her free will. Her husband curtly said that to maintain the social status she needs to move on. There can be no going back. They have to go on. She is once again dominated by the will of her husband. But fortunately that night he behaved sanely. But again the nightmares started gnawing her bit by bit- until she leaves for her parental home in the pretext of visiting her father after her mother's death.

If Saru's life is divided into two phases before and after her marriage, in both of these phases she is victimised due to her gender. And so is the society where woman is discriminated against. If we look at the world that Saru inhabits we see both Saru and other women are mistreated by the indifferent society. Saru for being sentient and sensitive is very much aware of the unequal position of women. Once Manu's friend Vidya, an incipient women's libber said some words which return to Saru almost verbatim as if they had been said for one day the words would have some relevance to her life. Vidya had said that Shakespeare presented a limited vision of life for his is a typical man's view of life to see the man at the centre, the woman always on the periphery. She had further said that it is not just their roles. It is the way he made the woman's personality to merge into the stronger colours of a man's personality. Hamlet, Lear, Othello were clearly different from Ophelia, Cordelia, Desdemona. The women were poor, feeble shadows. And when there was a conflict or a climax the woman always recedes into the background. He disposed of Lady Macbeth though she starts off very splendidly. But the positiveness and action proved too much for the poor female and hence she bows out. On Manu's joke she had asked him where he would like Sarita to be if he writes a play. Saru has said she would be down among the audience applauding all of them. On this Vidya reacted.

'See that you stay there,' Vidya said with a mock sternness. 'Or else, Manu won't like it.' (156)

The popular discourses from ancient time represent women at the periphery which is but a reverberation of the voice of the gendered society. Another incident comes vividly to Saru's mind. Once she had gone to a family for tea. The wife came silently, unobtrusively like a shadow to serve them and went out the same way. The husband's conversation was

not least disturbed by her presence as if she did not exist. He never introduced her to them and even they ignored her too. They ate and sipped the tea as if some waiter provided them the food & the drink. When Saru went to take her leave of her and smiled at her, she did not respond and her face was expressionless. She had successfully effaced her person and had fallen in with her husband's desire.

I looked down at her feet and saw that there was no shadow for some reason, the words came to my mind... If I cast no shadow, I do not exist. (159)

This is the condition of a larger section of women. Saru met her college mate Padma on her way back from hospital. After talking to him they came to know that they both visit the same hospital. For Padma's special efforts they started meeting each other regularly. It had almost become a habit with Saru when one day she refused his offer of lunch. Padma could not accept the answer and banging the door of the car walked away. Another day he came with the offer of a cup of coffee. On listening to Saru's denial he pestered on for listening Saru's yes. The way he uttered her name panicked Sarita.

There was still that little-girl-scared-of-men-and-rape inside my sophisticated exterior, panicking at the thought of a man being interested in me. (131)

This fear of Sarita is the fear of every woman in the society. Every woman carries within herself this fear for the society is unable to ensure her security.

Saru comes to meet her friends Smita and Nalu when she is in her parental home. Smita, her childhood friend opened to Saru another side of a woman's oppression. When Saru exchanged addresses with them, Saru frowned that Smita had written her name as Geetanjali. On questioning her she came to know that her husband had given her that name and he calls her Anju. Saru could not find any reason in it. The drastic change of identity, changing both the names that identified one for so many years, how then one would know oneself.

Though it seemed to Saru somewhat queer actually this is the fate in store for so many women - complete effacement of the self after marriage.

Saru came in close contact with the women of her neighborhood during her visit to parental home. Very soon she came to know the whole range of them their myriad complaints and varying symptoms. She found they have borne silently all the indignities of a woman's life-backache, headache, burning feet, an itch because they felt ashamed to tell someone about these things.

Everything kept secret, their very womanhood a source of deep shame to them.
(107)

They seemed to Saru as stupid silly martyrs, idiotic heroines. They seemed to destroy themselves doing their tasks for meaningless modesty. She could not either pity or admire them for their unconscious, unmeaning heroism, born out of the myth of the self sacrificing martyred woman. Saru treated and prescribed for them and thought even to stay there as a do-gooder in the village. But she knew that in order to change her life to that extent, she needed some impetus from outside to force her into it.

She remembered having read somewhere, in a magazine may be, of Betty Friedan saying that it was easier for her to start the women's lib movement than to change her own personal life. (107)

This is so with the life of women. Again she listens from Madhab how his father punishes his mother by not taking the food she cooks. Madhab has said that he did not eat anything she cooks. Listening to it Saru remembered of the woman in the Sanskrit story of her school text. The woman did not disturb her husband's sleep even to save her child from the fire. It was said that on seeing the woman's blessedness, Agni himself came and saved the child. Saru thought of the writer of the story. Obviously the writer would be some man. The story told all women for all time that their duty to their husband comes first. And women, poor fools, believed in the story. The result was that even today women like Madhab's mother consider it a punishment if not able to serve the husband. Saru herself was not out of these social taboos. When her father failed to give her support as she desired after listening to her lot, Saru blamed her love-marriage for it.

If mine had been an arranged marriage, if I had left it to them to arrange my life, would he have left me like this? (218)

She thought of the girl who had come back as a result of a disastrous marriage. The care and sympathy with which the girl had been surrounded was lacking in Saru's case. For in that case the burden of failure hanged on the parents too. But Saru was to carry the whole burden for hers was a love-marriage.

Saru's life, her mother's life and likewise the lives of women represent that they have no room of their own. Indian women are so groomed from childhood that they even desire death before their husbands'. Saru's mother used to worship the 'tulsi' so that she can die

before her husband. And she had died before her husband. It was all what all women prayed to the tulsī for. Thinking of her own life and her mother's life she thought of Virginia Woolf's famous phrase 'room of her own'.

She immediately related the phrase to her own life and thought... my mother had no room of her own. She retreated into the kitchen to dress up, she sat in this dingy room to comb her hair and apply her *kumkum*, she slept in her bed like any overnight guest in a strange place. And I have so much my mother lacked. But neither she nor I have that thing 'a room of our own'. (136)

She had also thought of her father who being a man led different life.

He had always been so much a man, the master of the house', not be bothered by any of the trivials of daily routine. (20)

Having seen all these discriminations, Saru had burst out in front of Nalu's students when she was asked to talk on medicine as a profession for women.

Listen, girls, she would say, whatever you do, you won't be happy, not really, until you get married and have children. That's what they tell us. And we have to believe them because no one has proved it wrong till now. But if you want to be happily married, there's one thing you have to remember. Have you girls seen an old fashioned couple walking together? Have you noticed that the wife always walks a few steps behind her husband? That's important, very important, because it's symbolic of the truth. A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he's an MA, you should be a BA. If he's 5' 4" tall you shouldn't be more than 5' 3" tall. If he's earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety-nine rupees. 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. Women's magazines will tell you that a marriage should 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 till in your favour, god help you, both of you. (137)

Saru had also referred to about Gita, Draupadi and Shakuntala. For ages they are considered to be epitomes of womanhood. In fact they were dominated by the males in different ways.

If Draupadi had been economically independent, if Sita had had an independent identity, you think their stories would have been different? No, these are things that have been voluntarily surrendered, consciously abandoned, because that is the only way to survive. And what in the long run, matters more than survival?
(137)

She also told the girls how Shankuntala after being rejected by the king was advised by the ascetics to stay on nevertheless in the harem of the king or as the king's slave for he was after all her husband. And when she had tried to follow them back home one of them had cautioned her.

...What, wanton girl, do you desire independence? (138)

So it is very clear that the ancient prescription was that a woman can never desire independence.

Saru has known and seen all these and as human beings have immense potentiality for growth, she too has grown up gradually. She now knows that a female cannot be whittled down and destroyed by domination.

She can be dominated, she can submit, and yet hold something of herself in reserve. (85)

She now knows that there is no escape from going on.

Therefore the only thing is to go on as if it is real, knowing all the while it is only an illusion. (220)

She knows that everyone in the world is alone still life has to go on for that is the only way in life.

All right, so I'm alone. But so's everyone else. Human beings... they're going to fail you. But because there's just us, because there's no one else, we have to go on trying. If we can't believe in ourselves, we're sunk. (220)

She is now ready to assert her individuality and confront the reality and not run away from it as she had done by coming back to her parental home.

My life is my own.....somehow she felt as if she had found it now, the connecting link. It means you are not just a strutting, grimacing puppet, standing futilely on the stage for a brief while between areas of darkness. If I have been a puppet it is because I made myself one. I have been clinging to the tenuous shadow of a marriage whose substance has long since disintegrated because I have been afraid of proving my mother right. (220)

It is the way of life. Every woman should liberate herself from the shackles of unnecessary fear and traditional taboos. In order to manifest one's individuality, a woman should exercise her free will for she has immense potentiality with which she can assert her individuality and realise her dreams. Discontented with the rhetoric of equality between man and woman Saru becomes non conformist and finally wins the race due to her inner strength. Due to the discriminations faced by her both before and after marriage, Saru became disappointed, humiliated and shocked. It took away her breath, her hope, her faith in herself, and her faith in the world. But she regained her self-esteem and could look upright when she made inner-journey into her soul. The process is hard but she has achieved it ultimately.

You are your own refuge:

There is no other refuge.

This refuge is hard to achieve.

- The Dhammapada