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The Quiet After the Night: Gendered Violence and Language Failure in *The Dark Holds*

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Abstract

Violence in its contemporary manifestations extends far beyond physical injury to encompass psychological harm, institutional coercion and discursive silencing. The paper examines violence as a socially produced and ethically ambivalent phenomenon by situating Shashi Deshpande's The Dark Holds No Terrors within this expanded conceptual terrain. Drawing on the philosophical and sociological theories of violence, the paper argues that Sarita despite being a doctor, a profession conventionally associated with rationality, precision an healing, is unable to find a language to articulate her own trauma. It stages the tension between embodied emotional experience and institutionalised linguistic frameworks in confronting gendered violence. Culture as a structure emerges from the appropriation of nature into systems of meaning, order and hierarchy. In this process, women often become central mediating figures through whom institutional values are secured and propagated. Their bodies and labour become sites of where kinship, morality and social continuity are played out. Thusly, culture sustains itself by controlling women and regulating the terms through which they may speak. Consequently, Sarita's trauma is not merely personal but emblematic of a broader social and professional failure of language in negotiating the complexities of power, desire and domination.

Keywords: failure, language, marriage, trauma, violence

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Introduction

Violence can be posited as an act of intimidation or endangerment. Though thinkers like Hannah Arendt and Lewis Coser conceptualise it as a survival mechanism, the power dynamics that underpin its deployment cannot be negated. Violence functions as a means of establishing control across intimate as well as institutional spaces. The sociopolitical landscape is saturated with overt and covert forms of violence, necessitating an inquiry into the mutating spectrum of physical and psychological behaviours through which the phenomenon manifests. It can also be considered as an instrument used by individuals and groups to legitimise competing ideological positions. Since violence resists reduction to an empirical formula or a conceptual criterion, the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence becomes deeply contextual and contingent. Restrained violence mobilised by individual against hostile social forces is often constructed as legitimate. Conversely, unregulated and indiscriminate violence that culminates in destruction of property or death is conventionally labelled as illegitimate. It is this binary of 'good' and 'bad' violence that Gerard Bensussan interrogates:

> This 'good' and just violence is nothing but the realization of my capability to act and to live. It could even stand for life itself in the sense that the latter is always engulfed in conflict and self-preservation. The other form of violence, the 'bad' and the wild, excessive, uncontrollable violence, would be on the contrary, the sinister ally to the destruction of mankind, which as a result is condemned as it spells out all that stands for bad or even for insanity. (Brata Das 4)

Every act of violence seeks to legitimize itself through claims of necessity either as a preventive measure against a greater violence or as a means to secure an orderly social arrangement. In this sense, violence emerges as a powerful but ambivalent phenomenon that is characterized by ethical equivocation rather than moral clarity. Violence may thus be broadly classified as an act driven by animus or by a desire to dominate. On the contrary, reducing its understanding to only physical abrasion would be a grave oversimplification. With time, the concept has expanded to encompass a wide spectrum of harms extending beyond corporeal damage to include psychological damage, institutional coercion and enduring trauma. In the words of Elaine Scarry torture is "Real pain, agonizing pain, is inflicted on a person; but torture, which contains specific acts of inflicting pain, is also itself a demonstration and magnification of the felt-experience of pain" (27). Trauma, by contrast may be understood as a state of psychic and emotional overload produced by a disruptive experience that overwhelms the capacity to cope or assimilate it.

Aim and Objectives

Violence can be understood as a socially conditioned set of practices that are recurrently validated though cultural norms, religious sanction or deviant psychopathology of an individual. Exercised within the ostensibly private domain of the family or by the apparatuses of the nation-state, violence either involves acts of aggression or a subtle denial of agency to the victim. Depending on the mode of

manifestation and its impact on the people, one can discern different types of violence. Violence perpetrated within the domestic boundaries by an authority figure over other members of the family can be classified as interpersonal violence. However, when read through a Foucauldian framework, interpersonal violence exceeds the private and reveals itself as a type of symbolic domination or a force that replicates the social power equation within the private sphere. Interpersonal violence comprises a strategic and patterned modality of domination that ends in to domestic abuse or sexual assault. Within the patriarchal structure, the male head of the family dominates other members, particularly women and also regulates their mobility, production, participation and behaviour. Women find it difficult to publicly articulate their suffering as the perpetrator is a close family member, most commonly the husband. Even in the cases of professionally employed and financially independent women, the intimate nature of abuse layered with social stigma and fear of reprisal acutely constrains avenues for expression, resistance and recourse. It is important to note that language collapses in such contexts as women are unable to find adequate words to express their experiences. Instead of rendering itself as a medium of articulation, language becomes a site of faltered meanings and enforced silence. The insufficiency of language makes the pain of the victim unintelligible, thereby reinforcing the power of the perpetrator.

Padma Shri awardee, Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) exemplifies the role of patriarchy and language failure in supporting interpersonal violence. The novel engages with the psychic and emotional world of the Indian middle class. It does not stage a spectacle of socio-political conflicts but turns inward and maps the domestic life of the protagonist that is replete with fragility, apprehension, guilt and silence. At the centre of the novel stand Sarita (Saru), a successful doctor whose social credibility and professional authority stands in distinct opposition to her vulnerability as a sexually violated wife. This disjunction and its attendant repercussions constitute the three-fold argument of this paper. First, professional expertise or financial independence does not essentially translate into emotional autonomy for women. Second, medical sciences ostensibly devoted to diagnosing and healing ailing bodies prove profoundly insufficient in addressing Saru's own physical and psychic pain. Third, all the dominant languages available to Saru, whether familial, social or professional, fail her thereby questioning the utility of language itself. By placing Saru's medical identity against her lived reality, the novel reveals how modern professions often mask rather than dismantle gender hierarchies.

Analysis and Discussion

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, violence is neither revolutionary nor redemptive. It is cyclical, internalized and emotionally corrosive. Saru hails from a middle-class family where maternal partiality shapes the emotional climate of the house. Her mother's discriminatory treatment engenders sibling rivalry. Her remarks regarding Saru's dark complexion and frail physique profoundly distort her self-perception. The

sustained denial of affection begets a deep-seated resentment in Saru towards her parents but she accommodates Dhruva, her brother with a reluctant tenderness. The dynamics of control and defiance become particularly pronounced when Saru seeks permission to watch a film with a friend and it is denied. As a silent rebellion, she resolves to hide somewhere and derive a perverse gratification from the anxiety that her absence would cause to her mother. As she prepares to leave, Dhruva insists on accompanying her and "the pampered child who would bear no opposition" (186). They reach the spot but the onset of drizzle alters the plan and she urges Dhruva to return home with her. He obstinately persists on building mud fort and thereafter he drowns in a fatal accident. In the aftermath of his death, Saru's mother holds her singularly responsible for the tragedy and severs all communicative links with her. This marks the first instance of language rupture in Saru's life. The household descends into a disturbing silence punctuated by her mother's impassioned outburst "Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead?" (191). The withdrawal of motherly warmth combined with moral condemnation epitomises a type of gendered violence which defies easy categorisation, as it operates within sexes and not across them. This situation exemplifies what Deniz Kandiyoti theorises as a "patriarchal bargain" within which elder women exercise authority over younger women by enforcing normative expectations and disciplining perceived transgressions (247-290). The moral reprimanding of Saru reflects an internalised logic that maternal responsibility is all about surveillance and punishment. "Saru's marital life reveals how patriarchal structures silence female identity within the domestic sphere" (Kumar 90). While such women themselves remain constrained by patriarchy, they derive power by transferring oppression onto younger female subjects. Problematically, the latent desire of younger women to inherit this sanctioned authority underscores the insidious durability of the system.

In this sense, Saru's mother's cruelty is not just a personal failure but an enactment of patriarchal expectation. Her mother retreats into an intensive religiosity, Saru devotes herself to rigorous academic pursuit and eventually becomes a doctor. The trauma that she carries into adulthood is therefore inseparable from the early lessons her mother gives. Saru falls in love with Manohar in college and seeks parental approval to marry him. While her father responds with a restrained silence, her mother openly derides Manohar's caste and precarious financial standing. Saru defies the opposition and marries him, an act motivated more by defiance than romantic idealism. Thus, right from its inception, Saru's marriage becomes a site of resistance than refuge. The early phase of her married life is marked by an array of disquieting experiences. The couple inhabit a squalid apartment characterised by "dank sealed-in odours, women with inquisitive, unfriendly eyes, men with lascivious stares" (40). The hitherto invisible couple gets noticed after people discover that Saru is a doctor. She offers free treatment which earns her social recognition and communal approval. Manohar however views the professional success of his wife as emasculation, which manifests in the form of coercive sexual intimacy. Sex thus becomes an act of domination rather than

mutuality, revealing the way in which patriarchal apprehensions are vented as bodily violence. For a brief period, the birth of her children appears to stabilise the marriage, lending it a semblance of normalcy yet this superficial equilibrium is shattered when an interviewer asks Manohar, "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?" (200). The question strikes at the core of his masculine ego as his financial dependence on his wife is publicly exposed. Unable to redress his wounded pride in any other form, he returns to sexual sadism as a compensatory assertion of power. Saru find herself stuck in an unremitting loop of emotional, physical and symbolic violence that pervades her life from childhood to motherhood.

This crucial juncture of existential impasse disarms Saru, as she can neither communicate with him nor abandon him. The social and medical languages available to her prove insufficient. As a woman, her sufferings would be normalised within the patriarchal discourse hence, she remains silent. "Suffering becomes the medium through which Deshpande's women move towards self-realization" (Pathak 52). On the other hand, she possesses clinical vocabulary, but no words are enough to articulate her trauma. She remains trapped within competing emotional imperatives, unable to translate pain into resolution. This must be read against the broader continuum of gendered violence in India which as Kumkum Sangari notes, "challenges the binary distinction between traditional or culture-specific violence and non-cultural or every day violence, the division between one's 'own' women and 'other' women and even the distinctions between apparently different forms of violence" (325). Saru inhabits a culture saturated with sexualised and demeaning representations of women where they are positioned as objects to be changed rather than agents of change. Her life's trajectory illustrates how structural violence precedes and conditions interpersonal violence. Her husband's sexual aggression is an expression of threatened masculinity within a social order that equates male worth with dominance and economic superiority.

Violence, as Veena Das suggests, often becomes most effective when it is internalised or rendered invisible. Saru's mother's caustic remarks and emotional withdrawal from the girl child reflect an internalised misogyny, a mechanism through which women unconsciously collude with patriarchy. Saru's subjectivity is profoundly shaped by her mother's persistent body shaming. Within an appearance-obsessed society, labels such as 'too skinny', 'too curvy' or 'too dark' operate not as innocuous descriptors but as quotidian forms of symbolic violence that discipline the female body. Saru says, "I was an ugly girl. At least my mother told me so. I can remember her eyeing me dispassionately, saying… You will never be good looking. You are too dark for that" (61). This conditioning limits even Saru's perception of a woman to her body as is evident in her loathing her mother's bodily structure and anxiously disidentifying from it, "I can remember walking as swiftly as possible, holding my pelvis rigid, willing it not to move, so that I would be as unlike her as possible. If you're a woman, I don't want to be one" (63) Womanhood for Saru is apprehended not as a complex social or ethical identity but as a site of vulnerability,

shame, and constraint, defined almost exclusively through the body.

Language becomes a contested spot in the domestic environment, as there exists no socially legitimate vocabulary to name body-shaming as abuse nor any expressive register through which she can contest her mother's remarks without being marked as a deviant or unfilial daughter. The everyday rhetoric covering body shaming under words like 'concern' and 'advice' thus obscures the harm and makes her suffering linguistically illegible. "Deshpande's women are caught between silence and speech, struggling to articulate their inner trauma" (Reddy 73). Saru's silence therefore, must be understood not as the deficiency of an individual but as a structural compromise produced by a patriarchal linguistic economy that forecloses the articulation of female bodily distress even before words are uttered.

The process of Saru's becoming' is shaped by successive acts of negation, negotiation and validation, making the maternal home, the first place where violence is normalised through silence and moral coercion. Her mother's consistent criticism results in psychological erosion, simultaneously invalidating her credibility. On account of its non-spectacular nature, emotional abuse remains difficult to detect, yet it is one of the most corrosive forms of violence. Its presence lingers long after the abuser ceases to exist physically, manifesting in the form of an internalised voice of self-reproach. In this context, Saru's attribution of her failed marriage to her mother may seem abrupt but it carries psychological and ideological coherence. Her anguished confession to her father registers not merely personal resentment but the afterlife of linguistic violence. She says, "I hate her, sapping me of happiness, of everything. She has always done it to me . . . taken happiness away from me. She does it even now when she's dead" (109). The maternal discourse that once disciplined Saru continues to shape the way she understands herself and her surroundings. The author thus exposes a regime in which misogyny and self-effacement collaborate to produce subjects who lack the vocabulary to articulate injury, trauma, blame, guilt and unresolved issues. Saru captures these dynamics with an acute irony, "I had won, but the victory was hers. She managed to draw blood after all, while I had not inflicted even a scratch" (145).

Professional Language and the Illusion of Control

At first glance, Saru's interest in medicine appears to be an act of resistance. As a doctor, she occupies a space traditionally associated with authority, rationality and social respect. Medical science through diagnosing and curing the pathology almost guarantees control over the body and pain. Deshpande systematically dismantles this belief by revealing the profound inadequacy of the medical language when confronted with emotional and sexual trauma. Despite her professional expertise, Saru lacks the vocabulary to name and articulate her suffering. The language of medicine is clinical, detached and objective thus it fails to accommodate experiences that are subjective, shame-laden and socially tabooed. Elaine Scarry's insight that pain 'actively destroys language' becomes particularly relevant here. Saru's trauma resists articulation not because it is unknowable but

because available discourses render it illegible.

The most unsettling episodes of the novel unfold in the intimate space of the bedroom. Manohar's nocturnal sexual violence as opposed to his daytime normalcy creates what at best can be labelled as a dissociative split. This split ironically destabilizes Saru's sense of self instead of Manohar. Her dilemma to open about the routine occurrence forces her into a personality disorganization, She becomes a ". . . two-in-one woman who, in daytime wore a white coat and an air of confidence and knowing, at night became a terrified, trapped animal" (134). The sexual violence has such a deep impact on her mind that she can use only fractured words and disjointed thoughts to recall it, "Or, was it I who was dreaming, going through a terrible nightmare that left behind this horrible aftertaste of fear?" (112). At the same time, she also points out the absence of anything at the core of the act, "when she felt him against her, she knew there was nothing. It was a shame. And something about it sickened her" (86). The void is reiterated when she says, "I was still groping out in the dark, hands outstretched, fingers held out to touch, to feel. But once again . . . nothing" (112). This repeated invocation of "nothing" signals a collapse of language where words fail to name anything ranging from desire to violation. Manu's dysfunctional manhood has dual implications firstly, he does not get pleasure from the assault and secondly, it is a way of reasserting his masculinity on Saru. Violence thus becomes a substitute language through which power is played when emotional, logical and sexual vocabularies collapse. The author deliberately introduces ambiguity into Manohar's actions to complicate an easy moral condemnation. The reader's impulse toward simple vilification of Manohar is averted as Saru herself confirms that selective amnesia is medically possible.

The Ethics of Non-Communication

One of the most profound aspects of Saru's trauma is her inability to speak about it not only to the society but even to herself. Reinforced by cultural beliefs, shame operates as a silencing mechanism that normalizes male entitlement to female bodies under the overarching garb of marriage. This silence is not passive but enforced. As Veena Das argues, violence often descends into the ordinary, embedding itself in daily routines and unspoken understandings. Saru's marriage exemplifies this descent where extraordinary cruelty is normalized through repetition and denial. Her experience resists narrative coherence, oscillating between bodily sensation and disbelief. This division underscores the failure of professional identity to safeguard women against gendered violence. She thinks while talking to her friends that "Bed, the one she shared with her husband, was to her an intensely private place. She could not, would not, draw aside the curtain that hid it from the world" (97). While Saru's medical training equips her to heal others but expressing her own trauma into comprehensible words becomes impossible for her. The absence of bruises or visible injuries further complicates her predicament.

It clearly reveals a that institutional language is not designed to register forms of violence that do not carry a corporeal trace. Ironically, Saru's professional

success exacerbates her marital crisis. Her financial independence and public recognition destabilize Manohar's masculine identity, provoking his violent assertion of control. This dynamic reveals the conditional nature of patriarchal tolerance toward female empowerment: women may succeed, but only to the extent that their success does not eclipse male authority. Saru's silent acceptance of this hierarchal logic is evident in her self-blame and her contemplation of professional withdrawal. Her advice to young women urging them to earn less than their husbands represent a tragic capitulation to structural violence masquerading as pragmatic wisdom. She says:

> 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 . . . No partnership can ever be equal. It is always unequal, but take care that it's unequal in favour of your husband. (137)

Conclusion: Towards Confrontation: Reclaiming Language

The novel's conclusion offers a tentative though significant shift. Saru returns to her paternal home after fifteen years under the pretext of caring for her widowed father. He receives her with a visible apprehension which intensifies her sense of dislocation. Her estrangement is further sharpened by the presence of Madhav, the tenant whose familiarity with the household agonises her. Despite maintaining an emotional distance from Saru throughout her life, her father urges to forgive her deceased mother. This initiates a rare moment of communicative openness that facilitates Saru to speak about the suppressed realities of her married life to her father. He says "Don't turn your back on things again. Turn round and look at them. Meet him" (216). Within this exchange, silence that has been a structuring force in Saru's life gives way to language as ethical engagement rather than professional discourse or strategic evasion. Although the prospect of speaking to Manohar initially terrifies her, she ultimately resists the impulse to escape. The novel's conclusion thus vindicates its title as the decision to initiate dialogue is confusing, risky and incomplete but empowering. Language here becomes not a guarantee of resolution but a threshold for relational renegotiation opening the possibility of a transformed marital dynamic. This confrontation however is not framed as a legal jargon or medical intervention but as an emotional reckoning.

Deshpande resists offering a simplistic resolution as Saru's choice to speak even if in faltering words signals a refusal to remain imprisoned within her inability to speak. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* exposes the reality of a popular belief that rational expertise can transcend social hierarchies. Saru's experience demonstrates that without a parallel transformation in emotional and cultural discourses, professional empowerment remains meaningless. Deshpande also critiques the

epistemological arrogance that scientific knowledge can resolve all forms of suffering. Violence, as the novel reveals cannot be cured through professional competence alone but it demands ethical confrontation and structural change. In this sense, the novel is not just a feminist critique of marriage but a profound meditation on the failure of language to name and confront intimate violence. Media assertions suggest that independent women automatically possess agency. This submission challenges that assumption by examining the ways in which structural and intimate power can erode autonomy despite professional and economic success of women.

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