

Moral Dilemmas and Relational Ethics: A Study of Deshpande's The Dark Holds No Terrors

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The study analyzes the ethical journey of the female protagonist in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), focusing on her moral conflicts and relational ethics. Using Carol Gilligan's theory of moral development, the research aims to explore how patriarchal structures influence the protagonist's moral choices. **Method:** The research employs Carol Gilligan's theory of moral development to analyze the ethical struggles and moral growth of the protagonist, particularly her challenges in balancing family obligations, societal expectations, and personal autonomy. **Results:** The study identifies the key stages where the protagonist faces significant resistance in progressing to the next stage of moral development. It also examines how her relationships with family, partner, and society shape her ethical decisions. **Novelty:** The research highlights the interplay between moral dilemmas and relational ethics in Indian English literature, offering new insights into how societal expectations and family dynamics impact the moral development of women.

INTRODUCTION

Literature has long served as a reflective medium for societal norms, values, and conflicts. Within Indian English literature, the portrayal of women's inner lives has garnered significant attention, particularly in the exploration of moral and emotional conflicts within domestic spaces. Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) stands out as a powerful narrative that delves into the challenges faced by women caught between familial obligations, societal expectations, and personal moral autonomy. This research examines the protagonist, Saru's, ethical journey using Carol Gilligan's theory of moral development. By analyzing Saru's struggles and her relationships with key figures—her parents, partner, and society—this study aims to understand how these factors shape her moral choices and ethical growth.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research follows a qualitative analytical approach, employing Carol Gilligan's theory of moral development as the theoretical framework. The study focuses on three stages of moral development: Pre-conventional, Conventional, and Post-conventional. Through an in-depth analysis of Saru's relationships and moral dilemmas, the study identifies the stage where Saru faces the most significant struggles in advancing to the next level. It further explores how societal norms, patriarchal pressures, and familial dynamics influence her moral choices. The research combines a close reading of

Deshpande's narrative with theoretical insights from Gilligan to analyze the protagonist's ethical transition throughout the novel.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Deeply ingrained patriarchal structures in Indian society often place women in subservient positions within family and community hierarchies. Marriage as a social institution ensures that this hierarchy is maintained. Indian English Literature precisely portrays the burden of inequality carried by women in India. Writers like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, and Kamala Markandaya are the most well-known and prolific Indian novelists who have written in English and have been actively involved in women's problems [1].

Shashi Deshpande has given voice to the silent struggles of educated, working, middle-class, married women through her female protagonists. She primarily focuses on women and their distinct feminine experiences. Deshpande's novels usually commence with an unconventional marriage that causes issues with adjustment, accommodation, and estrangement. As G.S. Amur correctly notes in the Preface to her book, *The Legacy and Other Stories*, "Women's struggle, in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and, most important of all, as human being, is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer, and this appears in all her important stories" (Deshpande). Her narratives are a microcosm of the larger patriarchal world. Veena Sheshadri has rightly pointed out that Deshpande believes in presenting life as it is, not as it should be [2]. Deshpande's works are realistic portrayals of the moral dilemmas faced by Indian women in their relationships with themselves and others.

Many problems not previously recognized by the Indian ethos have emerged as a result of the rise of middle-class working women in society. Even though the husband and wife are no longer in financial trouble due to their increased income, working women's dual duties sometimes make their situation miserable (Yadav and Jha). These women often have to make tough ethical choices, whether to choose their careers over family or compromise their goals to ensure family cohesion, whether to express their individuality or to fit in with society's expectations. Those choices are intricate and hugely patriarchal as they involve not only individual desires but also relationship obligations, social disapproval, and internalized cultural ethics. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Deshpande's first published novel, is a poignant and powerful exploration of these themes. The novel explores the internal struggles of Sarita (Saru), a doctor who seems like a successful and self-sufficient person but is confused by the emotional traumas of her childhood and the repressive relationship with her husband. Saru also faces a lot of moral dilemmas, and patriarchy has a significant impact on her moral judgments. Hence, she is torn between her role as an ambitious professional, a responsible wife, and a devoted daughter.

The realisation that previous ethical frameworks usually disregarded and undervalued women's experiences gave rise to feminist ethics, which is fundamentally a unique approach to conceptualising ethics [3]. It is motivated by a dedication to women's

dignity and examines how power, privilege, and social authority affect morality and ethical theory (Walker, n.d.). Pioneering psychologist, Carol Gilligan, significantly contributed to this field with her ground-breaking work *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982). Gilligan challenged her mentor Lawrence Kohlberg's theory, which advocated for a morality grounded in reason. She argued that women approach moral issues differently than men do [4]. Gilligan observed that Kohlberg's theory was lacking something. She proposed that these theories painted an inaccurate and partial picture of human moral growth because they were mostly based on male patterns of thought while neglecting female voices. Men's focus was on 'ethics of justice', which emphasizes abstract principles, rules, and individual rights, while women prioritise 'ethics of care', which is rooted in relationships, responsibility, and compassion [5]. In women, moral dilemmas arise from "conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights", and resolving these problems requires a way of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract. According to Gilligan, the languages of justice and care are not gender specific, with men speaking only the language of justice and women speaking only the language of care. However, she does hypothesize that they are gender related.

By having a moral voice, Gilligan creates a theoretical space for women, who were previously thought of as problems, objects, questions, or subjects [6]. So far, moral psychologists like Kohlberg have maintained that truth can be discovered by abstraction from relationships. Gilligan's postmodern-inspired approach seems to imply to Kohlberg's followers that they are on a path to failure because the reality of human existence is not found elsewhere, aside from relationships (Linn, n.d.). This research paper focuses on the ethical journey of the novel's female protagonist, Saru, by employing Carol Gilligan's theory of moral development. Gilligan proposed three stages of women's moral development, along with two transitions between the levels; they are Pre-conventional, Conventional, and Post-conventional levels. In the course of their moral development, women are said to move in and out of these three stages [7]. The study further identifies the stage at which Saru encounters the most significant resistance in her progression towards the next stage of moral development as per Gilligan's theory.

A patriarchal culture is one that is founded on a gender binary and hierarchy, a framework or lens that shows human abilities as either masculine or feminine, and favors the masculine. It also gives preference to some men over others and to all men over women. It creates a division between the self and relationships, so that, in effect, men have selves, whereas women ideally are selfless, and women have relationships, which surreptitiously serve men's needs. Patriarchy, though long established and widespread, is incoherent at its core because men's identities depend on relationships, while women's relationships depend on having a self. By suppressing women's individuality and forcing males to deny their yearning for connection, patriarchy harms both sexes. Yet, society discourages admitting this disparity. This research solely focuses on women and will assess how Saru's relationships with her parents, partner, and society influence her moral choices and ethical growth.

Saru's ethical journey starts in the Pre-conventional stage of her early years and profession. According to Gilligan, at the Pre-conventional level, the self and the need to survive are the only factors influencing moral judgment. A woman will choose to attend to her own needs when they conflict with those of others. As Gilligan explains, 'The question of rightness would emerge only if her own needs were in conflict; then she would have to decide which needs should take precedence' (Gilligan, 75). It denotes that moral choice at this stage is guided by self-preservation rather than social or relational expectations.

Saru's moral journey is not conducted in isolation; it is profoundly influenced by the patriarchal dynamics that define her key relationships. Her interactions with her husband, parents, and society produce a web of judgments and expectations that consistently impede her ethical growth. Saru's early years are characterised by her valiant attempt to survive in a difficult and emotionally void environment. She becomes the object of her mother's persistent wrath and blame after her younger brother, Dhruva, drowns accidentally. Women often experience powerlessness at work, at home, and in all other places. The grounds for this subordination are that a girl is socialized to be meek and subservient from an early age by parents and society, who favour a male child over a female child (Goel). Even in Saru's life, the first and most damaging person to enforce patriarchal ideals is her mother. She is a woman who has so deeply absorbed the ideals of the system that she becomes its cruel agent, particularly its preference for the male child. Saru, the daughter, is viewed as secondary, while Dhruva, the son, is cherished. The words of her mother, "You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive when he's dead?" become a recurrent theme of censure, influencing Saru's early awareness (Deshpande, 191).

There is no such thing as love or acceptance for Saru in this hostile environment. In this context, Saru's actions are largely driven by the pre-conventional need for self-preservation. Gilligan posits that during the Pre-Conventional stage, "The concern is pragmatic and the issue is survival. The woman focuses on taking care of herself because she feels that she is all alone" (Gilligan, 75). Saru naturally seeks an alternative mode of surviving in the face of constant emotional destruction at home. Her realization that "I could be a doctor. Yes, that would be the key that would unlock the door out of this life which even then seemed to me dreary and dull" (Deshpande, 140) reveals that her choice to succeed academically and pursue a career in medicine is not just an act of ambition; rather, it is a planned self-preservation tactic meant to make sure that no one ever again challenges her existence or her destiny. Her mother's contempt for her desire to become a doctor is rooted in a patriarchal script. Her mother tries to convince her father by saying, "Let her go for a B.Sc . . . you can get her married in two years, and our responsibility will be over" (Deshpande, 144). She believed that having a good career was secondary because, "medicine or no medicine, doctor or no doctor," a girl would ultimately have to get married, which to her was the ultimate goal of every woman's life (Deshpande, 144). Therefore, Saru understands that she must create her own value in the outside world if she is unable to find it within the family. Her excellence in school turns into a cloak of

protection. Her marriage to Manu is also a result of her tendency to use defiance as a survival tactic. The marriage is not only a revolt against her parents, particularly her mother, who was adamantly opposed to the match due to Manu's lower caste, but also a gesture of finding refuge from an insecure and loveless existence. At this pre-conventional stage, every significant life decision of Saru, whether it is career or marriage, is motivated by self-preservation, a desperate attempt to flee a family situation that threatens her psychic annihilation. Any other orientation would be untenable in a world that has denied her basic worth; thus, her moral compass only points in the direction of survival.

Saru's life undergoes a change when she marries Manu and moves out of her parents' house. Transition One is the term Gilligan uses to describe this change. As women move from the pre-conventional to the conventional stage, they begin to realize the importance of their duties to others. This is a crucial moment when they realize that their prior moral perspective might have come across as a little self-centered (Vinney). In the novel, a growing awareness of Saru's relationship with her husband Manu marks the transition from the survival stage, which is solely focused on herself. Saru initially regards Manu as a traditionally superior-minded husband; nevertheless, as her career progresses, Manu reveals his true colors [8]. Despite having its roots in the desire to flee, Saru's marriage to Manu ironically thrusts her into a life of responsibility. She feels a great responsibility to keep the marriage together, in part to justify the rebellion that brought it about.

At this point, tension arises between her newfound sense of duty to ensure Manu's happiness and her own wants (her successful career). According to Gilligan's research, girls are initially endowed with assertive abilities, but as the message of the dominant patriarchy is sent to them, these abilities are lost, leading to the suppression of their true voices [9]. In the novel, Saru starts to see her own accomplishments as a problem that needs to be handled when her career success starts to eclipse his, causing a wedge between them. As her career success begins to take precedence over his, Saru begins to view her personal achievements as issues that need to be handled, and this creates a barrier between them. Once a means of survival, she describes her success as a selfish indulgence that causes pain to Manu.

Saru moves into the second stage of Gilligan's paradigm, after being married for a while, and this is referred to as the Conventional Stage. At the conventional level, moral judgment is concerned with caring about other individuals. Women begin identifying themselves as members of a society whose claim to being good citizens relies on helping and protecting others (Vinney). She completely puts the relationship's perceived requirements ahead of her own. She is trapped for years in Gilligan's Conventional stage of "goodness as self-sacrifice" because of these relationships, which are the primary mechanisms through which patriarchy exerts its influence. She absorbs the idea that a good woman should be obedient and prepared to make sacrifices for her husband and family.

Saru's mother, who was raised with patriarchal ideals, could only view her daughter as a burden who needed to be married off to a different family. Due to the mother's relentless condemnation, Saru's morality is dominated by fear and guilt. Saru's mother portrays the active aspect of patriarchal tyranny, whereas her father represents its passive face. Although he is not a harsh man, his silence in the face of his wife's unfair treatment is a powerful lesson for Saru. It is not explicit, but it seems that he does not disagree with her mother's treatment. Barbara A. Viniar mentions in her thesis that, "The patterns of behavior characteristic of the conventional stage are encouraged, if not mandated, by society's expectations of women" (Viniar, n.d.). Saru's father also represents the society, due to which Saru learns a harsh moral lesson from his silence that even those who care for you may not come to your defense; therefore, one should neither seek help nor speak out. Her marriage is directly affected by this learnt helplessness. Her father's inaction serves to validate the existing power structure. She chose to keep quiet about Manu's nocturnal attacks because she was taught as a child that her voice is unimportant and her suffering is invisible. His failure to shield her establishes a moral framework in which it appears that the only practical course of action is to suffer in silence.

The novel effectively conveys the idea that this conventional stage is a patriarchal cage rather than a normal or benign stage of growth for women in this setting. In Gilligan's second stage, Saru has her most profound and terrifying moral struggle. In fact, at this stage, she encounters the most significant resistance in her progression towards the next stage of moral development. Social conventions dictate that a "good woman" or "good wife" should be modest, obedient, self-effacing, and should always be a few feet behind her husband. In this ideology, self-negation is praised as a virtue, effectively trapping women in a condition of hindered moral development. This ideology is ruthlessly enforced by Manu's violence. When her medical practice expands, she surpasses her husband in her career and becomes the breadwinner of the family, flipping the traditional power dynamic he expected. This directly threatens Manu's male ego, which is predicated on the patriarchal expectation of masculine superiority. His violent patriarchal retaliation pushes her into a painful cycle of self-sacrificing "goodness". His sense of humiliation and an inferiority complex curdle into sadism, for which Saru partially holds herself responsible as she observes in Mohan "Something missing in the eyes, in the face, in the man himself. And, oh god, maybe I'm the one who's taken it away from him!" (Deshpande, 48). This demonstrates that patriarchy prevents women's experiences from being acknowledged and, in addition to that, imposes certain norms that restrict women's voices and free expression. In such a situation, women are often compelled to adopt the patriarchal voice and speak in terms of it. Gilligan notes that such a voice is different from "women's voice" [10].

Social institutions are structured in such a way that they speak the language of the dominant group and uphold the authority of the linguistic techniques employed by the dominant gender (male). This worsens the situation for women, since they encounter difficulties in expressing and articulating their perspectives in the prejudiced masculine

discourse. The societal indifference towards women's voices and the neglect of their lived experiences make them inarticulate, mute, voiceless, and powerless. They become incapable of conveying their distinct social realities. She hides her anxiety and her bruises. In a frantic attempt to sustain her marriage and complete her perceived obligation to her husband, she suffers horrifying abuse in silence at the expense of her own safety, self-respect, and identity. In order to preserve the family's façade, she sacrifices her own well-being by treating the abuse as unreal and avoiding facing the reality of her circumstances. This is the central moral crisis of the novel. Saru links speaking up for herself with losing relationships. However, she does not realize that 'Agreement is easier and neater, but it comes at the expense of a genuine relationship'. A genuine relationship is one where she can voice her opinions, where conflict, disagreement, and intense feelings may occur. However, a relationship in which she keeps quiet out of fear of what will happen if she speaks her mind is definitely a false relationship [11]. Even if she desires to talk, she will have to contend significantly with societal constraints.

After marriage, dormant gender prejudices force women into unpaid domestic work. As a result, newly married women and mothers reduce the hours spent performing paid work, hindering career growth [12], [13]. Other social elements that impact women's career continuity include patriarchal and collectivist societal and family structures. Even Saru thinks about giving up her career due to patriarchal family structures. In order to appease Manu's frail ego and bring peace back, she considers quitting her job, saying she wants to look after the home and children full-time. It shows that she has internalised a system that views her achievement as a violation of gender norms. Her moral choice to sacrifice her career is not an isolated decision; rather, it is a conditioned reaction to a system that frequently places a man's ego and prestige above everything else. The patriarchal order is upset by her achievement, and she comes to view this as a personal moral failure. At the conventional stage, women's concern for others takes precedence over themselves, resulting in a self-sacrificing ethic [14], [15]. In order to restore the "natural" balance and appease the male partner, Saru chooses to shrink herself and sacrifice her accomplishments in an attempt to save the marriage, thus upholding the patriarchal structure. Saru even thinks of her children and stays silent; 'I couldn't shout or cry, I was so afraid the children in the next room would hear' (Deshpande, 201).

Despite being financially independent, Saru's situation is miserable as she becomes a broken person who leads a dual existence. Throughout the day, she is the competent, well-respected Dr. Sarita. At night, he ruthlessly reminds her of her assigned gender role and his physical strength by sexually assaulting her, turning her into a powerless object. He has to "make her a woman" in order to reclaim his sense of manhood. This dichotomy effectively conveys the deep tension she experiences between her developing, realised self and the traditional, self-sacrificing position she is desperately trying to fulfil.

The invisible cage that supports these dynamics is formed by society as a whole. The unspoken rules about marriage, the shame associated with divorce, and the

glorification of female sacrifice create an environment where Saru has few alternative paths. This has a major impact on Saru's moral decisions. Society offers Saru no script for being a successful professional and a wife to an insecure man. It offers no support to a victim of marital rape. Her suffering becomes extremely private due to the lack of societal recognition of her situation. Saru's greatest moral struggle, then, is not just an internal conflict; rather, it is a conflict with a strong external institution that has a vested interest in keeping her ethically "stuck" in a position of traditional self-denial. Her ethical development is hampered because society frames a shift towards self-assertion (Gilligan's Stage 3) as failure and selfishness rather than as growth, a failure to be a suitable, accommodating woman. Therefore, her revolt must be against the patriarchal society she lives in as a whole, not only against her spouse or her background.

When only others are recognized as the recipients of a woman's caring, her exclusion leads to relationship issues, resulting in a disequilibrium that triggers the second transition [16]. The second transition of a woman's moral development occurs when she starts to wonder if self-sacrifice without question can really be considered to be moral. In the second transition, Gilligan talks about a reinterpretation of personal values when women learn to distinguish between self-sacrifice and care. In accordance with Gilligan, for a "morally mature" woman, decisions are not just about fixed ideas of right and wrong. She understands the situation by thinking about the people involved and how her choices affect them. Gilligan is optimistic for the morally mature woman. It is suggested that women should be able to discern between self-sacrifice and caring, and that neither maturity nor morality functions to blur this distinction, but rather structures around gender and power which lock women into caregiving and caretaking roles [17].

The word "selfish" frequently appears during this transition. Women struggle greatly to develop a caring philosophy that does not rely on self-sacrifice, particularly in light of society's equation of goodness and self-sacrifice. Less sacrifice could be interpreted by women, their families, and their peers as less care, and the stability of their lives could be threatened by the renegotiation of relationships based on the new moral reasoning. Both internal and external strengths are necessary for the conflict created by this transition to be resolved successfully (Viniar, n.d.). This stage of Saru's development is the most crucial and painful. This shift for Saru starts when she returns to her father's house after the demise of her mother. Her choice to go home is more or less self-serving in the most ideal sense. She admits that she has come to herself, to escape that cocoon of isolation and lonely misery rather than to comfort her father after the loss of her mother. This phase of the change is crucial as she is consciously prioritizing her own need for healing. It is the change from a morality of "goodness" (pleasing others) to one of "truth" (honestly appraising one's own needs and desires too). Her physical and emotional space from her marital duties allows her to contemplate the very meaning of "goodness" that has shaped her life.

At this point, Saru begins to reconsider the relationship between morality and endurance. For many years of her married life, she felt that it was her responsibility as a woman to put up with her husband's violence and hostility. However, she starts to doubt

these lessons when she replays them in the solitude of her parents' house. When she is away from Manu, she faces the reality of her circumstances, that her self-sacrifice was a kind of self-annihilation rather than a virtue. She contemplates the patriarchal situations she encountered and states that 'Everything in a girl's life, it seemed, was shaped to that single purpose of pleasing a male. But what did you do when you failed to please? There was no answer to that. At least, no one had given her an answer so far' (Deshpande, 163).

As she realises the "good wife" was a sham that allowed abuse, she starts to dismantle the identity she had taken on.

She expresses her anger, guilt, and despair by giving an imaginary speech to a group of female students:

"Listen, girls, she would say, whatever you do, you won't be happy, not really, until you get married and have children. ... No partnership can ever be equal, 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. That's a wrong that will never be forgiven" (Deshpande, 137).

At this point, Saru begins to redefine morality as being true to herself rather than as blind endurance. However, patriarchy thwarts this change by fostering fear and shame. She is caught in an ethical dilemma, torn between walking away and finally being honest with herself. This struggle is the core of transition two; it is a painful but inevitable process of confronting the false morality of self-sacrifice.

This journey culminates in a post-conventional moral realization that includes self-care as an equal and legitimate component of the ethical equation rather than rejecting it. It opposes exploitation and suffering, adopts inclusion and nonviolence as ideals, and moves from goodness to the reality of relationships. At this point, care becomes a self-selected ideal that is defined by a refusal to give up the duty to care while still appreciating the significance of justice or fairness. The development of a care ethic is shaped by a deeper grasp of social interaction dynamics and a more nuanced concept of relationships in psychology, which is characterized by a greater difference between oneself and others. The idea that the self and the other are intertwined forms the basis of this ethic, which is an accumulation of knowledge about human interactions (Gilligan). A non-violent meta-ethic, causing the least amount of harm to oneself and others, replaces self-sacrificial conventional morality without returning to autonomy or selfishness, overcoming the tension between the self and the other and making care a function of interdependence rather than self-sacrifice. Gilligan states that the third stage entails the concern for relating to others; the realization that one is interconnected with others and that life, no matter how valuable it is on its own, can only be sustained in relationships (Khom).

After her mother passes away, Saru returns home to pursue her own healing rather than to comfort her father, marking the beginning of her transition from the Conventional to the Post Conventional stage. In the serene, emotionally detached

environment of her childhood home, she finally confronts the ghosts of her past: the profound grief over Dhruva's passing, the complex hatred for her mother, and the terrible reality of her marriage. Her meek, aloof father serves as the unexpected impetus for her ultimate moral awakening. After she finally tells the truth about Manu's abuse, her father does not provide an explanation. Instead, he gives her a simple, powerful directive: "Don't turn your back on things again. Turn round and look at them. Meet him" (Deshpande, 216). This guidance is life-changing. He says, "Don't go without meeting your husband. Talk to him. Tell him what's wrong" (Deshpande, 1990). It forces her to adopt a new morality of accountability and confrontation in place of her ingrained pattern of escaping. He also aids her in her endeavor by telling her I told you... They're dead. They can do nothing. Why do you torture yourself with others? Are you not sufficient for yourself? It's your life, isn't it?" (Deshpande, 217). Through these statements, he tries to instill confidence in her and reassure her of her own strength.

Saru's declaration "My life is my own" (Deshpande, 220) is a moment of tremendous self-actualization. After this self-actualization, she also chooses to forgive Manu. This stage of thinking aims to balance the requirements of the self and others, to be accountable to others and, therefore, "good", while simultaneously being accountable to oneself and, therefore, "honest" and "real" [18]. This is the cornerstone of her new, post-conventional morality.

Saru's progression into the post-conventional stage is inseparable from her negotiation with patriarchy. She is surrounded by patriarchy, which tries to suppress her. She is constantly reminded by the voices of her mother and society that women who resist are condemned. By imposing self-sacrifice, naturalising male domination, and instilling guilt, patriarchy impedes her moral development. Manu's bitterness, her mother's favouritism towards her brother, and society's censure all work together to uphold the traditional stage of morality. However, Saru is able to resist these difficulties due to her new moral perspective. Saru does not give up on her obligation to others by adopting the ethic of non-violence; instead, she learns to combine it with her own responsibilities. She transcends self-centeredness and self-sacrifice to achieve a balanced morality where justice and care coexist.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : The study highlights Saru's moral journey through Carol Gilligan's stages of moral development, focusing on her struggle for autonomy in a patriarchal society. The research identifies the conventional stage, marked by "goodness as self-sacrifice," as the site of Saru's greatest moral conflict, driven by patriarchal pressures from family and husband. The novel illustrates how these forces trap women in destructive moral frameworks and how Saru's eventual shift to a morality of truth and accountability marks her transition into the Post-conventional stage. **Implication :** The research underscores the potential of Carol Gilligan's theory to reveal the impact of patriarchal structures on women's moral development. It suggests that morality for women in a patriarchal society is not about silent suffering, but the ability to challenge

norms, embrace self-care, and develop a balanced moral perspective that integrates personal agency and relational responsibility. **Limitation** : The research focuses primarily on the protagonist's moral development, and while it examines the influence of patriarchal forces, it does not explore in depth the broader social and historical contexts that shape these gendered moral struggles. Additionally, the study centers on a single character, limiting the scope for comparison with other female characters in similar literary contexts. **Future Research** : Future studies could explore the application of Gilligan's theory to other female characters in Indian English literature or across different cultural contexts. Further research could also investigate how the intersection of gender, class, and education influences the moral development of women in patriarchal societies. Additionally, examining the influence of external social and historical contexts on female moral autonomy would provide a more comprehensive view of women's struggles for moral agency.

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