

**Contextualised Trauma: An Exploration of Trauma Experienced by Women with Emphasis on the Cultural and Social Context.**

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**Abstract**

The concept of trauma has been gaining momentum in the recent times. With many writers bringing out works on the explorations of trauma, new avenues and perspectives on trauma have opened up lately. The trauma underwent by women is distinct and different from the trauma faced by men. A woman suffers trauma because of a number of factors. Especially, when the women inhabit a culturally codified world with strict patriarchal norms, her trauma tends to be different. The core idea of this paper is to shed light on this unique nature of her trauma which may lead to more understanding and empathy towards her suffering. The paper also attempts to focus on the various methods and techniques employed by the authors to communicate the intensity of trauma without diluting its severity. The paper places at the centre of its study, the novel, “The Dark Holds No Terror” by Shashi Deshpande. It seeks to analyse and establish the ways the author of the novel uses to portray trauma felt in the context of a patriarchal society.

**Keywords:**

Contextualised Trauma, Third World Difference, Myth of the Willing Victim, Insidious Trauma, Interpersonal Trauma.

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Literature of recent times have opened many avenues to deal with traumatic experiences felt by its protagonists. Trauma, so long considered a scientific inquiry, made its way into the literary arena lately. According to Christa Schönfelder, “Literary Texts and their fictional worlds allow for nuanced engagements with the subject of trauma, which is often personalised and contextualised, fictionalised and historicised, as well as psychologized and metaphorized at the same time” (Schönfelder 29)

In this potential, literary texts, through the presentation of the afflicted and suffering characters offer a glimpse into the mind of a traumatized person. The subjective approach as opposed to a clinical and objective approach, helps the readers to empathise with the person

suffering the said trauma. Literary works with their potential to present various character types can broaden our perception of trauma.

According to Caruth. “trauma demands a mode of representation that textually performs trauma and its incomprehensibility through, for example, gaps and silences, the repeated breakdown of language, and the collapse of understanding.”( Unclaimed 115)

So, though a literary text affects empathy with the characters, it still has to effectively communicate the trauma to not dilute its grievous nature. Trauma is so intense. A text has to ensure the fact that the mental turmoils of the character is communicated without any lack in the effectiveness.

Apart from the methods listed by Caruth, there is also the use of dreams to write about, which are but a manifestation of the broken psyche, to explore the character’s mind. There are many real-life instances of trauma victims suffering from threatening dreams. Many texts employ dreams and flashbacks sandwiched between troubled reality, to bring about an understanding of the traumatised mind

Shashi Deshpande’s novel, “The Dark Holds No Terror” is a narrative of trauma underwent by one of its principal characters. Saru, the protagonist of the novel suffers immense conflicts in her mind. The novel delves into the mind of the suffering woman. It documents her thoughts and her reactions to the trauma she faces in her life.

As stated earlier, the novel provides the platform to study the trauma from various perspectives. Though Saru’s trauma has a personal angle to it, it still has other factors affecting it. The trauma experienced by her is well-embedded in the cultural and social context. The nuanced engagement that Schönfelder talks about is culture in this case.

Saru, the principal character in the novel is a doctor, who marries Manohar, against the wishes of her family. Though Saru’s marriage is one of love, Saru is constantly pained and afflicted in the relationship. Saru’s growth in her profession disturbs the insecure Manohar, who goes through a tough time in his profession. His insecurity and need to prove himself superior makes him behave sadistically towards her.

Saru’s trauma born out of her husband’s behaviour grows in her mind. First, it manifests itself in the form of doubts expressed by her about her self-worth. Most South Asian woman deem themselves the problem in the face of a trouble, as society keeps trying to change and fix them. Saru’s state of mind is best reflected in the following lines, “It is because I am something more than his wife that he has become what he is. If I can go back to being nothing but his wife...and yet was I ever that? ... he may no longer resent me.” ( Deshpande, 78)

Saru puts up with the trauma for a long time, fearing the outcome of disclosing her husband’s nature. Saru’s ironical situation of being highly qualified and harbouring a fear of society, can seem absurd in the absence of the cultural context. In many culturally bound societies women do not become fully sufficient, the moment they became educated or financially independent. It takes a long time for society to accept them and an even longer time for them to break out of the cultural moulds they have inhabited for long.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her work, “Under Western Eyes : Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” focussed on the need to study women’s problems within the cultural

context as she opined that the experiences studied in a general concept as done by the western feminists could reduce the intensity of the suffering by the Third World Women.

She introduced the concept of 'Third World Difference' to illustrate her point. According to Mohanty, "An analysis of sexual difference in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogeneous notion of what I call Third World Difference".(Mohanty 335).

Taking cue from Mohanty's work, it is essential to study trauma within the framework of a cultural and social context just like studying the experiences and oppression of women with reference to their situation in a culture and society. Trauma in the countries belonging to the global south is owing to a lot of reasons. The culturally inscribed strict patriarchal parameters on the behaviour and life of a woman are reasons that cause much stress and strain for her.

Sometimes, the trauma experienced by the women is so imperceptible or hushed up that it doesn't get to be talked about with the required seriousness. Laura S Brown talks about an insidious trauma, by which she means a trauma that impacts the soul and spirit of the victims without involving overt violence. The Global South has recorded many cases of real trauma which involves violence, however there are also many cases of insidious trauma, where the woman is made to feel lost within the suffocating societal norms.

The Global South is also a region that has instances of trauma in the interpersonal space. Laura Brown furthers the concept of interpersonal trauma when she says, "a feminist analysis calls us to look beyond the public and male experiences of trauma to the private, secret experiences that women encounter in the interpersonal realm and at the hands of those we love and depend upon." (Brown 122)

Interpersonal trauma is a trauma that happens within the bounds of one's home and the perpetrator is someone known to the known. The effects of an interpersonal trauma is so severe because the victim ends up occupying the same space as the victimiser, leading to more fear, disillusionment and anxiety taking root in the victim's mind.

In interpersonal trauma, the victim is silenced and the experience of the trauma is dismissed. Laura Brown introduces the concept of the 'Myth of the Willing Victim' in her work, "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma." She says, "If we maintain the myth of the willing victim, who we then pathologize for her presumed willingness, we need never question the social structures that perpetuate her victimization." (Brown 127)

By perpetuating the myth of willing victim of interpersonal violence, culture and society reduces the gravity of the trauma and normalises the behaviour of the perpetrator to uphold power relationships in a patriarchal society. However, it makes the woman bear the brunt of trauma that is multiplied in her mind many times.

Having understood this nature of trauma in the Global South, it is essential to see how the literary arena reflects trauma in the context of a specific culture and society. Shashi Deshpande's "The Dark Holds No Terror" checks all the boxes of trauma discussed earlier. Saru's trauma is a result of strict culture and gender norms. Her interpersonal trauma within the bounds of her home, silences and scares her from disclosing it to anyone.

The trauma experienced by Saru is both real and insidious. The physical manifestations of the trauma inflicts pain whilst the mental aspect of her causes to lose track of herself. The trauma

is intensely experienced by her, that in the long term, it breaks her psyche. Though Saru refuses to play the role of a willing victim in the trauma inflicted on her, she bottles up her grievances fearing the society. The society in the Global South is fast to point fingers at the women victims in the event of a conflict.

This context-specific trauma experienced by Saru is effectively represented through the use of dreams and flashbacks by Shashi Deshpande. In the beginning of the novel, Saru goes to her father's home and it is from there the story unfolds. In between the scenes of her present in the father's house, events from her traumatic past are placed. This technique of juxtaposing two different times of the character's life - one a time of quiet and other a time of much mental and physical strife, works well in bringing out the effect of trauma.

Saru feels relatively at peace in her father's house. Though the house is simple and devoid of much comfort, she feels at home. However, the past incidents at Manohar's house are one's filled with fear and confusion. The way Manohar believes that it is nothing wrong to inflict sadistic behaviour on one's wife, points to the privileged way men behave in most societies. Thus, Shashi Deshpande has juxtaposed quiet vs chaos, to reflect the mind of the traumatised person.

Another important impact of trauma is the way it hinders a person's thinking capacity. Shashi Deshpande presents this difficulty in the character of Saru quite clearly. Saru is constantly conflicted in her mind and she finds it hard to think clearly about things or arrive at solutions. The trauma felt at the hands of Manohar, triggers latent traumatic thoughts in her life and makes her withdraw further into her shell.

Saru also keeps second guessing her thoughts and actions, which is purely a trauma response. The Traumatic experience has destroyed her confidence completely and eroded her self-worth that she dwells in a constant state of self-doubt and paranoia with no resolve in her life. In all these traits expressed, Saru represents many women who are psychologically bothered by the unfair gender norms.

Shashi Deshpande in writing about the trauma experiences within a culture and society, becomes a strong voice of multitudes of women who have been silenced by society. As a sensitive writer, championing the cause of women, Shashi Deshpande focusses on the mental well-being of women. The novel centred around the emotional and mental strife of a woman is in itself a fitting reply to the society that places less significance on these aspects of a woman's life.

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