
Debility of Physique and Cognizance Captured by Indu Sundaresan in *The Shadow Princess*

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Abstract: Disabilities are of different types and each pose differing levels of severity. Life with challenging physical or mental conditions is neither humble nor relaxed. Dependency on others for meagre needs cripples the confidence too; but is always not the physical conditions alone that pose challenges, even incapacitated thoughts can incur trials. Situations like losing someone dearest, accidents, malignant circumstances, medical incapacities and psychological challenges all can become problematic and freeze the stable conditions of a person. *The Shadow Princess* by Indu Sundaresan is a historical novel based on Mughal empire, and the reign of Shah Jahan. The unexpected sudden demise of the emperor's wife brings many challenging conditions to the forefront. The problems are not literal disabilities of challenged group, rather it is an assortment feelings and disabilities of inner and out self. The psychological disabilities could be experienced through the characters of Shah Jahan and Jahanara; his eldest daughter. This paper focusses on some of the debilities of body and mind captured in the novel.

Introduction

Indu Sundaresan, one of the novelists, whose works have catapulted the interest of readers in Indian history to a level higher is of Indian origin. She has been fascinated with the aura of the Mughal empire since her childhood through the beautiful narrations of her father. Despite moving to foreign lands and settling abroad, she has kept herself rooted to the Indianism. The route to India is through her works, she transports readers into Mughal period easily. She had been a voracious reader of the history and her imaginations have given a different picture to the historical facts; thereby forming a fictitious world of historical facts. The collection of her works include Taj Mahal trilogy (*Twentieth Wife* (2002), *The Feast of Roses* (2003), *Shadow Princess* (2010), *The Splendour of Silence* (2006), *In the Convent of Little Flowers* (2008), and *The Mountain of Light* (2013). She has been awarded with Washington State Book Award for *The Twentieth Wife* in 2003 and Light of India award for Excellence in Literature.

Psychological disability of the Emperor

Khurram, as the emperor Shah Jahan is very much in love with his wife Arjumand alias Mumtaz Mahal, the exalted one of the palace; a title bestowed upon her after their wedding. Emperor's love knows no bounds and he has never thought of any other woman in Mumtaz's position. They have had successful wedded life and their fourteen children guarantee the union. The novelist beings the novel with the birth pangs of the fourteenth child and the aftermath of the delivery which shatters the world of the emperor altogether. He broke the rules and decorum for his wife, his presence at the delivery room is evident for the love and care he had towards her; "...and she screamed, frantic with worry that Khurram would hear; he was sure to be nearby, though he was not allowed to enter the birthing chamber." (*The Shadow Princess*, p. 4)

Shah Jahan's love for his wife was immeasurable, his concern for her is evident through the care he shows during her delivery of fourteenth child. He remains constantly with her and asks his daughter Jahanara to take care as well. They do not leave her even for a second, and Mumtaz also stays attached with Shah Jahan. It is unfortunate that she succumbs to post-delivery ailment. It is the demise of Mumtaz that takes a toll on Shah Jahan, it leaves him totally disabled psychologically. He doesn't participate in the affairs of the state and keeps himself truant from appearing at the Jharoka as well.

It is after his wedding with Arjumand, he had the hunger to gain the powers in the empire. He had decided not to marry anybody after Arjumand, though she was the third wife, her superiority remained intact until her death. He was completely smitten by the beauty and love of his wife. He even rejected the marriage proposal brought by Nur Jahan of marrying Ladli, her daughter. His desire to become the emperor to make his wife the empresses had compelled him to usurp the authority held by his father and also restrained Nur Jahan of her supremacies, "when... she was alive, there was something to fight for, a reason to be Emperor." It was his unending love which enabled him to plan for constructing the Taj Mahal for commemorating her love and presence in his life, "Mumtaz Mahal had died in Burhanpur, but she would live for posterity in the brilliant tomb that Emperor Shah Jahan would build for her in Agra... the Taj Mahal." (The Shadow Princess, p. 23)

After the death of Mumtaz, Shah Jahan becomes physically weak too. He completely lost himself and became cold inside and out,

He wondered if he would himself last many days without Arjumand; it was unimaginable, a life without her... his tears fell. His ears were filled with the crashing of rain on the white canvas of his umbrella... He would wear only white for the next few years. His shoulders stooped under the slender weight of the umbrella's gold-encased stem, and he felt himself age. Something had died inside him also. (The Shadow Princess, p. 21)

Shah Jahan's life had no meaning after the death of his wife. He became lifeless and did not participate in any of the affairs. He kept himself aloof and allowed only his daughter to be with him throughout. His words to Mahabat Khan show how distasteful he had become of everything, "I have no wish to live, Mahabat, let alone reign any more. What use is it to possess these lands and this wealth?" Shah Jahan's morale remains down thereafter, despite gaining some composure, his memories of Mumtaz daunt him often. He grows weak both physically and mentally. It is not only the physical deformity that could render one weak, but the loss of true love could also disable the inner and outer strength. He is completely dependent on Jahanara for most of his decisions, his unstable conditions motivates Aurangzeb towards gaining powers and the only work which Shah Jahan concentrates is constructing the monument to immortalize Mumtaz Mahal.

Inadvertent Circumstances Incapacitating Jahanara

Jahanara, one of the daughters of Shah Jahan is the shadow princess the novelist has focused on in this work. She remains under the shadow of her father throughout and later under the power and support of her brother, Aurangzeb. It is shown, Jahanara as one of the important persons in the life of her parents. She remains until the demise of her mother, protecting her and taking care of her. Even after the demise of her mother, she remains very close to her father taking care of him and she almost becomes the most important person in the entire empire. Even the other wives of Shah Jahan do not gain the significance which Jahanara had managed to get.

Jahanara is very young, very beautiful just like her mother and has all the possible conditions to make her suitable for any man to fall for her, yet her disabilities are found overpowering; it may not be the physical weakness or challenges but the psychic feebleness. She is not able to confess her desires to her father, her love for Najabat Khan remains a private affair. Her self-esteem grows weaker day by day, inspite of undisputed power and wealth in the empire. Her wishes of marrying Najabat are dismissed by herself on realizing the truth that the absence of her mother has rendered her disabled. She does not have the rights to follow the desires of her heart, rather is forced to look after the aging father. Forcing her inner desires only makes her immoral to a larger extent,

she develops a secret affair with Najabat and also gives birth to a son. She has to live a helpless life, devoid of any relief either from her father or other siblings. Jahanara is very strong and bold personality, just like her grand aunt Mehrunnisa, but unlike Mehrunnisa, she is not capable of taking her plans or desires to fruition. She goes against the customary practice during the funeral of her mother, she acts boldly like a man supporting her father and carrying out her duties, but her womanly weaknesses are evident in her failures. Jahanara, became the Padshah Begum after the death of her mother. She held the chief responsibility of bringing normalcy in the life of her father and in the court and other works. So many titles and powerful responsibilities could not keep her mentally strong. She diligently participated in every affair, shared her opinions and made important decisions, but as far as her life is concerned, she remained indifferent. In addition to her unstable personal life, the disability reflected in her physical self, when she met with a fire accident. A few days after her thirtieth birthday, she had accidentally burned herself with severe degree of burns, which almost could have succumbed her to death, but prayers and treatments saved her. She was bedridden for several months, unconscious of the conditions, and even royal physicians were unable to save her. Her past life and sins of birthing a child through an unwedded life, manifestation of cognition in the form of letters to Jahanara leaves her shattered. The men in Jahanara's life, could be held responsible for the inadequacy in the fulfilment of her inner desires. Her father required her in his presence to fulfil the void left by Mumtaz, and later it was Aurangzeb who wanted her as his enthusiast. Jahanara had spent her life repairing the impairments of her father initially and brother in the latter stage of life, the two men on the other hand, never cared to understand her personal desires or needs "But Aurangzeb had always been this self-centered, stifling her with his supposed love but unwilling to think of her- what she wanted and needed." (The Shadow Princess, p. 265) Disability is the unstable condition of either mind, body or both. Cognitive, intellectual, developmental, physical, sensory and mental dysfunctionalities are different types of disabilities; Shah Jahan and Jahanara have had the best childhood, unabusive, affluent, and influential status with unending choices, yet demented circumstances and mutilated relationships led them into disharmonious experiences. Thus, the life of the emperor and the shadow princess were more or less prone to disabilities equivalent to scientifically elucidated conditions, one such experience soon after the fire accident reveals the pain of a cognitively challenged person, "her burns became infected, her breathing slowed almost to nothing, and when she opened her eyes she did not recognize anyone in the room." (The Shadow Princess, p. 317)

Conclusion

Scientific reasons for disabled conditions may not be appropriate while discussing the deformities of Shah Jahan or Jahanara Begum, yet the circumstances render them poignant to the dysfunctionalities. Both these characters were marred by the circumstantial anomalies, which deterred their stability to a larger extent. They were not physically disabled but psychologically tarnished.

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