

A Re-reading of Domestic Violence in “Home to Haven”

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Abstract

Home is a multi-dimensional theoretical concept. It has contradictory meanings wherein it may be considered space, place, feelings, practices, and an active state of being in the world. Home is also a gendered space because it has different connotations for man and woman. For woman, it is not a fixed or a stable concept. Most women in India share one crucial displacement. After marriage—be this an arranged marriage or a love marriage—a woman has to leave her parental home and make a living in her marital home. However, some women become the victim of violence in their marital home which ultimately turns into a place of terror and restrictions rather than of repose and equality. A woman prefers to suffer within the walls of her marital home than getting out of a bad marriage. Champa Sharma’s short story “Home to Haven” brings forth the issue of domestic violence against women within the marital home. Through the character of Reshma, the protagonist, Champa Sharma highlights the predicament of women in the hands of an abusive husband and a son. The paper focuses on the traditional constraints imposed on women; the cycle of violence within abusive marital relationship; why women mostly remain in abusive relationships; and the impact of domestic violence on children.

Keywords: Culture, Domestic violence, Marital Home, Children, Displacement

Introduction

Violence against women is a global yet still hidden issue. The World Health Organization defines violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation” (2). Violence against women is any violation of a

woman's personhood, mental or physical integrity, or freedom of movement through individual acts and societal oppression. It includes all the ways our society objectifies and oppresses women. Violence is broadly classified into two categories: Social violence that occurs in public places and usually between strangers and Domestic violence that occurs in households and usually between relatives. However, domestic violence can be considered as "Hidden Epidemic" as it is caused silently within the four walls of a house. Every form of violence threatens all women and limits her ability to make choices. Women are statistically safer out on the street than they are in their homes. In this context, Venkatappa S. Madana in his book *The Prevalence and Extent of Domestic Violence against Women in Gulbarga District* remarks, "...the safest place for men to commit violence against women is home. On the other hand, home is the least safe place for women of all ages" (5). Champa Sharma's short story "Home to Heaven" highlights the exploitation of women within the marital home from different viewpoints. Through the character of Reshma, the protagonist, Champa Sharma highlights the predicament of women in the hands of an abusive husband and a son. The paper focuses on the traditional constraints imposed on women; the cycle of violence within abusive marital relationship; why women mostly remain in abusive relationships; and the impact of domestic violence on children.

"Home to Haven" revolves around Reshma who is married to Captain Gopal. They had a love marriage. However, Gopal's attitude changes soon after the marriage and he turns into an abuser who perpetrates violence against her. The ambience of domestic violence in the home has a drastic effect on their son, Manu also.

The sacred bond of marriage is based on the mutual trust and understanding between the couple. However, suspicion in a marriage is like a devil that destroys the relationship. It pushes the relationship to the brink of failure. This is highlighted in the character of Captain Gopal who doubts the activities of Reshma and always looks at her with spying eyes. He did not talk to her and gets angry with her for over a week when Colonel Srinivas, her brother-in-law organized a family picnic at the Mansar Lake and

she took a lift on Captain Goyal's bike to reach at the spot: "Once, he had nursed his anger for as long as a week when Reshma had taken a lift on Captain Goyal's bike" (*HH* 198).

Communication between husband and wife is requisite for a healthy marital relationship. Love and intimacy transform marital home into a place of comfort but the lack of communication is the first step towards the collapse of marital home. Problems develop when the husband and wife do not talk, argue and share feelings with each other and it ultimately disturbs the harmony of the home. Home becomes an isolated space for woman if the husband remains silent and aloof towards her. Many a time the notion that wife is 'second sex'- inferior, incapable, indecisive, meant for work and reproduction prevents husband to consider wife as equal: "Husbands who do not communicate with their wives are those that consider their wives inferior..." (Goodlight 30). Reshma and Gopal also lack marital communication between them: "Occasionally, Gopal would have his dinner home, though he was not averse to having breakfast at home almost regularly. Still, as his fancy took him, he would have a cup of tea and leave for office" (*HH* 205). He does not communicate with her because he considers her inferior and incapable of a sound communication: "'She is so dumb!' He would complain bitterly" (205). This shows that the violence against women has many faces. It is not only physical and sexual but also psychological. Reshma also becomes the victim of psychological abuse as Gopal creates isolation between them. He ill-treats her by his silence: "Silence...is often encoded as punishment when men withdraw verbally" (Chanda 144). He distances himself from her.

Woman is reduced to being a housekeeper and cook in the home. The maintenance of household chores is the prime allotted duty of a woman. Home is considered as a patriarchal space that is controlled and owned by man. It is the wife who makes the home with her care and concern but still she lacks control over her home. Reshma also spends the whole day taking care of the home but she is never appreciated by Gopal for managing the home: "home as a site of safety and security, produced by the

painstaking labor (of women), becomes an ideological given. The victimization of the very women who help produce this home can go unnoticed..." (Chawla 153). He acts like a boss of the marital home and treats her like a maid-servant. He never tries to help her: "Captain Gopal started doling out a few hundred rupees to Reshma to run the house..." (HH 205). He has withdrawn from his householder state but still exercises authority in the home.

For women, leaving an abusive relationship is very difficult. She faces humiliation, isolation, covert behaviour and sometimes desertion of husband but still prefer to remain within the marital home: "she remains stuck...she cannot or does not really want to escape; she struggles in her cage rather than seeking to get out of it" (Beauvoir 379). Reshma also prefers to remain hidden under a cloak of silence or acceptance for the sake of her son. She is of the view that she cannot leave the home as it will ruin the future of Manu: "How can I leave this house before seeing that Manu has an assured future? It is only because of him that I am trashing my life" (HH 206). In this context, Meena Shirwadkar remarks,

It is a sadder and truer end in the Indian context of a woman limping homewards, a woman who knows it is not possible for her, physically and emotionally to be away from home and children. A woman has to face the shame and suffering mutely as a price for the emotional need of a home and children even when the husband is not faithful to her. (54)

The relationship between parents has a serious impact on the mind of growing up children. Parents are responsible for creating psychologically healthy and happy children. There is a devastating effect on the psychology of children living in households where there is domestic violence. The relationship between Gopal and Reshma also affected Manu. The attitude of Gopal changed so much that he does not feel anything for the unborn baby: "Gopal's attitude towards Reshma began to change. The little one growing in Reshma's womb also became a victim of the father's neglect" (HH 204). However, the violent behavior of Gopal makes Manu a selfish child. He is built without love and care:

“He was no longer a raw child and knew where his interests lay. It was not mother, but only his father who could make something out of him, and it was him that he always took sides with” (207). This is highlighted in the incident when Gopal gives a sound blow to Reshma and in spite of attending to her wounds, both father and son goes for a drive in a car leaving her unconscious on the floor. However, Reshma is broken when Manu takes his father’s side explaining to the unit commander’s wife that she has slipped on the floor: “Mom slipped on the floor, aunty. We thought she was not hurt” (208). Manu’s blatant lie in order to protect his father forces her to leave the home: “For eighteen years I have suffered at your hands only because of our son... But he has opened my eyes today.... I thank you again, both father and son, for liberating me” (208-09). In the end, she decides to leave “Gopal’s home that had been her haven for all those years” (209).

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