

STRUGGLE FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN *SHE PLAYS WITH THE DARKNESS*

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Abstract:

The present paper attempts to study struggle for gender equality in Zakes Mda's novel, She Plays with the Darkness. The novel reveals themes like racial exploitation, gender discrimination and isolation. The post-modern novelists struggle for human rights, Zakes Mda is one of them. Zakes Mda is the most acclaimed South African novelist. He employed 'gender' with different views and idea gender means not only synonyms with women it refers to men and women.

Keywords: *Zakes Mda, gender, Dikosha, Radisene.*

Gender is not synonyms with women; it refers to men and women. Females are inferior in patriarchal society. Gender discrimination is basically a discrimination made between men and women. Simeon de Beauvoir rightly observes, "The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone to affirm their independence succeeding in living completely the life of a human being" (Beauvoir 30). Woman is capable of revolting and demanding justice. Simeon de Beauvoir opens her description with a statement that has become famous in feminist literature: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. . . It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminism" (Beauvoir 89). Black women are exploited in South Africa through white male-dominated society. It constitutes woman's awareness about patriarchal norms practiced in every field of society. It is an attempt to make society aware of injustice and oppression. Women have to undergo their secondary status, perception of processes of gender construction, and woman's subordination in the family and the society. But women reformed it at their own levels.

Mda displays unequal gender roles through the story of two siblings, Dikosha and Radisene. In childhood, Dikosha completes her education up to seventh standard with first class, but her mother was unable to pay the fees for further education. Her twin brother, Radisene even though he had received only a third class in standard seven is lucky, because the Holy Father of the church takes him under his wings and pays his fees at a Catholic high school. Dikosha, a brilliant student, is denied the opportunity to complete her schooling by local church father, who sees no future for an educated woman in their society. So writer also aptly observes: "After all Dikosha was a woman, they argued and bound to find a good man of the church and settle down in blissful matrimony Radisene, on the other hand. . . .He was a man"(5). Being a girl, Dikosha is denied access to higher education as well as advancement. But, being a son, Radisene gets a chance to take higher education. This constitutes Dikosha's awareness of patriarchal home. She observes that society's injustice and oppression are the two things which women have to undergo their secondary status, perception of the processes of gender construction and women's subordination in the family, the society and education. It constitutes her awareness of economic status and inequality of sexes for a long time. Dikosha was angry with the God Father, with her mother, with her twin brother, with herself and after all with everybody. So she cannot speak with anybody. She becomes vocally silent and lonely. Mda explores Dikosha's periodic silence as a weapon against being denied access to education and advancement simply because she is a girl.

The narrator observes, "Throughout that spring and summer she played with the darkness. She, the keeper of memories, sat in her hut, with all the windows closed and played with the absolute darkness that

she created”(169-170). Dikosha is happy in the sadness which she creates for herself. She lives with the snakes. Here, the narrator states:

She loved snakes and was not afraid of them . . . So she played with them, she mesmerized them with her dance. She could handle even the most poisonous snakes, like Marabe and Masumu, although she did not care of brightly coloured snakes, the one of green, and yellow, and blue. She laughed at the hopeless wrath of the Masumu cobra (4).

Dikosha loves Shane, a little boy who meets horrible death in mist. In his funeral everyone is busy to prepare the funeral meal but Dikosha does not take interest in that meal. So the people of the village say “Well, Dikosha is Dikosha. She does what she likes, even if it is against custom. It is because she conceived at a night dance” (169). Dikosha leaves society and rejects all imposed social interaction as means of escaping being ritualized and developed traditional relationship, power with Ha Samane:

Dikosha was filled with love for people of the cave and wished that she could spend all her days with them. She loved peace that reigned among them. No voice was ever raised in anger, and they did not seem to know any form of violence directed at other human beings. Men did not deem themselves to be more important than women. There seemed to be an equality among them that did not exist in the world of Ha Samane (52-53).

Dikosha lives her life in her own way. Her silence differs from Eugene Dawn, Barbarians and magistrate whose silence reflects the idea of frustration, weakness and self-defeat as 'victims'. Dikosha's silence is for her freedom and alienation from the society. The silence of a woman is more powerful than her own speech. Dikosha's silence shows her protest against patriarchal society. She spends her time in dancing and singing. For Dikosha, dance is the language of rebellion. Dikosha's darkness is firmly rooted in her avoidance of socialization, because she is motivated by her traumatic experiences of patriarchal oppression. This attempted escape is ultimately not a tenable solution to her grievances with her society. When Radisene goes from Ha Samane for a job as a teacher, she did not utter a single word. She seems to lose interest even in the songs of the pumpkin though it is her favourite one.

In the light of Dikosha's character, it will be appropriate to see what the scholars have to say about African feminism. African feminism has been aptly articulated by Molaria Ogundipe-Lesslie, who has incisively theorized gender oppression and the intricate web of oppressive systems:

One might say that the African woman has six mountains on her back: one is oppression from outside (colonialism and neocolonialism), the second is from traditional structures, feudal, slave-based, communal etc., the third is her backwardness; the fourth is man; the fifth is her colour, her race; and the sixth is herself” (Molaria Ogundipe-Lesslie 28).

Throughout the novel, Dikosha dances and teaches various forms of dance. At the beginning of the novel, it is interesting that once Dikosha loses interest in the songs of the pumpkin of her youth (after Radisene abandons her and her mother in search of fortune in the lowlands), she sinks further into silence and sadness, and withdraws from celebratory dances such as the famous that the builders enjoy whilst building (on Radisene's instructions) the mansion for Mother of Twins and Dikosha (74), and the sensual mokgibo dance that the women enjoy at Misti's graduation (42). The songs of the pumpkin, lifela songs and the healing songs that Dikosha learns in the Caves of Barwa present personal and 165 communal histories from the singer's point of view. In this connection, Coplan argues: “The songs and dances documented in the novel can be termed as “cultural construction of history”, a form of history and meaning-making that is only recently being nationally acknowledged, through the research being done by various government departments and museums into Indigenous Knowledge Systems”(Coplan xvii). Dikosha's dance is a form of communication and an escape. She indulges in the San rock paintings at the Cave of Barwa. The songs are also very effective as a form of protest against social ills. Dikosha's art has many functions: it is spiritual, ritual, it unites her with others, allows her to celebrate her cultural heritage and identity, and it serves as a retreat when she cannot handle the realities of the community. The contrast between Dikosha

and the other villagers is expressed within the novel's first pages: "Dikosha's loneliness was self-imposed, for people of the village lived in what appeared to be happy communion . . . She felt that if there was neither song nor dance, there was no need to be bothered with people"(4). For most of the characters, it seems that song and dance is purely a way to celebrate, whereas there are many more features to art for Dikosha: it pervades her life and is even present in her sleep, as her dreams provide her with all the new songs and dances which she teaches the others.

Thus, the gender patterns of the Lesotho are imposed on Dikosha from her childhood onwards, as she is denied secondary education because of her sex. Consequently, Dikosha becomes disillusioned with the village, the school and the church, and turns away from all of them. As she is so restricted by the gender patterns in her community, she retreats from it altogether, from the moment her brother abandons her. She does not just stop speaking, but she no longer grows older. She only speaks or interacts with others through her art. Her silence starts gradually as a resistance and rebellion against the society. Her rebellion against her community centers primarily against the wrongs committed against her as she is born in a patriarchal society. She struggle against gender discrimination through silence. Besides, as she feels victimized by the gender patterns of her village, she refuses to adhere to them by submitting to the village's rites of passage, such as marriage rites (5). The fact that Dikosha refuses to participate in the community's rites of passage automatically means that there is no social move upwards for her.

Referances

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