



The Duality Of Self And Societal Expectations: Analyzing Neha's Journey In Jaishree Misra's A Scandalous Secret

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Abstract

Jaishree Misra's novel *A Scandalous Secret* delves into the tumultuous journey of Neha who faces severe societal and internal conflicts due to an unplanned premarital pregnancy while studying at Oxford. The novel highlights the intense fear, isolation and emotional turmoil Neha endures as she gives up her baby for adoption to conform to societal expectations. The paper examines the cultural stigma associated with premarital pregnancy in India and its impact on women's mental health and societal standing. It explores Neha's struggle with secrecy and identity illustrating how her concealed past affects her well-being and relationships. The paper also highlights Neha's path to empowerment aided by her supportive husband, Sharat and present broader themes of sexual exploitation, emotional distress and the quest for self-acceptance in a rigid societal framework. Through Neha's story, Misra calls attention to the pervasive issues faced by women, advocating for societal change and enhanced support systems.

Keywords: Mental Conflict, Societal Pressure, Premarital Pregnancy, Secrecy, Women's Empowerment and Emotional Distress

Jaishree Misra was born in New Delhi to a Malayali family in 1961. She began her writing career in 2000. *A Scandalous Secret*, Misra's seventh work of fiction, is the third novel in her Secret Series. The story centers on motherhood and the relationships between mothers and daughters. The golden couple of Delhi, Neha and Sharat, have glamour, wealth and a beautiful home. Neha appears to be blissfully happy and is the envy of many in her family and among her friends. However, she harbours a dark secret that haunts her like a nightmare.

While studying at Oxford, eighteen-year-old Neha became pregnant by her professor. She was forced to make the difficult decision to give the baby up for adoption. Years later, her daughter, Sonya, now a fully grown woman, is determined to find her birth mother. Misra provides a detailed description of the mental agony Neha faced during her pregnancy. Neha recalls how, as a young, unmarried university student, she delivered her baby. Her mental state was significantly affected by societal expectations. A hospital counsellor advised her not to bond with the baby, avoid breastfeeding, and not to name her child. As an unmarried young student, Neha accepted this advice and decided to give the baby up for adoption. Her primary mistake believed that her professor, Alastair would take care of them after the child's birth. Three months into her pregnancy, Neha informed Alastair and begged him to take an interest in her. However, during the Easter break, he disappeared from the campus. Neha realized she had been completely rejected. No girl can imagine such a crucial situation. Neha was pushed to an extreme level of disappointment, isolated from everyone, and unable to convey her helplessness to anyone. It was intolerable for her.

Misra portrays her characters as facing alienation and isolation. Her writing is an effort to discover and convey the true significance of things. Neha, as a young woman of eighteen, has to face alienation, tension, worries, depression, disappointment, anxiety, and fear. Alastair no longer wants Neha or their baby. His indifferent behaviour towards Neha is evident. Neha intensely desires support from him. A social worker informed Neha that the baby would first be taken to a foster home and then be cared for by an experienced foster mother. This frightens her inner self. She tries to convince Alastair, but in vain. So, she decides to make the most crucial decision of her life. Her agony is now greater and her 'self' is haunted by the rejection of motherhood.

Neha's endless fear shows that she lacks emotional maturity and stability, making her feel more helpless. When the baby was taken away from her, she wept for herself and the mess she had created. She lost her baby and her Oxford dream. This is typical of someone who feels alienated. Neha is unable to overcome that traumatic adulthood, becoming a constant victim of sexual abuse. Her inner agony is intense. Neha believes the abuse is her fault.

Today, Neha has left her past behind and is silently moving towards a fulfilling life. She is extremely faithful to her husband, Sharat, who is a pillar of strength for her. She enjoys his undivided attention and affection. They move to London, and she begins her marital life with him. Neha is a classic example of a fostering self. Her progress to an empowered woman does not happen overnight. She serves as an inspiration to all abused women. Many Indian women suffer from similar unnamed problems. Misra draws attention to the condition of women in contemporary society. Indian society deems it sinful for a woman to be pregnant before marriage and fails to hold men accountable for their mistakes. The majority of women are still sufferers. Neha is judged, but her professor is neither accused nor blamed.

Sonya, the daughter Neha gave up for adoption, is the second protagonist of the story. She was adopted and raised by a loving English family, Richard and Laura Shaw. Sonya enjoyed a happy childhood with everything she needed. Although Neha and Sonya are physically apart, they are biologically connected. After giving up the baby for adoption, Neha found true love with Sharat. Neha remains silent about her previous affair due to societal condemnation.

At eighteen, Sonya is a confident young lady who has gained admission to Oxford. Being eighteen grants her the legal right under UK laws to trace her roots. She decides to find her biological mother, discovering that Neha Chaturvedi from Delhi, India, is her mother. Sonya writes a letter to Neha expressing her desire to meet her.

Though Misra does not present any solutions or alternatives to the problems faced by Indian women, the final note in her novels is a ray of hope. Sonya comes to Delhi with her best friend, Estelle. Neha's unhappiness and dissatisfaction with life grow stronger, causing her to feel fear.

Jaishree Misra, through her heroines, shows the courage of women arising from their bad experiences. Instead of falling down, Neha returns to her original self. The issue of sexual abuse is a significant theme addressed by the author. Eventually, Neha unburdens herself to her husband, Sharat, revealing the hidden truth about her past and introducing Sonya to him. Although delayed, Sharat accepts the eighteen-year-old girl who is a victim of sexual exploitation. A notable critic, Shoma A. Chatterji, writes about Jaishree Misra's work, stating:

Misra's narrative deftly exposes the societal hypocrisies that govern the lives of Indian women, weaving a poignant tale of secrecy, guilt, and the eventual quest for redemption. Through characters like Neha, she highlights the inner turmoil and societal pressures that shape their identities, offering readers a profound commentary on the resilience required to navigate such complex personal and social landscapes. (*Literary Perspectives on Contemporary Indian Fiction* 112-129) The uniqueness of Jaishree Misra's fiction lies in her treatment of feminine themes. All her writing is an effort to discover and convey the true significance of life. Sexual harassment and violence against women are prevalent worldwide. In social and marital life, women suffer from suppression, neglect, and marginalization. Misra advocates for every child to have the opportunity to achieve their full potential. She also portrays the exploitation of girl children and the cruelty of child exploitation.

References

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