

**SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THE BINDING VINE*:
A CRITIQUE OF RAPE CULTURE IN INDIA**

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ABSTRACT

With the increase of rape cases in India, most social activists and writers have started talking about it. In this research paper this issue is analysed in the light of Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Binding Vine*. The rape case of Kalpana is the central action of the story and Mira's marital rape provides more depth to the sensitive issue. The researcher has examined the social and personal attitudes towards rape, marriage, marital-rape and men-women relationship as depicted in the novel. Deshpande's novel is a cry against the culture of silence and a critique of rape culture in India.

Key Words: Rape, marital-rape, sexual-assault, patriarchy, oppression, culture, marriage, education.

Introduction

Ruchira Gupta, founder of "Apne Aap Women Worldwide" social organization, wrote in The Hindu, "I have seen the steady creeping in of a rape culture into the fabric of India". Rape culture is defined as "a concept which links rape and sexual violence to the culture of a society in which prevalent attitudes and practices normalize, excuse, tolerate, and even condone rape" (Wikipedia). Every day we hear news about a girl being raped by a stranger, a relative or a friend. In India the numbers of rape cases are increasing day by day. Sources have also reported that rape cases have doubled in India between 1990 and 2008 (Wikipedia). According to 2012 statistics, New Delhi has the highest number of rape-reports. There was a lot of hue and cry after December 2012 Delhi rape case; social activists and common people demanded the empowerment and security for women and only police department was held responsible for the same. But as research and data of rape cases happened in India shows, most of the rapes are committed by those who are known to the girl. It is either a close relative or a friend. But this rape culture is steadily growing just because of its normalization and tolerance in the Indian society. The issue was not taken seriously a few years back. Neither men nor women ever raised their voice against this inhuman act. Now the question arises whether we should keep on blaming the police department for the increasing number of rapes or should try to bring awareness among people so that real cause of this problem can be recognized and fought against.

Shashi Deshpande always writes about the key issues of her times. Her novels talk not only about modern, urban, educated, working women but also about women belonging to lower strata of society. With the passage of time the conditions and status of women has improved. They have been given the right to get education, equal work opportunities and right to assert themselves. But still crimes against women are not decreasing; the nature of crimes may be different but we cannot say that modern world is all safe for women. Deshpande depicts tragic conditions with which today's women are struggling.

Rape is the central concern in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*. In the novel she deals with this sensitive issue brilliantly. She has tried to reach the core of the problem by depicting how entire mechanism of patriarchal society works as a whole to let such heinous activities happen. It is just not men who are responsible for the rape culture in India but women also play a major role by not raising their voice against it.

Analysis

When the novel opens we come to know that Kalpana, who belongs to lower strata of society, is brutally raped and is on her death bed. The women of this class are more vulnerable to domestic violence. Even her mother, Shakutai, has lived a life of extreme poverty. Her husband left her in her father's house soon after their marriage so that he can search livelihood in Bombay. When he did not return after six months, Shakutai decides to go to Bombay. She realizes that her husband is a lazy and good for nothing fellow who does not stick to any job. They live in a relative's house where she is put through much humiliation. After the birth of three children, Shakutai takes the responsibility to support the family as her husband leaves her for another woman. Shakutai tells Urmila "that's been the greatest misfortune of my life, Urmila, marrying that man" (Deshpande 110). It is very unfair that in spite of putting up with such a worthless fellow and struggling alone to fend for her children, fingers are pointed at her when anything goes wrong in the family. This happens when Kalpana is raped by Parbhakar, her sister Sulu's husband.

Deshpande seems to convey that Shakutai's status in the society also plays its role in bringing about a tragedy on Kalpana's life. Shakutai is poor, uneducated and is not able to live decent life even after working so hard. Even then she tries to find meaning in her life by providing her daughters all the facilities which she herself could not get. She wants her daughters to be educated, well-employed and married in respectable families. But a condition arises when Shakutai has to ask Kalpana to marry Parbhakar just because her sister, Sulu, is not able to produce a child for him. If Kalpana will marry him, even Sulu will be able to stay there in her husband's house. But when Kalpana refuses to marry him, she is opposed by both Shakutai and Sulu. Kalpana tells her mother and Sulu that it is a crime if a man marries another woman without divorcing the first one. But Shakutai does not understand anything. She keeps pleading to her that Sulu has always treated her like her daughter and you should agree by whatever she demands. But Kalpana refuses this proposal ardently. Parbhakar becomes desperate for her after this incident. As Sulu tells Shakutai that he used to talk only about Kalpana after that and became obsessed with her. As a consequence, one day he rapes her. But when Shakutai comes to know that Parbhakar has raped her, she does not take any initiative to have him punished. Moreover, when her sister Sulu commits suicide, Shakutai loses the will to take any action against him. She says,

“What’s the use now? Kalpana is destroyed, we destroyed her, Sulu and I. And now Sulu’s gone also. What’s the use of it, what’s the use of anything?” (194)

Kalpana seems to have become the victim of extreme poverty because her mother cannot afford to bring her sister back to her house where she is already unable to feed her three children. Her economic status becomes a monster which claims Kalpana’s life because she is not ready to cope with the customs of society which expects her to give away her freedom and dignity for saving her aunt’s marriage who cannot afford to leave her husband as she depends on him for economical security.

But the way Shakutai reacts to Kalpana’s rape, shows that she works as an instrument of patriarchal ideology in which women equally play their part in women’s suppression, although unconsciously. Urmila, the protagonist, first meets Shakutai when she visits the hospital where Vanaa, Urmila’s sister-in-law, works as a medical social worker. Vanaa tells Urmi that Kalpana has been raped by someone. When she talks to Shakutai, she comes to know that Shakutai does not want the doctor to tell about the case to the police:

“No, no, no. Tell him, that, it’s not true, don’t tell anyone. I’ll never be able to hold up my head again, who’ll marry the girl, we are decent people.” (58)

It is in the end of the novel, it becomes most apparent that Shakutai would not let anyone know about the real culprit. In this way, by not breaking her silence like many Indian women, she contributes to her own oppression. It becomes one of the prominent reasons that the rape cases are increasing in India because due to the fear of being defamed, people do not report such cases to the police which encourages the rapists. Rape Cases, in which close relatives are involved, remain unreported because it is considered a disgrace for the family; ironically enough not for the rapist but for a girl.

Shakutai thinks that the kind of society in which she lives, virginity is considered the most important requirement for marriage. She says, “If a girl’s honour is lost, what is left? The girl doesn’t have to do something wrong, people will always point finger at her” (59). Shakutai is aware of the injustice that has been done to Kalpana yet she remains silent on account of social conditions. She is afraid that nobody will marry her daughter if people come to know about her rape. The fact that she is not a virgin anymore can mar her brighter prospects of marriage. For these reasons, Shakutai has not reported the case to the police which can probably spread the news of her daughter’s malignity.

Urmila finds it surprising that Shakutai should be so keen to get her daughter married when her own experience in marriage is not satisfactory one. Secondly, Shakutai like a typical Indian woman blames her daughter only for what has happened to her. She attributes it to Kalpana’s stubbornness and wilfulness. Although, in the end, she realizes that it is not her daughter’s wilfulness which is responsible for what has happened to her but her own blindness and ignorance. Shakutai seems right when she blames Kalpana because in Indian society only girls are blamed for their rapes. They will called characterless, shameless or low-women. Ruchira Gupta told in an interview to CNN that once she was attacked during covering the demolition of a mosque, and was sexually assaulted (not raped) by a few men. She filed a complaint against them and the questions which were asked to her by the lawyers were shocking and disturbing because like Kalpana, Ruchira was blamed by them. She says,

When I appeared in court to testify against the attackers, their lawyers asked me questions that implied I was responsible. How could the daughter of a good family have gone to cover the demolition? Did I smoke? What kind of clothes was I wearing? Did I believe in God? (CNN)

This is how women are always blamed for their rapes. It's either their clothes or their attitude which is considered responsible for their sexual assaults and nothing else. Shakutai's dialogue sums up the above:

We have to keep our places...I warned Kalpana, but she would never listen to me... That's why this happened to her...women must know fear (Deshpande 148).

Simone de Beauvoir's quote that one is not born a woman but becomes one seems true in the depiction of character of Kalpana. The way girls are conditioned and are asked to behave by their parents seems to be another reason of their being mistreated by the opposite sex. The girl child is indoctrinated to play the role of a disciplined daughter, a meek and submissive wife and daughter-in-law and a sacrificing mother. The exaggerated importance given to virginity of a girl is also greatly responsible for enforcing a restriction on her movements as soon as she reaches puberty. Any girl who tries to rebel against such codes of conduct is severely reprimanded (Singh 26). Kalpana is a victim of the same social conditioning. From Shakutai's own account of Kalpana, she is not satisfied with the daily routine which she has to follow. She does not want to merely survive but live her life on her terms. She says, "...she was self-willed...you should have seen her walking out, head erect, caring for nobody" (Deshpande 148).

There is a strict code of conduct to be followed by girls regarding their dress, speech and behaviour in order not to attract the attention of men. Shakutai warns Kalpana, "Here boys are like...they're like dogs panting after bitches. And if you paint and flaunt yourself, do you think they will leave you?" (145). But Kalpana resents such restrictions and does whatever she wants. When Kalpana is raped, her mother blames Kalpana for the same. But Kalpana is not raped by a stranger. It is patriarchy, a society which teaches women all the codes of behaviour and not to a man, that permits Parbhakar to first make a pass at Kalpana, and then demand that she should marry him and finally rape her.

The innocent girls, because they are taught to remain silent and bear all the suffering inflicted on them, remain silent and do not complain against such criminals who ruin their lives. Even a bold and confident girl like Kalpana remains silent, although she is aware of Parbhakar's intentions, fearing that her mother and Sulu will put the blame on her. Kalpana is aware of her weaker, worthless situation and chooses not to open her mouth. The ignition to Parbhakar's intentions is given by both Shakutai and Sulu, when Sulu try to persuade Kalpana to marry him and Shakutai instead of objecting to it, leaves the decision to Kalpana. But Kalpana is in love with a young man and is unwilling to sacrifice herself for her childless aunt. But the male desire claims her and she is raped, clawed into and beaten. As we know Parbhakar rapes her but she is already raped by the illiteracy and ignorance of her mother and aunt.

It is not a surprise in a society where woman is taught to just obey and submit to her father, brother and husband that the government has decided that marital rape is not a criminal offence (NDTV). But Shashi Deshpande takes up this sensitive issue of marital rape and depicts it through the character of Mira, Urmila's mother-in-law. What Mira has suffered from is generally not acknowledged by our culture as rape, but the legitimate right of the husband to possess her sexually, with or without her consent. Mira's husband has exercised this right against

her will, against her strong aversion to him. It is through Mira's diaries and poems that the narrator comes to know about her. From the diary, it becomes clear that she intensely disliked the sexual act with her husband. She hates the very word 'love'. She writes in her diary:

How I hate the word. If this is love, it is a terrible thing. I
have learnt to say 'no' at last, but it makes no difference,
no difference at all. What is it he wants from me? I look at
myself in the mirror and wonder, what is there in me? Why
does it have to be me? Why can't he leave me alone?
(Deshpande 67)

There has been no room for Mira's feelings and as a consequence her encounter with her husband becomes a case of rape within the marriage. Urmila remembers the poem in which her mother-in-law describes how a woman is expected to behave for a prosperous and fulfilling married life. She writes,

Don't tread paths barred to you obey, never utter a 'no', submit and your life
will be a paradise... (83)

Fate puts an end to Mira's misfortunes when she dies during child birth. Through her poems Mira becomes to Urmila a symbol of female oppression. Mira had been writing poetry since her college days. She had in fact aspired to become a poet. She had even met a promising young poet, Venu and given him some of her poems to read, hoping for perhaps a word of encouragement from him. But Venu who later became "a grand old man of Indian literature" apparently believed that creativity is solely a male preserve. His answer to Mira justifies the thesis of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar that dominant patriarchal ideology presents artistic creativity as a fundamentally male quality. He advises Mira,

"Why do you need to write poetry? It is enough for a young woman like
you to give birth to children... leave the poetry to us men." (127)

However, Mira's attempt to write poems seems a kind of resistance to patriarchal ideology which expects a woman to adopt submissive attitude and confine herself to household work only. Thus, Mira becomes a symbol of resistance for other women in society who have nothing to offer but a legacy of violence and her efforts show the way to millions of oppressed and victimized women.

Mira's poems haunt Urmila so much that she decides to publish them. But when Vanaa, her friend and sister-in-law, comes to know about it, she is enraged. She feels that by doing so Urmila will destroy the honour of the family, "it is as if knowledge of what her father did, or what he was, has threatened something, disturbed the inner rhythm of her being so that there is a sense of disharmony about her" (181). Vanaa is an example of how women internalize patriarchal values which make them look at things from a male point of view. Women like Vanaa become instrumental in covering up the deeds of criminal men and never try to expose them to help their sex instead.

Urmila is the only character who voices against Kalpana's rape and publishes Mira's poem. Through this character Deshpande seems to be giving us a solution to this inhuman activity. That is, if mothers start teaching their daughters the lessons of bravery and not that of submissiveness; and a feeling of sisterhood between women grows; any girl or woman will never be raped. They just need to become aware of their rights and education can do the rest.

Conclusion

Thus Shashi Deshpande has successfully dealt with the issue of rape culture in India. Through the character of Mira and Kalpana she has successfully depicted the plight of rape victims. Kalpana, a young intelligent girl, who aspires to study further and work in future, is victimized by her brother-in-law. Her dreams are shattered. Mira, a newly-wedded, girl puts her grief in writing when she is unable to share her grief with people around her. She dies an early death during child-birth and leaves behind a legacy of oppression. Shakutai and Sulu are characters, who being women themselves never understand Kalpana's dreams and insist her to marry Parbhakar. Sulu commits suicide when she comes to know that Parbhakar has raped Kalpana. She chooses this cowardly action rather than going to police and taking right action against him. Shakutai scared of social insult and defame, refuses to report about the rape to the police. She thinks that if people will come to know about her rape then nobody will marry Kalpana. Urmila is the only character who shows the right path to these characters. She decides to publish Mira's poems in spite of all the opposition by Vanaa who thinks that through these poems people will come to know about their grandfather's behaviour towards their grandmother which can bring dishonour to the family. Urmila also suggests Shakutai to report about the rape. Deshpande seems to present an idea that through education, social awareness and zero-tolerance towards rapes and sexual violence, such crimes can put to an end.

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