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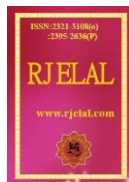
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SEXUAL SUBJUGATION OF WOMEN IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THE BINDING VINE*

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Abstract

Violence against women in its differing forms is a worldwide phenomenon, which cuts across cultures, nations, and social and age groups. The root causes of violence against women are dominant gender norms and the unequal power balance between men and women. Rape is the most drastic epitome of the inequality of men and women, and of the degradation and oppression of women by men. It is not a sporadic deviation, but a deeply entrenched social practice that both expresses and reinforces the inequality, degradation, and oppression of women. Deshpande in her novel 'The Binding Vine' problematize the deeply ingrained traditional modes of violence as perpetuated upon the minds and bodies of women. The novelist discloses the harsh actuality of the patriarchal rule and suppression, the space occupied by women in a patriarchal setup. She concentrates on female friendship which empowers women and unites them to combat sexual violence.

Keywords: violence, suppression, patriarchal, combats, sexuality, empowerment

There can be no mass-based feminist movement to end sexist oppression without a united front--women must take the initiative and demonstrate the power of solidarity. --Bell Hooks, "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Among Women" 127

Violence against woman is ingrained in the patriarchal system and is responsible for the internalization of female inferiority through a process of socialization, customs, religious laws and rituals. The underreporting of violence is of serious matter and the major reasons for silence in obnoxious relationships are (i) the universal acceptance of gender discrimination reinforced by social and religious beliefs in support of male supremacy; (ii) the deep seated reverence for family as a basis for continuing the existing social order and values related to regulating sexual behavior,

particularly female sexuality within the precincts of marriage. The nature of family relationship forces woman to struggle alone against violence where society supports the husband to assert his right to dominate and control the wife. In general, woman is socialized to accept physical and mental abuses as part of a husband's marital right. Established social attitudes define violence against woman as normal practice and not as a punishable crime. When the violation takes place within the home, the abuse is condoned by the tacit silence and the passivity displayed by the State and the law enforcing machinery. The acquiescence of violence against woman is the deep rooted social belief that woman is primarily of less value than man. Allan G. Johnson rightly remarks: "A society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege by being male dominated, male identified, and male centered. It is also organized around an obsession with control and

involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women" (5).

The concept of sisterhood has always been a central tenet of Women's Movement. The vision of a women identified community united by common interests and a determination to combat sexist oppression has fueled contemporary women writers across the world. The feminist movement, according to feminist theorist Bell hooks, mobilizes to end "sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" by transforming and equalizing these oppressive relationships that men have with women. Bell hooks exhorts women to conquer internalized sexism which is "the enemy within" and explains that women have been socialized by the patriarchy to judge [themselves and each] other without compassion and punish one another harshly. Women often perceive themselves as inferior to men and also tend to compete with one another for male approval. The material realities of internalized sexism indicate that the feminist agenda need not only focus its attention on the relationships between men and women, but also on "the enemy within" women which perpetuates dynamics of patriarchy as well. De Beauvoir's response in her book *The Second Sex* is that all the main features of the women's training and socialization have conspired to bar them from the roads of revolt and women, unlike other oppressed groups, do not see themselves as united in a similar plight. The lack of commonality among women in language or culture acts as an obstacle to the eradication of women's oppression. Beauvoir urges women to struggle against being the Other in this patriarchal society, for to be the Other means to remain an outsider, excluded from the center of society and powerless.

Shashi Deshpande in her novel *The Binding Vine* presents female friendship as a non-sexual relationship between women based on giving and receiving emotional and moral support, sharing stories and experiences, caring and nurturing. Hudson Weems defines such kind of relationship: "This particular kind of sisterhood refers specifically to an asexual relationship between women who confide in each other and willingly share their true feelings, their fears, their hopes, and their dreams" (65-6). The novelist describes the plight of women

who suffer different forms of oppression and portrays female friendship as a strategy for fighting back against prejudice. She engages a critical eye on hierarchical male-female relationships- the inequitable relationship between the sexes yielding harsh tangible results. She portrays how politically, woman's body has become battleground and how socially, woman falls victim to gender violence. In her essay "Biologically Correct", feminist writer Natalie Angier writes that there is a struggle between men and women "over the same valuable piece of real estate—the female body" (10). There is a constant push and pull between the sexes: woman fights to have control over her physical body as well as her place in society, while man fights to maintain his dominance over woman in society.

The pain of the death of her daughter motivates the protagonist of the novel, Urmila to reach out to other women who suffer due to male supremacist ideology. She is drawn to-in sympathy and sharing her sorrow with Meera, her own dead mother-in-law who suffers rape in marriage and Shakutai and her young daughter, who is brutally raped and is lying unconscious. Deshpande foregrounds the healing powers of female bonding, which allows women to overcome prejudice and survive, to enjoy female empowerment, and to extend female friendship into female solidarity. The novel explores the relationship of individual to her community and its history which leads beyond individuality, back into the past and forward into the future. Urmi feels that women have to know their mothers and grandmothers to know their situation as sharing of experience and supporting are essential parts of bonding. The novelist exhorts women to achieve transformation not by reforming patriarchal systems, but by being creative and reappropriating their own identities within these antagonistic systems. That is, the women achieve a measure of fulfillment and strong sense of their own individuality within an imperfect context. Particularly in their individual responses to the experiences of marriage and motherhood in a traditional context and in their seeking an authentic identity that enables them to be the women they want to be and not the women society would like them to be.

Urmi comprehends through Meera's poems the grim realities confronted by women in the past in a phallographic culture. In her perceptive book *Writing a Woman's Life*, Carolyn Heilbrun contends, "Women must turn to one another for stories; they must share the stories of their lives and their hopes and their unacceptable fantasies"(11). Mira's writings raise the crucial issue of marital failure and highlights the way woman suffers patriarchal oppression through marriage. The novel attempts to grapple with the issue of rape which in a male-dominated society, both reflects the low valuation of woman and contributes to her subordination in the sexual stratification system that takes place on and over woman's body. Mira's poems lead Urmi to witness a legitimized rape- that of Mira by her husband. Urmi observes: "When I read Mira's poems, something comes through. It's like a message being trapped on the wall by the prisoner in the next cell. She is trying to say something. What is it?" (115). Mira is forced into a marriage which is not consensual and so her right to body is not recognized and marital rape becomes the means by which she is initiated into her womanhood. The idea of romance which creates the myth of merger, a two-in-one person, of shared thoughts and desires is shattered and the marriage becomes intimate colonization as Mira is romantically desired by her husband to whom it never occurs that she may have a will of her own. So, sexuality loses its contact with sensuality, with beauty, with the gratification that goes with it. The desire which the husband has for Mira is not directed towards her because she is a human being, but because she is a woman; that she is a human being is of no concern to the man; only her sex is the object of his desires. This means that she is not regarded as a person in the moral sense; her humanity is not respected. Consequently, she becomes (she is made into) an object of appetite. The sexual desire is directed towards her body and self in a way that reduces her to a mere tool for sexual purpose. She becomes an aesthetic object; something desirable and inevitably possessable; something non-autonomous and unequal. This marriage results in annihilation of Mira's personality, individuality and will. Feeling of

violation and violent dismemberment and separation from herself occurs as a result of rape.

Through Mira's life, the author takes up a significant issue, i.e. woman's right to her own body. Mira's husband exerts his full right on her, stifling her right to say "no". She has to submit to him against her wishes. Even the older women like her mother and other relatives advise her to quietly follow her man: Don't tread paths barred to you/ Obey, never utter a 'no'; /Submit and your life will be/ a paradise, she said and blessed me (83). This advice is not acceptable to Mira but as a woman she cannot resist overtly. To counter her state of utter subjugation and helplessness she takes to writing. Her poems and diaries are both the records of her submissiveness and compromises and exploration of her selfhood. The circumstances of women's lives and the choicelessness that characterizes their situation are highlighted through examination of the familial and domestic, the so-called natural domain of women. Her writings engage with women's silences- silences of a mother, daughter, a young girl, silences that speak a thousand words that pave the search for one's own space and voice, to come to terms with oneself. The act of writing enables her to communicate with herself and to counter her loneliness. Her writings are more than an indulgence, more than a healing tool, and much more than a writing exercise- they are a source of empowerment and a potent weapon of resistance.

Reading of Meera's poems by Urmi results in intersubjective encounter and a close affinity between the two women. Urmi's reading of the poems makes Mira appear as the substantial presence animating her writings. For her Mira's poems are the doorways to reach the 'heart and mind' of the woman. Meera's "texting of the self" prompts Urmi to comprehend the "space" occupied by a woman in a male dominated world vis-a-vis family. Her poems have an everlasting impact on Urmi and awaken her to understand herself vis-à-vis, being a woman. The binding wine (Meera being the "stump" and Urmi the "tendrill") grows between the reader and the author. This is what Urmi experiences and declares:

Meera in some ways stays with me. I know she will never go. All these days I have been imagining myself the hunter and Meera my prey? I have been filled with the excitement of the hunter each time I approached her. Suddenly our relationship has changed. It is Meera who is taking me by the hand leading me. Where? I don't know, I have no idea. What lies at the end of this remarkable journey, but on the way I have seen Kishore (135).

Meera's poems serve their purpose for which they were written- to enable the posterity to comprehend the stark realities of phallocracy and to find a way to do something positive with a greater understanding of the problems they encountered. Her writings are a legacy to others, especially other women. They serve as a link to the past and a reflection of the future. She leaves a personal commentary that, when shared, finds universal connections across the barriers of time and space. Meera's poems boost Urmi's confidence and serves as a springboard for her take off. She proclaims: "Meera has cleared my emotional life, swept away the confusing tangle of cobwebs" (137). Urmi comes to know that it is desire and attachment which are the root cause of women's marginalization. Meera's poems about Buddha, reverberates in Urmi's mind and prepares her for the future battle against phallocracy.

'Desire' says the Budha is the cause of grief; But how escape this chord/this binding vine of love? Fear lies Called within this womb-piercing joy. Smiling and joyful, Kama tore of his armor, His body trailed blood. Will that courage be mine when demanded/I stand naked and bare? (136-37).

Deshpande combats the detrimental image of women's sexuality through her literary representation of the act of rape, examining the ways in which a patriarchal society uses rape to force women to conform to its dictates. She presents another sexual assault which occur outside the licit relationship of marriage to reinforce the sexist norms of the society and victimization of women. Our culture's concepts of gender and sexuality make

rape an act of dominance and possession and turns women into objects of men's ownership and control. As argued by Dworkin: "All men benefit from rape, because all men benefit from the fact that women are not free in this society; that women cower; that women are afraid; that women cannot assert the rights that we have, limited as those rights are, because of the ubiquitous presence of rape."(142). Kalpana falls a victim to the lust of her relative (her masi Sulu's husband) Prabhakar who wants to enjoy her young body and therefore tries to molest her many time but fails. He is a male with masculinist ideology who considers a woman as mere 'body' and wants to own Kalpana's body for his own sexual gratification. Prabhakar's proposal to marry Kalpana shows his evil intentions. Kalpana exercises her will and says 'no' to his marriage proposal and this audacity from a female hurts the male ego and defies the male self-image. Kalpana's rejection of Prabhakar and assertion of her independent existence is beyond the comprehension of patriarchal hegemony of which her molester is a representative. He exercises his male power and bestially assaults her and exploits her bodily integrity. The rape by Prabhakar, an act of oppression perpetrated by him on Kalpana is an attempt to curb her individual liberty and distort her psyche, in the process sounding a warning to her not to tread the path of liberty. Susan Brownmiller rightly explains in 'Against our Will': "Rape is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear" (6).

Urmila actively undertakes to drive out the cloud of misunderstandings from the minds of several women around her and becomes instrumental in raising their consciousness against conventional false notions. She soon begins to see the connection in Kalpana's and Mira's tragedies and her own grief. Through her persistence and support, she is able to make Shakutai understand that rape is never 'deserved', that her daughter has not 'shamed' the family by 'asking for it'. By understanding the sorrows of others she gains insight into what she sees as the cruelty of human nature: "Why do I imagine that love absolves us from being cruel? There is Shakutai-she says she loves her

daughter; but I know, and she does too, that she was cruel to her. Perhaps it is this, the divide in us that is the greatest divide. Perhaps it's this divide in ourselves that's the hardest to bridge, to accept, to live with" (201). Through her relationship with Sakutai and Mira (through her poetry), Urmi has also been able to finally let go of the hurts of her childhood, and look at her mother and other women in her life with compassion.

Urmi realizes the pain of Shakutai and their concern and grief become one. Shakutai also reposes full faith in Urmi and when Urmi is around, she feels secure. She even seeks Urmi's advice and trusts her opinion. The unfortunate woman has no family support system in her hour of need. Her husband comes, sheds tears and goes away; Sulu offers no consolation; and Prabhakar on whom Shakutai depends, turns out to be a villain. It is Urmi who stands as her anchor. Her speaking out for Kalpana who is raped and is in coma generates public opinion and creates awareness. When Kalpana's rape case appears in the media, there are demonstrations, questions in the Assembly and publicity is given to the suffering family. The hospital authorities are instructed not to shift Kalpana but provide her a decent bedding in the hospital. Urmi is the representative of the new woman and becomes the mouthpiece for the suffering women. She takes up a hard stand for Kalpana with her own family when they advise her to keep away. Bhaskar enlightens Urmi to the fact that fighting an established system is an uphill task. His reaction to Urmi publicizing Kalpana's rape highlights the stark reality operating in a society where sexual colonialism is apparent but Urmi argues with Dr. Bhaskar and the police officer, and most of all she convinces Shakutai to let the case come on record.

The illiterate Shakutai imparts the wisdom to Urmi at the end of the novel: "You can never opt out, you can never lay it down, the burden of belonging to the human race. There is only one way out of this chakravayuha. Abhimanyu had to die, there was no other way he could have got out" (202). She gives a life sustaining message to Urmi: "The main urge is always to survive" (203). Urmila's decision to publish Meera's poems and to take the issue of Kalpana's rape to the streets is a pointer to her determination

to combat patriarchal forces. She knows that the oppressions meted out to woman cannot be raised or effaced overnight and it takes time to usher in a change. Her comments on Indra Gandhi are significant: "Look we have a woman Prime Minister. Look how much we have progressed, look how free they are. One Indra Gandhi in charge of the nation and a country full of women not allowed to take charge of their own lives" (38). She explains to Vanna that she cannot put Meera's poems under the carpet for fear of exposure of sadism of her father: "They never had a chance. It's not fair, it's not fair at all. And we can't go on pushing it- what happened to them- under the carpet forever because we're afraid of disgrace" (147). Urmi struggles to avoid being subsumed back into the dominant patriarchal discourse. Urmi's wish to get Mira's poems published is fraught with dangers, the perils of hurting her own people, of jeopardizing her emotional ties with Vanna, Kishore and others, of damaging family honor. But she is ready to give voice to the silenced woman as she feels that the patriarchal culture has always ignored and devalued women's experience: "They never had a chance. It is not fair, it's not fair at all" (174).

Urmi wants Mira's poems to be read as a social document expressing the writer's own ambiguity as a woman asserting subjective power in a traditional patriarchal society. Her poems though personal are universal in appeal as they capture the anger, rage, and rebellion of women struggling in a men's world. Urmi knows that the publication of writings by Mira cannot simply defeat, overturn or suddenly transform disciplinary power it however can resituate the problem of power abuse and "weaken processes of victimization, and generate personal and political empowerment through the acts of naming violations" (Faith 39). The writings can help women reclaim power, identity and self-expression through language, all of which have been stolen from them by the perpetrators of the violence. The publication of Mira's poems will mark woman's shattering entry into history which has always been based on her suppression and her initiation into symbolic system and political system. Susan Brison remarks: "Just as one can be reduced to an object through torture, one can become a

human subject again through telling one's narrative to caring others who are able to listen" (26). In writing about sexual violence, Deshpande herself bravely disobeys the patriarchal edicts of silence and, through this challenge, threatens the continuation of the code which the women defy.

Through the character of Urmi, Shashi Deshpande gives a clarion call to women not to submit to androcentric interest. Her leanings are towards androgyny as Urmi declares: "No I don't like men, who try to dominate women. I don't like women who do it to men either" (133). Being rational, Urmi tries to find the root cause of the problem that exists between fe/male. Her observations appear a bit philosophical: "Perhaps it is this divide in ourselves that is the great divide. Perhaps it is this divide in ourselves that is hardest to bridge, the hardest to accept, to live with" (201). Being aware of this dichotomy in wo/men and their selves, the novel ends on a conciliatory note- a plea for sisterhood -women helping women and thus finding a solace in a hostile world.

Shashi Deshpande presents female friendship as a form of empowerment that helps women build new identities and survive their misfortunes. The novel reveals the existence of two forms of empowerment—women who empower each other through female friendship and those who empower themselves at the expense of other women. The mutual support and sharing provide an opportunity to learn and grow as illustrated in a poem contributed by Mira for the annual journal of her college: Come, my brothers/ come, my sisters,/let us join our hands;/ a new road, a new way/ a new age begins (44).

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