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## BLEMISHED WOMENHOOD A STUDY ON *THE BINDING VINE*

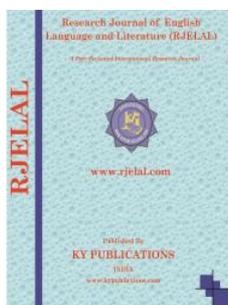
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### ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande in *The Binding Vine* encapsulates the myriad stigmas associated with rape, oversexed lovelessness in marriage and the unspoken yet strong boundaries women are compelled to maintain. Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* explores rape, in and out of marriage, as a social stigma to elucidate the relationship between rape, power and virility. Death as a motif runs from the beginning to the end of the novel. The women in the novel discard their selfhood and identity to be the embodiment of tolerance, obedience and submissiveness. This paper aims to analyse in particular the motif of marriage as a tool of repression that ultimately silences women and underplays all that is feminine.

**Keywords:** stigma, marriage, rape, women.

Shashi Deshpande, through the epigraph of the novel, 'What were the use of my creation, if I were entirely contained here?' from *Wuthering Heights*, encapsulates the myriad stigmas associated with rape, oversexed lovelessness in marriage and the unspoken yet strong boundaries women are compelled to maintain (6). The novel opens with a reminiscence of Vanaa about an accident Urmila or Urmia, the protagonist had while learning to ride a bike. Vanaa was trying to steady the bike when Urmia screamed at her "I can manage", pedaling furiously she lost her control and crashed (7). This ominous beginning sets in tune the undercurrent of the novel that, women who discard the norms ascribed by patriarchy, can be in trouble.

Urmia is disconsolate over the death of her one year old daughter, when she is plunged into the life of three other women, stigmatized and stifled: one her dead mother-in-law Mira, then Kalpana, a victim of rape, and Kalpana's mother Shakutai.

Urmia tries to revive Mira, who died in childbirth, through her poems, diaries and photographs. Mira's future husband saw her at a wedding and fell in love with her (or with her body?). The man became obsessed with her, and finally married her, a young bride of 18. A "strong clear thread of an intense dislike of the sexual act with her husband, a physical repulsion from the man she married" (63) runs through all her writing. A woman raped by her own husband.

Love! 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 (67).

Mira was christened Nirmala on her marriage to symbolize a new beginning, but for her it was an act of stripping away her identity, an estrangement from her former existence. It was the deed of writing that sustained Mira who was bound

by the bondage of lovelessness in marriage. Even though sanctified by marriage Mira was assaulted and her body encroached upon by a man whom her parents bestowed on her. In a way her marriage was never consummated. The stigma of forced marriage loomed on until she found sanctum in writing poetry and her poems reveal the pain of woman trapped in an unhappy marriage. Mira's husband is never named in the novel for he may symbolize any man.

The age-old plight of women is portrayed through Mira's mother. She saw her daughter married off and pregnant and was contended. She died happy. Mira's mother knew the fact that Mira was dissatisfied with her marriage but was afraid to ask her, afraid that she would admit it. Yet Mira told her nothing. Even if she told her about the traumatic ordeals what could she have done? "Nothing. That was all she could do her entire life – nothing. 'Don't ask me,' she used to say to us. 'Nothing is in my hands'"(126). Thus she made her daughter a shadow of her own.

Urmi remembers when one of Akka's numerous nieces got married. There was a funeral solemnity at the first night ceremony. Though she couldn't see the girl's face, could see that her hands were trembling uncontrollably. The back of her neck "looked like a lamb's, waiting for the butcher's knife to come down upon it" (63). But after a few days when Urmi saw her with her husband, she looked "flushed and radiant" (64). It works most often but not for Mira as is evident in her poems. Yet Mira never wrote a single poem about love like most women poets do. "Didn't she believe in love" (82).

'Huddled in my cocoon, a somnolent  
silkworm

Will I emerge a beautiful being?

Or will I, suffocating, cease to exist?'

Mira once tried to escape the ennui of her life by presenting her poems to Venu, a celebrated poet. Venu's retort has been quoted in her diary. "Why do you need to write poetry? It is enough for a young woman like you to give birth to children. That is your poetry. Leave the other poetry to us men" (127). Thus, Venu represents the patriarchal society, a man who can proudly, arrogantly say that he's a poet, and silences the voice of a woman forever. This

typical male chauvinistic view clips Mira's creative wings from attaining recognition.

For underprivileged women like Shakutai, her sister Sulu or daughter Kalpana marriage is the only refuge for survival and stability. When Shakutai married Baba they promised her that he will take her to Bombay. She waited for six months, went to Bombay seeking the man and realized the fact that "this man had no job" (110). Not because he couldn't find one, but he didn't want to work. After the birth of Kalpana, Sandhya and Prakash he leaves Shakutai for another woman.

Shakutai's veneration for her sister Sulu and her husband Prabhakar is enumerated in great detail. Prabhakar is "a good man, he doesn't touch drink, not even cigarettes..." (144). But God did not give them children. When Shakutai did all kinds of menial works so that her children could grow up, go to school and live better than her, it was Sulu, who looked after the children. It came as a relief for Shakutai when Sulu and Prabhakar offered to look after Kalpana, her schooling and all sustenance. But after three days stay with them Kalpana ran away and went to her father. He brought her back to Shakutai but Kalpana refused to go back to her protectors.

Shakutai was proud of her daughter Kalpana. She used to wonder how a woman like her could get a daughter "so delicate and fair, just like a doll" (93). Kalpana is smart and she learnt to speak English. When Kalpana was brutally raped, her mother rather than blaming the culprit blames her daughter that they are all disgraced because of her. She was raped, her mother says "because she flaunted herself"(149). Kalpana was stubborn, self-willed, dressed up, painted her lips and nails so this happened to her. "...women must know fear" (148). Urmi tries to reason with her saying, it was the man who did this to her to be blamed, he's the wrongdoer. But the girl doesn't have to do anything wrong, for people will always point a finger at her. It is not the death-in-life existence of Kalpana she's concerned about but the chances of her daughters' marriage. Shakutai does not want the case to be registered for she says "I have these two girls..." (62). "The destiny that society traditionally offers

women is marriage. Even today, most women are, were, or plan to be married, or they suffer from not being so" (Bea).

But when Prabhakar is revealed as the culprit, Shakutai is inconsolable and Sulu immolates herself. Sulu was always frightened and lived in the constant fear of getting thrown out of the house. She even knew the first time Prabhakar tried to lay his hands on her but warned Kalpana not to tell about it to Shakutai. Sulu's survival depended on Kalpana. It was when Prabhakar came to know that Kalpana was getting married he resorted to such a heinous crime.

Kalpana ran away from Prabhakar's house once, tried to tear up a photograph taken of Sulu, Prabhakar and herself, refused to wear her first saree which Sulu brought and used to walk out at the insinuating praises of her beauty by Prabhakar; but still Shakutai could decipher nothing. Who is to be blamed? Sulu and Kalpana, for not letting Shakutai perceive the machination of Prabhakar or Shakutai for being blind at the obvious radiance of facts.

There are women characters who suffer silently, the atrocities perpetrated against them by virtue of their sex. Urmi was sent to her paternal house at Ranidurg, for Inn one day left the infant with Diwakar "a man" (199). Though Diwakar served the family for years, Papa was furious for leaving Urmi with him. For years Urmi held Inni guilty for sending her away and comes in terms with her when she comprehended the fact that Inni's supplications were denied. "Papa's anger and silence were weapons against which Inni had no defence" (81). Akka's marriage to late Mira's husband was not ignited upon companionship and love but he needed only a mother for the motherless child.

Every girl child is born with an invisible stigma. She is indoctrinated even from childhood, to comply with the patriarchal gender norms. Any deviation from these conservative norms brings forth the then invisible stigma to visibility. The stigmatized women will have to relinquish their whole life to diminish the stigma. Permanent erasure of stigma is impossible. As the title of the novel suggests, only the binding vine of

companionship, humanitarianism and love can hold the victimized together and heal the stigma of humiliation and shame.

The concepts of fragile marriage and ruined family work as a powerful tool in *The Binding Vine*. The stifled pain that women endure undermine the gradual corrosion of their marital life.

Mira, a budding poet was thrown into a marriage wherein everything except love and companionship eluded her. She had to live with a man who tried to possess her against her will. After Mira's death during childbirth Akka replaces Mira's spot only to be warned on the day of her marriage that "What he really wants now is a mother for that motherless child" (47). Akka then knew what to expect.

Vanaa with her submissiveness and her willingness to go along anything that Harish wants and her constant refrain of "Harish says" (80).

As for Shakutai who is deserted by her husband the prime concern lies not in the "neither dead nor alive" (86) existence of her brutally raped daughter but in the fact that now as she is wronged Kalpana's chances of marriage has dwindled. Shakutai got nothing out of her marriage and yet she longs for her daughter's marriage.

Sulu immolates herself when she knows it was her husband Prabhakar who molested Kalpana. This realistic novel subverts the romanticization of marriage to unfold the appalling ugly side of it. Mira's mother, then Mira, Inni, Akka, Shakutai and Sulu had unsettling marital life. Yet Mira's mother and Shakutai did not abstain their daughters from getting married, only because they found security in marriage, despite the fact that history may repeat itself. But what if the marriage sanctified by religion is contaminated? A woman who walks out of her miserable marriage is considered obstinate and head-strong. A woman who leads a single life is stigmatized by her family as well as the society who dictates the norms of life. There are Miras, Shakutais and Sulus who could never imagine of asserting themselves who comply with the domestic roles assigned to them.

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Indira Nityanandham observes: "The hope for the Indian woman lies in the happy fact that though here are Miras and Kalpanas and Shakutais, we also have our Urmilas".

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