

MARITAL RAPE- THE ISSUE OF MAN'S LUST AND WOMAN'S HELPLESSNESS IN THE BINDING VINE

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ABSTRACT

In The Binding Vine, Deshpande makes a bold attempt to tackle the subject of marital rape. Through the character of Mira, she focuses attention on all those women who are doomed to silently suffer nightly assaults by their husbands because the very idea of a woman protesting against her husband's sexual advances is unheard of in our society. Deshpande also hints at the lack of compatibility in Urmi's marriage even though hers is a love marriage. Through the character of Shakutai, Deshpande shows how at the lower level of society, marital vows are flouted most casually by men like Shakutai's husband. He is a good-for-nothing drunkard who leaves his wife and three children to fend for themselves and hankers after another woman.

INTRODUCTION

The Binding Vine is a curious intermingling of three lives and is narrated by the sharp-tongued Urmi, a character drawn in almost the same vein as the protagonists of Deshpande's other novels. The weaving of three different tales into a single narrative is, in the main, due to the bereavement suffered by the narrator. Urmi is grieving over the death of her year old daughter Anu and in this condition she is highly sensitive to the suffering and despair of others. It is this sensitivity which leads her to befriend Shakutai, the mother of a rape victim. Urmi would never have associated herself with Shakutai in the normal course of her life as she belonged to a different strata of society altogether. It is the same sensitivity which also makes her delve into the poems of her long-dead

mother-in-law, Mira and frantically try to understand the mind of the young Mira.

In *the Binding Vine*, for the first time in the history of Indian English writing Deshpande encroaches upon yet another piece of hallowed ground, the almost entirely untouched subject of marital rape—hitherto considered a taboo subject by other Indian writers in English. She has written on the same subject in her novel, *The Dark Holds No Terror* in a different context. Here, the protagonist Sarita is assaulted at night by her husband, who vents his frustration on her as she becomes a successful doctor while he remains an underpaid lecturer. In *The Binding Vine*, however, Deshpande describes the obsession of a man with his wife and her intense dislike for physical intimacy with him,

which finds voice in a series of poems discovered by the protagonist Urmi long after her death.

Urmi is given an old trunk full of books and other odds and ends belonging to her long dead mother-in-law, Mira, by her husband's step-mother, who is referred to as Akka, many years after her marriage. Akka is also the mother of her friend, Vanaa. While handing over the trunk to her, Akka tells her how Urmi's father-in-law had been attracted to Mira, a college student, and how he had pursued and married her. Perusing the voluminous pile of writing left behind by the young Mira, Urmi fathoms the extent of forced sexual activity Mira was subjected to by her husband. The trunk is full of school note books which Mira had used as diaries, scribbling pads, untidy bundles of paper, a file and an envelope full of photographs. Reading through the cryptic poems and entries in her diary, Urmi is able to reconstruct the tragic tale of a sprightly girl who was condemned to suffer in an incompatible marriage. After a careful study she is able to decipher the essence of the thoughts which Mira had, perhaps, tried to put down on paper. From the book of poems presented to Mira by her father, it is evident to Urmi that her father was proud of her talent. Mira's photographs and writings resurrect in Urmi's mind an image of vivacious and intelligent young girl. Her desire to be a poet and her inhibitions about expressing it

aloud, her fear of being laughed at, are all obvious in her poems:

*Huddled in my cocoon,
a somnolent silkworm.
Will I emerge a
beauteous being? Or
will I, suffocating,
cease to exist?*¹

Her innermost feelings find expression in her poems written in vernacular, Kannada.

Mira, perhaps, symbolizes the plight of countless women who face the same situation but are unable to voice their suffering. The invasion of one's body even though sanctified by marriage, can be as traumatic as rape. We come across a similar situation in ShashiDeshpande's short story "Intrusion" which describes the experiences of a honeymooning couple. It is a highly sensitive story where the husband imposes himself on his yet unprepared wife. These experiences evocatively bring out the humiliation experienced by the protagonist who feels her body has been violated by her crass and insensitive husband.

A husband imposing himself on his wife is, however, never publicised at least among the Indians where the Puranas dictate that it is a wife's duty to please her husband in bed. Tradition

demands that a perfect wife should possess the following qualities:

KaryesiDasi

KaraneshuMantri

RoopechaLaxmi

KshmayaDaritri

Bhuktesu Mata

ShayanesuVeshya

ShatkarmaYukta

KuladharmaPatni

Loosely translated, these lines mean that a wife should serve her husband like a slave, give him proper advice, look as beautiful as the goddess Laxmi, forgive all his sins however terrible they may be, feed him like a mother, and serve him like a prostitute in bed. These lines, often quoted as advice to wives, clearly show the injustice meted out to women who are expected to give top priority to their husband's pleasure.

It is no wonder, then, that Urmi's mother-in-law, Mira, had to put up in silence with the violation of her body. Her thoughts, however, are recorded as poems for posterity. Urmi's careful

translation of the Kannada poems into English reveals the pathetic condition of Mira.

Going through Mira's diary, Urmi is convinced that she had written from her personal experience. "She observes that it runs through all her writing a strong, clear thread of an intense dislike of the sexual act with her husband, a physical repulsion for the man she married." (63) To prove her point, Urmi narrates a passage where Mira had clearly put down on paper, the relationship she shared with her husband and her feelings or lack of them for him:

*Talk, he says to me,
why don't you say
something, why don't
you speak to me?
What shall I talk
about. I ask him
stupidly. "What did
you do today, where
did you go, what have
you been thinking
about all evening?"
and so he goes on,
dragging my day, my
whole self out of me.*

But I have my defences; I give him the facts, nothing more, never my feelings. He knows what I'm doing and he gets angry with me, I don't mind his anger, it makes him leave me to myself, it is bliss when he does that. But he comes back, he is remorseful, repentant, he holds me close, he begins to babble. And so it begins. "Please," he says, "please, I Love You." And over and over again until he has done. "I Love You." 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 does it have to be me? Why can't he leave me alone? (67)

Urmi is able to feel her pain and anguish years later and connects her sorrow to that of Shakutai's who also has the same thing to say, "Why does this have to happen to me?" (67) Urmi alleviates her grief by discovering and empathizing with the sorrow of these women. Since the beginning of time, it had always been taken for granted that marriage provided a means for man to satisfy his sexual urge and to help in the task of procreation, and that woman was only a tool to be used towards that end. The feminist movement initiated in the West, shattered this myth and proclaimed that woman had every right to find fulfillment in the act of sex. Indian women, bred as they are in the culture which demanded their total subjugation, however, could not even dream of asserting themselves in this aspect. While

Deshpande's Mira represents women who are victims of marital rape, Anita Desai's Maya, in *Cry, the Peacock*, represents women whose husbands remain insensitive to their desires. Just as Mira silently subjects herself to the nightly assaults of her husband, Maya turns a psychological wreck unable to get any solace from her unresponsive husband.

According to Simon de Beauvoir, husbands and wives are thus bound in an institution which can hardly be called marriage. She observes:

Marriage is obscene, in principle insofar as it transforms into rights and duties those mutual relations which should be founded on a spontaneous urge; it gives an instrumental and therefore degrading character to the two bodies in dooming them to know each other in their general aspects

*as bodies, not as persons.*²

CONCLUSION

Going by this definition by Beauvoir, it would be no exaggeration to say that most Indian marriages are obscene, conducted as they are, taking caste, creed, community, financial and social status and everything else except the feelings of the prospective bride and groom into consideration. Countless generations of women have been victims of loveless marriages and several generations will continue to be so in future if society chooses to ignore the feelings of women.

REFERENCES

- 1 Deshpande, Shashi - *The Binding Vine*, New Delhi: Penguin India, 1992, 65.
- 2 Beauvoir, Simone - *The Second Sex*, trans. de H.M. Parshley, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 463.