
**MALE SEXUALITY AND MANHOOD: A STUDY OF SHASHI DESHPANDE'S
ROOTS AND SHADOWS AND THE BINDING VINE**

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ABSTRACT

There are many myths prevalent in our societies that portray men in different ways. Men too tend to believe in myths about themselves. Like other myths, the myth of male aggression and sexuality also shapes male perceptions and attitudes. In the area of sex, one notices, many of the men tend to be highly aggressive in order to assert their superiority and dominance over their women. At times, their aggression takes a violent form which they use as a means to control and coerce the opposite sex. This happens, particularly, in the case of those who feel insecure and lose their sense of confidence and prestige in their own eyes as men when they happen to fail in the economic and social areas. The idea that man by nature is sexually active and aggressive turns them insensitive to the individuality of women. They tend to see the willful expression of their virility and treatment of women as mere sexual objects for their own gratification as something legitimate. This paper is an attempt to study the concepts of male sexuality and manhood in Shashi Deshpande's novels, namely, *Roots and Shadows* and *The Binding Vine*. Some of Deshpande's men appear to be indifferent to the needs and desires of their wives and thus try to exercise complete control over their sexuality. They feel shocked at woman's expression of passion as they expect women to be passionless and submissive.

Keywords: Male Aggression, Dominance, Myth, Sexuality, Virility, Manhood.

1. INTRODUCTION

In patriarchal societies men tend to dominate women not only in social, political and economic fields but also in the crucial field of sexuality. The sexual behavior of men is often considered to be the marker of their image of manhood. The sexuality of man has different layers. It includes psychological, social and cultural aspects of men's sexual response and related phenomena. It covers a varied range of issues, including male desires and behaviour which are deeply affected by one's ideology and surroundings. It is generally observed that in our society, the patriarchal ideology of male superiority directly affects the world of sex, making men feel superior and dominant in this area of relationship also. To prove their dominance, they use the theory of might is right and, at times, use their bodies as weapons to suppress and subjugate women whose emerging status appears to be alarming to them. When they sexually abuse women, they act out of a wish to dominate, control, or punish. In such situations, men seek to reduce women to mere commodities forgetting that they are also human beings like them. That is why; young men apparently interested in friendship with women, often refer to them as an object or commodity. Men who treat women in this way often see sex as an achievement and the woman as a commodity to fulfill their bodily hunger. They view sex as a war in which their victory only matters. For them, it is a battlefield where they have to crush their female partners, their eternal enemy. If they lose this battle, they feel seriously humiliated. This attitude of men suggests that only a few of them are able to accept the instinct of sex as natural and equally

essential to women too. The idea of mutuality in this area of relationship is unacceptable to majority of men.

Male tendency to force woman to yield to their desire using the most inhuman means of rape is not limited to the relationship between husband and wife alone. They also try to exert their authority and right over other women as they tend to take women's submission and passiveness for granted. Women's deviation from their gender roles may challenge the masculinity of men and can provoke violent behaviour and sexual aggression in men. This type of gender based violence is a pervasive problem in India that can be understood in the light of the phenomenon called failed masculinity. If a woman refuses to a man's love or lust, he tends to perceive it as a personal humiliation and can go even to the extent of raping or molesting her. Kamala Bhasin remarks on this attitude:

Because sex is a war in the mind of men, women who refuse to respond or submit to sexual advances sometimes face horrible consequences. There are cases of men throwing acid on women who reject them, even killing them saying, 'If I can't have her, nobody else will' or raping them, saying, 'No one says no to me.'

Such destructive masculinity which robs women of their dignity and humanity is apparently visible in Deshpande's novel *The Binding Vine*. In it, a young girl named Kalpana is ravished by her own uncle, Parbhakar—the husband of her mother's sister. This uncle of hers is a lecherous man and keen to take her for a second wife. His wife, Sulu, tells about him: "He was always mad about Kalpana. Even then, when Kalpana went to live with them, he tried to ... he wanted? She gives up. She was only a child then, she was fourteen and he thought he could.... That's why she ran away and refused to go back." Kalpana is in love with a young man closer to her own age and unwilling to be sacrificed for the security of her childless aunt. But male desire claims her as its own and Kalpana is sexually assaulted and brutally injured. When he fails to possess Kalpana through marriage, he overpowers her by violating her virginity. Regarding such cases, Barbara Sichterman aptly points out:

A case of rape is only very indirectly a sexual act; it is, as the women's movement has repeatedly demonstrated, first and foremost a demonstration of power, of a will to assert authority and dominate, an attempt to (re) establish male dominance by means of physical force, just like wife battering. Using the sex organ in this act of violence does not make it a sexual act, but only serves to show that the rapist despises not just women but sexuality too and wants to dominate both.

Urmila, the protagonist, realizes that what has happened to Kalpana also happens to many girls in India. There are many cases of rape and violence inflicted on women by men. What pains her is that such things are never reported to police. They are often treated as accidents for the sake of the reputation of the girl and her family. The culprit often goes scot-free but the victim suffers only because of the traditional mindset of the society. How the fear of social disgrace dominates our psyche is evident from the remark of Kalpana's mother, Shakutai: "If a girl's honour is lost, what is left? The girl does not have to do anything wrong... people will themselves point a finger at her... even if it is true, keep it to yourself, don't let anyone know of it. I have another daughter, what will become of her...?" (59). Such type of fears of being dishonoured in society keep the culprits safe. Above all, male sexuality and female sexuality in the Indian context are considered different in that while the male is given the allowance of succumbing to his urges, the woman, even in her liberated state, has to discipline herself in the interest of the family. Male sexuality is regarded as a symbol of power and strength whereas

female sexuality is considered passive and something to be ashamed of. Moreover, male sexuality is a form of domination which ultimately destroys women and gives a feeling of victory to men. This, of course, takes varying shapes in different generations and different social classes.

Another aspect of men's sexual behaviour, determined by socio-cultural definitions of manhood, which Deshpande's novels reveal, is their inclinations to treat woman as a commodity meant only for the satisfaction of their needs and desires. This makes men totally indifferent to her preferences and wishes. When it comes to marital relationships, most of the men consider themselves to be the sole owners of their wives, both mentally and physically. They often treat them as objects devoid of any feeling and emotion. This leads to many untold stories of marital rape happening within the four walls of seemingly happy homes in India which, most of the time, are not even construed as rape because it is thought that men have only taken what is rightfully theirs, while women remain mute spectators robbed of their dignity in their own houses. In her novels, the writer has brought to the fore the issue of marital rape, which is often not discussed in public and which is not often viewed as constituting violence simply because it is the husband who is the perpetrator. She depicts how male domination and violence have kept women in pain and silence for ages through the character of Akka in *Roots and Shadows*. She has survived through the relationship as if through a long and gruesome punishment, but ultimately emerges stronger through the experience.

Akka belongs to the older generations, a time when child marriages were common. At the time of her marriage, she is depicted only as a child while her husband is a strong man. He seems to be experienced in the field of sex as he has been keeping mistresses to satisfy his biological needs. His idea that wife is nothing more than an object of getting pleasure is manifested by the way he treats her. In his mad pursuit of getting sexual satisfaction, he regards it his right as a husband to force himself on her regardless of her age and desire. He tortures and hurts her so badly that she tries to escape by running away from home. But her attempt is foiled by her mother-in-law who catches her and beats her up. In spite of being locked for days without food, Akka prays her mother-in-law in vain not to send her back to her husband's room. He appears to her like a monster frightening her every night. His behaviour is so much disgusting to her that she starts despising him. Akka's nightmarish experience is described by other women of the house:

But I heard that twice she tried to run away... a girl of thirteen. Her mother-in-law, I heard, whipped her for that and locked her up for three days. Starved her as well. And then sent her back to her husband's room. The child, they said, cried and clung to her mother-in-law saying 'Lock me up again, lock me up.' But there was no escape from the husband then. I remember her telling me before my own marriage was consummated, 'Now your punishment begins, Narmada. You have to pay for all those saris and jewels.'

Through Akka's experiences, Deshpande brings out the brutish treatment meted out to women and girls in the name of tradition by men. As a result of such inhuman dealings, Akka, begins to view conjugal relationship as a punishment. For her husband, on the other hand, it does not matter whether he is hurting his wife or not. He is mad only for his own fulfillment and satisfaction. He behaves like an inhuman creature overlooking the fact that she is also a human being like him.

In patriarchal societies, as stated earlier, love and passion are viewed as a male prerogative, women are supposed to fall in love, to respond to man's sexual initiation and to remain passive during the act. Moreover, within marriage, this view of society becomes legitimized and comes to be regarded as natural for many men. Jasbir Jain is very much to the point when she observes, "The male impulse to possess the women and override female resistance marks an aggression which is backed by social approval through marriage." Men generally do not allow women to assert their right and interest in the area of sexuality. This is further evident in the case of Mira's husband in *The Binding Vine*. Like Akka's husband (RS), he also rapes his wife within the so-called holy institution of marriage. Urmila, the protagonist and Mira's daughter-in-law, reveals her pathetic story. She tells that Mira did not love the man who was so obsessed with her. Her husband gave her no freedom to opt out of the relationship. Again, like Akka (RS), Mira's relationship with her husband is one long nightmare. He forces himself on her in spite of her repeated refusals. Ultimately, she dies while delivering her child. Mira's life illustrates the traumatic aspects of loveless marriage, and one-sided passion of her husband.

Urmila learns that Mira's husband had seen her at a wedding ceremony and at once fell in love with her. After that, he became a man in single-minded pursuit of an object: marrying Mira. As he could not directly make the marriage proposal, he got a mutual friend to do that. The proposal was accepted and the marriage was settled. It was a triumph for the man, however, a disaster for Mira. From her diary, it becomes clear that she intensely disliked the sexual act with her husband. She felt a physical repulsion for the man she married because he always crushed her in bed. For him, the definition of marriage is limited to physical pleasure only. Thus, she started hating the word, 'love'. She wrote 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?"(65). Mira's husband is madly obsessed with her, but his sexual obsession creates terror in her mind about the coming of the night. His tradition-coloured idea that love can only be expressed in this way makes him indifferent to her objection to it. It does not matter to him whether she likes it or not. In this connection, Indirani Jaising rightly observes about the psyche of man:

It is assumed that by marrying a man, a woman has given her consent to sexual intercourse with her husband at any time. Thus, even if he forces himself on her, he is not committing an offence (of rape) as her consent is assumed. In this respect, the women's movement has consistently demanded that the law of rape should be changed.

No doubt, the demand of women has been accepted and the law of rape has also been changed but it seems to have little effect on the behaviour of most of the men because beliefs sanctioned by myths and socio-cultural dictates still tend to be more potent and effective than the law. Mira's husband too seems to be one of such men who, like a monster, invades her during night. She too feels helpless in raising a voice against the inhuman treatment meted out to her by her husband. Her poetry clearly shows her fear of the man at night:

But tell me, friend, did Laxmi too,
twist brocade tassels round her fingers
and tremble, fearing the coming

of the dark - clouded, engulfing night? (56)

It runs through all her writing—a strong, clear thread of an intense dislike of the sexual act with her husband, a physical repulsion from the man she married. On the other hand, her mother-in-law, an embodiment of traditional beliefs, teaches her never to say ‘no’:

Don't tread the path barren to you
obey, never utter a 'no'
submit and your life will be
a paradise, she said and blessed me. (57)

But, in spite of the blessings and teachings of her mother-in-law, one day she refuses to succumb to his beastly advances and the “no, growing painfully within / like a monster child was born” (57).

He ravishes her continually in spite of her rejection and fear. It is out of this forced relationship that Kishore is born and Mira dies. In fact, through her novels, Deshpande has criticized the tradition that dictates that the husband has a right to satisfy his biological needs regardless of the wife's unwillingness, thus allowing crimes like marital rape. Marriage, which was a spiritual bond in the older times, has become now a days only a sexual, legal bond. The behaviour of Mira's son, Kishore, towards his wife, Urmi, is not much different from that of his father. In spite of being educated, he appears to be deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology. Like his father, he is also unable to understand his wife's yearnings for spiritual love. Each time when Urmi tries to reveal her emotional insecurity, he asserts himself sexually. For him, sex is the only means to assure her of her security. Kishore, the archetypal Indian husband, never understands the depth of her feelings. “Each time you leave me that parting is like death,” she tries to tell him two times, and both the times, he finds solution in the physical relationship. But to her:

... sex is only a temporary answer. I came out of it to find out that the lights had come back... ‘go to sleep’ he said. He was kneeling by me, his face close to mine, but the closeness was only physical. His voice was cold. I could see the goose bumps on his shoulders, his chest. I did not look into his face. I was afraid of what I would see. I turned round and fell asleep.(140)

Urmi finds sex as a temporary answer but for Kishore, who is emotionless and tough, knows sex as the only answer. He seems not to be conscious of the fact that women also need compassion and company, not only the physical pleasure. As Promila Kapur, the renowned sociologist, has concluded in her study *Love, Marriage and Sex*, “the women now aspire for natural companionship, respect, material comforts, satisfaction of emotional and physical needs in marriage.”

All these men, who appear to be dehumanized in one way or the other, can be viewed as reminders of the violence in the modern Indian male rooted in traditional values. They perpetrate acts of physical and sexual violence against their wives and other women, even though for different reasons, to achieve a similar end—assertion of their manhood. Most of these men have scant regard for the feelings of their wives and do not, for a moment, think of the consequences of their actions which are responsible for the failure of their marriages and

relationships. The behavioural patterns of all these characters make it clear that modern Indian male has not completely shed his traditional mindset. His relationship to women is far from being based on equal terms even though in public spheres, one can see men talk of gender equality. Marital rapes and violence are still adopted by men as means to maintain their dominance. This, perhaps, confirms the reality that men are victims of social conditioning; nature has not played any role in making them so.

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