

# Representation of Violence Against Women in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror* and *The Binding Vine*

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## Abstract

Shashi Deshpande is one of the prominent female authors in the Indian writing in English who paved the path of a 'new woman' for a glorious and hopeful future. Though the female characters initially appear to be subordinated and subjugated but ultimately, they struggle against the patriarchal prejudices and stereotypes to make a mark of their own. The paper aims to bring out how violence has been used to suppress and subjugate women in a patriarchal setup by exploring Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *The Binding Vine*. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* exposed the sensitive issue of marital rape and gender discrimination while *The Binding Vine* shows women facing violence through rape, marital rape, mental harassment and gender discrimination.

**Keywords:** Violence, gender, patriarchy, trauma, female patriarchy.

## Introduction

Shashi Deshpande, a Sahitya Akademi Awardee has exposed the subordinate status and position of women in Indian society. The society of India is patriarchal in nature and women have to face numerous issues in their day to day lives to sustain. Violence against women is clearly visible in her novels *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *The Binding Vine* where women are individually or collectively exploited either physically, mentally, emotionally, psychologically or economically.

Violence can be categorized into three parts: self-directed violence, interpersonal violence and collective violence. The issue of violence that women face in the evil system of patriarchy comes generally under the category of interpersonal violence which means women are harmed mentally, physically, or emotionally by another person such as their husbands, parents, in-laws and other members of the family. Sometimes this violence also takes a woman towards self-directed violence which results in committing suicide or harming themselves. Johan Galtung gave the theory of 'Violence Triangle' which consists of Direct, Structural, and Cultural Violence. Lenore Walker developed the theory of violence and psycho-social theory of learned helplessness in *The Battered Woman* (2009) in which she talked about the three stages of violence: 'the tension building phase, the acute battering, and the honeymoon phase'(55). The first phase describes the tension building phase where the tension rises and a woman can sense that the male has become edgy and reacts negatively to frustration more often. The first phase advocates the myth that a woman would not be beaten if she behaves better. Thus, it's the duty of a woman to prioritize man's moods and his needs above her needs and desires. This phase includes little episodes of

violence which are quickly covered. Thus, he may begin to lash out verbally at her for some real or imagined wrongdoing and quickly apologize or become docile again... (Walker, “Who are the Battered Women?” 53)

During the acute battering women are constantly being exploited and remain under threat but there are constant time periods and situational factors responsible for the battering of women. The only question that appears on surface is why women keep tolerating such behavior? The battered women gave a common excuse of staying in abusive or violent relationships that is their love for the man. When interviewed most of them said they loved the man, despite the fact that their reasons for staying in their relationships were also financial, fear of dying or suffering more severe injuries if they tried to leave, and the need to avoid loneliness. (Walker, “Who are the Battered Women?” 54) However, in the last phase of the battering cycle is a period of contrite, forgiving, loving behaviour from the man is indicated. He sincerely apologizes for losing control of his anger, and he tries to make up for the painful battering by acting particularly tenderly. As a result, he turns into the kind of spouse or lover that a woman expects—kind, considerate, attentive, affectionate, and sensitive to all of her needs and desires. (Walker, “Who are the Battered Women?” 54)

### Main Part

The protagonist of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita was a victim of marital rape. Manohar exerted violence in form of physical abuse on his wife to pour out his frustration, anger and false male ego only because she makes more money than him. This particular type of violence is called ‘Intimate Partner Violence’ which is part of ‘Direct or Interpersonal’ violence which is seen when one’s partner or spouse tried to physically or mentally harm the other one knowingly or unknowingly. It can be a result of aggression or controlling behaviour of the culprit which cannot be controlled. It has some long-term effect on the victim such as sexual tension, psychological trauma, physical pain, injuries, stress disorder and depression. The intimate partner violence affects not only the victim but also the entire family including children.

Sarita marries Manohar out of her own will that too going against her parents specifically her mother. Before and after marriage Manohar supported Sarita in pursuing her medical career while he himself was a teacher in an institute. After a while Sarita becomes successful with the help of her senior doctor. She is known as one of the most famous female doctors in short span of time. This made her more confident about herself which she had always craved for, from the times when her mother used to taunt her that she would not be able to do good in her life. The potential for development amongst humans is limitless. Deshpande in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* opined that Sarita grew a few inches taller because of the respect (esteem) she was surrounded. However, it's possible that the same factor that made her inch taller also made Manohar inch shorter. When they were married, he was a young man and she was his bride but now she was a lady doctor and he was her husband. (42)

Manohar too started to enjoy the luxury which came after her success but only until he was being taunted by every other person he met. He became irritated by all the attention that was given to his wife in front of him. Sarita narrated an incident where one day a woman came home to seek help for her child who was suffering from diarrhoea. She examined the child and wrote out a prescription. The next day it happened again and the day after and it continued. Now when she walks out of the home, people nod to her, murmur greetings and namastes and smiles to her. But all the respect, greetings and wishes were for Sarita, only for her and not for Manohar. He was almost totally ignored by them. He was unable to stand

the fact that his wife has become the bread winner for the family and it is 'her' money with which they can afford a good lifestyle. Once an interviewer innocently asked a question that how does it feel when your wife earns the butter as well as most of the bread? This becomes the reason of rage within Manohar, he felt humiliated and poured his anger on his wife.

The rage of Manohar made him a monster in the darkness of the night. He began to molest his wife Sarita in the name of marital relation. He forced himself on her in order to prove that he is still the patriarch (male) of the family and Sarita is his subordinate. When it happened for the first time, she could not believe as how to react to that but then this nightmarishly event took place more than often, she began to feel disgusted and explained the night as, 'Panic. Then pain'. (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* 112) When it happened for the second time, she felt it was just a nightmare. Her entire body and soul were hurt as he wounded her body through hands and savage teeth. It was a horrible assault which occurred with her night after night. She began to struggle but couldn't do anything against the fearful strength which caused her pain.

Sarita felt helpless and was unable to even address the issue in front of anyone or even to Manohar because after the night he behaves as if nothing happened in the night. His behaviour after the incident made Sarita even more miserable and helpless because it was disheartening for her to know that her husband does not even consider his act as harmful to her. She described another incident while she was dressing up one day, "God, Saru! Have you hurt yourself? Look at that!" (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* 203) Saru was surprised at his concern and could feel the genuineness, though she couldn't understand is there any use talking to him? She felt maybe he needs treatment; this resonates in her ears and her voice grows shrill. She further added that the patriarchal society would consider that Sarita needs the treatment, it's not so easy, to spill out the reality of such a toxic relationship. They will never accept the reality. This exhibits Lenore Walker's Honeymoon phase where Manohar expressed his concern for Saru. He seemed to be kind, attentive and sensitive towards Saru as if he loved her and never been exploitative at all.

Sarita recalls that she had a happy married life until she became successful. She was so much in love with him and he too loved her, supported her with full heart. With Manohar, she felt the kind of love that she had never experienced in her life. Her childhood was not joyous and the relationship that she had with her mother was also uncordial. She recalls the initial days with Manohar, was quite happy and satisfying mentally and physically. She was enjoying the bliss of marital life, tender moments of passionate love and affection which was full of intense joy. She felt if there is a heaven on earth it is this or something like this. Things changed as Manohar was unable to accept his failure in life and became jealous of his wife's success. His wounded male pride turned into sexual sadism and he exerted his animal power over her on the bed. Deshpande wants to project that marriage has been used rather misused as a license by Indian men to assert their superiority and the subordination of women. (Sharma 95-96)

Later, she finally decides to share her grief with her father and told him everything about the nightmares that she had been facing since so long. She told her father, "My husband is a sadist." (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* 199) Initially her father was unable to understand what she was trying to communicate as it was something really new and unknown to him. She explained, "He attacked me like an animal that night. I was sleeping and I woke up and there was this... this man hurting me. With his hands, his teeth, his whole body." (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* 201) Saru's outburst explained the acute battering phase of Lenore's theory of violence.

Sarita has always been mentally tortured by her own mother because her brother could not be saved from drowning while Sarita was there with him. Her mother always taunted her about the incident and made her the culprit of her brother's death, "You did it, you did this, you killed him" (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* 173). She had always been neglected by her mother when her brother was alive which made her feel sad but she loved her brother and was equally sad after his death. What made her sadder than ever was that her mother became more distant to her after the incident. Her mother once said, "Daughter? I don't have any daughter. I had a son and he died. Now I am childless ..." (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* 178) She said she will pray to God for her unhappiness. She wanted her to know the pain which she has given her. Due to this entire mental trauma, she became cold towards her mother and stood against her to marry Manohar and never came back to meet her after marriage. She started hating her, she wanted to hurt her and make her suffer. She was also upset with her mother because she opposed her selection of medical studies as a career. It was her father who supported her for further studies after school. It is the patriarchal outlook of her mother which made her think that it's useless to let her daughter study and persuade her to opt for a career because according to the patriarchal norms prevalent in the society, women are seen only as housewives, devoting their entire life in the service of their husband and children. Mental trauma has been reflected through Sarita's relation with her mother.

Very inhuman treatment is meted out to her during her monthly ordeals. She is treated liked an untouchable, segregated from the other members and is made to sleep on straw mat with a cup and plate exclusively meant for her to be served in from a distance. As a result, she is engulfed with a sense of a shame and prays in desperation for a miracle to put an end to it. This segregation on the part of the family fills girls with a feeling of shame. This feeling of shame and unwantedness produces hatred in the hearts of girls during their impressionable years. (Sharma 110)

On the other hand, *The Binding Vine* is a tale of a few women experiencing different kinds of violence in patriarchal social set-up. Urmila is the protagonist of the novel who was found mourning on her infant daughter's death in the beginning. She experienced extreme pain after her death and was unable to share this pain with anyone, not even with her husband as he lived far from her and does not seem to care much as she does. She was depressed over the fact that she would not be able to see her daughter ever again. She was consoled by her sister-in-law Vanna. Vanna tried to deviate her from the pain and asked her to remember their childhood when she was hurt by the bicycle and cried, but it doesn't seem to lift her mood as she connected that pain to her current one, "That was just a hurt, a small hurt, and this is my child, Vanna, it's my child". (Deshpande, *The Binding Vine* 8) She further tells Vanna that, there can be no vaulting over time. No matter how hard or painful the journey is, one has to endure it; nothing can avoid it. Furthermore, she adds she doesn't have the desire to move ahead in time and imagine a moment when all of this suffering has passed, healed, and been forgotten. The pain which is left reminds her of Anu-her daughter. This is all she has, the pain, if she will lose this, she will lose her daughter entirely, nothing would be left for her.

To distract herself from the painful memories, she tried to get involved in the lives of other women such as her mother-in-law, Mira. She found her poetry which unfolded the miserable life of Mira with her husband. It seemed that she was trapped in a toxic relationship and was unable to speak about it. Later she gets to know that Mira was sexually and physically abused by her husband and turns out to be a victim of a matchless marriage. Mira's husband in some way or the other resembles Manohar (Sarita's husband) as he also took advantage of her at night in the name of marriage and love. He brutally

assaulted her in the darkness of the night and told her that he loved her so much that he cannot resist her, “I give him the facts, nothing more, never my feelings....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.” (Deshpande, *The Binding Vine* 67)

Mira’s poetry made Urmila understand her situation and plight of other women who experienced the suffering of same issue. She was a victim of marital rape like Sarita but the cruelty of the situation was that, it could not be discussed openly in the society because it was not considered as a crime in the eyes of patriarchy. The patriarchal society believed that it is the right of a man to hold command over his wife’s body and soul. This exhibits the direct as well as cultural violence of Galtung, where stereotypes has been internalised by the individual.

On the other hand, Urmila gets to know about the case of Kalpana who was a rape victim and suffered at the hand of her own family member. She was raped by her maternal uncle (aunt’s husband) who was fascinated by the idea of marrying Kalpana because his wife (Kalpana’s aunt) has failed to give him an heir. It was her mother and aunt’s idea to get her married to him which showed the stereotypical attitude and pathetic nature of a woman in the patriarchal social set up of India. Here female patriarchs are responsible for dragging down other women in the name of norms and rules of the society. Kalpana was an independent woman and wants to live her life on her own terms and condition which was disliked by others. Even her mother discarded this ideology because she was against the independent and carefree life of a girl and believed they are meant to play the role of a wife and mother. She told Urmila about Kalpana’s willingness to live life at the fullest without any hindrance and social obligations. She was not one of those persons who would stop doing certain thing because it’s unacceptable by the society, “She is very smart, that’s how she got that job in the shop. Kalpana even learnt how to speak in English. People in our chawl used to laugh at her, but she didn’t care.” (Deshpande, *The Binding Vine* 92) Kalpana was the lover of freedom and freewill. She denied the marriage proposal at once, which seemed disrespectful to her uncle and he raped her thinking that after conquering her body, he would ultimately win her and can marry her. After the incident, when Urmila had a talk with Kalpana’s mother Shakutai, she was shocked as Sakutai was still thinking to save their ‘respect’ by not filing the complaint against the man who raped her daughter. She told her that if she would file a case, others would know about Kalpana, which would make Kalpana’s life miserable and nobody would marry her.

Shakutai’s life has also been difficult as she was left alone by her husband in the city like Bombay with daughters and she had to manage everything on her own from raising her daughters to marrying them off. After all this, it becomes very difficult for her to deal with her daughter’s miserable condition. She was sad to see her in pain and does not want her to struggle after this incident by dragging her in police investigation. This in fact is the attitude of almost every family whose daughter has been physically assaulted. The irony is that the society blames the victim and not the culprit of such heinous crime. Her uncle freely roams around as if nothing happened and his wife has to suffer all the trouble and she finally decides to set herself on fire. She commits suicide after serving her husband normally because she was unable to see the pain which her niece has to go through and her husband’s cruelty made her feel disgusted about everything. Instead of blaming him and making him pay for the crime he did, she chose to end her life.

## Conclusion

Through the condition of Sarita, Mira, Kalpana, Urmila, and Sulu; Deshpande has demonstrated the plig-



ht of women in the patriarchal social set-up where they have to witness and go through so many traumatic experiences to survive in the world. The heinous crime of rape makes a victim suffer throughout the life. Instead of making the culprit pay for the crime, it is always a woman who has to pay the price. They been told to behave in a certain manner so that they don't get raped and there is nothing more pathetic than this thinking of the society that women do such things which makes obvious for men to take advantage of them. Deshpande has addressed the sensitive issue of marital rape which has not been discussed much in the society as it should have been. She has criticised the marital rape and subordination of a woman through body and mind. Apart from this, Deshpande also addressed the mental trauma which women have to face in order to sustain in the family and society. Sometimes it is the family which becomes the reason for their traumatic journey in life like for Sarita and Urmila. Deshpande has skilfully shown the nature of violence against women taking place in the patriarchal society and their suffering and agony which has to endured by women throughout their lives. She even portrayed courageous and wilful female characters who struggled and paved a path of a new woman in the society who can think and live freely and independently in the society.

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