

Social Taboo and the Female Gender: Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone* and Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*

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Abstract: This paper highlights two social taboos; illegitimacy and rape that victimize the female gender. The underlying theme of motherhood and determination to uphold female dignity is discussed. Trajectory of the argument lies in the female courage to fight against victimization and exploitation. Female subordination and injustice experienced by women from their male counterpart and the vast gap that exists between the two genders is postulated in relation to social taboo. The protagonists in Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone* and Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* are from middle class family; English and Indian respectively, determined to change the female world juxtaposed to traditional norms. The discourse also lies in the art of writing; patriarchal authority and its dictate that reduce Mira to nothingness. Subjugation of the female and hierarchy that operates within society that gives specific identity to individuals is further discussed.

Keywords: illegitimacy, rape, marriage, and patriarchy.

Various writers and theorists have been concerned with the English middle class that comprises of a majority of the English population, a mixture of intellectuals, writers, painters, musicians, fashionable hostesses, stockbrokers, politicians, engineers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, university lecturers and professors. Similar mode of middle class structure has been replicated in colonial India and thereafter in post-colonial India. *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, (1997) edited by Mary Eagleton states:

Women of the upper and middle classes could partake in a few of the activities of their menfolk whether of business or pleasure. It was not usual for them to engage in politics, business, or the administration of their estates, while the main masculine leisure pursuits such as hunting and drinking were also barred. Such women, therefore, had a great deal of leisure, and this leisure was often occupied by omnivorous reading. (Eagleton, 148)

Drabble and Deshpande seem to create female protagonists belonging to the middle class in order to represent the voice of the majority of females within a social construct. Urmila in *The Binding Vine* represents the Indian middle class female gender and she simultaneously acts as the bridge and spokesperson for the lower section of the female gender in the Indian context. Urmila retrieves Mira's dairy and poems that unfolds female exploitation and subjugation experienced within the marriage bounds. In contrast, Rosamund in *The Millstone* solely represents the English middle class female gender although at various instances she voices universal female thoughts. In *The Millstone*, Rosamund is surprised to discover that she is pregnant on her first sexual encounter: I was sure

enough, having indeed a fool-proof case in favour of George's paternity, for he was the only man I had ever in my whole life slept with, and then only once. (TM-20) Rosamund has committed the mistake of being pregnant but unwed in the 1960's London, at a time illegitimacy is a taboo. Toril Moi, in *What is a Woman?* (2001) explores the woman's will to change, which in phallogentric writing is sadly omitted. Toril Moi questions: Am I not imprisoning myself in traditional disciplinary thinking? Have I no need to cross and breakup generic and disciplinary boundaries? (Moi, 124) Drabble through the protagonist Rosamund decides to 'breakup the generic and disciplinary boundaries' and Rosamund decides to have the illegitimate baby, face publicity, and consequently she meets the harsh ordeals and reality of living. Rosamund decides to be an independent mother and enters into an existence that she has never encountered. Her struggle involves completion of her university thesis, earning a living, and the near delivery of her baby. In *The Binding Vine*, Deshpande takes up the theme of rape and how rape victimizes the female while the male culprit seems to be free of victimization. Although Dr. Bhaskar Jain feels that it is right to report the rape in order to identify the culprit, Shakutai, Kalpana's mother vehemently protests against it: 'If a girl's honour is lost, what's left? The girl doesn't have to do anything wrong, people will always point a finger at her.' (TBV-59) If Kalpana recovers, she will not be able to find a suitable husband as she has been raped. The culprit on the other hand lurks, free to marry another woman. Dr. Bhaskar Jain, Kalpana's doctor relates his case report to Urmila and he finds it strange that the policeman should reply him thus:

We don't like rape cases, the man said. They're messy and troublesome, never straightforward. But forget that and think of the girl and her family. Do you think it'll do them any good to have it known the girl was raped? She's unmarried, people are bound to talk, her name would be smeared. (TBV-88)

The difference between male and female gender concerning social taboo is highlighted by both the novelists. Traditional women easily get blamed due to the fact that women do not contest against the males as in the case of Kalpana's mother. The transcendence of the female gender from traditional type to an emancipated one is remarkably clear in the select texts. Rosamund fights for the unborn infant in order to raise the child, but in the case of Kalpana who remains unconscious after she is raped, Urmila fights for her and exposes Kalpana's case to the public in order to identify and expose the rapist. In *The Millstone*, Rosamund breaks the social code as she commits the social taboo of bearing an illegitimate child, and at the same time maintains a social front as she is still a part of the society that she lives in. The stigma and the taboo attached to illegitimacy do not seem to bind the English male gender while it restricts Rosamund. Thus, she is for the first time afraid to meet her wedded brother and sister, and she also delays in writing any letter to her parents whom she recounts as: Extraordinary blend of socialist principles and middle class scruples. (TM-31) Who are at present attending to the socialist job of working in Africa. Patriarchal ideology is focused in *The Millstone* by Rosamund's friend Roger who offers to marry her to solve the

problem of illegitimacy for both Rosamund and her child. Roger suggests: 'We could always get divorced more or less instantly. (TM-54) The male idea of marriage as compensation for Rosamund and the baby is voiced by Roger, whereas Rosamund feels that marriage has no compensation and remarks: 'I think it's a ridiculous notion. But nice, just the same. (TM-54) It is 'nice' because Roger is thoughtful about her. Joe suggests that he lends her money for an abortion, and her male foreign students are sorry that she is pregnant. As for Kalpana, she remains unconscious in the hospital due to her physical injury; the outcome of rape. It is her mother who voices traditional notion as she does not want to inflict shame to her family by making a case report and she pleads to the doctor: 'She turns to him, '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...?' (TBV-59) Deshpande's focal thrust is that men who commit rape are not victimized for their crime while it is the women victims and their female family members that face victimization. Kalpana's mother and her younger sister bear the brunt of disgrace and humiliation of the rape that may at a later stage, result to an unmarried status for her younger sister. The conversation between Urmila and Shakutai clearly depicts the Indian mentality in cases related to rape. Urmila comments on the male culprit: 'The man, who did this to her. Don't you see, can't you see he's the wrongdoer?' She looks at me in silence, eyes wide and startled, as if the thought of the man has never occurred to her.

'The man,' she says after a small silence. 'What use is it blaming him? Women like you will never understand what it is like for us. We have to keep to our places, we can never step out. There are always people waiting to throw stones at us, our own people first of all...' (TBV-148)

Shakutai knows that the rapist is to be blamed, but she also perceives that in a patriarchal society, females are always blamed; women cannot escape the blame. Parallel stories in the form of poems are related by Mira, the rape victim of her husband. Reading Mira's poems Urmila states: '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. (TBV-63) In the novel, Deshpande illustrates how men commit rape within the marriage bounds. In her poems Mira writes:

But tell me, friend, did Laxmi too, | twist brocade tassels round her
fingers | and tremble, fearing the coming | of the dark-clouded,
engulfing night? (TBV-66)

The fear mentioned in the poem is the fear of rape that Mira undergoes every night. It results to her abhorrence of the night: the time that she has to succumb to her husband's sexual desire. Mira has been taught by her mother not to say 'no' to her husband's advances. She detests the plight that she suffers and she blames her mother for being too traditional. Liberty for women characters in male writings is impossible as women are oppressed by male factor and ideology. Female intelligence and intellectual achievement is out of the question in a male construct. Gilbert and Gubar in *The Mad Woman in the Attic*. (1979), comment on the male writers:

...those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her human face
both to lessen their dread of her "inconstancy" and by identifying her

with the "eternal types" they have themselves invented to possess her more thoroughly. (Gilbert & Gubar, 17)

Drabble's protagonist Rosamund therefore goes beyond the boundary of madness and compromise:

I experienced the usual doubts about whether my child would like me, whether I would like my child, and so on, but simultaneously with these doubts I experienced absolute certainty. I knew for a fact that the child would be mine and that I would have it. (TM-89)

Rosamund is uncertain about her future, but she is determined to keep her baby in custody. Rosamund thus breaks the social codification and pre-conception on illegitimacy. She further states:

Also, although I am different about the particulars of my qualifications I suppose I must have a rock-like confidence in my own talent, for I simply did not believe that the handicap of one small illegitimate baby would make a scrap of difference to my career: I was in such a strong position by nature that were a situation to arise in which there were any choice to make between me and another, I would win, through the evident superiority of my mind. (TM-125)

The given passage denotes Rosamund's confidence, talent and willingness to efficiently progress in her career. She therefore, decides to go for regular check-ups during her pregnancy and tutors foreign students in order to maintain her middle class economic front. Work for Rosamund the emancipated woman is a necessity to solve a needed economic end. Deshpande in the guise of Mira refutes to patriarchy and uses Mira as the symbol of a woman who is about to emerge from her traditional notion to an emancipated stage. Yet, the transformation is curbed as Mira feels insignificant and inefficient to write poems for publication especially after she listens to Venu reading his poems. Mira states:

I know this is what I want – to be able to write like this. But I can't believe I ever can. And, thank God, I never say this aloud. They will laugh at me, I can imagine how they will, I can hear them laughing. (TBV-66)

Mira is even dissuaded to write poems by Venu the poet on their first meeting. The male contention of being the better gender and the firm resolve to patronize the art of writing for the male gender is the focal thrust of the following passage: '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.' (TBV-127) Deshpande at this juncture clearly depicts the male mentality with respect to writing and highlights how patriarchal dictates have marginalised women through the centuries in the field of writing. Mira remains quiet about her poems from the day that she is told by Venu to 'leave the other poetry' to men. Writing is therefore, a social taboo for Mira and the female gender. But, Mira's urge to express herself in poems cannot be restrained and she writes: Shall I surrender to this Maya-world | dancing peacock, displaying its feathers? | Or shall I, defying the market world | retreat into my shell tortoise-like? (TBV-98) The 'Maya-world' in the poem may be assumed as the world of literary illusion created by the male gender; writing ascribed only to males. Mira retreats into her 'shell' and writes her poems that are

unpublished during her lifetime. As the story progresses, it is told that Mira is mad and that she is confined to a particular room of the house, just as Bertha Mason was confined to an area of the house in Charlotte Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre*. When Mira loses her child, she grieves for the death of her child and the death of her mother. But her grief for the dead is not the end of her female grief as the following passage confirms:

They all think I am grieving because I could not meet her before she died. Am I? Yes, I am. But there is more. I wish I could have asked her a question. 'Mother,' I always wanted to ask, 'Why do you want me to repeat your history when you so despair of your own?' But she died and I will never know her answer now. (TBV-126)

Mira questions the cause of repetition of the female history of subordination that has claimed her mother and all the females before her. Tradition repeats itself through societal notions and norms that a woman unfailingly imbibes and enforces the same on her daughters in order to align them with social codifications and morals. Even if the thought to obstruct and retaliate against traditional codes occurs in a female mindset, the fear of being different and facing the consequences silences her and prevents her from exposing the injustices faced by her. It is for this reason that Mira writes about the injustice which remains unpublished, and in order to repudiate her husband's physical assault she convinces herself that she is a widow. In *The Millstone* and *The BindingVine*, Drabble and Deshpande focus on the emergence of the new woman with protagonists from middle class society who are intellectual, intelligent and determined to create new avenues for themselves and the female gender. Both the novelists through their protagonists seem to suggest that it is possible to acquire this new woman identity only through determination, zeal, conscious effort, education, intelligence and rebellion against the existing patriarchy. This may be the reason for the two novelists to create middle class educated and intelligent women as their protagonists, who they feel are able to portray their focal thrust, and who can simultaneously represent the majority of the female gender.

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- TBV – *The BindingVine*, TM – *The Millstone*

