

The Naked Truth: Sexual Objectification of Mira in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*

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Abstract

Objectification, according to Martha Nussbaum, is the act of treating someone as an instrument or object. And objectification theory offers a significant framework for comprehending, researching, and intervening to enhance the lives of women in a sociocultural environment that sexually objectifies the female physique and links a woman's value to her physical appearance and sexual abilities. Further, sexual objectification encompasses a broad range of practices and institutions that contribute to the portrayal of women as mere sex objects. This objectification theory explicates the harms and wrongs of sexual objectification, as it explains the association between instrumentalization and the processes of social stereotyping facilitate its functioning. This paper, therefore, investigates how Mira is sexually objectified in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*, and its devastatingly traumatic impact on the victim's psyche.

Keywords: Women, feminism, sexual objectification, sexual assault, trauma.

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INTRODUCTION

The theory of objectification offers a significant framework for researching, comprehending, and intervening to enhance the lives of women in a sociocultural environment that sexually objectifies the female physique and links a woman's value with her physical appearance and sexual abilities. The academic perusal of the aspect of sexual objectification is of prime importance for the feminists because it undermines the identity and self-worth of a woman. That being the case, the social and political philosophy of objectification calls for a diligent scrutiny. Sexual objectification in Bartky's views is a phenomenon in which the "sexual parts or sexual functions" of the person "are separated out from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her" (*Femininity and Domination* 26). The concept of sexual objectification has been studied first by Immanuel Kant, using individuals purely as instruments to achieve one's goals, and more recently, by Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, and Martha Nussbaum. In non-academic discussions, many authors and activists have denounced the construction of women as sexual objects and the wide range of practices and institutions that participate in it. Nussbaum's instrumentalization account suggests that objectification

is essentially the practice of utilizing something for one's own gain/advantage. This is a normalized account of objectification of woman constructed by the patriarchal society. In this regard, Catharine MacKinnon mentions, "to be sexually objectified means having a social meaning imposed on your being that defines you as to be sexually used" (*Toward a Feminist Theory* 140). The central aspect of sexual objectification is the assignment of a certain status to women in society, which renders them appropriate for manipulation and control; this curbs their autonomy and social standing. On the other hand, Nussbaum's discussion of objectification centers mostly on the practical treatment of a human being as an object, with instrumental use, rather than with the social meanings that make women susceptible to such instrumental use, and her examples often relate to intimate interpersonal relationships.

Nussbaum's paper "Objectification" examining objectification, seeks both phenomenological and normative aims. She is looking to gain insight into the phenomenological meanings of perceiving and/or handling someone as an object. Objectification, as a concept, lacks moralization, and she is attempting to prove it from a normative standpoint. Although objectification can be "necessary or even wonderful

features of sexual life,” yet some types of objectifications are always potentially problematic (“Objectification” 214). Further, Nussbaum advances the idea that the following seven types of treatment of people are elements of objectification:

1. **Instrumentality:** The objectifier treats the object as a tool for his or her purposes.
2. **Denial of autonomy:** The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination.
3. **Inertness:** The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity.
4. **fungibility:** The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types.
5. **Violability:** The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary-integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into.
6. **Ownership:** The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.
7. **Denial of subjectivity:** The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account. (218)

Nussbaum, however, focuses particularly on the negation of autonomy and instrumentality, contending that these are the most crucial, as they often encompass most of the other aspects of objectification. Subsequently, Rae Langton has contributed three more notions to the concept of Nussbaum’s “Objectification” through her work *Sexual Solipsism*. They are:

8. **“Reduction to body:** one treats it as identified with its body, or body parts.”
9. **“Reduction to appearance:** one treats it primarily in terms of how it looks, or how it appears to the senses.”
10. **“Silencing:** one treats it as silent, lacking the capacity to speak.” (228–30)

The act of treating as-an-object and thus the phenomenon of objectification could include one or more of these elements, and there is no exact regulation that specifies the required and sufficient conditions for a form of treatment to constitute objectification. Nussbaum’s account is evidently appealing because of its phenomenological angle. She demonstrates how the patriarchal society typically manipulates women in a way that is analogous to the way in which inanimate objects are manipulated and utilized for personal gain. Regarding the notion of objectification, in “Against the Male Flood: Censorship, Pornography, and Equality,” Dworkin defines the phenomenon of sexual objectification as:

Objectification occurs when a human being, through social means, is made less than human, turned into a thing or commodity, bought and sold. When objectification occurs, a person is depersonalised, so that no individuality or integrity is available socially or in what is an extremely circumscribed privacy.

Objectification is an injury right at the heart of discrimination: those who can be used as if they are not fully human are no longer fully human in social terms; their humanity is hurt by being diminished. (30–1)

That being said, sexual objectification strips-off an individual’s right of self-assertion by assaulting her identity and integrity. It devalues her emotions, dreams, and desires by taking away her right of self-representation. It is an unfortunate state of a deadlock in which there is no ray of hope for the woman. She is deprived of her identity in a way that she cannot even acknowledge her misfortune; rather, she is expected to normalize this tragedy by accepting it as a social norm.

Shashi Deshpande’s *The Binding Vine* portrays this kind of tool-like objectification through the character of Mira, who helplessly submits to her husband’s advances at night as if she is nothing but an emotionless object for him, who uses her to gratify his senses. Since Mira Purohit is deceased, she does not appear in the novel, the traumatic life story of Mira as a wife comes to light when Akka (Urmi’s step-mother-in-law) brings out Mira’s trunk full of “variety of books,” “Textbooks,” “Note books of an earlier era,” “Scribbling pads,” “old diaries scribbled all over, not a page left blank” to Urmi (Deshpande 42). “The scraps of paper scribbled over were the beginnings, the file with long pages in it, one poem to a page, had all the completed ones” (45). And Urmi displays her eagerness to read all the writings. On the other hand, Akka narrates Mira’s story. “No, not her story, just the story of her marriage” (46). In other words, Mira’s ultimate sexual objectification and her installation as an object in a house.

Mira was a college-going girl who caught the eye of a man at a wedding she attended. “After which he became a man in single-minded pursuit of an *object*: marrying Mira” (emphasis added; 47). This marriage was founded on the man’s intense obsession with her. The man desired to marry her was driven not by his love for her but by his lustful intentions to possess her ripe and alluring body that had ensnared his senses. His sensual craving for her had bewitched his mind to such a magnitude that he did not bother to establish a friendship with Mira. He did not give her the time to get to know him and fall in love with him. His carnal hunger hunted his psyche to such an extent that he could not wait to take control of her body and devised a plan to marry her through his friend who also happened to know Mira’s family. Marriage, for him, was important because it guaranteed his ownership over her. For him, marriage was nothing more than a socio-legal sanction to ravish her body that had maddeningly incensed his mind.

In other words, Mira’s identity is reduced to her “body or body parts” (*Sexual Solipsism* 228). In order to own the object, the man “induced a mutual friend to

suggest his name to Mira's parents as a possible groom for their daughter," and managed "to conceal his eagerness...and they were married" (Deshpande 47). Resultantly, she is compelled to discontinue her studies. Urmi (Mira's daughter-in-law) ponders, "Was she angry that she had to give up her studies? Did she protest, say anything to her parents" (64)? In addition, the perusal of Mira's writings fills Urmi with shock, as she wonders about the time when her mother-in-law's traumatic life began, which she was compelled to endure for the rest of her life. Through the writings of Mira, Urmi visualizes the moments in which her husband "forced himself on her" (83). Urmi mentions:

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. When did it begin? Before marriage? During the girl-viewing ceremony? When he came with his parents to officially 'look' at her? Or did it have its genesis later, during their first night together? (63)

Mira's hatred towards the physical act of love-making was the outcome of her sexual objectification by her husband. "Objectification theory posits that" the sexual objectification "of females is likely to contribute to mental health problems" such as "eating disorders, depression, and sexual dysfunction" (Szymanski et al., "Sexual Objectification of Women" 8). Under such circumstances, Mira suffered not just the physical pain of the sexual act, but the unending psychological agony of violation as well.

This agony was centered upon her desire for a married life that resembled her ideal of Laxmi-Narayan, a relationship of an everlasting emotion of care and compassion devoid of overbearing sensual yearning. She aspired to establish a spiritual connection with her partner about which her husband was completely oblivious. Mira craved an association of souls while her husband's threshold was limited to his own bodily needs. In Mira's case, unfortunately, it is only about a man who became the "man in single-minded pursuit of an object: marrying Mira" (47). By the same token, it can be said that to get the "ownership" of her ripe body, so that he can treat "the object [her body] as a tool of his purposes," that is for his sexual gratification ("Objectification" 218). Her gender makes her both the 'other' and an object. Further, as the ownership of the object changes, the object's name also changes. It exemplifies how men in society objectify women as material objects. Mira writes:

*A glittering ring gliding on the rice
carefully traced a name 'Nirmala'.
Who is this? None but I,
my name hence, bestowed upon me
Nirmala, they call, I stand statue-still.
Do you build the new without razing the old?
A tablet of rice, a pencil of gold*

*can they make me Nirmala? I am Mira.
(Deshpande 101)*

Despite her opposition to this outlook, the event of objectification is pivotal to Mira's traumatic life as a wife. In addition, one of her poems depicts the agony of her married life. She 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? (56)*

The traumatic events in Mira's marriage have caused her to develop a fear of eventide, as she is aware of what may occur after sunset. Soon enough, Urmi comprehends the reason behind her fear of "fearing the coming of the dark-clouded, engulfing night" (56). She gets the answer from one of Mira's diaries where she documented the physical, psychological, and emotional torment she endured after nightfall. Mira writes:

[He used to ask] what have you been thinking about all evening? and so he goes on, dragging my day, my whole self out of me.... 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 can't he leave me alone? (67)

As Mira is regarded as a sexual object, her primary function is to satisfy his sexual desire, and her identity as a human being does not matter at all. Objectification of Mira results in the loss of her identity. Most importantly, at night, she is reduced to a mere body or body parts ("Reduction to body"), and she is perceived as something whose feelings and experiences are not to be brought under consideration as she is an object ("Denial of subjectivity"). These events emotionally, physically, and psychologically disturb Mira, and she is compelled to write about those terrifying intimate moments with her husband, since she cannot share these experiences with others, including her mother, as her mother had advised her to be always violable to her husband. In *The Subjection of Women*, John Stuart Mill perceives that a non-consensual marriage is equivalent to bonded slavery, where the enslaved individual is required to fulfill their duties towards their master without any questioning. The moment, "she promises life-long obedience to him at the altar" she is bound to serve him "all through her life" (Mill 17) which is very clear from the advice her mother gave her during the marriage farewell ceremony, Mira writes:

*Don't tread paths barred to you
obey, never utter a 'no';
submit and your life will be*

a paradise, she said and blessed me. (83)

Mira's poem reveals the societal pressure she experienced when her mother advised her to obey all the commands of her husband. Later, whenever Mira offered a weak protest, her elders would silence her and advise her on the significance of adaptation and conciliation in conjugal connections. The regulations that govern marriage in India have their origins in a sexist ideology that regards women as the property of their husbands, giving men the authority to impose unrestricted force on their wives, both emotionally and sexually. Although she learns to reject his advances, her denial does not generate any favorable result. Mira writes, "I have learnt to say 'no' at last, but it makes no difference at all" (67). Women like Mira have no alternative but to yield to the demands of their spouse. Within the marriage, Mira is "nothing more than an object for her husband's use and abuse" (Papadaki 343). In *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir states:

The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems wanting in significance by itself...She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other. (16)

As an "unhappy wife," Mira felt powerless when confronted with her husband's advances and regarded herself as a feelingless object solely for his desires. Because her husband reduced her to an object, this eventually became a pivotal traumatic experience in her life. In this context Judith Herman's words are quintessential: "The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma" (*Trauma and Recovery* 1). Thus, individuals experience a fundamental urge to write so as to achieve cathartic discharge of emotions for their survival. Similarly, Mira seeks to underscore gender discrimination through her verses, presenting her own subservient existence as a woman. Further, she refutes this stereotype by articulating her aspiration for a harmonious way of life for both the genders. Therefore, she addresses:

*Come, my brothers, come, my sisters,
let us join our hands;
new road, a new way
a new age begins. (Deshpande 44)*

To conclude, it can be said that the ten forms of objectification and sexual exploitation of a woman push her into a whirlpool of diminished self-worth and hopelessness. This kind of objectification of women takes away their humanity and reduces their identity to mere objects of amusement. This happens when the marital relationship is devoid of emotional connection that is of utmost importance for its success.

Consequently, the essence of conjugal relationship which is consent and mutual respect gets destroyed; it was the absence of these values that led to the objectification and sexual exploitation of Mira. As a result, Mira's marriage became a constant source of pain and suffering for her. Her autonomy and subjectivity were not respected throughout the course of the relationship; she is thus reduced to the status of a meager instrument in the hands of her husband. She is reduced to a passive witness of her own violation and is forced to experience only the bitter residue of a marital relationship. This unethical and immoral treatment of Mira leads to the loss of human essence inside her. In addition, she is dehumanized and her emotions cease to matter to her partner. It is this loss of human essence is the most unfortunate aspect of female objectification. Living such a torturous existence is more unfortunate than death itself.

All in all, the objectification of women fueled by the un-empathetic societal norms of complete surrender to the man pushes a woman into an abyss of abject misery. It not only devalues her but bereaves her of the capacity to form healthy relationships in her life. Ergo, she is left to suffer in despairing isolation, which disrupts her mental health and overall well-being. In this light, research endeavors pertaining to women's objectification foreground the inhumane societal norms that not only promote gender inequality but suffocate them to no ends. This work, therefore, has attempted to highlight the unfortunate existence of Mira, who is objectified, violated, and is forced to suffer in seclusion. Works like these create awareness to foster a sympathetic view towards the victims of objectification so that the society as a whole would cater countermeasures on this issue. The cynosure is to challenge such discriminating cultural norms to establish a fair environment for individuals, irrespective of their gender.

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