

**Crime, Vulnerability, and
Compassion in Kishwar Desai's
*Witness the Night***

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Abstract

Women in India today don't feel protected or safe either within the four walls of family or in public spaces. Women have served in various senior positions but this progress doesn't reach the common society. Many women in India still exposed to such difficulties within their families and in society. Violence against women, especially the number of rapes is increasing in India. Despite all the efforts taken for the progress of our nation, women still suffer from such social exploitation. The reason surprisingly lies in the unit of an Indian family. In Indian society, families are the centre of everything. The efforts should be started from there for the real progress of Indian women. Education, jobs and such exposure bring women to the forefront. Such efforts will give them the courage to stand up for themselves and others who are in crisis. This paper discusses crime against women, vulnerability of women and the necessity of compassion towards women discussed by Desai in her novel, *Witness the night*.

Keywords- Women, Equality, Violence, Exploitation, Family, Society

Equality and protective rights are relevant to a successful nation's growth. Securing these will secure the future of the country too. India is a country with a very low gender equality rating where a woman was murdered only because of her gender. Violence against women is a profound injustice that prevailed enormously in Indian society. It is one of the main hurdles to the fulfilment of women's rights and to the achievement of the country's development goals.

India has a high tolerance for crimes against women. Rape and dowry deaths are becoming common incidents. It has become as a part of life for women, to suffer such violations, especially for those women who come from socially and economically backward communities. In those areas, where development and progress are low, women easily become prey to such violations. Crime against women has become a stain in the progressive efforts of India. The day by day increase of these crimes has amplified to a disturbing level.

Different forms of violence that majorly prevailed all around the world are partner violence, sexual violence like rape, human trafficking and forced prostitution, female foeticide, female infanticide and child marriage. Among this, it is recognized that the majority of violence that occurs towards women is intimate partner violence. The majority of women experience sexual violence at some point in their life all around the world. In underdeveloped countries or developing countries, their number is more when compared to developed countries. But most of the time they go unreported. These acts of violence mostly occur from their partners or other relatives. The rate of violence is just an assumption; the original rates are even higher due to unreported crimes. The majority of the women murdered in India are killed by their

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close relatives or husband. They mainly happen in India as dowry deaths, honour killings, female infanticide, and sex-selective abortion. Domestic violence is also a serious issue that causes many deaths every year. India is considered as the most dangerous country in the world for rape. Rape is a very underrated and common crime in India. Also, marital rape is not considered a crime in India. India is one of the many countries that do not recognize marital rape as a crime.

Lakhs of women disappear from different parts of India every year. In some other cases, they are brought in as workers or manipulated as brides but they end up as sexual tools or in brothels. Violence against women occurs throughout her lifespan from pre-birth, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and even in her old age. These acts of violence occur in different settings such as at home, workplace, hospitals, public places, and in the community. It occurs in all socioeconomic and cultural groups. One of the major concerns is the increasing cases of domestic violence, sexual harassment at the workplace, dowry-related violence, honour killings, acid attacks, and gang rapes.

The reason behind all of this is the traditional patriarchal outlooks of Indian society. Gender-based inequality can be seen in all aspects of Indian society. Boys have more access to education whereas girls are only given basic education. In some cases, that also is unacceptable. These inequalities start from home itself. Girls are given less food than boys. Less nutritious foods that their diet doesn't include milk, butter, meat, etc. The novel *Witness the Night* by Kishwar Desai talks about the terrible situation of women in Indian households especially in Punjab.

The story of *Witness the Night* is set in a small-town Jullundur in Punjab, where a 14-year-old girl, Durga, is the suspect of murder

and a social worker from Delhi, Simran Singh who was born and brought up in Jullundur comes to help her and work hard to find out the truth. 13 people from a rich family are killed on a rainy night, their house is also partially burned and their daughter a 14-year-old girl, Durga, is the only survivor of the macabre. She is the main suspect. Durga was found tied in one hand, raped, and was found surrounded by the corpses of her own family in a partially burned house. The novel won the 2010 Costa First Novel Award. The novel explores many themes related to the violence against women in India. But the novel mainly focuses on the dark reality of female infanticide in India. It talks about how women are exploited in the names of culture, honour, and status in their own household.

When Simran speaks with Durga, she realizes that there is more to the story than she knows. Durga looks like a very vulnerable child. Since there was nobody to support Durga, Simran takes it up as her duty to find out the truth about the incident. As she tries to uncover the truth, she finds that the situation of women and girls in Jullundur has turned to a sinister level.

The novel critically questions the preference of bearing sons over daughters. The novel gives many examples of the practice of killing female embryos and new-borns.

“not so long ago, the midwives used to take away new-born girls from their mothers, seal them in earthen pots and roll the pot around till the baby stopped crying. Or they would simply suffocate them. Or give them opium and then bury them. For a largely farming community, girls were a burden.” (Desai 55)

The novel deals with a very important subject - female infanticide. The novel also discusses other issues like female education,

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human trafficking, forced prostitution, etc. the novel exposes the truth about the place of women in a conservative society and how vulnerable they are. The book is an eye-opener towards the way Indian society treats our women. It tells how a woman is exploited due to her gender from her mother's womb itself. The novel questions the unethical views and customs that endanger the entire womanhood in India.

Durga and her older sister, Sharda, represent every unwanted daughter from every Indian family. In the novel, the reader encounters the dark secrets of infanticide, gender inequality, domestic violence, and thirst for money, human trafficking, corrupt politicians, a corrupt system, and a lot more issues in Indian society.

Desai asserts in her 'Author's note':

While the characters and places in this book are entirely fictional, the events which take place are not. There is a complicity of corruption between the police, the judicial system, politicians, media and the uncivil society...gender issues are still treated with contempt. (212)

This novel helped the issue of female infanticide and other violence against women to be brought into a wider audience. With the success of this novel, Desai brought this issue to the mainstream. In an interview conducted by online newspaper 'The National', Desai talks about the inspiration behind the book:

The book is a conflation of two real events: a woman came to my office in Punjab who learnt her parents had given her opium when she was born - it's a very common way to kill babies. 'She survived - but her life was completely traumatic because she grew up in a household where she knew her parents were her would-be assassins.' I

kept thinking about that, and then I read about this girl in Bengal who had been accused of murdering her entire family. So *Witness the Night* wasn't made up in that sense. (Arts & Culture np)

In a country like India where sex is a taboo other social evil like Dowry and the lower status of women further exacerbates these crimes. Once afflicted with such violence, the chances of re-victimization are higher and more traumatizing. They may lead to depression, suicidal tendencies, abortions, mental illness schizophrenia and risk of infections that have been reported after violence.

Durga was a lonely child who yearned for love. Sharda was her only relief. Even their mother saw them as a nuisance. This need for love is what Harpreet used to manipulate her to turn against her family. They never loved or accepted her as their daughter in the first place. Simran quickly discovers that Durga's family doesn't approve of their girl children. Like many parts of Indian society, they also implemented all the means possible to eliminate them. This book discusses infanticide, child abuse, domestic violence, asylum, dowry violence, etc.

Simran is the only one who believes Durga. She strongly believes that Durga is more of a victim than a suspect. She fights with the whole of Jullundur society for the rights of Durga. She tries very hard to make people understand why a victim needs compassion. She says

Look I don't think she did anything. She's completely innocent. She's only fourteen years old, after all. You know what the justice system in India is like. I worry about her all the time. (Desai 43)

But the attitude of the people is as she is the culprit, and a culprit doesn't deserve

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compassion. But Simran is very headstrong in his decision to help her. She knows as a social worker, who witnessed many such women, that helping the girl is the right thing to do. She points out to me, “My job is to get her talk. She was poisoned, tied up, raped, terrorised. Her whole family wiped out.” (Desai 43)

Desai mocks the society in several places throughout the novel, pointing out the baseless efforts they put. She also put statistics in the novel to point out the seriousness of the issue. Through the novel, she says that it is about time we start protecting our girls.

The headlines on television announced that saplings were being planted in memory of all the disappeared daughters. Punjab is known for murdering its daughters. The sex ratio here is the lowest in the country – less than 850 girls per 1000 men—and despite all sorts of dire warnings from social scientists and demographers, girls are still considered inauspicious... (Desai 54)

Desai says that fiction is the most powerful tool to discuss issues like this because it will reach a wider audience. She wanted the readers to feel anger and compassion towards women rather than pity because this book is about survival.

Violence against women is one of the many dangerous factors that put our countries progressive efforts in a declining graph. Women’s lives are being shattered by such violence and sexual assault. It is about time we start putting the effort in searching for the solutions. This book is a great example of exposing all forms of violence against women from childhood.

Prevention methods should be formed by mobilizing young people to act against gender inequality, patriarchy in a harmful form and general solutions to prevent femicide.

Media should be prevented from covering gender-biased news, films that show stereotyped contents against women and advertisements that portray women as sexual tools. This event is an important step towards women's rights but this event will not be enough. Actions should be taken to protect women. Women should feel empowered rather than vulnerable in society. Society should be compassionate towards the female community.

The reasons for such violence are traditional, religious. They are caused by men as well as women, from households, from villages. Justice system should be strong enough to investigate and punish those responsible for violence against women and those who restrict the freedom of women. Importantly, we need to invest more in survivor-centered programmes that will encourage women and girls to come forward and seek help if they are experiencing abuse. The society should be compassionate enough towards women that she should feel courageous to express and question the discrimination against women.

This means that different sectors of society, such as health, social services, the police, and the judicial system must come forward to ensure the safety of women. We need to provide positive representations of manhood in the society by setting good examples to the coming up generation. The attitude of people should change. Violence against women should not be accepted as a normal thing. Women should know their rights. Our schools, workplaces, religious institutions, and households should ensure the safety of women.

We also need to support and listen to survivors. Simran Singh's compassion towards Durga is a very welcoming one. One can easily understand that without Simran Durga would still be in jail for rotting in a mental asylum like

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her sister. People like Simran are a necessity for the Indian society. This brave social worker's quest for a fourteen-year-old girl's justice set an example to the whole Indian society on how they should be compassionate towards women, not only the victim but to the whole community of women.

Through the tale of Durga, her sister Sharda and women like Sudha, Desai exposes Indian society and its old-fashioned evil ways. Simran Singh who represents the author's opinions exposes not only the hypocrisy of men in Indian society but systematic abuse and violence against babies, girls, and women done in the name of honour and financial gain.

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