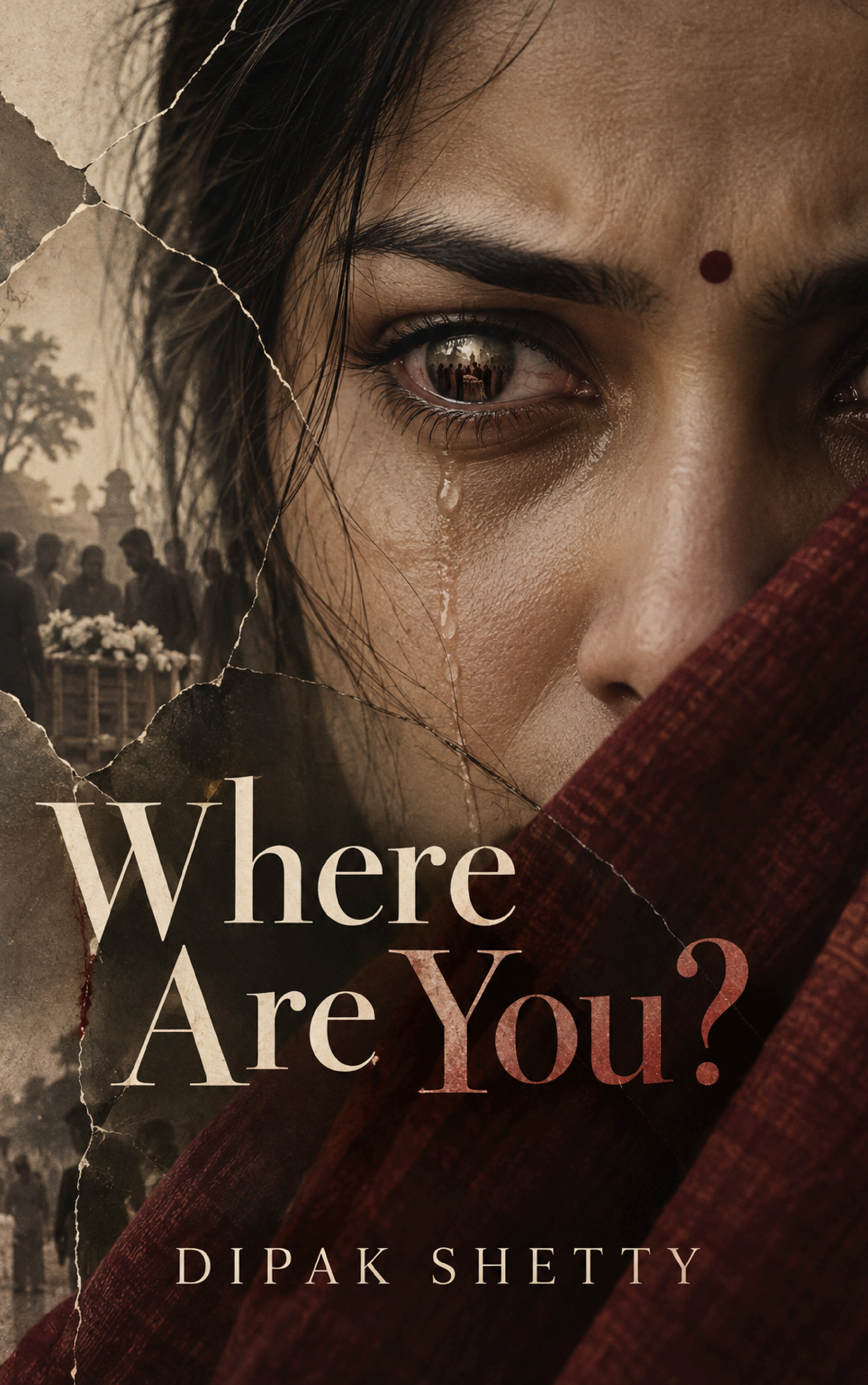




Where Are You?

DIPAK SHETTY

The room is full of noise. Everyone seems to be talking at the same time.

A girl moves through the crowd with a tray of tea in her hands. She smiles when someone looks at her, but she is hardly paying attention.

She is listening.

Every few steps, she hears another piece of a conversation.

Another story.

Another memory.

And with each one, the confusion on her face grows.

To her right, a few men talk about him.

How kind he was. How much he helped people.

How everyone respected him.

To her left, a group of women shares their own memories.

“He always helped when someone needed him.”

“He cared about everyone.”

“He never thought only about himself.”

She keeps walking with the tray in her hands, listening.

With every story, she becomes more confused.

They all seem to know this man so well.

But to her, he sounds like a stranger.

Then it happens.

The tray slips from her hands.

Cups hit the floor and shatter. Hot tea spills across the room. The sound is enough to stop every conversation.

Heads turn.

But what comes next is louder.

She cries.

Not softly. Not the kind of crying someone can hide.

It comes out all at once, like she has been holding it in for years.

Tears run down her face. She looks around at the people in the room, at the faces full of grief, at the stories they have been telling.

Then she speaks.

“I never met this man,” she says.

Her voice shakes.

“I didn’t even know he existed until today.”

For a moment, no one moves.

Then she shouts, “Where are you?”

The room goes silent.

Just a few moments ago, everyone had so much to say about the man lying there. They spoke about his kindness, his love, the good he had done. Now no one speaks. Now no one knows what to say.

Rina stood there, trembling.

She looked around the room at everyone who had been praising him.

“How come I never met the man you’re all talking about?”

No one answered.

“You keep saying he was kind. That he cared about people. That he sacrificed so much for everyone.”

Her voice started to break.

“I lived with him. I knew everything about him. But the man you’re describing... I don’t know that man.”

She looked toward her father’s body.

“This man... this man I’m ashamed to call my father.”

Then she turned to her mother.

“Why, Mom? Why?”

People around them began whispering.

Aunt Martha stepped forward. She had known Rina’s father for years, mostly through small conversations outside the house.

“Rina, don’t talk about your father like that. Especially today. He was a good man. A sweet man.”

Rina stared at her.

Then she laughed.

Not because anything was funny.

“Sweet?”

She looked at Aunt Martha for a few seconds.

“Of course he was sweet to you.”

The room went quiet again.

“You spoke to him for five minutes outside this house.”

Rina pointed toward herself.

“I lived with him.”

Before she could say anything more, her mother grabbed her hand.

Her eyes were full of tears.

She didn't say a word.

She just tried to pull Rina away.

But Rina wasn't going to stay quiet today.

Her mother tried to pull her away, but Rina gently pulled her hand back.

“No. Not today.”

Everyone stopped talking.

Rina looked at Aunt Martha, then at the others in the room.

“You want to know how sweet he was?”

Her voice was shaking, but she kept going.

“Let me tell you.”

For a few seconds, she said nothing.

Then she looked down.

“When I was little, I didn’t even know if what I was seeing was right or wrong.”

Her mother lowered her eyes.

“I asked Mom once.”

Rina paused.

“She told me it was normal.”

The room became even quieter.

“So I believed her.”

She looked around at everyone.

“And after that, I stopped asking.”

People exchanged looks.

No one knew what she was about to say next.

And somehow, that silence made it worse.

A few people started crying before Rina even finished.

Someone whispered, “Oh God.”

A woman standing nearby stepped closer.

“What happened, Rina?”

Rina looked at her.

“You don’t have to be ashamed. Just tell us.”

Rina took a breath.

“I was very young. Some nights, I would wake up and hear them fighting.”

She stopped for a moment.

“Sometimes I would get out of bed and see my dad hitting my mom.”

Her mother looked down.

“He would shout at her. Insult her. Sometimes he would hit her because there wasn’t enough salt in the food.”

Rina’s voice became quieter.

“Sometimes it was because she forgot to remind him about something.”

She looked around the room.

“Something he never even asked her to remind him about.”

No one spoke.

For a moment, Rina thought they finally understood.

Then someone asked,

“That’s it?”

Rina looked toward the voice.

Another person added,

“Did he ever do anything to you?”

Rina just stared at them.

They had been expecting something worse.

As if watching your father hit your mother was not enough.

As if pain had to reach a certain level before people were allowed to call it pain.

Rina stared at them.

“That’s all?”

She repeated the words slowly, almost like she couldn’t believe what she had heard.

“Isn’t that enough?”

No one answered.

“Why do we wait for things to become worse before we care?”

Her voice grew stronger.

“Why does someone have to be completely broken before we admit something was wrong?”

She looked around the room.

“I’m scared to tell you everything now.”

A few people shifted uncomfortably.

“Because what if I tell you something else he did, and one of you says that was normal too?”

The room stayed quiet.

Rina shook her head.

“How much are we willing to excuse before we finally say enough?”

For a moment, she waited.

Maybe someone would understand.

Maybe someone would say she was right.

But slowly, people started moving again.

Someone adjusted the flowers.

Someone whispered to another person.

The rituals continued.

And just like that, what Rina had said was pushed aside.

As if she had spoken too much.

As if she was the one making everyone uncomfortable.

Rina looked around the room.

People had already started moving on.

That hurt more than she expected.

She raised her voice again.

“You tell me.”

A few people turned back toward her.

“Was this not a big deal?”

She looked at her mother.

Then at her father’s photograph.

“Because to me, it was everything.”

No one had an answer.

Rina knew one thing now.

People often wait for something terrible to become even worse before they take it seriously.

A slap becomes normal.

An insult becomes normal.

Fear inside a home becomes normal.

And once something becomes normal, people stop questioning it.

Her story didn't change the world that day, nor did it sway the hearts of all who heard it. But for those who listened, really listened, it was a stark reminder of the deep-seated issues that still plague society. It was a call to refuse to normalize the unacceptable, a plea for empathy and change in a world teetering on the edge of moral oblivion.

Why, as a society, do we often wait for tragedies to escalate before they earn our attention and provoke our outrage? Why is the threshold for empathy so high, and our capacity for denial so vast?

These are the questions I hope you, as readers, will ponder.

The indifference Rina faces reflects a broader apathy toward domestic abuse, a topic often whispered about but rarely confronted with the seriousness it deserves.

"Where Are You?" is not just a question Rina cries out in a moment of deep isolation. It is also a challenge to each of us. It asks us to question where we stand, not just physically, but morally and emotionally, when faced with uncomfortable truths.

Are we bystanders in the normalization of violence, or are we willing to stand against it? As you close this book, I hope Rina's story stays with you, not just as a story of personal struggle, but as a reason to reflect and question what we accept as normal.

Let us not be the crowd that dismisses her pain, but the community that refuses to ignore it.

Abuse, in any form, should never be treated as a "small issue." Our voices, like Rina's, can help bring change.

In a poignant twist, Rina's name mirrors "Nari," meaning "woman" in Hindi, and reflects the struggle and resilience of many women.

Thank you for walking this path with me. Rather than merely calling out, "Where are you?" to those we only notice when it's too late, let us dare to ask deeper questions: Why are some people left to suffer in silence? How can we foster change? Together, let's transform our questions into actions.