

A Feminist Reading of Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*: Sisterhood, Identity Quest and Resurrection of the Self in the Indian Bourgeois Society

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande is considered one of the eminent figures among the contemporary women novelists who concern themselves with the female predicament and their quest for identity and individuality. Especially, she has concentrated on the theme of marginalized status of women and their struggle to survive in tradition-oriented institutions. Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* delves deep into the problems of how the traditional Indian society is dominated by patriarchy. A society ruled by patriarchy never considers women as intellectually equal to men. The narrator of the novel Urmila is a middle class educated lady who tries to bind those women who are victims of patriarchy. This paper primarily seeks to focus on the psychological exploration of the inner mind of the female characters in the novel. Deshpande provides centrality on the theme of marriage, the oldest institution of Indian society that considers marriage as a social discipline and a sense of security. But in Deshpande's novel, it comes under the microscope of critical scrutiny and she shows us its weak spots. The present study also attempts to focus on how women characters become silent on social taboos like marital rape (in the case of Mira) and sexually abused rape (in the case of Kalpana). *The Binding Vine* tries to reconstruct the aspects of women's experience and attempts to give voice to the muted ideologies. The title of the novel suggests many bonds in the life of the heroine Urmila. They

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are, her bond of familial ties of parents, husband and children; her bond of love for Mira's poems; her bond of sympathy for the wrongs done to Kalpana. So, sisterhood and humanity are the binding tools for the characters in the novel.

Keywords: Gender; Indian Society; Silence; Patriarchy; Marriage.

Introduction:

Shashi Deshpande occupies an important place in the realm of Indian writing in English. Her works portray the plight, trials and tribulations of contemporary middle-class Indian women and their outer and inner world with keen astuteness. She has raised her voice against traditional Indian society ruled by patriarchal normativity that never accepts women as intellectually equal to men. She tries to reflect the status of women who are forced to live under male hegemony. By reincarnating the 'new women' in traditional Indian society, Shashi Deshpande attempts to give a sharp blow to the normative ideologies of the male chauvinist society. It is the time to ring the death knell of patriarchy, it is the time of equality between men and women. She has written many novels such as *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *A Matter of Time*, *Small Remedies*, *Come Up to Be Dead*, *Roots and Shadows* etc. that trace the journey of her female characters from silence, submissiveness, suppression to resurrection, emancipation and articulation. Her female characters aware of their subjugation, discrimination in a male-dominated society, are tangled up between the dilemma of what they want to be and what the society demands from them. They refuse to surrender before the strategies of the conventional society and this inability to compromise results in loneliness and isolation. They are always in pursuit of their long-lost true selves and this 'female consciousness' becomes the focal point of her novels. David Kerr in *Indian Women Novelists* points out:

"There are portraits of the personal annihilation experienced by women who become victims of social stereotyping, sometimes blindly, sometimes willingly, and there is the final promise of hope for those who keep the gates of choice open" (Kerr 137).

Deshpande's heroines struggle for self-assertion and liberation from the norms of the patriarchal society and try to establish themselves as autonomous beings. Madhumalati Adhikari in *Indian Women Novelists* states:

"Shashi Deshpande dramatizes the conflicts her protagonists confront and resolve experience and accept in the process of becoming. Deshpande's sympathies are decisive with

the oppressed, exploited and sexually abused women within the parameters of middle-class domesticity. She deliberately explores these problems through the female consciousness by making her female characters intensely introspective” (Adhikari 68).

The Binding Vine:

The relationship between literature and society is ubiquitous. It has recorded the predicament of women through the ages and with the change in society, the depiction of women in literature has also changed. Deshpande’s novels are a loathsome critique of Indian patriarchal society. In an interview with Vanamala Viswanatha, Deshpande talks of her women characters:

“My characters take their own ways. I have heard people saying we should have strong women characters. But my writing has to do with women as they are. Most of the women I’ve known are like that- their decisions are made for them. Due to being over-protected, they are people who think one way and do another” (Viswanatha 8).

The Binding Vine is also a women-centric novel. The protagonist of the novel Urmila, called Urmi, is grieving over the death of her one-year-old daughter Anu. The novel represents the journey of Urmi who becomes the support system for the women who break their long silence. She becomes the voice for those who are silenced by hegemonic norms. She tries to find out a road beyond silence and forms a larger bond of solidarity as evident in the words of Mira, Urmi’s mother-in-law:

“Come, my brother, come my sisters
Let us join our hands
A new road, a new way
A new age begins... (Deshpande 44).

Female Characters in *The Binding Vine:*

Like her other novels, *The Binding Vine* (1993) also depicts a female protagonist who strives for self-identity and raises her voice in a male-dominated society. Deshpande uses the protagonist Urmi as a narrator to reveal the suffering of women from different strata of society. The novel deals with the multifaceted central character Urmila, an educated middle-class wife who works as a lecturer in a college. She is different from the common mass of middle-class women; she knows to raise her voice and to affirm her judgement in every sphere of her life. The primary source of her independence comes from her financial security. She is married to Kishore, a Merchant Navy officer who is representative of a conventional husband. Though she has

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married the man of her choice, she feels a lack of love and emotional support from her husband. As her husband remains absent from the house, she feels a void but whenever she talks about this emotional void, Kishore asserts himself sexually without realizing that her need is emotional, not physical. she feels as if she has become a sex object for her husband. She has gotten a financially secure respectable life but she lacks marital bliss. The grief of her losing her daughter Anu has made her able to understand and relate to the suffering of other women like Vanna, Inni, Akka, Mira, Shakutai, Kalpana, and Sulu.

Deshpande has sensitively presented the fear, helplessness and agony of Shakuntala who is the mother of rape victim Kalpana. Soon after her marriage, her husband leaves her with three children and marries another woman. She singlehandedly rears up her children but she is made responsible for the failure of her husband. Shakuntala's sister, Sulu is another tragic victim. She is a caring, supportive wife but she is ill-treated by her husband as she is unable to give birth. Her husband Prabhakar is physically attracted towards Kalpana (Shakuntala's daughter) and he proposes to marry her. Kalpana rejects Prabhakar and as a result of it, Kalpana is brutally raped by Prabhakar. When Sulu come to know the truth about her husband's deed, she commits suicide. Through the relationship between Shakutai and her daughter Kalpana, the novelist attempts to show that how a middle-class woman is conditioned by the norms of society. She blames her daughter for her miserable condition, her fashionable lifestyle has caused this rape. She does not file a case of her daughter's rape because she thinks that it will cause infamy upon her family and she will not be able to find any match for her younger daughter Sandhya's marriage.

Another important character is Mira, Urmi's dead mother-in-law whose tragic life is unfurled before Urmi through Mira's diary. From the very beginning of her married life, Mira was a sex object to her husband, there was no place for Mira's emotions that resulted in marital rape. Her diary reveals the incident of Mira's meeting with a poet Venu whom Mira gave some of her poems to read, he said: "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" (Deshpande 127). These views of Venu are the replica of the norms of male-chauvinist society.

Other submissive characters are Vanna, Akka, and Inni who are also the tragic victims of societal discrimination. Vanna (Urmi's sister-in-law and childhood friend) stands for the typical Indian woman who always tries to maintain her status of 'Ideal Woman'. She cannot take any decision about her daughters without the permission of her husband. In spite of her

intense desire to have a son, she cannot express it to her husband, because it is only her husband who can decide how many children they are going to have. Akka, Kishore's stepmother never gets love from her husband as she is taken to the family with the sole purpose of performing the duty of a mother. Kishore's father married Akka as Kishore needed a mother after the death of Mira. Another victim is Inni, Urmi's mother, who is separated from her daughter at the very early age of Urmi for being a working mother. Her husband believes that the only duty of a mother is to look after her child.

Marriage, a social institution and marital rape, a taboo:

Like her other novels, marriage, in this novel turns out to be an important theme. Most of the female characters are married here, but they somehow miss the true bliss of marriage and suffocate in their married lives. Their married lives become one kind of shackle for them as their partners desire the so-called 'Ideal Women'. Urmi is married to her childhood friend Kishore, still, it is not a happy one. Urmi craves emotional attachment, but for Kishore, sex becomes the panacea for all problems. Through this novel, Deshpande wants to focalize the problem of the Indian society that conditions a girl child from her childhood that she has to sacrifice in all spheres of her life and thereby, she will become an 'Ideal Woman'. As she has to be an ideal wife, mother, and daughter-in-law, she is trained in household chores from her childhood. In the article, "Go Home like a Good Girl: An Interpretation of *That Long Silence*", Parvati Bhatnagar states:

"The tale of girls belonging to middle class is different. They are sent to school and college and required to help senior ladies of the family in the kitchen and other household work in their free time more as a part of their training" (Bhatnagar 136).

Vanna, an educated working, is also mentally, and emotionally tortured in her loveless marriage. Her husband, Harish is careless and unsympathetic towards her. Still, Vanna tries her best to satisfy her husband as she is told from her childhood that she has to compromise to make her married life happy. Kishore's father marries Akka to give Kishore a mother. A girl has to marry a man as the man will provide her financial and social security. Shakuntala has received nothing from her marriage except children and suffering, still, she wants her daughter Kalpana to get married. So, Deshpande through Shakuntala's longing tries to show how Indian society makes marriage an important social institution and allures women through the trap of this institution. Simone de Beauvoir points out:

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“Most women simultaneously demand and detest their feminine condition; they live it through in a state of resentment-vexed at having produced a woman. She hopes to compensate for her inferiority by making a superior creature out of one whom she regards as her double... Sometimes, she tries to impose on the child exactly her own fate: what was good enough for me is good enough for you, I was brought up this way, you shall share my lot” (Beauvoir 533-34).

In *The Binding Vine*, like the husband-wife relationship, the mother-daughter relationship also becomes antagonistic which is visible in the following pairs- Urmi-Inni, Shakuntala-Kalpana, Akka-Vanna, and Vanna-Mandira. The mothers have gone through a lot but the daughters uphold some sort of grudge against their mothers. From her childhood, Urmi has blamed her mother for her separation from her mother at an early age but in reality, Urmi's father is responsible for this. In spite of being a working woman, Vanna has to fully contribute to the household chores and this causes a problem in the mother-daughter relationship. Mandira accuses her mother of being left to a maid-servant and says- “I don't want Hirabai, I want my mother” (Deshpande 72). Kalpana also blames her mother Shakuntala for her father's irresponsible nature and says- “You're always angry, always quarrelling, that's why he has gone” (Deshpande 93). So, the female characters both as wives and mothers feel some sort of emotional void.

Women are in chains everywhere; they do not have any right over their bodies. In most cases, in marital relations, women are considered as bodies, and men consider their wives as property. Thus, the concept of 'marital rape' is most often mocked by society, it is not considered as a criminal offence. Deshpande brings forth this issue of 'marital rape' boldly in this novel and she seeks to establish the fact that rape is not just a social crime but a pervert male desire to objectify women as sex items. The binaries of male/female, subject/other, and master/subject are central to the issue of rape. The fear of rape makes women more silenced and confines them within the four walls of the home. Our conventional society projects rape in such a way that rape becomes shameful for a woman, the victim. Mira, Urmi's mother-in-law is a silenced sufferer of this less talked about issue of 'marital rape'. Her husband is only concerned about her beauty and body; therefore, Mira fails to form an emotional connection with her husband. She is frustrated with her loveless marriage and is repulsed by the sexual act with her husband. Thereby, repulsion is evident in one of her poems-

“But tell me, friend, did Laxmi too

Twist brocade tassels round her fingers
 And tremble, fearing the coming
 Of the dark-clouded, engulfing night?" (Deshpande 66).

Here, Deshpande throws a heavy shell of criticism towards the male-chauvinist society that considers that a husband has full control over his wife's body, he can exploit her whenever he wants and moreover, he can satisfy his biological needs in spite of his wife's unwillingness and thereby it sanctions heinous crime of marital rape.

Sisterhood as a site of resistance:

On one hand, Deshpande has portrayed docile, meek, submissive characters like Vanna, Mira, Akka, Shakuntala, and Sulu but on the other hand, we find the strong, bold, assertive characters like Urmi, Priti, and Vandana who can make a balance between domestic life and professional life. Our protagonist Urmi has become the most rebellious character who raises her voice against the injustices against women prevailing in society. She determines herself to fight for those women who are silenced by patriarchy. Urmi fights on behalf of the rape victim Kalpana whose mother thinks that her daughter's waywardness is responsible for her present predicament. Shakutai blames Kalpana as her rape has brought dishonour to her family. Moreover, it is not the rape of the body but the rape of the mind. Shakutai does not file any case for this heinous crime in fear of public humiliation. In the novel, the police officer files the case of Kalpana as an accident and says, "She's going to die anyway, so what difference does it make whether, on paper, she dies the victim of an accident or a rape" (Deshpande 88). Neither her family nor society is ready to talk on behalf of Kalpana, all are eager to hide the incident. The social infamy is only targeted towards the victim not towards the predator. Urmi has no familial connection with Kalpana and Shakutai but she appears before Kalpana as a messiah to fight for her, to find the truth about the predator. She ultimately becomes successful in making Shakutai understand that there is no fault of Kalpana but the real predator is Prabhakar whose marriage proposal Kalpana has denied.

The poems of Mira haunt her and remind her of the injustices done towards Mira. She decides to publish Mira's poems, which infuriates her sister-in-law Vanna as it will expose her father's behaviour and destroy the family's honour. She also chastises Vanna for being a submissive wife and her attempt to please her family by becoming a perfect wife, and a perfect mother. Her pain after losing Anu makes her more connected to the suffering of the other women in the novel. She becomes the voice of those who are silenced by the ideologies of the

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society. She realizes that the power of love is the ultimate thread that binds all together. The phrase 'binding vine' symbolizes variegated bonds in the life of Urmi. They are the familial bond of parents, husbands and children, her love for her dead child Anu, her love for her Mira, and her sympathy for the rape victim Kalpana. So, the vine of love intertwines Urmi with the other female characters. She is fascinated by the words of the uneducated Shakuntala, who says-

"This is how life is for most of us, most of the time: We are absorbed in the daily routine of living. The main urge is always to survive" (Deshpande 203).

The same thing is also told by Mira in her poem-

"Just as the utter fertility of living overwhelms me, I am terrified by the thought of dying, of ceasing to be" (Deshpande 203).

Conclusion:

In *The Binding Vine*, Shashi Deshpande presents a realistic picture of middle-class Indian society and the female predicament in this society. Her female characters are heavily chained up by the shackles of patriarchy and tradition and they try to find solace within the sphere of domesticity. But the urge to survive brings the female characters together, forming a circle of female fellowship. Through this novel, Deshpande attempts to unite women and create a world of harmony and equality for women. So, through sisterhood and by the redemptive power of love and compassion, resistance against patriarchy and male domination is possible.

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