

## Portrayal of Women in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*

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### Abstract

Indian women novelists in English have been dealing with sorrows and sufferings, pain and agony, suppression and oppression of an Indian woman who is born and destined to suffer all through her life in the name of gender discrimination and marriage in Indian patriarchy. Shashi Deshpande, a well-known name in the field of Indian English Fiction, started her literary career with the publication of her first short story in 1970. Her collection of short stories was published in 1978 whereas her first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, that brought her a lot of praise and admiration, came out in 1980. Her novel, *That Long Silence*, published in the UK in 1988, and India in 1989, won her the Sahitya Academy Award and Nanjangad Thirumlamaba Award. The aim of present writing this article is to highlight the theme of helplessness on the part of a woman. Whether she is a mother, daughter, sister or wife, the society always desires that she should be docile, timid and submissive. Through this particular novel Deshpande is trying to highlight the change towards which our society is moving but still millions of miles need to be covered for this change to be visible.

**Key words:** Submissive, Discrimination, Suppression, Society.

### Introduction

The status of woman all over the world, particularly in India, has been undergoing a rapid change in the recent decades. So the image of woman in Indo-English novel is based on the traditional ancient literature of India, which showed woman as a devoted wife or a devoted mother. The imaginative and creative responses of the writers are related to the changing world view and the questioning attitude thereby developed by it. The attitude to women has changed in recent times. Their writings are based not only on observations of external behavior but also on the internal journey in the psychological realm of the feminine sensibilities. A few women novelists like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur make straight journey into the psyche of their women characters that are torn on account of the tensions generated by the discord between the individual and the surroundings. They have started trying to understand Indian women and portray her in their novels.

Shashi Deshpande '*The Binding Vine*' is very much similar to her earlier novels, as it sketches her middle-class female protagonist predicament in a male-dominated world, where she has very little scope to give voice to her concerns. Although the story in this particular novel at the superficial level appears to be very identical to her other novels, but if one

explores it deeply he can easily sense the peculiarity in it. In all other novels we find that the protagonist is of paramount importance and all the other characters are used to feature her concerns and feelings. But in this novel the minor characters play a very significant role; the protagonist Urmi plays the role of anchor, it is she who is used by the novelist very cleverly to expose the sufferings of women from different sections of our society.

### **Women in the Binding Women**

The Binding Vine deals with the multi-facetedness of its central character Urmi. Urmi is an intelligent, educated middle-class wife, who is employed as a lecturer in a college. Urmi's vision towards life is quite different from other women of our society. She is one who affirms her independence and freedom in each and every judgment of her life. Urmi united in marriage with the man whom she preferred but is desperate in her married life because of her ego and to some extent Kishore her husband is accountable for it. The problem with Urmi is that she is brimming with confidence, as is financially independent and well settled in her life. Due to this economic stability she has developed a kind of super ego in herself which makes her reluctant to submit before her husband. Moreover, she cannot tolerate the submission of Vanaa (her sister-in-law) and her mother before their spouses.

From the initial days of her marriage Urmi starts feeling that the bond between her and her husband is not that of love and there is lack of emotional support and understanding. Although Urmi knows that for a woman to adjust in a totally new world, love and compatibility on part of a husband is very essential, but on the other hand Urmi's husband Kishore is the true reflection of the conventional Indian husband, regardless of being an educated Merchant Navy officer. Every time when Urmi tries to reveal her emotional insecurity, whenever Kishore goes away from her, he asserts himself sexually rather than understanding that her desire is not physical what she needs is something else. Urmi is leading an economically and socially secure life like a normal human being even without the support her husband. But sometimes she feels erotic feelings growing within her because she is deprived of true love and she finds it hard to control her wishes.

Urmila is the primary figure in the novel which connects all the threads, in the plot - the stories of Mira, Kalpana, Shakutai, Sulu, Vanaa, Priti and Inni. It is Urmila's anguish, who mourns over the death of her one-year old daughter which intertwines all emotions and themes into one. It is Anu's death that sensitizes Urmi towards the pains and agony of others. Thus her narrative is encompassing of all the three tales broadly - one about Kalpana who is a rape victim, Mira, a victim of marital rape, who is Urmi's mother-in-law, and Shakutai who is Kalpana's mother.

The most assertive tale which closely weaves all these tails together is that of Urmi herself, Urmila starts to battle with her loss, with unanswered questions of the past, and an introspection of herself and her marriage to Kishore after she comes across her mother-in-law Mira's poems and after her involvement with Kalpana who had been savagely raped. Urmi finds it almost impossible to get out of the memories of her dead infant daughter. She fights with the reminiscences of her daughter but also realizes that forgetting is unfaithfulness: "I must reject these memories, I have to conquer them. This is one battle. I have to win if I am to go on living. And yet my victory will carry with it the taint of betrayal. To forget is to betray" (21).

She also realizes her accountability and responsibility towards her son who desires her love and affection and watches her anxiously. The novelist has very sensibly laid bare the fear, anger, helplessness and anguish of Shakuntala. When Urmi escorts Shakutai to her home that night she comes to know about Kalpana from her. What we as reader find that she has kind of mixed feelings for her daughter, that is sometimes she is full of praise and love for her daughter but the very next moment she condemns her for her present condition. The point which Deshpande is trying to make is that it is not the victim who is responsible, but it is society at large which is to be made accountable for such savage acts against woman.

Shakutai is the most unfortunate out of the whole lot, soon after her marriage her husband leaves her in her father's house with an assurance of earning a better livelihood. Even after a lapse of period of six months he did not return, so Shakutai decides to join him in Bombay. But very soon she comes to terms with reality and realizes that he is passive and worthless. Meanwhile she gives birth to three children after which she decides to work for the sake of wellbeing of her children. Despite of all her hard work and efforts to sustain her relationship, her husband deserts her for some other woman. Since her husband has left her she is the one who is to be blamed for anything that goes wrong in the family. The reason being in our society if a marriage fails it is always the woman who is held responsible for such collapse. Shakutai's sister, Sulu, has her own tragic life. She is very supportive, affectionate and caring and helps her sister a lot who is living a miserable life. She was even ready to take the responsibility of bringing up Kalpana but that seemed beyond the bounds of possibility because her husband Prabhaker had a strong desire for Kalpana.

The result was similar to what these ladies thought, Kalpana took her own decision not to marry him the result being she was brutally raped by the man whom she discarded. Sulu who is a personification of love and submissiveness commits suicide after she comes to know about her husband's fateful deed. Yet another tale of submission, grief and unhappiness is that of Mira, who Urmi's mother-in-law is. When the novel opens Mira is already dead we come to know about her through her writings. Urmi becomes familiar with her when (Akka) Kishore's step mother gives Urmi her writing masterpieces. After reading and interpreting them Urmi comes to know that arranged marriage did not work for Mira.

It is Akka who tells how Kishore's father saw Mira at a wedding and felt in love with her. Since then he had "single-minded pursuit of an object; marrying Mira" (47). At last their marriage was arranged and approved. But from the starting itself there had been no place for Mira's sentiments and emotions as a consequence her encounter with her husband becomes rape within the institution of marriage.

Mira's diary is a glaring revelation of her extreme dislike of the sexual act with her husband, a physical repulsion for the man she married. Taken collectively, her poems and the diary entries pointed out molestation in marriage. When she came to her in-law's house she was christened Nirmala-the first estrangement from her individuality. This brings about how marriage is a loss of self hood and identity for women. Mira's dairy further tells about her meeting with Venu a poet, who later became a grand old man of Indian literature. When Mira gave him 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" (127). These views of Venu are quite insightful of the handicaps and hardships that women writers have to face in a male-chauvinist society.

The poem of Mira haunts Urmi so much that she decides to bring her thoughts back to life by getting her poems published. But when Vanaa Urmi's sister in-law who is an archetypal Indian pativrata comes to know about this she is infuriated. She feels that this stride of Urmi will destroy and demolish the honor of her family. In fact in our society the women are brought up in such a way that they start looking at the world and interpreting it from the male point of view. Their own individuality, perception and thought process is marred by their own conventional female counterparts. Urmi, however, appears to be the most rebellious of Deshpande's female protagonists. Being acutely aware of the injustices and inequalities prevailing in the society against women, she makes an effort to set things right. She strongly fights on behalf of the rape victim Kalpana and resolves to translate and publish her long-dead mother-in-law Mira's Kannada poems. She also admonishes Vaana, who is a meek and submissive wife, and encourages her to be more assertive. The novel celebrates women's coming together with other women as friends and companions and sharers of life rather than as rivals for approval by men.

### Conclusion

A woman should be aware, self controlled, strong willed, self reliant and rational, having faith in the inner strength of womanhood. A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense. Though independent to some extent, Shashi Deshpande's women characters are firmly bound by the shackles of tradition and seek fulfillment only within the orbit of family and tradition. *The Binding Vine* presents a female world in which women come together in a feeling of fellowship.

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