

A Road Beyond Silence: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*

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Abstract: Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Binding Vine* (1993), represent a new phase in her development as an artist. The novel's protagonist Urmila initiates a new journey for woman who breaks the long silence, which has become hallmark of woman's existence. Urmila of *The Binding Vine* leaves her predecessors behind by her efforts to assist and establish solidarity with her fellow women. The novel projects a growth towards heightened humanity. Urmila proves a support system for the marginalized and oppressed one. She becomes the voice of those who are silenced by societal norms. The novel beautifully depicts 'the urge to survive' on the face of adversity. Urmi helps other women to redefine themselves. She is not a rebel but she refused to surrender to this hypocrisy and took up cudgels against this conspirational 'silence'. She tries to find a road beyond silence where the unexpressed pain and untold tales could find a place to get itself heard.

Keywords: Solidarity, Marginalized and oppressed, Rebel, Silence.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the brightest stars in the august galaxy of contemporary Indian women writers who in her various works has depicted the contemporary middle-class women's outer and inner world with rare acumen and insight. Deshpande is a towering figure who has raised her voice through her novels against the andocentric attitude prevailing in the society. She has highlighted the problems of women and their smothered, frustrated and fettered identity in the patriarchal society. The novels of Deshpande try to trace a journey of male and female characters from silence, suppression to articulation and self-recognition. Her earlier novels, *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* have characters of submissive nature but her next two novels, *The Binding Vine* and *A Matter of Time* represent such characters who have a different temperament and they have enunciated some new developments and objectives in the phase of their lives.

In the present paper Deshpande's novel '*The Binding Vine*' has taken up for study. Although, her later novels have not received as much of attention from her critics and readers as her earlier works have. *The Binding Vine* is also a woman-centric novel. *The Binding Vine* is not only about the silence of women's lives but silences they sometimes break and the stories they choose to tell. Ruby Milhoutra finds that Shashi Deshpande has presented in her novels "modern Indian women's search for these definitions about the self and society, and the relationship that are central to women". A development in writer's vision of affirmation with the value of life' can be seen in the actions of her major characters seem to come out of their shield and their concerns have developed and extended to the social world. One can infer a 'positive attitude and resolution to move forward in a spirit of greater solidarity in the following words of Mira and practiced by Urmi, her daughter-in-law:

Come, my brother, come my sisters

Let us join our hands,

A new road, a new way

A new age begins...

- *The Binding Vine*

The protagonist of the novel *The Binding Vine*, Urmila – a college teacher is a step ahead of the protagonist of the earlier novels in the sense that she is able to realize the shackles of tradition and futility of ‘the daily routine of living’ right from the beginning and hence is able to tread upon a path beyond her suffocating silence to emerge as a sensitive anchor and a ‘binding vine’ for other suffering women: “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”(203) She does not only speak but also tries to break shackles of age-old tradition of treating women as mere commodities. She meets with a saga of women who are ‘silences’ in themselves who couldn’t speak beyond whispers even among themselves. In her essay, “Sisterhood”, Bell Hooks writes, “sexism is perpetrated by institutional and ‘social structures’, by the individuals who dominate, exploit or oppress; and by the victims themselves, who are dominated, exploited or oppressed; who are socialized to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo”. Having borne the loss of her one year old daughter-Anu, she is able to understand and relate to the silent sufferings of other women like Vanaa, Mira, Shakuntai, Akka and Sulu who act in complicity with the status quo. The novel presents a world where women surpass men in terms of their strength to deal with their surroundings, come to terms with their losses and their miraculous ability to beat into an alliance among themselves and learn to live. As Urmila realizes that love is the only adhesive that binds the suffering hearts together and nurtures the sapling of life in a compassionate manner, she calls upon others-men as well as women to join hands since “a new road, a new way a new age” has begun where, bonds of love and compassionate understanding, alone, can rejuvenate the ‘spring of life’ for broader human existence and survival.

Like her earlier novels, marriage constitutes an important theme of the novel like her earlier counterparts Saru and Indu, Urmila also goes for a love marriage. Although, she believes in the anchoring power of love, she finds that their marriage is not founded on it. For Kishore, sex is the solution to her problems, but for Urmila emotional bonding is more important. This experience gradually forces her to realize her inability to remove Kishore’s mask of indifference: “... Kishore will never remove his armour, there is something in him I will never reach”.(141) Deshpande throws light on the colonial upbringing of the girl child in the patriarchal society where she is prepared for her subjugation right from her childhood. In order to prepare her for marriage the mother gives her the training of the household chores from childhood. Parvati Bhatnagar in her article “Go Home like a Good Girl: An Interpretation of *That Long Silence*” observes, “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” (136).

In the novel, Vanaa, is an educated working woman but never dares to question her husband’s supremacy. This age old distribution of responsibilities between man and woman is not acceptable to modern women. But woman’s foray in new arena of commercial market has increased her problems. She doesn’t get any help from her male counterpart in the novel, Harish is careless not only about his household duties but he is also unsympathetic towards his wife. Akka is another victim of patriarchal system. She was forced to marry Kishore’s father because she has crossed the marriageable age. Sulu is always fearful that her husband might throw her out of the house because of not giving him a child. She finds it a serious drawback on her part and a constant fear lurks in her: “After marriage she changed. She was frightened, always frightened. What if he doesn’t like this, what if he wants that, what if he is angry with me, what if he throws me out?(195) So, here Deshpande exposes the reality of Indian institution of marriage that how it shattered the self-confidence of a vivacious girl and turned her into a fearful and nervous human being.

Sulu's sister Shakutai is different from her in the way of realizing the futility of clinging to a bad marriage and good for nothing husband. But soon, she realizes the limitation of her choice because Indian traditions don't allow woman to walk out of marriage. So, through all these examples Deshpande shows how the institution of marriage becomes oppressive and works as an agent of woman's trials and travails and her humiliation as a human being. All these women whether educated or illiterate working or housewife, feel trapped in nuptial bond. But what makes Deshpande's protagonists different is that they never think of breaking this auspicious bond.

If the husband- wife relationship proves harmful to the personal growth and fulfilment of the characters of *The Binding Vine* then mother-daughter relationship is equally dissatisfying for them. A.G. Khan feels that almost all of Deshpande's heroines have "an antagonism towards their mothers". *The Binding Vine* provides a peep into this mother-daughter relationship of five pairs. Urmi-Inni, Mira's mother-Mira, Shakutai-Kalpana, Akka-Vanna and Vanna-Mandira None of the above mentioned pair enjoys harmonious relationship that can satiate their mental and emotional selves. Deshpande effectively presents the reality of the world of male supremacy where women are taught to conform to the social norms for their survival. The conservative and traditional women hold these social norms as ideals which make their lives smooth as they learn to merge themselves with others. These women become the upholder of these values and by their best to inculcate them in their daughters so that they can adapt themselves very well in the domineering set-up. As Simon de Beauvoir points out:

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 may lot.(533-34)

Urmi's disenchantment with her mother is rooted in her separation from her mother out an early age. Though Urmi's father, a domineering husband was responsible for her displacement but it was Urmi's mother who had to bear the wrath of her daughter. Dual responsibility of home and workplace proves instrumental in the rift between Vanaa and Mandira. Mandira dislikes being left to the care of maid servant. "I don't want Hirabai, I want my mother"(72). But the most important relationship between mother and daughter, packed with tensions and Complications is the one between Shakutai and Kalpana. Shakutai's estrangement with Kalpana starts even before her birth. As she accepts before Urmi," I didn't want the child. I didn't want Kalpana. I wanted her to die." So, the forced motherhood brings out more burden than the emotional fulfilment Kalpana's carefree outlook filled her with a kind of fear when she says," If you paint and flaunt yourself, do you think they will leave you alone"?(146) Kalpana holds her mother responsible for her desertion (Shakkutai) by her father. She said, "You're always angry, always quarrelling, that's why he's gone".(93)

This made Kalpana indifferent and stubborn towards her mother and she never shared anything with her mother. Shakkutai fails to understand her daughter's urge to live an independent life of her own, different from the depressing and smothering life of her mother and aunt. Mothers in the novel symbolize tradition and their demeanour is shaped by the Patriarchy which insists them to adhere to male supremacy. And this is the main reason for the rift and discord in their relation. Rousseau's statement that "Man is in chains everywhere" is apt in context of woman as well. She has not right even on her own body. The sanctity of her human body is destroyed through forced physical relations. Frank Hosken says that violence against women is perpetrated "with an astonishing consensus among the men in the world" As far as, marital relationship is concerned, many men consider themselves the sole owner of their wives and their bodies respectively. 'Marital Rape' is never considered as a criminal act in our society; as it is thought that men have only taken what is rightfully theirs, while women remain mute sufferers robbed of their dignity in their own homes. Shashi Deshpande is bold enough to touch upon this topic in a candid way. In her earlier novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*,

she talked about the issue of 'marital rape' and in the present novel she establishes that rape is not just a social crime but also a 'psychological perversion stemming from male desire to overpower the self and identity of a woman'.

In India, an overall continuum of silence seems to pervade this issue, which if at all is discussed in Indian milieu, is done in whispers and subdued tones. But one should always remember that if words have consequences then silence too. Silence speaks a lot; it means a lot but no one knows about this except the person who is silent. Similarly, in this novel Urmi is voicing not only her own despairs and frustrations but those of each and every woman who is a victim of this male-driven world and is not allowed to think herself as an entity. Imtiaz Dharker in her poem, "Sacrifice" emphasizes that society and tradition weigh so heavily on a woman's consciousness that fear alone can sum up her situation. Traditionally, women are seen as 'belonging to men like their property.' In this context Bhattacharji writes: Herself a piece of commodity she could not give gifts but could be given in sacrifice, always lost and won in chess, bought or sold as goods. She had no right to property, none over her own body-she was a man's absolute possession"(32). So, the binaries of male female, man/woman, or powerful/powerless are central to the issue of rape. Moreover, the fear of rape curtails a woman's freedom, confining her within the four walls of 'seemingly happy homes' in India, since "Rape is dishonour, a shameful thing for a women. It is a crime where the victim faces" dejection (of both society and her family) (Premlatha 23).

For Urmi, the predicament of Mira, her mother in law, is like that of a lamb waiting to be butchered by her tender age of 18, though she wants to study further and develop her poetic talent. But her husband's manipulative behaviour succeeds in getting her as his wife. He is obsessive only about her body and fails to establish an emotional bond with her. Because of this loveless marriage she develops "an intense dislike of the sexual act with her husband, a physical repulsion from the man she married"(63). In one of her poems she presents her fear of sexual act.

But tell me, friend, did Lakshmi too
Twist brocade tassels round her fingers
And tremble, fearing the coming
Of the dark-clouded, engulfing night? (66)

A husband's right over his wife body is socially acclaimed and it becomes a wife's duty to satiate the physical needs of her husband. Shashi Deshpande in her novels makes a scathing attack on such tradition that dictates that a husband has a right to satisfy his biological needs irrespective of the wife's unwillingness, thus, sanctioning crimes like marital rape. As Indrani Jaisingh, an eminent lawyer opines, "It is assumed that by marrying a man, a woman has given her consent to sexual intercourse with her husband at anytime. Thus, even if he forces himself on her, he is not committing an offence (of rape) as her consent is assumed."17

Through the character of Kalpana, Deshpande sketches the plight of a raped girl, who is cursed by her own mother for her vegetal (rape) state in the hospital little does Shakutai (the mother) realizes that Kalpana's boldness, her waywardness are not there as one of her sexual violation; rather it is her own maternal uncle, who lets the beast out of him and tries to silence her by raping her. Ignorantly, she blames her own daughter, for bringing such shame and dishonour to their family. The virtues of 'Virginity and chastity' are firmly rooted in our society since ages, making rape the most serious, disgusting and horrible of all the crimes. As Adrienne Rich also observes," it is not rape of the body alone but rape of the mind as well." Although, our society believes that the term 'Marital Rape' can't be applied to the Indian context but a rape is rape regardless of where and in what context it occurs. A marriage should not be held as a licence to rape anyone. Societies such as India that condemns adulterous relationships often force men into marital relationships only for free access to physical consummation, which puts women under immense sexual threat.

This unsympathetic and biased attitude of media, police, judiciary and society adds misery to the innocent victims of sexual assaults. In the novel, police officer registers the case of Kalpana as an accident and not as a Rape-Victim. As he 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”(88). So, this inhuman treatment towards women is shown in these form of loneliness, negation and rejection from society and members of their own families is projected through the lives of Akka, Vanna, Mira, Shakutai, Urmil, Kalpana.

Urmil’s decision to publish Mira’s poems: a step towards her resurrection, to make her alive again. Urmil risks the friend-ship of Vanaa because it involves the exposure of her father’s behaviour. *The Binding Vine* is a refreshing change from the first three novels of Deshpande. Protest against societal roles and attitudes come easily from the protagonists. No other character in Shashi Deshpande’s earlier novels is so rebellious like Urmil. The protagonists of earlier novels though are aware of the inequalities in the society but they never make any attempt to set them right. But Urmil, at every step, emerges fully aware of the unequal treatment meted out to women. The hope for Indian women lies in the happy fact, that though, here are Mira’s and Kalpana’s and Shakutai’s, we also have our Urmil’s (Nityanandham: 66)

Though Urmil has no relation with Kalpana and Shakutai but, she shares a bond of ‘sympathy and emotional attachment. Her regular visits to hospital and their house show her concern towards these women. She becomes successful in making Shakutai understand that it’s not Kalpana’s fault but the real Culprit who did this is the man, Prabhakar. The novel is quite different from the earlier ones in the sense that it introduces a concept of female bonding i.e. the desire of one woman to help out the less fortunate one. Unlike Indu, Saru and Jaya, who have fought their own battles; Urmil strives hard for other women with the help of her friend Malcom, she becomes successful in bringing the issue into limelight and government orders a fresh investigation. Her efforts become fruitful when Shakutai realizes who was the real culprit and after Sulu’s suicide finds Prabhakar, the man behind the crime and asks “Should I tell the police” (194).

Though Urmil is educated who shows a rebellious side of her nature but this nature never shows male hatredness. She doesn’t seem to believe Simon De Beauvoir’s belief that marriage diminishes man but almost annihilates woman. She believes in the institution of marriage and its importance in the lives of women like Sulu and Shakutai for who it guarantees a ‘social, economic and physical security’. She finds herself in a better position as she is educated, economically independent and smart enough to cope up with any situations. She realizes that a relationship becomes strained when one refuses to flow with the main stream’. And this realization brings peace to her turbulent mind. She becomes hopeful for a renewed relationship with her husband kishore, that one day he will remove his armour of withdrawal’ and she will try ‘to reach his soul’. She realizes her pain of losing Anu, but she still has kartik towards whom she has her motherly responsibility. She understands that however burdensome our this are, however painful our experiences are, one can never give up: “We struggle to find something with which we can anchor ourselves to this strange world we find ourselves in only when we love do we find this anchor”(137).

She realizes the power of love which like an adhesive binds people and protects them from being an alienated one. It is only through love that Urmil become successful in bringing a change in Shakutai. She surpasses all her fellow women characters and her earlier counterparts in the sense that she tries to ameliorate the conditions of less fortunate ones. She becomes the voice of those who are silenced by societal norms. In spite of understanding of the value of love and relationships, she receives the greatest knowledge from Shakutai, an uneducated woman, who says,

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

And they become successful in this urge to survive which becomes clear from their busy routine given on the last pages of story. She agrees with Mira, who says.

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

Thus, this urge to survive makes *The Binding* a different novel from the earlier one and the feeling of female solidarity which Urmi shows, puts her on a higher position than Indu, Saru and Jaya. She believes that a change is a slow but sure process. Things are gradually improving but at a slower pace, hence Urmi is not a rebel against the existing system. She just tries to encourage her fellow women to redefine themselves. The society she lives in demands total surrender, total silence on part of women. But she refused to surrender to this hypocrisy and took up cudgles against this conspirational 'silence'. She tries to find a road beyond this silence where the unexpressed pain and untold tales could find a place to get itself heard.

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