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Dissonance In Marriage: An Analysis Of Marital Discord In Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Wine*

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Abstract

The concept of marriage is the key theme in Deshpande's novels and she successfully layers out the reasons for the dissonance in marital life. The success of her portrayal lies in the clarity with which she unveils the characters to resume their conjugal life even after a storming mental agony. All Deshpande's novels feature marriage that has traditional and cultural roots specific in the Indian subcontinent that fall within the Hindu marriage system.

Marriage is the constant and central aspect that can be observed in the novels of Deshpande. This article throws light on the conflict in the conjugal relationship in *The Binding Wine* and analyses the reasons for angst and disappointment in the characters.

Key Words:

marriage, dissonance, angst, disappointment, anticipation

Introduction

Marriage is the highest state of friendship. If happy, it lessens our cares by dividing them, at the same time that it doubles our pleasures by mutual participation.

-Samuel Richardson

Many Family theorists have emphasized the importance of marriage and the problems arising out of incompatible marital relationships. Goode asserts, "Marriage itself is likely to be a public event, signalling its importance to outsiders as well as to the kin network. The ceremonial is the virtual passage for the couple, for both pass into adult status, with its new rights and responsibilities" (51). While Goode comments on the nature of marriage in general, Posterverbalizes about marriage in the contemporary situation:

Demands made by spouses on each other for emotions and sexual fulfillment have risen dramatically. Husbands and wives are not willing as their nineteenth century predecessors were, to hide their emotional problems in the closet, in order to maintain harmony and respectability in marriage. Increased demands for psychic fulfillment have placed a heavy burden on marriage. The result is that marriage is no longer viewed as an exclusive relationship or a lifetime partnership. This situation leads to great unhappiness both for those who undergo the trauma of divorce and for those who maintain the marriage but feel unsatisfied and frustrated in it. (201)

Benokraitis highlights the positive motives that govern the stability of marriage as, "Positive motives strengthen a relationship and enhance the likelihood of marital stability. The reasons don't guarantee that a marriage will last, but they increase the odds of staying together, especially during rough times" (260). She says that marriage connects people. The happiest couples report that they help each other, spend time together and feel emotionally close. Moreover, those who believe that the quality of a marriage depend on determination and hard work are more likely to report having good marriages than couples who believe that relationships depend on fate, luck, or chance. (Benokraitis 261)

Marriages are made in heaven and celebrated on earth. It is the merging of two into one, as a contract between two autonomous individuals. Though the concept of marriage in the world is as old as civilization itself, the word marriage has its origin to Anglo French; it first appeared in Middle English around 1250–1300 CE. Originating from Old French marier (to marry) and ultimately Latin marītāre meaning to provide with a husband or wife and marītāri meaning to get married. Marriage is also called as Matrimony or Wedlock; it is a socially or ritually recognized union or legal contract between spouses that establish rights and obligations between them, their children, and their in-laws. Baber defines marriage as, “Marriage, on the other hand, is essentially a form of relationship between the sexes, socially approved and regulated” (Baber 32). The popular belief is that marriage is a special bond shared between two souls, who tie the wedding knot after swearing to be companions for a lifetime. When two people marry, they bring their dreams with them. “Marriage involves the meeting of two dreams with a state of facts. Matching the dream with dream, and both with the realities, is the essence of adjustment. This is a continuous process; it begins with courtship; it continues through marriage” (Folsom 32). It is the spiritual union of two souls comprising both the physical and mental aspects. It brings companionship, faith and significant stability to human relationships, which is otherwise, is incomplete. In transferring the culture and civilization from one generation to the other, it plays a crucial role so that the human race is burgeoned. The institution of marriage is advantageous to the society as a whole, because it is the foundation of the family, which in turn is the fundamental building block of the society.

The key to successful marriage is often described as love, understanding, mutual respect, trust, commitment and togetherness. Mixed with all these aspects marriage helps to enable the establishment of the family by perpetuating the growth of the offspring. It plays a pivotal role in disciplining and controlling human’s desire for sexual pleasures within its boundary that they do not seek for it outside the marriage. Modern marriages find a great quake at its very foundation as the socio-cultural changes rocking the society is enormous. The growing awareness of women’s rights and economic independence has made women stable and contemplate on the nature of their own selves. Men on the other hand find it hard to cope up the changes meted out by women and there is absolute incompatibility in the minds of married couple. According to Coontz, Marriage no longer gives husbands the right to abuse wives or sacrifice their children’s education in order to benefit from their labour. Modern marriages no longer feature two standards of living, one for the man and a lower one for the wife

and children. There is also no longer a rigid double standard that turns a blind eye to a man's adultery and tars a woman for life if she has sex outside marriage. (309)

The changes though positive, seeking equality between the couple, the adjustments made by the partners are less promising and do not allow them to lead a conflict less life. The result is the degeneration of the marital spirit that subsequently wrecks the family life. Coontz articulates the same notion. She says:

The historical transformation in marriage over the ages has created a similar paradox for society as a whole. Marriage has become more joyful, more loving, and more satisfying for many couples than ever before in history. At the same time it has become more optional and more brittle. These two strands of change cannot be disentangled. (306) Until recently the definition of the marriage is "a union of man and woman" but the emergence of same sex marriages and cohabitating couples have modified this historical understanding amidst controversies rising from the right wing and religious fraction of society.

Coontz observes, "One of the reasons for the stunningly rapid increase in acceptance of same sex marriage is because heterosexuals have completely changed their notion of what marriage is between a man and a woman" (308). It is now believed marriage is based on love, mutual sexual attraction, equality and a flexible division of labour. There are several aspects to marriage such as, trust, partnership, conjugality, companionship, commitment, procreation and economical, emotional, psychological and physical nourishment. The success of marriage mostly depends upon how couples respond to these demands of their partners and the breakdown of their marriage can be triggered depending upon individual's fixation of their expectation.

The concept of marriage is the key theme in Deshpande's novels and she successfully layers out the reasons for the dissonance in marital life. The success of her portrayal lies in the clarity with which she unveils the characters to resume their conjugal life even after a storming mental agony. All Deshpande's novels feature marriage that has traditional and cultural roots specific in the Indian subcontinent that fall within the Hindu marriage system. Marriage is the constant and central aspect that can be observed in the novels of Deshpande. Dharkar says, "The importance that our society attaches to marriage is reflected in our literature. It is the central concern of Deshpande, whose heroines caught in the quagmire of marriage struggle to come up for air" (50). While Deshpande has used several relationships within the family drama, it's the man-woman relationship that has

taken the primetime in her novels. Even her novel *Shadow Play* reveals her fascination with marriage where she portrays astoundingly, the minute details of a Hindu marriage ceremony in the opening chapter. Deshpande's stories explore the significance of marriage stressing the importance of marital harmony and the consequences of having dissonance in marriage by bringing out different aspects of marriage. Her strong belief in marriage can be observed on close analysis of the climax in her novels.

Silence adhered in marital life paves way to numerous problems, as it doesn't promote healthy involvement between the partners. This silence sometimes squeezes one's individuality and makes her a victim to the atrocities existing around her, especially in her marital life. Mira in *The Binding Vine* is a classic example to this kind of victimization. It touches the core of the inner selves of the women characters who are torn by the clutches of unsuccessful marriage in the name of 'obsessive love.' The protagonist Urmi journeys through the lives of her dead mother-in-law Mira and Shakutai, the mother of the rape victim, and unveils their angst and agony, mirroring the labyrinth of depressed relationships. Though Urmi does not find much of conflict in her marital life, except for the insensitiveness of her husband Kishore, it is Mira, her mother-in-law who totally gets suffocated in a loveless married life.

Since the beginning of her married life Urmi finds that the bond between her and her husband is not that of love, though she believes that the anchor to attach oneself is love with this strange world. From the very first night of their wedding she feels distanced from Kishore. She sees a sense of fear on his face, "The two of us in a closed room...and we can't get out. That's marriage" (137). She realizes that he looked trapped in the web of marriage. Kishore being a naval officer is away at ship for most of the time. Each time he leaves Urmi, she is overcome by a kind of terrible feeling that she is alone and depressed. Having grown up under the custody of her grandmother and being deprived of her mother's love she undergoes a sense of alienation and longs for the nearness of her husband. She always wants to tell him, "Don't leave me and go. Each time you go, the parting is like death" (138). Whenever she expresses her longing for him he interprets it as a longing for physical intimacy. Each time she tries to reveal her emotional insecurity, Kishore asserts himself sexually. Kishore, never understands the depth of her feeling. Deshpande is deeply disturbed by the sexual assaults in marital life and this keeps haunting her writings consistently.

A cold indifference exists between them, though Urmi and Kishore have a healthy sexual life and understand each other's preference very carefully. This is because of Kishore's inability to understand his wife's fear. However, Kishore has a mystery about him and Urmi knows he would never remove his armour. There is something in him, she thinks, she will never be able to reach and neither will he allow her to encroach that inner self of him. Urmi feels that her marriage is different:

Marriage with a man who flits into my life a few months in a year and flits out again, leaving nothing of himself behind? Often after he has gone, I find myself a frantic grappling for his image, as if in going he has taken that away as well. Then he returns and we pick up the course of our lives from the moment of his return.

Both of us behave –at least he's always done and I have learnt to do so – as if there is only this present. Neither the past nor the future has any place in our life together; we reject both. (164) There is lot of space in their married life where they are capable of showing both attachment and detachment at the same time. Devoid of love in the absence of her husband, Urmi tries to find herself in the relationship with doctor Bhaskar because he is a patient listener to her talk and gives her the right response. He cares for her emotions and makes her feel complete. Extra marital love, though not a true solution to the problems of incompatibility, finds a prominent place in Deshpande's novels. It shows the urge of the woman to assert herself whether it is inside marriage or outside it. The married life of these women, whether working or non-working, ends in discontentment. When Bhaskar proposes to Urmi and asks her whether she loves her husband, Urmi realizes that she loves him immensely. It is her love for Kishore that restricts her from accepting Bhaskar's proposal. However, Deshpande's implies that Kishore makes Urmi feel that there are certain aspects of his life, which are inaccessible for her. She also shows how a woman feels dumped by her husband when he leaves her unmindful of her emotional needs. Urmi is totally shattered due to the untimely demise of her daughter Anu. The sorrow stricken Urmi at this juncture establishes a relationship with Shakutai, when she is deeply involved in the rape case of Shakutai's daughter, Kalpana. At this juncture, she is given an old trunk full of books and diaries belonging to her dead mother-in-law Mira, by her husband's stepmother, who she calls 'akka'. When

‘akka’ gives Mira’s belongings to Urmi, she tries to brief about Mira’s marriage with her father-in-law, the story that shudders

Urmi.

Urmi’s father-in-law sees Mira at a wedding and falls in love with her. After which he becomes a man in single-minded pursuit to marry her. As he knows his mother would never countenance such a marriage he is unable to propose directly to her. Nor could he ask his parents to propose to her parents on his behalf. And so he goes at it deviously with tenacity. He induces a mutual friend to suggest his name to Mira’s parents as a possible groom for their daughter. After this is done, they go through the whole complicated process of settling marriage and finally they are married.

Urmi while reading the enigmatic poems and the entries in the diaries written by Mira is able to fathom the untold suffering of Mira in her incompatible marriage. Urmi understands Mira’s passion to write poetry, from the books of poetry presented to Mira, by her father. It is inferred that her father has been very proud of her daughter unlike the mother who has insisted her to be docile and mute in her life. Mira had written about her mother:

Don’t tread paths barred to you

Obey, never utter a ‘no’;

Submit and your life will be

A paradise, she said and blessed me. (83)

Though she never wants to be like the image of her mother, after her marriage finds herself as the shadow of her mother, “The daughter? No Mother, I am your shadow” (126).

From the photographs and poems that are found in the trunk, Urmi could resurrect the image of Mira as a vivacious and an intelligent girl. Her love for writing poetry, the fear of articulating her mind, the fear of being laughed is all obvious in her poems. Her true nature, her overwhelming anxiety to spread her wings as a poet are seen in the following lines of

Mira:

Huddled in my cocoon, a somnolent silkworm

Will I emerge a beautiful being?

Or will I, suffocating, cease to exist? (65)

The anxious girl with innumerable dreams unfolding before her loses her identity after her marriage. Thereafter, the poems get saddened with untold miseries, with a silent cry of a suffering wife under the crazy obsession of the husband. The poems written in Kannada, are profound with her inner aspirations and longings. The feisty young girl, who nourished the dream of becoming a poet with lofty ideas, after getting married, turns out to be a caged bird. Her diaries endorse a clear picture of her loveless marriage and Urmi feels, “A single thought runs through all her writings; a strong thread of an intense dislike of the sexual act with her husband, a physical repulsion from the man she married” (63).

The way Mira’s husband shows his obsession to marry her, launches an idea that he is more hooked to her external appearance than her inner self. His craziness is beyond one’s comprehension and proves to be a torment to his wife. His own sister has once commented, “My

brother was very crazy about his wife...I've never seen a man like that" (47). This kind of craziness leads to excessive sexual drive and Mira's husband is no exception. Mira who has been caught in the turbid current of marriage writes:

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

The above lines render the mental anguish of Mira, when her husband invades her body against her wish. Marital rape is an alarming mental agony to women who try to establish their identity. Kiffe argues about the effects of marital rape as follows:

Feelings of grief and loss are common for victim/survivors of marital rape because the rape is a break in an important relationship... She may experience a great loss of self-esteem, and feel worthless because someone who loved her did something so horrible to her. The loss of control over her own life is always an issue for a sexual assault survivor, but when that assault takes place within marriage the loss is extreme. (Kiffe)

Mira symbolizes the plight of the countless women, who face the same agony, without a voice to articulate their buried emotions. Palkar says, 'What Mira had suffered from is generally not acknowledged by our culture as rape, but the legitimate right of the husband to possess his wife sexually, with or without her consent and Mira's infatuated husband had exercised this right

against her will, against her strong aversion for him” (169). The ‘invasion of one’s body’ even in a marriage that has been sanctified is equal to a traumatic rape. Kiffe observes, “Marital rape is seldom given the legitimacy or validity of other forms of sexual violence, but it can be just as devastating. What sets marital rape apart is that the victim has to live with her rapist” (Kiffe). This is very true in Mira’s case as she is frightened of ‘clouded, engulfing nights.’ Deshpande brings out similar mental agony in one of her short stories ‘Intrusion’ where a husband imposes himself on his young, unprepared wife. For any woman, this humiliation can cause lifelong mental ‘anguish’, curbing her from being herself. Though our ‘Puranas’ avow that a ‘wifely duty’ is to gratify her husband, plundering the pleasure from her against her will, is an act of violence.

The consequence of this dogmatic ‘right’ to own a wife’s body without her consent, pillages her inner psyche, impeding her autonomy. “Women raped by their intimate partners are more likely to be diagnosed with depression or anxiety than those who are victims of physical violence and those who were sexually assaulted by someone other than one’s partner” (Plichta). Mira’s husband has been imposing himself on his wife in the name of love, uttering the word ‘Love’ to her all the time. The following entry in the diary by Mira shows how she had singled herself out from her husband:

Talk, he says to me, why don’t you say something, why don’t you speak to me?

What shall I talk about, I ask him stupidly. ‘What did you do today, where did you go, what have you been thinking about all evening?’ and so he goes on, dragging

my day, my whole self out of me. But I have my defenses; I give him the facts,

nothing more, never my feelings...What is it he wants from me? I look at myself in the mirror and wonder, what is there in me? Why does it have to be me? Why

can't he leave me alone? (67)

From the above passage Urmi understands the dissension in Mira's marriage, the plight of the violation of Mira's body, her inability to connect with her husband who is a sexual maniac and the loss of her identity. This identity is lost in Mira's life the very moment she gets married to her husband, who changes her name to Nirmala. She feels, "A tablet of rice, a pencil of gold, can they make me Nirmala? I am Mira" (101). The firmness with which she asserts herself shows that she has been cringing when a new name is thrust on her. Reddy observes, "The Indian custom of changing the bride's name is a pivot point of transformation-a complete revamping of any young girl's psyche, so aptly documented in the saga of Deshpande's heroines or protagonists" (100). Society calls her mad when she starts alienating her from the outer world. The world perceives her as insane when she shows her dejection.

In Mira's life, her insensitive husband smothers her 'self' suppressing her identity. But Mira in the midst of her imperfect life conceives her first child, starts hoping for a better future. She unconsciously expects a male child, may be due to the gripping fear of the same destiny of hers that would dawn on her female child. She writes, "he moves-why do I call the child he?" (149). It is ironic to see that the preference for a male child is not because he will be an asset, but because he may not undergo the burden of being a female. Having suffered in the incompatible marital life, Mira dies at the age of twenty-two, while giving birth to a male child. Her upbringing is one of the reasons for her distressed marital life. Marital dissonance is so disastrous that it can put an end to one's life as well. Loveless marriages bring disharmony to the partners and also inflict huge mental anguish to the people around them.

Conclusion

Deshpande is seriously concerned with the roles of human relationships in the realm of the family. She does the analysis ingeniously as she believes that family can never be ignored. While exploring the role relations, she restates on the bonding of man-woman relationship in marriage that is quintessential for the sustenance of the family unit. She exposes the problematic issues within the sphere of marriage and navigates her heroines through the hard marital life by making them realize their flaws and regenerating in them the hope of life. It is interesting to note that there is no visibility of anti-man attitude in these woman characters but rather an acceptance of the egocentric maleness.

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