

# SHASHIDESH PANDE'S NOVEL "BINDING VINE" – AN ANALYSIS

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## Abstract:

The author depicts the upper middle-class milieu in this novel. She remains perturbed by the violence and cruelty that she witnesses around her. She suffers from an inherent inability to adapt to her social milieu. The researcher analyses the following aspects of feminism in this novel: compromise as an essential condition of life; the effect of childhood experiences on adult personality; parental rift and estrangement; the effect of homelessness in childhood and the resultant insecurity, diversion, retrogression to childhood, delusion, loneliness and boredom of city life; communication gap between spouses, temperamental incompatibilities and violence in life.

*The Binding Vine* is about Urmi, she is an educated middle-class wife. The novel begins with Urmi anguished in excess of her dead infant daughter, who finds it difficult to let go her memories. In such an aggrieved state she happens to meet Shakuntala, mother of suffered and rape victim, Kalpana. She approached her in the hospital where her sister-in-law, Vanaa works. Kalpana is lying unconscious and her mother thinks that she has met with a car accident. Dr. Bhaskar, the doctor in charge, on examination reports that Kalpana has been cruelly raped. Her mother Shankuntala's responses are that of a characteristic Indian mother bred in an oppressive male-dominated society. She tells Vanaa: "it's not true; you people are trying to blackmail my daughter's name."<sup>1</sup> Gathering from Vanaa and Dr. Bhaskar's conversation, she cries in agony and fear. "No, no, no. Tell him, Taj, it's not true, don't tell anyone. I'll never be able to hold up my head again, who'll marry the girl, we're decent people, doctor,"

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## Introduction.

Urmi escorts her home and from there starts her association with her. She pays regular visits to Shakutai's place to inquire after Kalpana's state. It is during these regular visits that Urmi comes to know about Kalpana from Shakutai. She swings, between two extremes; sometimes she is all praise for Kalpana and sometimes puts all the blame on her. They should have observed her running out, head in the air concerned for nobody. It is all her mistake, Urmila, all her fault.

Shakutai does not want a report to be lodged with the police, as she knows that if she does a much greater injustice awaits her and her daughter. A victim of rape is a loser on two counts. First, she has been raped; secondly the society looks down upon such a victim as a kulta (a characterless woman) which leaves the victim in a much miserable plight. The police officer knows very well that it is a rape case, but he has his own logic. He tells Dr. Bhaskar that "She is going to die anyway, so what difference does it make whether on paper, she dies the victim of an accident or a rape. He further adds "her name would be smeared."<sup>3</sup>

In a society governed by Manu's laws which depict a woman as a being full of carnal passions, love for ornament, contaminated desires, anger, dishonesty, hatred and bad conduct, it is Kalpana who is blamed for as heinous a crime as rape. Urmi wants justice to be done to Kalpana by bringing the culprit to book. She finds herself a lonely advocate in her fight. Despite opposition from Vanaa and Urmi's mother she takes the matters to the press. She gets the case reopened and with this the identity of the rapist is revealed who is no other than Prabhakar, Shakutai's sister Sulu's husband. Sulu feels so guilty that she immolates herself leaving behind a grief-stricken Shakutai.

Shakutai too has her own tragic tale. Soon after her marriage her husband quits her in her father's home and goes to Bombay on the pretext of earning a livelihood. Six months are past but he does not return. Shakutai becomes annoyed and joins her husband in Bombay. Soon she understands that her husband is indolent and worthless. She gives birth to three children and decides to work for the sake of her children. Despite this her husband deserts her and the children for another woman. She tells Urmi, *"That's been the greatest misfortune of my life, Urmila, marrying that man"*<sup>4</sup> Since husband has deserted her, she is to blame not only for her husband's abandonment of her but also for anything that goes wrong in the family, for example Kalpana's rape.

Shakutai's sister, Sulu, has her own tragic life. She is affectionate and helpful in nature. She helps her as much as possible and even takes upon herself the responsibility of bringing Kalpana up but that was not to be. Sulu's husband Prabhakar had lusted after her, and Sulu under pressure from her husband had proposed to Shakutai Kalpana's marriage to Prabhakar. Kalpana is infuriated at Sulu and ridicules her. Yet another saga of misery, submission and sorrow is that of Urmi's late mother-in-law, Mira. Mira has disliked to bodily closeness with her husband and unmoving she has to set up with his fascination for her. She articulates influence to her interior identity in her poems. Several years subsequent to her marriage, Urmi accepts an old trunk full of books and a little other thing from Mira's husband's stepmother, submitted to as Akka. In all these books Urmi identifies Mira's diary which is *"not a daily account of her routine life but a communion with herself. When Akka hands over Mira's jewellery to Urmi, she says, They are Kishore's mothers, but while giving books and diaries to her, she says, Take this, it's Mira's"*<sup>5</sup>

Urmi goes through the poems in Mira's diary and get a glimpse of her troubled marriage. She comes to know from Akka how Kishore's father had pursued and married Mira, a college student. The poems and accesses in the diary are evidence enough for Urmi to envisage the enforced sexual action Mira had to undergo in a mismatched marriage. Enforced infringement of a woman's body even in marriage can exist as hurtful as rape; even however it is not located in the same bracket. In the Indian social setup it is presenting upon a wife to provide the husband in bed like a prostitute. Thus Mira's diary is a glaring disclosure of her *"intense dislike of the sexual act with her husband, a physical repulsion for the man she married."*<sup>6</sup>

In a case filed by a husband against his wife for restitution of marital rights, the court had ruled that the husband couldn't force the wife into physical relationship against her will. Priti is extremely excited whereas Urmi remains sober. Priti says: "Isn't radical, absolutely earthshaking in this country I mean? Can you imagine the consequences?"<sup>7</sup> But Urmi thinks that one judgment by a single judge which can be appealed against will make no difference to the entire womankind.

The study is interpreting Shashi Deshpande's recent novel *The Binding Vine* from the female point of view. The first section of the study introduces, in brief, the basic features of feminism both occidental and oriental. Traditionally, the Indian woman has been represented as a pathetic, wooden creature, subjected to male domination. Shashi Deshpande is a feminist par excellence. Her distinctiveness is that her protagonists are not rebels but they should be trained in the course of their meet with the unsympathetic truth of life to create in themselves the authority to manage with the male-domination. The second section is devoted to a formal analysis of the novel. This section will foreground the dimensional depth of the feminine self of Deshpande's protagonists. Whereas, the earlier protagonists like Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Indu in *Roots and Shadows* and Jaya in the Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel *That Long Silence* think primarily about themselves and seek their own redemption, the protagonist Urmi in *The Binding Vine* is preoccupied with the suffering of her elongated dead mother-in-law focussed to rape in marriage and the unmarried girl Kalpana-also the victim of rape. It is also pointed out that love has the capacity to redeem human values. The last section brings about the findings and makes necessary generalizations.

The study articulates the Love, sex, victims and rape in the *Binding Vine*, it explores the all relationships, gives the power to survive. Urmila reminisces when she gets things falling away from her hands, "And yet I think of Vanaa, heavily pregnant, sitting by me..... think Akka crying for Mira, of Inni's grief when Papa told her about his illness ...of the touch of grace in Shakutai's hand when she covered me gently at night ..."<sup>8</sup> These gesticulation of fondness show the accurate worth of love, an significant element in all human relationships and human identity.

Does writing in English make a writer any the less Indian? The persists and nativists in their anxiety for the safeguarding of the regional languages against the persistence onslaught of English may positively think so and look upon Indian Writing in English as a sign of colonial overshadow or cultural colonialism. But in spite of their hue and cry against the domination of English, the tribe of the 'traitors' who write in English goes on increasing. In fact, post-independence India has witnessed a deluge of creative texts from 1980s onwards which continues unabated in the 90s. Defending her use of English rather than a regional language for her creative work, Shashi Deshpande explains her position in the following manner:

To those of us who write in English, it is neither a foreign language, nor the language of the colonizer, but the language of our creativity. Whether the writing is rootless, alienated or elitist should be judged from the writing, not from the language. *My writing comes out of myself, the society I live in, it is shaped, as I am, by my family my ancestry, the place I was born in, the place I live in, the culture I am steeped in. The fact that the writing is in English changes none of these things*<sup>9</sup> Reading Deshpande's novels one often forgets that she is writing in English and not in Kannada or Marathi. Hers is

very much a variety of Indian English that draws its sustenance from the ambience of the regional cultures of the neighboring states of Karnataka and Maharashtra. Her claim therefore to be considered as a regional writer has considerable validity.

Shashi Deshpande's female protagonists, like their author, hail from middle-class families. To belong to the middle-class milieu in India, or in the commonwealth countries for that matter, means you are a hybrid creature bearing within you the marks of your English education and its cultural baggage as well as your native traditions and culture. Since the introduction of English in this country this is the paradox that haunts the middle-class Indians who have to constantly do a balancing act between tradition and modernity with varying results. This is the class that throws up your reformists and revivalists, your so-called Brown Sahibs and nativists, secularists and BJPs. Meenakshi Mukherjee points out that *"This cultural conflict – or synthesis, as the case may be has for some reason always assumed a vital significance for the Indian novelist who writes in English"*<sup>10</sup> This cultural conflict is evident in Deshpande's writings-especially in the female narrators of her stories. Though the middle-classes may have come under attack in India, as in the West, in recent times, an author cannot disown her class origins. That would be dishonesty of a kind. Similarly she cannot discard the language of her creativity just because now it is politically correct to disown English.

Deshpande's representation of relations between men and women is strongly radical feminist in spirit. Like the theorists Millet and Firestone, she portrays women as constituting a different 'class' and 'culture' from men. They are described as 'slaves' in the home. The protagonist in Deshpande's fictional world smashes the long silence that had turned into the characteristic of feminine survival. This is unambiguous in Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*. A questioning attitude had already been displayed by Deshpande's earlier protagonists and they had started questioning their roles, functions, approaches and even behavior. There is the consciousness that they need to extricate themselves from centuries of servile devotion to shared norms and inevitable roles. Yet they succeed in doing it within a limited purview of their lives. They exhibit no sign of rising as feminists with the capacity to purge society of its evils and attain success of a stupendous nature. *The Binding Vine* is a novel with a difference. The narrator-protagonist, Urmila, is regaining her composure after the sudden death of her infant daughter. She gets involved with Kalpana, a young victim of rape and wants people to realize the humiliation that is heaped upon a rape victim by a man. Only the victim knows the shattering physical and emotional effects. She wants everyone to realize how very painful these are for the victim and how great is the necessity for a commendable punishment to the criminal. While Kalpana's mother with a typical feminine attitude puts the blame on Kalpana saying, *"It's all her fault, Urmila, all her fault."*<sup>11</sup> She further says, *"Women must not fear"*<sup>12</sup>.

It's only Urmila who rages at the humiliation heaped on the wronged woman and impunity with which men are able to get away! *"She was hurt, she was injured, wronged by a man, she didn't do anything wrong. Why can't you see that? Are you blind? It is not her fault, no, not her fault at all"*<sup>13</sup> Just as Shashi Deshpande's novels cannot conceal her class individuality; they cannot help but be disloyal to her gender personality. As Deshpande admits in one of her recent interviews, *"As writing is born out of personal experience, the fact that I am a woman is bound to surface. Besides, only a woman could write my books they are written from the inside, as it*

were"<sup>14</sup>. It may be easy for an educated Indian male to approve or extol the native institutions and structures as they require little personal sacrifice on his part. But for an educated woman, constantly hampered and inhibited by the place and role that the patriarchal systems have allotted her, it is difficult to accept that everything is right with the native traditions.

As we have seen, the heroines of Deshpande's earlier fiction spend the period of hibernation in their parental home. The insights that they get are generally arrived at in the absence of their husbands. Urmi need not undertake a journey to her parental home as she is previously stay to continue with her mother, Inni, since Kishore, her husband, works for the Merchant Navy and is therefore more of a visitor than a regular member of the household. He too is one of those 'absent' husbands that we come across again and again in Deshpande's fiction. Urmi, while anguished over the defeat of her daughter, obtain concerned and finds relief from her agonizing pain in the predicaments of two persons Mira and Kalpana-one by now dead and another going through a death-in-life survival. What had happened in the past, therefore, has its resonances in the present too. As Urmi exclaims, *"I've suddenly realized-what has happened to Kalpana happened to Mira too"*<sup>21</sup>What connects Mira, Urmi's mother-in-law and Kalpana, a deprived household servant's daughter is that both have been the victims of rape. What Mira had undergone from is normally not approved by our mores as rape, but the justifiable true of the husband to possess his wife sexually with or without her approval and Mira's besotted husband had implemented this right against her will, against her strong hatred of him.

The two central parts of the novel are devoted to the unraveling of the past through various encounters, surfacing of memories, physical surroundings and a self-questioning while the first and fourth are more directly concerned with the present. With the Mohan-Jaya relationship and the inquiry being conducted against Mohan. In the fourth part, Jaya goes home to look for the mail as well for her son who has been temporarily lost and Mohan makes a trip to Delhi to sort out his affairs. The novel which is more a woman's novel than any other novel of Deshpande's, and which is full of minute details of everyday life, the hopes and dreams and the insignificant happenings, ends on a positive note. The crisis has forced a whole lot of rethinking. And there is hope for a new beginning. Jaya has recovered her lost self and the length with that her ability to daydream. She has determined to obtain purge of the silence which women have survived with for decades.

Urmi's journey therefore is not so much into her personal past-though that is also there-but into the buried life and thoughts of her mother-in-law, Mira, Kishore's mother, who had died at the age of 22 while giving birth to her son. Mira's inner life is made available to Urmi through the diary and poems that the former had left behind at the time of her death and which now become Urmi's legacy. Talking about one of Mira's poems Urmi observes:

*"Mira was only 22 when she wrote this. She had been married at the age of 18. Since, then, she had lived a life which even if normal to most women of that time, must have seemed terrible to her. It seems appalling to me when I think of the choices of my own life, of its freedom. Cloistered in a home, living with a man she could not love, surrounded by people she had nothing in common with-how did she go on?"*<sup>22</sup>

Urmi comes to the conclusion that what had sustained Mira in the claustrophobic atmosphere of her marriage was her writing. Mira had been producing poetry as her college days. She had in reality desired to become a poet. She had even get together a talented young poet, Venu and provided him some of her poems to read, eager for perhaps a word of support from him or at least an assurance that she possessed poetic talent. But Venu, who afterward suit *"a grand old man of Indian literature, one of the great poets of the century, having won all the awards that there are Apparently believed that creativity is a male preserve"*<sup>23</sup>. What he said to Mira would substantiate the thesis of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guber that the dominant patriarchal ideology presents artistic creativity as a fundamentally male quality Venu's advice to Mira was:

*"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."*<sup>25</sup>

As the customary Indian belief, the only salvation for a woman is her attainment of motherhood. Women should not desire to everything beyond her wifely and motherly position. In this context the epigraph to the novel which is taken from Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* assumes significance: *"What was the used of my creation, if I were entirely contained her."*<sup>26</sup> Being a mother, wife, or daughter or sister is important to a woman; Deshpande does not deny that. But that is not or should not be the whole story about a woman.. Deshpande in *The Binding Vine*, brings to light the life and poetry of an unknown woman. Truly Deshpande in her novels has created for us an inspired female historiography which fills in the gaps absences found regarding women in our social or cultural history.

*The Binding Vine* carries forward three narrative strands introduced in her earlier novels. Akka's marriage of terror and unhappiness from *Roots and Shadows* is projected in Urmi's dead mother-in-law Mira's experience. Mira, who did not love the man so neurotically in love with her, was given no freedom to opt out of the relationship. Love and passion are viewed as a male right. Women are supposed to fall in love and oblige. Mira's relationship with her husband is one long nightmare. It is rape within marriage. And Mira, who writes poetry and keeps a diary, dies while delivering her child. With echoes of the Rukhmabai case of the late nineteenth century is where the husband insisted on the restoration of his conjugal rights. Mira's life illustrates the traumatic aspects of a loveless marriage, and of one sided love. The male impulse to possess the woman and override female resistance marks an aggression which is backed by social approval through marriage.

After reading the poems, Urmi realizes the suffering of Mira *"the woman who wrote those poems in the solitude of an unhappy marriage, who died giving birth to her son at twenty-two. In the eyes of Urmi, Mira's diary is not a daily account of her routine life but a communion with herself"*<sup>27</sup> For the time-being she forgets her own suffering and tries to probe into Mira's poetry to visualize the kind of troubled life she had lived.

Taken together, the poems and the diary entries connote molestation in marriage. Take for example the following lines: *"But tell me, friend, did Laxmi too twist brocade tassels round her fingers and tremble, fearing the coming of the dark clouded, engulfing night?"*<sup>28</sup>

This is further denoted by the diary entries like the following:

But I have my defenses; I give him the facts, nothing more, never my feelings....and so it begins, 'Please,' he says, *'Please, I love you.' And over and over again until he has done' I love you' Love How I hate the word. If this is love it is a terrible thing"*<sup>29</sup>

Such passages embody the psychological fears and physical suffering of Mira. Urmi wants to share this suffering with Vanna, her friend from childhood and now her sister-in-law but she cannot, because *"I cannot speak of Mira, of Mira's writing, to her. That is another pocket of silence between us. One can never see one's parent as a sexual being; he or she is merely a cardboard figure labeled parent. Urmi remembers the poem behind which lies the man "who tried to possess another human being against her will. 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"*<sup>30</sup>

## 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. In *Difficult Daughters*, Manju Kapur presented women, emancipation and striving for some space in such a manner that we read not just with our eyes but also with our heart.

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