

Portrayal of Women in Shashi Deshpande's - THE BINDING VINE

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***Abstract:** The aim of 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:** Relationships, society, marriage, sufferings*

Shashi Deshpande's 'The Binding Vine' (1993) 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.

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 judgement 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.

She says:

"...but her submissiveness, her willingness to go along with him in whatever he wants makes me angry.

You let him get away with too much; I tell her what do you want me to do? 'Assert yourself. You don't have to crawl before him. Do you, 'I don't crawl. I do what I want'.

'No, you don't. You're scared of him, yes you are. I've seen you. You don't ever dare to call your daughters anything but Mandira and Pallavi, no, not even when you pet them because Harish doesn't like Baby talk.....' "(80).

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. "Each time you leave me the parting is like death", she tries to tell two times, and both the times, he finds solution in the physical relationship. But to her,

"..... sex is only a temporary answer. I came out of it to find that the lights had come back..... 'Go to sleep' he said. He was kneeling by me his face close to mine, but the closeness was only physical. His voice was cold. I could see the goose bumps on his shoulders, his chest. I did not look into his face.

I was afraid of what I would see, I turned round and fell asleep "(140).

Thus, we can say that 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;

"I could put my desire into a deep freeze and take them out, intact and whole, when he returned "(65).

Here Deshpande is trying to make a point that financial security cannot curb the need of a person to be pampered and cared within a relationship. It is this vacuum in her life which leads to

the advancement of her friendship with Dr. Bhaskar. The point here is that the realization of the need and demand of sex by the new woman who is independent in various aspects of life has been effectively suggested by Deshpande.

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 savegely 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. When Inni wanted a framed photograph of Anu on wall she rejects the idea and is reluctant to do that and says:

*I don't need a picture to remember her,
I can remember every bit of her, every moment of her life" (68).*
When her friend Lalita asks how many kids she has,
she replies, *"Only one. A son."*

And soon she realizes that she has done injustice to Anu:

*"Only one, a sonthe words keep hammering in my mind.
How could I? That was betrayal, treachery
How could I deny my Anu? Only one son how could I? "(106).*

S. Indira aptly observes: *"She clings to her pain
and allows her memories of Anu, every small*

incident to flood her with longing and a great sense of loss."

In such a disturbed state of mind she comes across Shakuntala, mother of a rape-victim Kalpana. She meets her in the hospital where her sister-in-law works.

Kalpana's mother thinks that her daughter has met with an accident. But Dr. Bhaskar the doctor in charge on examination of Kalpana reports reveals that she has been brutally raped, the response of Shakuntala to this statement of Dr. Bhaskar is that of typical Indian mother bred in an oppressive male dominated society, which functions on terms and conditions laid down by male section of society. She tells Vanaa:

"It's not true you people are trying to blackmail my daughter's name"(58).

When she comes to know that her daughter has been raped from the conversation of Dr. Bhaskar and Vanaa, she cries in agony and fear:

*No, no, no. Tell him, Tai, 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," She turns to him don't tell the police"(58).*

In her fearsome state of mind she gives us an insight into the society's attitude towards victims of rape. She says:

*"If a girl's honour is lost, what's left?
The girl doesn't have to do anything wrong,
people will always point a finger at her "(59).*

The novelist has very sensibly laid bare the fear, anger, helplessness and anguish of Shakuntala. When Urmi escorts Shakuntala to her home that night she comes to know about Kalpana from her. What we as readers 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. She says:

*"She is very smart, that's how she got the job in the shop.
Kalpana even learnt how to speak English. People in our
chawl used to laugh at her but she didn't care.
When she wants something she goes after it, nothing can stop her.
She's stubborn, you can't imagine how stubborn she is" (92).*

She is full of praise when she talks about her daughter's physical appearance she says:

"She's very pretty, my Kalpana. She's not like me at all. When she was born, she was so delicate and fair, just like a doll. I wondered how a woman like me could have a daughter like that"(93).

Although she adores and loves her daughter very much, she puts all the blame squarely on her shoulders because she has a conventional mindset, and feels that if her daughter would have restricted her moves this would not have happened. And she bursts out in tears and says:

But she went her way. You should have seen her walking out, head in the air caring for nobody. It's all her fault, Urmila, all her fault"(14).

But 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.

Some people have the boldness and guts to seek individuality and hold their convictions like Kalpana did, other women may unconsciously approve of it and even desire to do so themselves but are afraid to break rules which have been laid down by the society. Therefore they react in a similar manner as Kalpana's mother did.

Urmi finds it very hard to agree with Shakutai that Kalpana is culpable for her condition. She tries to persuade her by telling her:

"It's not her fault, no, not her fault at all" (147).

The susceptibility of the girl child in our society towards such heinous acts is clearly brought out by their conversation. It is very clear that relationship within the family is no protection against the sexual vulnerability. In Kalpana's case Sulu's husband (i.e. her mousi's husband) was the culprit. Shakutai fears that whatever came about with Kalpana will completely ruin the life of Sandhya her second daughter at this she tells Urmi:

"Take her, Urmila, take her away with you. I can't look after her, I don't want her. I'll destroy her like I did Kalpana. Take her to your house, keep her there, I'm not fit to look after her"(192).

Very soon we come to know about Shakutai's tragic past. She 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 all her hardwork

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 tells Urmi,

*"That's been the greatest misfortune of my life,
Urmila, marrying that man." (110).*

She also tells her that she is the one who will be held responsible by the society for the pitiable condition of her daughter. She bitterly tells Urmi:

*"what can you expect, they say of a girl
whose mother has left husband?"(147).*

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 Prabhakar had a strong desire for Kalpana. Sulu under extreme pressure from her husband proposed to Shakutai Kalpana's marriage to Prabhakar. Both Shakutai and Sulu herself wanted that Kalpana should marry her mousaji' otherwise they knew somewhere inside that she will suffer for the rest of her life. 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 an personification of love and submissiveness commits suicide after she comes to know about her husband's fateful deed. Shakutai who is full of praise and admiration for her sister tells Urmi".

*"After marriage she changed. She was frightened, always frightened.
What if he doesn't like me, what if he throws me out?
Nobody should live like that, Urmila, So full of fears "(195).*

Shasli Deshpande suggests here that how sometimes a marriage entirely ruins the persona of a woman by making her enormously meek and passive.

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.

The novelist here for the first time touches and raises her concern on the subject of marital rape. 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 revolution 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 point out molestation in marriage the degree of which can be gauged from the following lives:

*But tell me, friend
Did Laxmi too twist brocade tessels
Round her fingers and tremble,
Fearing the coming of the dark-
Clouded, engulfing night. (66)*

This is further demoted by the dairy entries like the following:-

*But I have my defences; I give him the
facts, nothing more, never my feelings....
And so it begins," Please," he says,
" Please, I have you. "And over and
Over again until he has done "I love
You": Love! How I hate the word.
If there is love it is a terrible thing. (67)*

When she came to her in-law's house she was christened Nirmala-the first estrangement from her individuality. Though explicitly she does not react but puts down her reaction in these lives:

*A guttering ring gliding on the rice
Carefully traced a name (Nirmala)
Who is this? None but me,
My name hence, bestowed upon me.
Nirmala, they call, I stand statue-still,
Do you build without erasing the old?
A tablet of rice, a pencil of gold
Can they make me Nirmala? I am Mira.*

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 same sort of soreness was given expression on by Kamala Das in her poem "An Introduction".

*Dress in saris, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroider, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in on.
Belong, cried the Categorizes.*

This attitude which our society follows is quiet symbolic of how women are deprived of imagination and the power of communication. 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.

Besides sharing the sufferings of Mira her Mother-in-law, Urmi also tries to bring some sought of relief to Kalpana by getting the accused punished for his brutal act. Talking about rape Deshpande says', everybody wants to hush it up..... I would say yes, make it public, but when it comes to my own daughter, my own self, would I ? Sometimes organization lack compassion and sensitivity on dealing with these conflicts. In Binding Vine I have tried to represent this situation."

This particular novel is a beautiful reflection of mother and daughter relationship. Each and every facet of mother daughter association is highlighted through three characters in the novel who are Shakutai in her relationship with Kalpana, Inni's relationship with Urmi, and Urmi's relationship with her dead daughter.

To conclude we can say that Urmi is the true reflection of a woman, revolting and finally coming to terms with herself. Sashi Deshpande has portrayed Urmila as chaste women whose sympathy for the less fortunate women is sparked of by the death of her daughter Anu. Despite her frustrations, longing for the compassion and love of her husband Urmila is not a radical feminist, but one who comes to term with her own sufferings and anxieties when she sees the harsh realities of life.

The central theme of the novel is the 'binding vine' of feeling and emotions between parent and child and between husband and wife. The true symbolic importation of the title is discovered in the following lines of Mira's poetry:

Desire says the Buddha, is the

*Cause of grief;
But how to escape their cord
This binding vine of love?*

It is love which is the binding vine of life

"The most important needs is to love. From the moments of our births, we struggle to find something which we can anchor ourselves to this strange world we find ourselves in. Only when we love do we find this anchor. But love makes you vulnerable" (137).

At last Urmi realised that relationships bind one another and that:

"Each relationship, always imperfect, survives on hope" (141).

Towards end we can say that very skillfully the novelist has painted the necessity and significance of love and understanding in one's life. Through female characters from different sections of society she has raised this issue that how they are deprived of love and compatibility which leads to loss of their personality and individuality. The whole endeavor made in this particular novel is to make the people recognize, that it is not only the male who is accountable for the plight of women but it is the society at large which has to take the call. The refinement needs to be made in the basics of upbringing and rearing of a child whether he is a male or a female, only then we can imagine a society which is liberated of corruption and occupied of love, admiration and sympathetic attitude towards each other.

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