



**Strained Relationship And Uncontrived Portrayal Of Bounded Sisterhood:
Unvoiced Struggle In Shashi Deshpande's The Binding Vine**

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Abstract

Women's fight for equality and social justice is still considered to be questioned in the social milieu. Women have faced many hurdles in their private and public lives such as legal and civil rights, sexuality, equal opportunities, etc. However, the issues and identity crises have been trapped in the lives of women by the patriarchal world. Women have always been treated and assumed “othered” by society. They are always defined by their male counterpart in their lives. The purpose of this paper is to analyze women's struggle with identity and the solidarity that women develop for one another over the struggles, pains, and hardships through contextually analysing the characters in *The Binding Vine*. The researcher is an attempt to examine the metaphoric journey of the characterisation and quest for the seeking self-identity in a hegemonic and patriarchal world.

Keywords: Feminism, womanism, marriage institution, sisterhood, violence, memories, stream of consciousness.

Shashi Deshpande is a prominent feminist author of post-Independence India. Unlike other contemporary writers from post-independence India, she did not write about the women who suffered carnage of partition or religious subjugation only but also, she wrote about the women who belonged to the middle-class background and their physical and psychological struggles. Her female protagonist is the woman who encounters innumerable experiences in day-to-day life. The individual sufferings become the collective common struggles of all women in their lives although women have belonged to different caste, classes, gender, location, race, ethnicity, etc. They have troubles in their marriage, home, strained relationships with parents and other relatives, and also suffer a lot in their personal and social life. Women have been fighting for the internal struggles to the reclamation of identities and place in the patriarchal world. Deshpande's novels are mainly predominately focused on character novels. The influential impacts of the journey of characterisations instead of the story reveal in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* (1993). Henceforth the plot is driven by characters and usually revolves around the central character and their metaphoric journey of finding themselves. *The Binding Vine*, even though reflects upon the struggles of central character Urmi and the other characters particularly female characters around her also have been given paramount importance by the author. Protagonist character Urmi and her struggle due to the impact of surroundings makes her weaker and on the other hand, sisterhood binds them together to fight

collective struggles. Their sufferings lead the way to develop in Urmi a sense of sisterhood and a sense of bringing justice to those who have been unjust in the patriarchal system.

The narrative of the novel *The Binding Vine* unfolds through the eyes of Urmi. She is the central character. At the beginning of the novel, she is grieving over her one-year-old daughter Anu's death. She thinks that she must keep the pain caused by the death of her daughter alive. Urmi believes that it is the pain, which will help her to keep alive relationship with her daughter and bound her emotions. Urmi feels that her agony is the only medium through which she can remember her daughter. She even shoves away her sister-in-law and friend Vanaa's effort to ease away her pain. Urmi argues with her that, if she forgets her daughter's death or the pain then it will be like a betrayal of her memories (Deshpande 09). Urmi comes across as a strong, confident, working middle-class married woman but strives so hard to keep her daughter's memories alive. Furthermore, she was self-proclaimed that the mother's identity is attached to her daughter, and to keep her sense of motherhood she must have to suffer from the agony in the memory of her daughter. The societal gender roles are fixed and considered in the lives of Urmi and there is no freedom from the fixed roles by the system of patriarchy.

Protagonist Urmi's strained association with her mother depicts the struggle because of societal pressures. Abandoned of the daughters in *The Binding Vine* is not because of the women's correlations to each other but the structure of

patriarchy. Hence, they are not able to challenge the imposed rule of patriarchy. Urmi always considered that her mother's selfish reasons that made her abandon. On the contrary, Urmi does not want to escape her emotions and memories of her daughter Anu. Urmi and her mother Yamini or Inni are poles apart from each other one is confident about herself and another one is submissive to the gender roles laid down by patriarchy.

Urmi develops a closeness with her dead mother-in-law, Mira. Though she has never appeared in the course of the novel; her character does leave an impact on Urmi and her way of thinking. Like Urmi, Mira also had a tense relationship with her mother. Mira perceived her mother to be nothing and whenever Mira or other children asked her about anything, she always shushed them away by saying that she does not know it (125). Mira's mother's constant denial of answering any question that went in her way her having lack of identity. Mira started writing poetry before age of 13. She wanted to be known like a poet Venu. Mira though was conscious of her writing lived in fear that people might laugh at her (65). When Urmi got hold of Mira's dairies through Akka, she realized her potential. Urmi surmised that Mira aspired for eternity (65). Urmi also got a peek into her dead mother-in-law's confident personality when she refused to respond to the name *Nirmala* given to her by her in-laws. Mira tries to assert her identity and keep it integral and often wondered stroke of a pen can change someone's identity. Writing is the greatest weapon to reveal the pain and claim for self-identity. Similarly, women in the novel struggle to find their identity although their relationship is stuck in different instances. They were trying to bond together by sharing their untold life experiences.

Another similarity, which binds two women together, is their relationship with their husbands. Mira was unhappy in her marriage and she did not like the physical touch of her husband. Urmi on the other hand was happy in her marriage with Kishore. However, she always felt that they lacked in their emotional attachments. Kishore worked in the merchant navy and earned a significant amount of money. Urmi's work reflected upon her passion for financial independence and her trying to keep her identity intact outside of the marriage. Kishore and she had a love marriage but his constant absence strained their relationship a bit. When Urmi got acquainted with Dr. Bhaskar she had a momentary lapse which her mother and Vanaa picked up but she was confident of her love for Kishore and refused to live like a 'cloistered nun' (115). She tried to sort differences between Kishore and her, but whenever she wanted to have an emotional connection with Kishore he asserted his connection sexually, which Urmi did not crave. She craved for 'companionship'

and that's the only regret she had about their marriage that Kishore will never be able to discard his patriarchal role and she can never reach out to him (141). Mira and Urmi craved more from their husbands and both of them longed for more intimacy than proximity. Thus, Urmi at least got a chance to explore her relationship with Kishore, unlike Mira who died in childbirth.

Shakutai and Kalpana are another mother-daughter pair who had a strained relationship with each other. Urmi meets Kalpana when she goes to visit her sister-in-law Vanaa at the hospital where she works. Kalpana is hospitalized because of injuries and is in a coma until the end of the novel. As the novel progresses it is revealed that Kalpana was brutally raped by someone. Upon hearing this, her mother, Shakutai immediately contemplates that societal role and fear of discard from the social sphere. She also thinks Kalpana being a rape victim will affect negatively her other daughter Sandhya's life. She even tries to hush this matter by asking police to report this incident as an accident. Shakutai even blames her daughter's flamboyant nature for her downfall. Shakutai was abandoned by her husband for another woman is even though financially independent is dependent on her sister Sulu and her husband Prabhakar for support. She makes Kalpana live with Sulu and Prabhakar even though against the bidding of Kalpana. When Kalpana refuses to move to her Sulu's house, she angrily asks her to 'die' (111).

Kalpana on the other hand did not care what other people thought of her. According to Shakutai, she was self-willed. Kalpana knew her worth and she wanted a better life for herself. Her ability to speak English lands her a job at a shop. Shakutai though disapproved of her daughter did agree that Kalpana was smart (92). She was proud of her daughter's achievement. She wanted her children to have a different life than the one that she led. That is why she agrees to marry Kalpana to Prabhakar knowing well that he is her sister's husband and significantly older than Kalpana. She wanted Kalpana to have marital security that she did not have (112). Kalpana had her dreams and aspirations. She wanted to marry the boy she loved. She even dressed in a fine manner, which her mother considered provocative. Kalpana's strong character is evident from her mother's description of her to Urmi. Whenever Kalpana set her eyes upon something, she went after it. She made sure nothing comes between the things that she wanted (92).

Kalpana meets with an unfortunate end when she passes away towards the end of the novel. Urmi fights for her justice. She implores Shakutai to register a police complaint. She along with doctor Bhaskar release information to the press. Prabhakar is revealed to be the culprit. When Sulu finds out about her husband's heinous crime, she commits

suicide. She believes that she cannot face the world and especially her sister. Shakutai and Urmi form a bond over their love for their daughter. Whatever differences Kalpana and Shakutai had with each other, they did love one another. Initially, Urmi comes across as the mother that cannot get over the grief of her daughter later on fights for justice for another daughter. Urmi, after getting insights into Shakutai's life and struggles finally tries to understand her own mother's point of view. The abandonment that she earlier perceived as her mother's selfishness later she understands it to be her mother's helplessness. Urmi realises her mother could not go away against her father's wishes.

Vanaa and Akka are one of the less talked about mother-daughter pairs of the novel. Vanaa is Urmi's sister-in-law. They were friends when they were living with her paternal grandmother. That is how Urmi got acquainted with Kishore. Later on, Urmi found out that Kishore and Vanaa are half-siblings. After Mira's death, Kishore's father married Akka. Akka's whole identity is defined by men in her life. She was brought into that marriage not as a wife but as a mother. That further diminished her identity. She was not even on equal terms with her marriage. Vanaa also grew to be submissive like her mother. Urmi hates the fact that both of these women do not even try to assert themselves. They completely accept the roles that society had laid down for them.

Deshpande comments upon Marriage as an institution throughout the novel. She tries to define the way marriage works in a patriarchal society. It is best summed up by Sakutai's remark "You are safe from other men" (88). In a patriarchal society, women are deemed to be dependent on men. If she does not have a man in her life then she is unsafe or is not even complete. Her entire existence and identity are based on her relationship with men. As if, they cannot be anything on their own. Women are always perceived to be inferior. They have to fit in the mold shaped by society (Beauvoir 238). Shakutai's remark on marriage becomes very important upon closely studying Mira and Kalpana's life. Both women seemingly led parallel life. Both were headstrong and strong-willed women. Both had ambitions and aspirations for themselves. Mira wanted to be a poet, whereas, Kalpana wanted a better life for herself. Unfortunately, both women become a victim of the rape. One was raped outside of marriage and the other was inside of marriage. Shakutai's comment about marriage becomes a forewarning in terms of women's life. It can save them from other men but it cannot save them from the man they call husband. Mira was raped by her husband. Shakutai was abandoned by her husband. Inni led a life as a submissive wife to Urmi's father. Vanaa and Harish's marital dynamic is also the same. They became complicit in maintaining the

status quo of their relationships (Hooks 45). Deshpande here raises an important question about arrange marriage through Urmi when she wonders what it would feel like to live with a man whom you don't know? (Deshpande 63). However, her marriage is even though a love marriage is not a successful one. She does have a better status in marriage than other women in the novel but Kishore and lacks the understanding and emotional connection. Urmi later, reflects upon her marriage as almost all relationships are imperfect, they all survive on hope (141). Sulu also becomes a victim of rape, when she commits suicide for a crime committed by her husband. In India, rising crime against women is a concerning issue in all strata of society. However, only those crimes against women become mainstream or come to the light are if they are committed by other people. In the case of Mira and Kalpana, both women were wronged by men but the only crime against one woman became a concern. Kalpana did get justice in the end but Mira stayed victim of 'Marital Rape'. No one dares to talk about it. Urmi fights for Kalpana's justice but does not voice her opinions about Mira's rape. Rape is a heinous crime and it is considered a dishonour and shameful act. However, all this is only applicable to women. It is a crime for which the victim is punished by dejection from both societies as well as her family, instead of the culprit. (Premlatha 23)

Akka, never explicitly mentions but even her relationship with her husband was not of that of love. When she finally wails in front of Urmi and Vanaa, she cries for Mira not for her husband. Mira and Akka though were related to each other because of marrying the same man it was only their pain that bound them together. They became the companion of each other in pain even after Mira's death, whereas they could not become their husband's companion in marriage. Throughout the novel, Deshpande has given several anecdotes and instances through which women's identity crisis becomes evident. What anchors all these women together is their pain and suffering. Bell Hooks has rightly pointed out that women struggle to support other women, to understand their positions keeping differences between them aside, they try to change misguided and distorted perspectives which society had set for them. Breaking the stereotyped gender roles and seeking self-identity is the resistance against the mindset of patriarchy. In such a scenario, women are laying foundations for solidarity. They are opening a way of sisterhood. Solidarity is necessary for women. It is the way of showing interest, sharing belief, ways for them to unite, and ultimately building a sense of sisterhood among women who also have been suffered and subjugated like them. (Hooks 67)

Shashi Deshpande had depicted Female bonding as a rewarding phenomenon by showing the struggles of her characters. They all find courage in each other's presence. Urmi learns to deal with her daughter's death when she starts her fight for justice for Kalpana. She even encourages Shakutai to voice her views for her daughter's sake. Urmi and Shakutai channel their grief for a better cause with the support of each other. Akka finally opens up in front of Vanaa and Urmi about all the things she had suffered throughout her life. Vanaa and Urmi also learn to unburden themselves in each other's company. Women characters in the novel are reunited by the natural bond of sisterhood together and portray the role of unity. Their sufferings are common and unique experiences as compared to men.

In conclusion, in the lives of these women, it becomes evident that society and patriarchy always try to push down women try to redefine their existence. In such times, female binding works in a miraculous manner. Deshpande has aptly given title to the novel, *The Binding Vine*. Vine is though seeming a delicate thing but can endure many things when supported by other vines. Similarly, female bonds although delicate can help women in their survival as well as those of others. Women are trying to bond with each other through their collective experiences and struggles. They are binding based on freedom and space in their lives also disapproval of strained relationship between them. Sisterhood and understanding the common pain are the main bridge of bond between their relationship to avail dignity, pride, and justice in a patriarchal world.

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