

## Feminism in Shashi Deshpande's Novel 'The Binding Vine'

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**Abstract:** *Shashi Deshpande occupies a prominent place among the contemporary women novelists who concern themselves with the problems of women and their quest for identity and individuality. Shashi Deshpande depicts effectively a disturbed but a brave feminine psyche in the new ethos. Hers is the authentic, poignant tale of the middle-class educated women and their exploitation in a conventional male-dominated society. What is heartening is the fact that her protagonists are determined to foray the world. Shashi Deshpande carefully avoids the western feminists, concept of emancipation and presents the Indian version of the modern woman who searches for the whole of her identity and not fragmentations of herself. Thus in a way Shashi Deshpande is more creative and, politically and culturally, a more alert and aware feminist. Shashi Deshpande provides centrality to the theme of marriage in her novel *The Binding Vine*. Marriage is the oldest institution of human society. On it have hinged social discipline and a sense of security. But of late, this institution has come under scrutiny. She upholds it and at the same time she shows us its weak spots.*

**Key Words:** *Feminism, Inferior, Subordinate, Patriarchy, Marriage.*

The term 'feminism' broadly refers to the new woman's movement which emerged in the 1960s. The experiences of women and the status of women in the sexual hierarchy were the concerns of this movement, which implicitly as well as explicitly questioned the positioning of women as "inferior" or "defective" (Aristotle), "passive" and "subordinate" in comparison to men. Feminists challenged these assumptions of woman's secondary status to the primary status of man and the presumptuousness of compartmentalizing her essence as a home maker, a mother, a stationary presence in stark contrast to the stereotypes of masculinity, male strength, wanderlust and aggression. The feminists identify the origins of this "sexist" bias in patriarchy. According to the epochal study of Kate Millett, patriarchy constitutes 'perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power' (*Sexual Politics* 25). In keeping with Millett's approach, feminists have politicized existing critical methods, and it is on this basis that feminist criticism has become a new branch of literary studies. Since it resents all essentialisations, as being a patriarchal ploy for preserving an exploitative order, feminism does not intend to provide alternate definitions of woman/man, masculinity/femininity, and male/female. In other words, today's feminism is anti-patriarchy but not anti-man just as it is pro-woman without seeking to replace patriarchy with matriarchy. As a critical approach its purpose is to scratch the surface of the so-called 'neutral and 'objective' texts and reveal that these are in fact, appropriated by patriarchy to preserve its voice against any possible resistance. Feminist critics have been unearthing the women writers whose expression has remained largely marginalized in the literary canons all over the world.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most important Indian novelists writing in English. Gifted with a rare literary bent of mind, she has matured with experience in life and readings, for her fictional concerns and art, she has made a niche for herself among contemporary Indian English novelists. The transparency of her language and her spontaneity makes her novels readable. Her real contribution lies in the portrayals of plight and problems, trials and tribulations of middle-class Indian women - especially those who are educated and have chosen a career for themselves. Shashi Deshpande does not betray any inclination or ulterior motive to sell India abroad by liberal doses of oriental mysticism. For her the psychological milieu of the individual is quite an empirical canvas to work on. In fact, Shashi Deshpande very subtly shows women's submission, their lack of voice, the society's attitude to their suffering and the abuse of women's body, through the various women characters. But, she also shows the changes in social perception. For example, Urmi certainly has more choices than her predecessors like Mira, Akka or Inni. Shashi Deshpande does not call herself a feminist writer. But she feels strongly for women and exposes the social norms that are detrimental to women's development. In this sense, she is a feminist. In an interview she says, "I am a feminist in the sense that, I think, we need to have a world, which we should recognize as a place for all of us human beings. There is no superior and inferior, we are two halves of one species" (*The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande* 254). She recognizes the "inherent potential" within all human beings and gets irritated to see how society discriminates against women, advocates Sati, considers it a loss when a girl is born and a gain when a boy is born. All these points pertain to the women question and

some of these are taken up in this novel. In *The Binding Vine* (1993) men are absent except Dr. Bhaskar and Kalpana's father. Kalpana's father comes and goes like a shadow and Dr. Bhaskar has a minor role to play. Despite these facts, men are powerfully depicted. The three main women characters, around whom this novel revolves, suffer indirectly because of their men. Other women like Akka, Inni, Shakutai and Sulu suffer directly. Thus, Shashi Deshpande creates a world in which men exert their influence and women have no voice. If they break their silence, they suffer like Kalpana. However, Urmi's brother Amrut is presented in a favorable light.

In fact, Urmi is the representative of the new woman and becomes the mouthpiece for the suffering women. She gives them their voice. She takes up a hard stand for Kalpana with her own family when they advise her to keep away, she argues with Dr. Bhaskar and the police officer, and most of all she convinces Shakutai to let the case come on record. Obviously, Shakutai understands her society better than Urmi does and is apprehensive that the community may castigate them. She is right in one sense. The stigma will harm Sandhya's future. Deshpande very subtly shows how the social values work. In a case like this the blame always falls on the woman. Nobody mentions Prabhakar. We do not even know his whereabouts. The focus is on Kalpana. Shakutai blames her for dressing up too gaudily and attracting male attention, Sulu thinks she should have agreed to marry Prabhakar. The police officer and all the others consider her frivolous and some even hint that she could be a "professional". Only Urmi stands by her.

In Urmi's psyche, the cases of Mira and Kalpana overlap and become one. In both, the question of woman's right to her body is of prime significance. Mira's diary and, poems show her emotions. She does not have a voice but she manages to record her intimate feelings in her verses. Thus, her need to express her emotions is satisfied. Her poems have strong feminist ideas and Urmi wants to get these verses published. Her point is that women like Mira had a voice but they never got a chance to express themselves. "They never had a chance. It's not fair, it's not fair at all. And we can't go on pushing it - what happened to them - under the carpet forever because we're afraid of disgrace" (*The Binding Vine* 174). Urmi may be right theoretically but practically, she cannot get past the social question. She has to consider many aspects if she is to think of giving publicity to Mira's poems; Vanaa is against it because it concerns her father, Kishore would be hurt because it pertains to his father and mother.

Feminists want a woman to have the right to her body. It signifies that man should not own her. She must have a voice to decide her own course of life - and she should decide whether to have children or not. Theoretically, this may sound good but again socially, this is not permissible. Deshpande agrees that women must demand respect for their body but there are many social and psychological issues. For example, Mira resents her husband, but she feels elated at her approaching motherhood. For a woman, motherhood is fulfilling. When Mira conceives and feels the "stirring of life" within her, she forgets all her bitterness. Similarly, Urmi as a mother is possessive about Kartik and she grieves endlessly for Anu.

Relationships, according to Deshpande should not be a trap. They must give sufficient freedom to the other to grow as an individual. Urmi realizes how all relationships bind us at the human level. Urmi has no relation, so to say, with Shakutai and her family, but on the human level she feels one with them all. Their concern becomes her concern; their grief becomes hers. She helps them as much as she can. Shakutai also reposes full faith in Urmi. When Urmi is around, Shakutai feels secure. She even seeks Urmi's advice and trusts her opinion. The unfortunate woman has no support system in her hour of need, Her husband comes, sheds tears and goes away; Sulu offers no consolation; and Prabhakar on whom Shakutai depends, has turned out to be a villain. It is Urmi who stands as her anchor; she becomes a bridge between Shakutai and the doctors, Shakutai and Vanaa, Shakutai and the media.

Human relationships mean building bridges between situations and across people. The man-woman relationship is based on the bridge of understanding and common well-being. There is an undercurrent of love and affection that gives meaning to it. When love becomes selfishly blind, the bond loosens and misery follows. The author explores the relationship between Mira and her husband. Mira was looking for love; all she got was its compulsive version. Akka and her husband also could not build up a sound and healthy relationship because her husband could not move beyond his deceased wife's memory. The children are sufferers in both these cases - Kishore is undemonstrative and remote and Vanna is insecure. But fortunately, they do not fail to establish healthy relationships in life—Vanaa and Harish are happy, Urmi and Kishore are also happy.

The mother-daughter relationship is also very fragile in this novel. Urmi and Inni are always arguing. Urmi is sharp-tongued and flippant with her mother. When her mother shows concern for her health. Urmi often gets irritated. Their conversation is never normal, it is always sharp. Urmi harbours a secret grudge against her mother for sending her away to Ranidurg. Urmi's perception clears when her mother tells her how her father took the decision single-handedly

without ever asking Inni. Urmi now feels sorry for her mother. She realizes how dominating her father was. The mother-daughter relationship is seen in all its tender aspects in the Urmi-Anu relationship. Urmi is like a tree and her infant daughter is like a creeper around her. Her daughter is her world. Her passing away leaves Urmi empty. Shashi Deshpande explores the mother-daughter relations at yet another level when she describes the Shakutai-Kalpana relationship. The daughter is not very respectful towards her mother. She rejects her mother's advice and follows her own whims in dressing up, going out and in her decision to marry the boy of her choice. Her mother regrets all this after the rape incident. She also regrets not having understood Prabhakar's motives. There is, however, no chance now to set right the wrong. The mother-daughter relationship flounders on the rock of misunderstanding. Similarly, Mira does not abide by her mother's rules set for a daughter. She fails to identify with her self-effacing and weak mother.

Further, Mira was married to a young man who loved her immensely. She was eighteen then, when the proposal came from the "boy's" side, and the family was jubilant because it was immensely elevating for the family honour; and nobody could think of rejecting it. It was not even though necessary to take Mira's opinion. From the social angle, Mira was fortunate to go into a good middle-class family and have a loving husband. For Mira, however, her husband's obsessive love was a torture. She could never accept him. She in fact, feared his advances. What could be called love, was obsession and when love becomes too demanding, it loses its value. Shashi Deshpande subscribes to the view that love should be a source of happiness and strength in our life. Love has the power to offset the distress we encounter during our struggle for existence. When love becomes oppressive and too demanding, it turns sadistic. Here, sadistic does not mean perverted, it means with the tendency to find conscious or unconscious gratification in enslaving a partner. Mira's husband was not a bad man; he was compulsive. His love was a trap. It did not give her sufficient space of her own, a will of her own, and the freedom to say 'no'. This was what Mira resented. She remained an unhappy wife, despite all comforts.

The marriages of Inni and Papa (Urmi's father) and Vanaa and Harish are based on the traditional concept of submissive wives and dominating husbands. Vanaa is a caring wife and Harish is a loving husband but there is no sense of equality between them. Urmi does not like Vanaa's attitude and wants her to assert herself. Even Inni, Urmi's mother, never asserted herself. Papa was dominating. It was always his will that prevailed. It was Papa's decision to send Urmi to Baijaji and Aju at Ranidurg. It hurt Inni though she could never raise her voice to stop him from sending Urmi away. Despite this, both of them had an innate tenderness. Urmi realizes this when she sees the last look in Papa's eyes before he dies and Inni's distraught state after his death.

These descriptions pertain to middle-class families. In the lower strata of society love and marriage have yet another connotation. Shakutai and Sulu do not know what a husband's love is because it is his lust they encounter. Shakutai's husband leaves her with three children to stay with another woman. Sulu's husband Prabhakar has evil intentions and in his proposal to marry Kalpana, it is his lust not love. Marriage as such is meaningless for women like Shakutai, Sulu and Kalpana but a man's presence is important as security. Urmi is right in her assessment when she tells Dr. Bhaskar that for women like Shakutai marriage has only one meaning "you are safe from other men. . . . Even if it hasn't worked out for her, it usually gives them that guarantee of safety. It takes much greater courage to dispense with a man's protection" (*The Binding Vine* 88). Shashi Deshpande raises several questions regarding marriages - whether arranged or love. After reading Mira's diary, Urmi ponders, "What is it like with a man you don't know?" (*The Binding Vine* 63). Even her marriage, which is a love marriage, leads her to admit that she does not know Kishore sufficiently "I have lived with the hope that someday I will (reach him). Each relationship, always imperfect, survives on hope. Am I to give up this hope? Is this what Mira is offering me?" (*The Binding Vine* 141).

Nevertheless Deshpande is selective about her technique. Her books, therefore, are finished works of art. They are free from strain, the story runs smoothly and the form and content do not smother each other. An analysis of *The Binding Vine* shows that the novel has, many strands running side by side. It has two rape cases, but rape is not the central event of the story. Death may be termed as the central motif because the novel starts with Urmi grieving over the death of her infant daughter Anusha. There are several deaths reported at short intervals - Baijaji, Aju, Urmi's father, Mira, Sulu and Kalpana's near-dead condition. Women desperate with grief occupy the novel. But that again is not the only theme. In fact, the novel is an amalgam of death, violence, fear, insecurity, rape and memory. As the title suggests, the dominating theme is love and human relationship, "this cord, this binding vine of love" (*The Binding Vine* 137). The unifying strand is provided by Urmi, her memory, her interaction with various characters and her comments. The novel is divided in four parts all joined by a common strand. Part One opens with Urmi's grief at her loss, but this major event leads to other revelations. Urmi appears aggressive, irritable and given to hurting Vanaa.

In fact, it is also relevant to know that Urmi harbours a kind of grudge against her mother. The author does not tell us directly that Urmi has strained relations with her mother. She reveals it slowly to heighten the suspense. On the opening pages of the novel, Urmi and Vanaa discuss how Urmi, as a girl, used to wear the badly-stitched dresses made by Baiajji, quietly rejecting the beautiful, expensive dresses brought by Inni, "You looked different all right in your Baiajji's clothes. You must have been the worst dressed child in school" (*The Binding Vine* 9). After a few pages Urmi asks her brother, Amrut, "It's like reversal of roles. When has she ever acted the doting mother with me...?" (*The Binding Vine* 25). This is not a question. This is a complaint that her mother has never been a mother to her. Urmi remembers her Baiajji with deep affection but she is often rude to her mother. This sets the tone for mother-daughter tension.

*The Binding Vine* is told from the autobiographical point of view of Urmi. She is in a pivotal position. Everything happens around her or within her purview. She is the judge, the commentator, and the prime mover. The reader knows the episodes through her. The characters too come to life, as Urmi wants them. But Shashi Deshpande does not make her all powerful. Urmi's comments are countered and balanced through situational facts. The author "shows" Urmi through her words and actions, through her motives and interactions with people around her. The other characters gain personality through her. At the beginning of the novel Urmi gives a generalized statement about how we live as our image. She determines to fight that image and be her "self". This is a big resolve and we have to see if Urmi succeeds in it or not. The path is not so easy. There are psychological problems too. Urmi is grief-stricken and she has to fight it out to get over it. Urmi unfolds her life through her memory, through flashbacks and through the present.

The structure of *The Binding Vine* is based on the stories of three women but the responsibility to reveal the stories is given to one woman - Urmi. She is the medium who not only tells her own story of grief but also in the process discovers the lives of two other women. Together, these stories expose the entire patriarchal system and the novel comes nearer the feminist novel. The plot revolves round the themes of death, marriage, fear and violence. The importance of communication, of establishing bonds, is repeatedly emphasized. It is the death of Anu, Urmi's infant daughter that makes Urmi hysterical. In the course of the narrative, Urmi realizes that she is not the only sufferer, there are other women who are worse sufferers. The stories of Kalpana and Mira assume significance and the two sub-plots get attached to the main plot. *The Binding Vine* is divided into four parts of almost equal length. The past and the present so overlap in each part that it is not possible to ascertain whose story is told in a particular section. Roughly, part one focuses on Urmi's grief, part two is partly about Kalpana and partly about Mira, part three reverts again to Urmi, and part four offers some sort of knots are unraveled.

The protagonist of *The Binding Vine* is Urmila, called Urmi in the novel. She is grieving over the death of her one-year-old daughter Anu and it is from here that the story picks up momentum. Urmi's husband Kishore is in the Merchant Navy. He remains on the ship for many months and is, therefore, absent from the novel. Urmi is a lecturer and she lives with her little son and her mother, in Bombay. When the novel opens, Urmi is in conversation with Vanaa. Vanaa is her childhood friend and also her sister-in-law (Kishore's sister). Urmi is in a bad mood. She feels irritated when Vanaa talks of a small incident of their girlhood days when Urmi was learning cycling in Ranidurg. One day she had fallen off the bicycle and hurt her knees. At this Urmi asks her angrily, "Well, what are you trying to say Vanaa? . . . Why don't you say it straight off, Vanaa? I know what you're trying to tell me. But that was just a hurt, a small hurt, and this is my child, Vanaa, it's my child" (*The Binding Vine* 8). Actually, Vanaa is trying to shift her mind from her grief but Urmi is in no mood to be soothed by such remarks. Urmi refuses to let go of her pain. She tells Vanaa that when she fell off the cycle, it was a small hurt compared to the agony of losing her daughter. She has lost her child and she cannot forget it, "There can be no vaulting over time. We have to walk every step of the way, however difficult or painful it is; we can avoid nothing. And I have no desire to leap into the future, either, to project myself into a time when all this pain will be a thing of the past, healed and forgotten. This pain is all that's left to me of Anu. Without it, there will be nothing left to me of her; I will lose her entirely" (*The Binding Vine* 9).

At the mention of her girlhood days in Ranidurg, Urmi is reminded of her grandmother Baiajji. Urmi was fond of her grandmother. Her childhood with Baiajji and Aju (grandfather) was a happy one but she was always puzzled as to why her parents had sent her away while Amrut her brother stayed with them. She bore a kind of grudge against her mother, Inni. It is only towards the end of the novel that Inni recounts the incident. Long back, when Urmi was a child, Inni had gone out leaving her in the care of Divakar, a trusted servant. Urmi's father had come home early that day and seeing that the girl was left with a male servant, had got angry. After that he decided to send Urmi to his mother. He made his decision without even consulting his wife - Inni, Urmi's mother. At this point Urmi understands the sinister power of male dominance that rendered her mother a helpless victim. Urmi's mother must have suffered the pain of separation and how bravely she now realizes how she bore it over the years without complaining. She feels sorry for her

mother. But this realization comes only towards the end and before that we have to go through many more incidents and get to know many characters.

From the letters and diaries, we come to know the pain of yet one more woman - Mira. Urmi reads the papers assiduously and re-creates Mira's life, her aspirations, failures, fears and desires. Mira's problem is the obsessive love of her husband. He loves her for himself, not for her sake. For him gratification of his desire is of prime significance. He never pauses to think of her wish or will. Mira frankly records her intimate feelings in her diaries. Her poems are also confessional. She wants love, not lust. Love means understanding the other and caring for his or her needs; lust is selfish and it looks for personal satisfaction. Mira is afraid of her husband's lustful love. Looking at the situation from a social angle, Mira's fear and anger has no relevance, as her husband's demand is perfectly legitimate within the canons of marriage. Despite her despair, Mira feels happy when she is with child. As an expectant mother, she starts loving life. Unfortunately, she dies in childbirth.

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