



Resurrection of Self: A Feminist Perspective, Study of shashi Deshpande's "The Binding Vine"

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Indian writing in English today has acquired an admirable position and the commendation for it goes to a good number of women writers, whose pens have spilt much ink in fetching to light the agonies of women's life, left untouched by their male counterparts. The myriad expressions of their feminist works expose the bruises of women's sole and their miseries as individuals. They project the plight of women, suffering from the conventions of patriarchal society and express the quest of women to assert their selfhood in a society prejudiced in favor of men. These women writers liberate their female from the confinement of men and give them new birth to emerge out of the dominancy into the openness of assertion. Their expository and creative writers have significantly encouraged and shaped the feminist's struggle to empower women and help them transcend their deprived status. These feminist writers are audacious explorers of female psyche, make strenuous efforts to renounce and emancipate their women from the conventional patterns of patriarchal codes. From the formidable array of these Indian women writers, Shashi Deshpande is chosen for my venture to reveal her missionary zeal for exposing the disgrace heaped on women, their pathetic condition and how they evolve into a new being from various assaults of life.

Shashi Deshpande, the recipient of much sought after Sahitya Akademi Award for the novel, *That Long Silence* holds a prominent position in Indian English Literature. Deshpande, the living dynamic writer explores and exposes the vivid picture of women in traditional Indian society. She is the daughter of famous Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit scholar sriranga. Her major novels include, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Vine* (1992), *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Small Remedies* (2000), *Moving On* (2004) and *In The Country of Deceit* (2008). The themes of her novels revolve around women and their struggle, entrapped between tradition and modernity. G.S.Amur rightly observes: Woman's struggles in the context of the contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important of all, as human being is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as writer (Amur 10). Deshpande has written inspiring collections of short stories which explicate the literary values. Her novels are about women trying to understand themselves, their history, their roles and their place in this society.

Feminism is the belief that all people should be treated equally in legal, economic and sexual arenas-regardless of gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity and other similar pre-dominant identifying traits. The term 'Feminism' has its origin from the Latin 'Femina' meaning 'Woman' and thereby refers to the advocacy of women's rights, status and power at par with men on the ground of 'Equality of sexes'. Feminism, besides being a political crusade, attempts to question the pre-conceived assumptions about the roles that men and women are expected to perform in the patriarchal setup. In literature feminism investigates the depiction of gender roles which tend to impose social norms, customs, conventions, laws and expectation on the grounds of gender discrimination. It brazenly audaciously the age-long customs of gender-bias and explores a new social order wherein women play an emancipator role and liberate the victims of man-made society.

Virginia Woolf defines the miserable condition of women in the pre-defined patriarchal society as, "A very queer, composite being thus

emerges. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She provides poetry from cover to cover: she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquers in fiction; in fact she was the slave of anybody whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband." (1999:41)

The visual image of women depicts the same picture as it was summarized by Virginia Woolf. The role of women was always pre-determined by men with rigid norms where her importance was felt in the kitchen, to take care of in-laws, so on & so forth. The field of reading and writing is the domain of men where women dread to enter.

Shashi Deshpande dislikes being termed as feminist and voices out that her novels are not intended to be viewed as feminist works. In one of her interviews, she states: Is writing by women only for women... when I sit down to write, I am just a writer- my gender ceases to matter to me We are different, yes, but once again the factors which unite us are far more important than the gender differences which divide us I'm a novelist, I write novels, not feminist tracts. Read my novel as a novel, not as a piece of work that intends to propagate feminism. (Deshpande 2003:143).

At another instance she writes: My writing has been categorized as 'writing about women' or 'Feminist' writing. In this process, much in it has been missed. I have been denied the place and dignity of a writer who is dealing with issues that are human issues, of interest to all humanity. (Jain 37)

Deshpande's novels indicate the arrival of a new Indian woman, eager to challenge rebelliously against the well-entrenched moral orthodoxy of the patriarchal social system. As a result her women characters are strong and they take bold decisions to survive in the challenging society, which makes her essentially a feminist novelist. Her novels reveal her acute sensitivity to the issues involving women and her tremendous sympathy for them who suffer in solitude. She unveils the sorrows and sufferings of women, sculpting them carefully to re-incarnate their being, their identity, norms and values in socio-cultural context. Her novels present multitasked women who do not refer to a particular section of society but they represent universal womanhood. Compared to other female writers, Deshpande portrays an authentic picture of Indian women. Her word-paint arouses a universal sympathy for women, smiling amidst multitudes of sharp knives piercing her soul. In her depiction, Deshpande is neither prejudiced nor partial but describes the true status of women in the modern society. Patronizing the autonomous self-hood for the women, she advocates a significant and plausible methods should be adopted by women to improve their dignity in the society.

In the novel "The Binding Vine", Deshpande attempts to explore the psyche of women who are traumatized by various tragedies in their life. The present paper attempts to examine how 'The Binding Vine' narrates the story of women who struggle to emancipate themselves from the confinement of patriarchal Indian social structure that circumstances their being. In the exotic technique of stream of consciousness, the author weaves the tale of three different women

and their journey of life. Urmila is the narrator and protagonist of 'The Binding Vine'. When the novel opens Urmila is grieving over the death of her baby daughter. She is a sharp-tongued, witty woman, much sensitive to the predicaments of society. When she tries to recover from the loss of her daughter, she encounters Shakutai in a distressing circumstance, where her daughter Kalpana is brutally raped by a treacherous hooligan and she is swaying between life and death. This callous scene enrages Urmila and she decides to help Shakutai and offers her solace in the hospital. Meanwhile Urmila befriends the doctor, Bhaskar who is inspired by her benevolence, falls in love with her, but she makes no advancement in his desires. In the course of the novel, doctors try to move Kalpana to the distant hospital which is unaccepted by Shakutai.

Shakutai pleads Urmila to help her and yields to her plan for the goodness of Kalpana. Consequently Urmila seeks help from Malcolm, the press reporter, to publish the news of molestation. As it was published, many controversial issues arise and people at home censure Urmila for disgracing the girl's name. Vanaa, the friend and sister-in-law of Urmila mistakes her and there is a perturbation in their mutual understanding. Urmila discovers the poems of her late mother-in-law treasured by Akka, finds a reservoir of female trauma that epitomizes the experience of women, globally. Urmila the protagonist spends most of her time in her feminine energy; she is the receiver of attention and helps the victims, being most compassionate she empathizes the people around her. People are drawn towards her enticing inner beauty which responds to the problems of others, comforts them and offers remedy positively. Filled profusely with feminine energy, Urmila embraces the feminist idea that woman is equal to man in socio-economical status. She heaves to the higher position of social ladder and leads other oppressive women.

In the novel 'The Binding Vine', when Urmila meets Shakutai in the hospital where Kalpana lies unconscious after a ravish molestation, she immediately contemplates the death of her baby daughter. Urmila's state of bereavement makes her highly sensitive to the despondency and misery of other women who suffer a terrible fate. Bhaskar, after a careful examination informs Shakutai that her daughter is brutally raped. Shakutai is shattered from the core and disbelieves the misfortune of her daughter. Hysterically she cries to vanaa to conceal the matter claiming in the name of girl's honor.

"If a girl's honor is lost, what left? The girl doesn't have to do anything wrong, people will always point a finger at her. Doctor', she turns to him, 'even if it is true, keep it to yourself, don't let anyone know of it, I have another daughter, what will become of her.....?'"(59)

Urmila accompanies the distressed woman Shakutai to her house and makes association with her, inquiring her whimpering about life. Shakutai seems to be carrying a load of misfortunes; her husband abandoned her with three children and married another woman. Three children grew up under her care and responsibility, Shakutai utters with pride, she deprived nothing and provided every needs for her children but Kalpana disgraced their family. Shakutai blames Kalpana for her unfortunate plight; she is exhausted with her daughter's boldness to step out the conventions laid by male chauvinistic society. Shakutai accuses Kalpana with the following words,

"You don't understand, Urmila, it's not only the lipstick. Here boys are like.....they're like dogs panting after bitches. And if you paint and flaunt yourself, do you think they'll leave you alone? Ever since kalpana grew up, I have had to live with fear. But Kalpana don't understand. Once she started earning, she thought she could do what she wanted" (146)

Urmila persuades Shakutai to register a rape case in the police station and punish the culprit, but she is not convinced. Shakutai is worried about the scandal that would certainly ruin the family's reputation and impair the marriage prospects of not only Kalpana but her younger daughter, Sandhya. Shakutai decides her daughter to suffer in silence because publicizing would make the matters worse. This is an authentic picture of women in Indian patriarchal set-up. The pre-defined patterns of this society ruthlessly punish the victim to suffer in solitude, rather seeking justice. Shakutai goes to the extent of desiring premature death for her daughter instead of carrying the ignominy throughout her life. The restriction against women's libera-

tion is being accepted by women as a social order to prove their chastity. Shakutai censures Kalpana's behavior as, "We have to keep to our places, we can never step out. There are always people weighting to throw stones at us, our own people first of all. I warned Kalpana, but she would never listen to me. 'I'm not afraid of anyone,' she used to say. That's why this happened to her..... women must know fear"(148)

Deshpande presents the blind acceptance of women but never fails to question their ignorance. Urmila explains to Shakutai that it is the culprit who has to be punished but not the victim. The crux of all the prevailing problems of women is their subjugation which is always in the form of silent servitude. Violence against women, whether physical, psychological or emotional, is an issue that crosses all borders and all classes of women. Women's suppression is rooted in the very fabric of traditional Indian society. In this novel 'The Binding Vine' Deshpande has dexterously united three sub-plots, which essentially deals with the tragedy of three different women. If Kalpana's tragedy is the rape outside marriage, 'Mira', the late Mother-in-law of Urmila is the victim of marital rape. Violation of one's body is a sin to be avoided. Mira, who had a forced wedlock, does not entertain any love relationship and physical charm with her husband. Though Mira consciously avoided her husband's love play, it was a futile effort, for her inner being was torn into pieces to fulfill her husband's lust. For her being alone is more blissful than with her husband, together. Her cry of rage and anguish is explicit in the following remarks,

"And so it begins, 'please', he says, 'please, I love you. '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."(67)

Mira often prefers to suffer in silence rather than exposed to humiliating criticism and justification of others. In fact, it was Mira's writing that kept her alive. Her diaries unveil her servitude, pain, humiliation and mortification experienced by her in her marital life. Mira's diary reveals another significant event: women's entry is deprived in the literary world by the prejudiced attitude of men. Mira has genuine interest in writing poetry, but she is discouraged by her very idol Venu, the highly admired and acclaimed poet of her times, whose greatness Mira aspires to achieve. Venu criticizes her,

"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)

Deshpande subtly portrays how women are discouraged and denied of their intellectual pleasure. Like Virginia Woolf, she feels that women should be allowed to utilize their talents and simultaneously they should fulfill their household duties in their family. Woolf remarks in 'A Room of one's Own', many glorious literary texts, the property of women, were often left without signature. Mira's suffering epitomizes the universal plight of women. Violation of one's body, even if sanctified by marriage, can be as humiliating and traumatic an experience as rape. This was long back observed by Simon de Beauvoir as: marriage is obscene in principle in so far as it transforms into rights duties those mutual relations which should be founded on a spontaneous urge; it gives an instrumental and therefore degrading character to the two bodies in dooming them to know each other in their general aspects as bodies not as persons (Beauvoir 463).

In 'The Binding Vine', Deshpande laboriously attempts to explore the agony of women which tears them into pieces to make their men whole. Sulu, the sister of Shakutai is the most dutiful wife of Prabhakar, was like a mother to Kalpana. She assisted very piously her husband to the fulfillment of all his needs but she was tossed desperately with the fear that Prabhakar would take another woman because Sulu is infertile

Deshpande strikingly portrays the unbearable pain of this unhealthy woman who is alienated by her husband.

"Sulu was frightened; she was always frightened because she had no children. She was afraid he would throw her out, take another wife. And then started getting these white patches on her face, her arms her neck. He stopped touching her after that" (192-193)

Finally Sulu discovers her husband to be the black sheep in Kalpana's rape; she reveals the truth to her endeared sister Shakutai and kills herself in ignominy. Deshpande gives minute details of the development of a girl-child's psyche adhering to the patriarchal society. Vanaa's daughter Mandhira, who has swallowed profusely the pre-conceived notions of man-made society, openly resents her working mother and subtly accuses her to be irresponsible in leaving behind the children at servant maid's care.

"You know, urmiauntie, when I grew up, I'm never going to leave my children to go to work."

"What will you do?"

"Stay at home and look after them."(72)

Deshpande's fiction not only disseminates feminist ideas but also advocates women to understand their deplorable status in the society. Her novels suggest that women should take cognizance of their weakness, overcome them and implement their potentials in order to assert their individuality. Vanaa's submissiveness towards Harish's command at the very sight irritates Urmi and she exhorts her friend to be assertive.

"Assert yourself; you don't have to crawl before him, do you?"(80)

Priti, the friend of Urmi embraces the feministic attitude when she unearths the pathos and sufferings of women in the name of honor. Priti, the filmmaker of the movie 'Sati' has earned a fair reputation by portraying violence against women. She is not the structurally patterned traditional woman, but brushing aside all narrow social conventions she throws light on the brutality experienced by women.

The novel 'The Binding Vine' chiefly revolves around the individual tragedies of Urmi, Kalpana, Shakutai, Sulu and Mandhira. The author tactfully hints at the suffering of numerous other women. Deshpande's women characters however rebellious they are, never leap to break familial relationships and most esteemed cultural values. Being sensitive and aware of the social injustice prevailing in the society; her protagonists try to change the situation or at least fight for their basic rights. They offer solace and encourage the other victims to find remedy to the problem. The novel 'The Binding Vine' celebrates women's coming together with other women, sharing their grief with other female companions who are sailing in the same boat offers them courage and comfort to battle against male-chauvinism. Commenting on this, Indira Nityanandam observes: the setup forward, achieved in this novel, is the introduction of female bonding, the deserve of one woman to help another less fortunate one. Urmila draws society's attention to the plight of the rape victim and determined to get Mira's poems published. This is a positive development in the protagonist; Sarita, Jaya and Indu were involved in fighting only their own battles (qtd. By Dhawan 66)

Shashi Deshpande visualizes that changes would clean the society if women forge into sisterhood. In the words of Urmi,

"From the moment of our births, we struggle to find something with which we can anchor ourselves to this strange world we find ourselves in. Only when we love do we find this anchor" (137)

One of the significant findings of Deshpande's novels is that she finally liberates her women characters from the trap, who come alive, afresh with profuse strength. Urmi the narrator and protagonist of this novel attempt strenuously to break the shackles of male hegemony and strive to attain gender equality. Deshpande's women explore the cause and find their remedy, their cause of life emanates from a strong will, the will to experience and enliven the rough and tumble of life and extract delight out of them. She presents the glimpses of their shattered being but allows them to fight their own battles, the giant sponge of daily routine absorbs their pain, wisdom dawns from the experience and Shakutai comes back alive and afresh from the remnants of the fatal blow. As Urmi states,

"We are connected to our physical selves by the fragile thread of our wills. It's only when the thread snaps that it's all over. That hasn't happened to me, not as yet. I want to live. And I won't break down; I'm in full control of myself."(20)

Deshpande's novels reveal her acute sensitivity to the issues involving women and her tremendous sympathy for women. She presents both the weaknesses and strengths of women. She exhibits the power of women to withstand and withhold to survive with an identity created by individuals but not by the society. Her women finally realize, after everything- grief, shock, anger, bitterness and treachery, that life is worth living.

Thus we find the women in "The Binding Vine" undertake the journey of suppression and oppression in their lives, but they are not weak. They believe in the cruel hands of time yet they cling to hope and vicissitudes not denying the fact that they have to excavate their real strength. Her women characters despite their exploitation by the society preserve their real selves, the key to their resurrection of self. In the end they like a phoenix emerges to live life afresh.

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