



Sorrows of Womanhood in The Binding Vine

KEYWORDS

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'The Binding Vine' is a curious intermingling of three lives and is narrated by the sharp-tongued Urmi, a character drawn almost in the same vein as the protagonists of Deshpande's other novels. The weaving of three different tales into a single narrative is, due to bereavement suffered by the narrator. That Long Silence that had become the hall mark of woman's existence is broken by Urmila. The earlier women protagonists of Shashi Deshpande had already begun to question their roles, function, attitudes, and even behaviors. They have realized that they have to unshackle themselves from the chains of bondages which have chained these women's rights for centuries. They are aware that the age-old societal norms and their pre-ordained roles have subjected them to severe suffocation and humiliation. They finally succeed in knowing about themselves but only within the limited view of their own lives.

Urmila of 'The Binding Vine' is one who is ahead of her predecessors by her endeavors to help other women. Urmi is an upper middle class career woman. She is also a grieving mother who has recently lost her one year-old baby daughter, Annu and consequently has become highly sensitive to the suffering and despair of other. It is this sensitivity which leads her to befriend the helpless Shakutai, whose daughter Kalpana lies in coma in a hospital after being brutally raped. The mutual support and sympathy between Urmila and Shakutai in, coming to terms with each other's grief is remarkable. Normally Urmila's meeting with Shakutai would not have happened as Shakutai belongs to different strata of society. It is the same sensitivity which also makes her delve into the poems of Mira, her long dead mother-in-law and understand the mind of the young Mira who is subjected to rape in her marriage. In spite of the best efforts made by her friend cum sister-in-law Vanna, Amrut and Inni, her own mother, to bring grieving Urmila back to normal life, Urmila seems to be taking her own time to cope with the untimely loss of her daughter.

Another pain in Urmi's heart is the longing for Kishore, who is far away from her. The fear in her heart of losing Kishore is always troubling her. A kind of suffering which is not visible to anyone. Earlier she was fearless, confident and her love gave her immense strength but now:

"Somewhere on the way she seems to have lost that confidence. Now there is fear-the fear of Kishore never returning home, lost in the seas somewhere as one of his friends was; the fear of his not wanting to come back to me. Yes, that's the thing, that's I am most afraid of. And I can understand them only too well, Vanna and Inni. I want to submit too. But I know that if I walk the way of submission once, I will walk that way forever. Yet I never ask him

'why?', when he goes away from me even in our few day's together, I never reveal my heart, my longing to keep him by my side..... Fixed forever in our places, Face to face the two of us, Like Shiva and his nodding bull.¹

Shakutai and Sulu are the two female protagonists in the novel whose life has become pathetic due to progeny. Neither are they accepted at home not in the society. If such women are dependent on their male counterparts they survive a pathetic life. Shakutai points out: "Sulu was frightened; she was always frightened because she has no children. She was afraid he would throw her out, take another wife."²

Sulu always considers Kalpana as her own child; looks after her with great care and affection. She is stunned when her husband proposes to marry Kalpana. She has no other choice but to carry the proposal to Shakutai as beggars and borrowers can't be choicer. Sulu tries to hide her husband's infidelity, whereas Shakutai combats it. She inculcated her strength for the up-bringing of her children. Her motherhood gives her strength and volition to live. Shakutai recalls:

After marriage she changed. She was frightened always frightened. What if he doesn't like this, what if he wants that, what if he is angry with me, what if he throws me out.....? Nobody should live like that, Urmila, so full of fears. What kind of life as it? I don't have your courage Shakutai". She used to say to me. But was I born with this courage? I learnt I had no choice; I had to have courage or stop living. But sulu.....?³

Shakutai talks about Sulu in bits and pieces. She says, "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 she started getting these white patches on her face, her arms, and her neck. He stopped touching her after that. She told me this only yesterday, she kept everything to herself, she never told me her troubles, even about Kalpana she knew, that first time, that he'd tried to put his hands on Kalpana. But she warned Kalpana not to tell me, not to tell anyone."⁴

Thus Sulu presents the category of women silently suffering, bearing all the traumas silently.

Sulu represents those women who are the epitome of submission because to them, husband is the sheltering tree and one can't perceive or act beyond that. Sooner or later, they become the objects of victimization. She is exploited on the pretext of her incapability of producing progeny which she accepts without resistance. Her submissiveness is working as a slow poison which eats away her dignity

and self-respect. The denouement of it is that she has to give the penalty of her own life. Prabhakar dishonors Kalpana and this incident works as a bombshell, blowing up her castle of endurance and patience.

Sulu who had no children to suffer, so do Shakutai, a wounded mother. In an attempt to help Kalpana, she is pained to see Kalpana's news with a twisted story and photograph flash in the newspapers. She cries to tell that Kalpana was a good girl. "She was a good girl, I swear to you, my Kalpana was a good girl. As long as you know that, Shakutai, doesn't worry about what others say." 'How can I not worry? I have to live with people, I have to live among them.' She further says "I think, I made a mistake I should have kept quiet. I thought I was helping Kalpana. But sometimes I think the only thing that can help Kalpana now is death. Then it's as if someone has hit me here and I think, what kind of a woman am, I too long for my daughter's death, I, who gave her birth. I'll never live like you; she used to say to me, always all the time. God has fulfilled that desires of hers. Look at her, just look at her, I gave her nothing in life, my Kalpana, and now I've given away her name as well" ⁵

Shakutai's heart cries out. Her cries are the cries of wounded motherhood and womanhood. The condition of women in the society is brought before us very vividly by Shashi Deshpande.

The sorrows of Mira, another female character, and Urmil's mother-in-law, are conveyed through her poems and diaries. In her grief of losing Annu, Urmil turns away from the solicitous care of her mother and Vanna, preferring to deal with her grief all by herself, Urmil turns to Mira's poems and diaries. As she tries to reconstruct the tragic tale of a sprightly girl who suffered and wrote poems in the solitude of an unhappy marriage, Urmil senses a message being deciphered like a message tapped on the wall by the prisoner in the next cell. Through Mira's diaries, which were only her school note books and the few photographs of her family, Urmil tries to visualize her as a girl, a favourite daughter of her father who was obviously proud of her intelligence and talent evident in his act of presenting her with a book of poetry. Mira's desire to be a poet, her fear of being laughed at if she expresses it aloud, her questioning, anxiety, and uncertainty are all evident in her poems.

Her marriage was only like "a dark-clouded, engulfing night"⁶. She waits with dread. She begins to hate the word "Love" as it is uttered by her husband all the time. She doesn't allow him to drag her whole self out of her. She keeps her feelings, her rage and despair at being singled out for her physical obsession of her, to herself. Utterly lonely, she lives in that alien household which treats her as mad, with hopelessness hovering about her.

"They called me mad, they, who cocooned themselves in briskly blankets and thought themselves warm when I spoke of my soil that boiled and seethed." ⁷

She shrinks further when a new name, Nirmala, and a new density as a wife are thrust on her. But at the same time, she refuses to give up her name and density and proclaims "I am Mira." ¹⁰¹

"A glittering ring gliding on the rice carefully traced a name 'Nirmala.' Who is this? None but I, my name hence, bestowed upon me. Nirmala they call, I stand statue-still

Do you build the new without razing a tablet of rice, a pencil of gold can they make me Nirmala? I am Mira" ⁸

Appalled even as a child at her mother's total indifference to her own life, surrendering her 'self' totally to her husband and children, Mira decides that she would never give away her life dismissing it as nothing opposing her mother's advice, "never utter a 'no', submit and your life will be a paradise", her will rose like "a mother child" ⁹ and she struggled against the man who tried to possess her despite her intense repulsion.

Urmil can read through the poems the sufferings of Mira. But she can't speak about it to Vanna because one can never see one's parent as a sexual being. Mira suffers the burden of forced sexual relationship.

She says: "I can remember how uneasy it made me sometimes, the palpable attraction between papa and Inni. This, what happened between Vann's father and Mira, is much worse. I know vanna's loyalty and so I can never speak to her of what I now know her father to be—a man who tried to possess another human being against her will was it her mother who, told her 'never to say no?' ..

Urmil reads Mira's poem which says:

"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."¹⁰.

Through the poems Urmil can see how Mira felt burdened with her feminists. The silver toe-rings and anklets made her stumble and fall. Though she never wanted to make herself an image of her mother, she knew that she too was trapped with no escape.

"But tell me, friend, did Laxmi too twist brocade tassels round her fingers and tremble, fearing the coming of the dark-clouded, engulfing night" ¹¹.

The poem reveals Mira, the frightened girl who feared 'the coming of the dark-clouded, engulfing night?'

"Whose face is this I see in the mirror unsmiling, grave, be dived with fear? The daughter? No, Mother, I am now your shadow."¹²

It was Mira's diary in which the clay out of which she shaped her poems lies.

"Talk, he says to me, why don't you speak to me? What shall I talk about, I ask him stupidly. 'What did you do today, where did you go, what have you been thinking about all evening? And so he goes on dragging my day, my whole self out of me. But I have my defense; I give him the facts, nothing more, never my feelings. He knows what I'm doing and he gets angry with me. I don't mind his anger, it makes him leave me to myself, it is a bliss when he does that. But he comes back, he is remorseful, repentant, he holds me close, he begins to babble. And so it begins. 'Please' he says, 'please' I love you.' She expresses her pain further, "And over and over again until he has done, 'I love you' love! How I have the word. If this is love is a terrible thing. I have learnt to say 'no' at last, but it makes no difference, no difference at all" ¹³

The pitiful condition of Mira, her sufferings are revealed through her poems and diaries. She suffocates under the

pressure of the extreme possessiveness her husband has for her. He expects her to give her details of the day about her each minute. Reading this Urmila gets entangled in 'why'?

"How clear it comes to me across the years, her cry of rage and anguish, 'why does this have to happen to me?' why did it have to happen to my daughter? Shakutai asked me. Why? My own question comes back to me Why?"¹⁴

Indeed, there is no answer to this Why? Such questions keep haunting women like Mira, Urmila and Shakutai but there is no answer. Suffering is always there for women and there is no answer to their 'why'?

It is through Mira's poetry, Urmila realizes that each relationship, always imperfect, survives on hope.

"Tiny fish swimming in the ocean of my womb

My body thrills to you;

Bridging the two worlds, you awaken in me

A desire for life.

Desire, says the Buddha, is the cause of grief;

But how escape this cord this binding vine of love?

Fear lies coiled within this womb-piercing joy."¹⁵

Pain, joy, and fear are inextricably intertwined. The pain of child-birth results in the joy of seeing one's own child and no one, not even Mira with all her intense loathing of the sexual acts with her husband discord with him and his family could turn away from the anticipatory joy of giving birth to her child, her creation, just like her favourite poem. At the same time she is aware that, this new-found love for her unborn child would make her vulnerable and hence the fear that she would remain trapped forever. Perhaps it is because she is frightened of bearing the constant burden of fear for her daughter as well if the child turns out to be a girl; she has an unconscious desire that it should be a boy.

"I feel the quickening in my womb, he moves – why do I call the child he?"¹⁶

Urmila in her childhood had seemed Mira's house when she had gone there with Vanna to give a message from her father to her uncle. Then once again she enters the house through the poems of Mira, she writes: "Now I have gone into the house once again with Mira. I have seen the corner room where the woman sat three long days, sequestered from the rest of the family, the room with a window, which looks cut on to the street- 'My companion for three days, window in the corner room.' Mira calls it. When I read the poem I can see Mira sitting on the floor, hair disheveled, wearing an old saree, her plate, and glass by her side. I can see her drawing herself into a huddle each time someone entered, tucking her saree, under her fee, drawing it tightly round her shoulders when the children ran in, afraid of polluting them with her touch. And then, when she was alone, looking out of the window, listening to the cries of the hawkers....."

"Shall I surrender to this Maya-world dancing peacock, dis-

playing its feather? Or shall I, defying the market world retreat into my shell tortoise-like?"¹⁷

This reveals the trauma of Mira during those three days, Urmila felt that the diaries and the poems complemented each other the gaps in one are filled by the other. Urmila finds it curious that Mira mentioned very little about the family she married into. Urmila understood from Mira's poems that she was alone and very lonely. Mira's poem goes:

"The sun sets, the lamp unlit, wrapped in my clock of darkness, I sit. What is it that flutters there? Is it the glow worm, it the moth?"¹⁸

Towards the end of the novel, the jig saw of the Binding Vine becomes clear and complete with all the odd, puzzling, pieces being put in place. Urmila's unvoiced accusation against her parents as to why they had left her to live with her grandparents gets an answer from her mother's pathetic confession seeking her understanding after all these years. Inni burst out, in agony that it was Urmila's father who had sent her away to Ranidurg as he didn't trust his wife with looking after the child well as once she left the baby with a man servant, Diwakar. The sudden revelation of the rift between her parents makes Urmila ponder once again how difficult relationships are, with too many charms to bridge. The relationship between her papa and Inni, Baijji and Aju, Vanna and Prakash, Vanna and her daughter, Shakutai and Kalpana loves but it does not abstain them from being cruel to each other, ignited by clashes of egos, desires, and interests. The relationships can be wholesome only when the people themselves are whole. But however painful our experiences are, however burdensome our ties are, one can never be out of it. One has to accept life as it comes and live it, even if it comprises a daily routine that takes care of a hundred trifling matters, bringing an order and rhythm to it. Realizing this, Mira says, "Just as the utter futility of living overwhelms me, I am terrified by the thought of dying, of ceasing to be."¹⁹

Mira was not that happy even she was pulsating with a new life within her. Urmila was not able to understand what is that weighed Mira down. Urmila wonders whether it was the fact that she was bearing the child of a man she didn't love. Mira however lost her first child. And when she found herself with child again, her mother was dead. Mira writes:

"My mother is dead. She died happy, they tell me. She saw me married, she saw me pregnant, and she was happy. I am supposed to comfort myself with this thought. But I can find no comfort in it, not for myself, anyway. She is dead, that is truth. What does it matter whether she died happy or unhappy? Yet I am glad I told her nothing. What if I had? What could she have done? Nothing that was all she could do in her entire life-nothing. 'Don't ask me,' she used to say, to us. 'Nothing is in my hands.' She knew I was not happy, I know, she knew it; but she was afraid to ask me, afraid I would admit it. Now I am glad I never told her anything."

She further writes: "They all think I am grieving because I could not meet her before she died. Am I? Yes, I am. But there is more. I wish I could have asked her a question. 'Mother' I always wanted to ask 'Why do you want me to repeat your history when you so despair of your own? But she died and I will never know her answer now."²⁰

Considering the fates of Mira, Kalpana, Shakutai and Sulu, Urmila regained her courage. Accepting the freedom and advantage of her life as a gift, she decides to be content with her life hoping that Kishore will remove his armor one day and she would reach him. Anu is gone but she still has Kartik. Urmila also derives consolation for herself from extending sympathy to similar women like Shakutai and Mira whose frustration is perhaps greater than her own. In spite of difficulties and obstacles caused by the patriarchal society, these three women endeavor to channelize their emotions in different ways because of their strong urge to survive. Having entered a 'Chakravayuha' from which there is no escape, the women want to make the best of their given life by hardening themselves to face the harsh realities of life. Thus with the underlying sorrows these women try to find joy and live their lives.

Shashi Deshpande has, thus, offered an affirmative vision thereby unfolding the ultimate goodness, beauty, and truth of life. Although Shashi Deshpande has tried to articulate the hurts and agonies of woman experienced in a male-dominated society her vision of life is not pessimistic. This is evident from the "spring of life" Urmila searches, for in "The Binding Vine".

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