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2

WOMEN'S QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVEL THE BINDING VINE

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Research Paper - English

ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande's concern in her novels is quest for identity. Her protagonists who strive to find out themselves through the fullness of experience in their lives. No doubt, they are haunted by the memories of their past and feel a kind of worthlessness; however, towards the end they realize their selves. Her protagonists are educated, middle class women who become hapless victim of conjugal life and its responsibilities. Though, they appear to be successful outwardly, but they seem to lack direction and feel a sense of futility. Her women protagonists are in constant search for their selves. Deshpande's novels fit into such a scenario and help women realize their potential in a positive manner. The quest for identity has its roots in the patriarchal set up. This paper seeks to explore quest for identity in Deshpande's novel The Binding Wine which is a powerful narrative dealing with the theme of quest for identity as experienced by women in a tradition-bound society. The theme is delineated in terms of the conflicts and imbalances between traditional expectations and the new demands on the part of modern women.



In the process of resolving the conflicts, the women in the novel undergo psychological suffering. Deshpande portrays in the novel the struggles and sufferings of women effectively for recognizing their real self.

The Binding Vine is centered on the life of Urmila, a self-willed woman of determination. It swings back and forth between the past and the present where she lives her childhood, the golden days she spent during her adulthood, and moves on to larger questions of life in the subsequent period of her married life. Urmila leads a contented married life. An educated woman that she is, Urmila teaches in a college for earning her livelihood. She is married to Kishore, a man of her choice, against the wishes of her parents. After her marriage, Urmila finds that the bond between her and her husband is not that of love, but of only physical relationship. However she strongly believes that an emotional attachment is essential for a meaningful and everlasting marital life. In spite of her best efforts on her part, she feels distanced from Kishore right from the beginning of their marriage. She tries to reveal to her husband her emotional insecurity. But Kishore asserts himself sexually without paying heed to her feelings and emotions. In this context, Kishore may be understood as the archetypal Indian husband. He would never understand the depth of her feeling. She feels: ... 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 shoulder, his chest, and I did not see into his face, I was afraid of what I could see. I turned round and fell asleep (Shashi Deshpande, 1992).

To add to her marital discord, her life is marred by the unexpected death of her young daughter, Anu. She remembers her daughter again and again. She struggles hard to forget the memories, but realises that forgetting her memories is betrayal on her part. She also realises her responsibility to her son, Kartika who needs her love. When her father died, she could bear the shock easily, "Papa is only a memory, a gentle memory (27)."

She is financially independent with self-confidence. She develops a kind of ego, because of which she does not submit herself before her husband. Urmila feels that they are too petty to be compared to her grief now. She wants to cling on to her grief. She also feels that she cannot betray her daughter's memory by trying to blot her out of her mind.



Commenting on her masochistic attitude, S. Indira writes:

Instead of fighting her pain and sorrow, she holds on to it as she believes to let go of that pain, to let it become a thing of the past would be a betrayal and would make her lose Anu completely. Like a masochist, she clings to her pain and allows her memories of Anu every small incident to flood her with longing and great sense of loss (S. Indira, 1995)

The novelist portrays the way how women in India in particular and in patriarchy in general are expected to lose their identity. Veena Noble Das writes, "That woman loses her identity after her marriage. They are seen either as a wife or mother who in a way erase her real and imposes another alien self on her. (Veena Noble Das, 1994) To portray this aspect, the novelist juxtaposes an interesting intermingling of three lives. Deshpande weaves three different tales into a single narrative. This is necessitated by the bereavement suffered by the narrator. Having to undergo sorrow on account of the death of her child, she is highly sensitive to the suffering and despair of other women who struggle and suffer on account of either marriage or sex. It is a sense of solidarity and sensitivity which leads her to befriend the struggling women.

Shakutai is the mother of a rape-victim, Kalpana. Urmila meets her on her visit to a hospital. Earlier the mother assumes that her daughter, who is now lying conscious, has been injured in a car accident. On examination, the doctor informs her that she has been raped, and is badly injured. But Shakutai bemoans, "It is not true, you people are trying to blackmail my daughter's name" (9). After the conversation between Vanna and Dr. Bhaskar, she recoils in fear against the word 'report,' "No, no, no. Tell him, Tai, it is not true, don't tell anyone. I'll up my head again, who'll marry the girl, and we're decent people. Doctor, she turns to him, "don't tell the police" (58).

She also thinks that the case of rape would damage the family's honour and the marriage prospects of the other daughter. In writing about rape, Deshpande has not attempted anything new, but the way she has portrayed this aspect is very realistic. Urmila visits her regularly to inquire after her daughter. Through their conversation, the reader gets a view of Kalpana's life. While speaking of her daughter, Shakutai is full of self-confidence:



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).

Shakutai blames the girl for being attractive. She feels that her dress and her lipstick have brought her to that state. In spite of doing all kinds of work, and begetting three children, her husband deserts her for another woman. Yet Shakutai hesitates to describe her husband bad. She talks to Urmila of her unfulfilled desire to have a "Mangalsutra made in Precious Gold? That's been the great misfortune of my life, Urmila, marrying that man" (110). It is, indeed, tragic that in spite of putting up with such a worthless husband and in spite of struggling alone to fend for her children. She bitterly tells Urmila, in one of her conversations, "what you can expect, they say, of a girl whose mother has left her husband? I imagine! He left me for another woman, left me with these children to bring up" (147).

Even Shakutai, a woman from the lower strata of society, did not find her painful experiences acceptable. She says to Urmila, "I, a woman, had to sleep there, in public with strange men walking up and down. And my husband... the voice drops low, you know what men are, he wanted to ... 'we are not animals, I told him. As if he cared. And I got pregnant. I was the worst thing that could happen to us then" (110-11). Kalpana is another character through whom the reader understands that tradition binds women. Her mother Shakutai belongs to lower strata of society. She is an independent woman, and she wants to decide and live for herself.

Her reaction is a reflection of the society governed by the age-old patriarchy. There is a strict code of conduct to be followed by girls regarding their dress, speech and behaviour in order not to attract the attention of men. A girl is advised at every step to avoid behaving like a male, and to establish her feminine identity. A lot of importance is given to the way she sits, stands, talks and interacts with others. To avoid masculinity, a girl is told to walk with soft steps, that they are barely audible to the others. It is considered sacrilege for a girl to dress or move in such a way so as it brings the contours of her body into greater prominence and attract people's attention. Pointing out to the obvious signs



of rape on the badly mauled Kalpana, Urmila asks Bhaskar:

What about the injuries, I asked him? I'd examined the girl damn it," Bhaskar says angrily. "You could see the marks of his fingers on her arms where he had held her down. And there were huge contusions on her thighs-he must have pinned her down with his knees. And her lips bitten and chewed. Surely, I asked, no vehicle could have passed over her lips leaving teeth marks? (88)

Shakutai is scared of her children remaining unmarried. She informs that her husband had deserted her long ago for another woman leaving her alone. Hence she derives little comfort or happiness with her children. She tells Urmila, "women are astonishing, I think it takes a hell of a lot of courage for a women like that to even think of marriage" (87). Urmila replies that women marry in spite of everything because it provides security. She makes a valid point emphasising the vulnerability of single woman in the society where men and women are expected to follow a rigid code of conduct keeping natural, biological feelings under control. Mulk Raj Anand, in this connection wrote "No woman in our land is beyond the threat of rape, because of the suppressed energies of the male, through the taboos of patriarchy which deny sex before marriage and make male young into want on animals who assault any possible victim when possessed by lust." (Mulk Raj Anand, 1940)

This shows docile nature of Vanna. But Urmila doesn't approve the ways of Vanna, who remains silent. Urmila expresses her anger at the docile and submissive nature of Vanna. "It irritated me terribly at first, her constant refrain of Harish says. She says it less now, but her submissiveness, her willingness to go along with him in whatever he wants, makes me angry" (80). Vanna does not have any grouse against the life she has been leading. She does not mind doing the bulk of the work while Harish relaxes. She has lost herself along the way. She has in the process become only an automation carrying out Harish's bidding.

Another character that Urmila associates herself with is Sulu, a silent woman. She loves Kalpana very much. When she gets married, she is unable to bear a child and this is the main reason for falling apart. Prabhakar, her husband stops touching her subsequently. He threatens her to get Kalpana for his wife and she could stay on in the



house. When Kalpana refuses, she had to bear the brunt of his anger. Being scared of her husband's ire, she begs Kalpana and even falls at her feet. She does so not to be thrown out of the house. Prabhakar rapes Kalpana.

Unable to confront her husband, Sulu feels quiet. She commits suicide to put an end to her problems. While Shakutai decides to live a new life after her husband has deserted her, Sulu lacks this courage. Therefore, Shakutai says, "Nobody should live like that, Sulu, so full of fears. What kind of life is it? I don't have your courage, Shakutai, is 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" (195).

A submissive character is Inni, Urmila's mother, who is silent in the novel. She loves her husband deeply, and submits herself readily before him. She has no defense against her husband's anger and silence. She is constantly preoccupied with his feeling, grope towards him but he would reject her over turns and she would be hurt. Still, when Urmila calls him cruel, Inni refuses to acknowledge it. Inni's love defeats Urmila.

Love! How I hate the word... I have learnt to say 'no' at last, but it makes no difference at all. What is it he wants from me? I look at myself in the mirror and wonder, what is there in me? Why does it have to be me? Why can't he leave me alone? (67). However, Mira pays heavy price for asserting herself. Had she committed herself willingly to her husband, she would have been happier. But she always wanted her independence and the right over her body, emotions, thoughts and freedom of expression. She knew well the cause of her misery. She expresses the secret of a woman's happiness in her poetry: "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" (83). In her poetry, Mira reveals the strength of her character and the self-assertion. As a woman, she rebels against the tradition. She prefers to have individuality and identity of her own:

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 the old? A tablet of rice, a pencil of gold can they make me Nirmala? I am Mira (101).

This being the nature of Mira, Urmila is immensely overwhelmed by the strength



of Mira. Hence she decides to publish Mira's poetry. It is a sense of sensitivity which makes Urmila delve into the poem of her long-dead mother-in-law. Urmila frantically tries to understand the mind of Mira. She earnestly feels that Mira's poetry never reached the people because Venu the male poet had discouraged her by saying, "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). This shows that the woman is relegated to a restricted activity. In India, however, the woman is still haunted by the enforced act of man upon her. While reading Mira's life-history, Urmila compares her to Kalpana, a victim of rape hanging between life and death in a hospital. She feels, "what has happened to Kalpana happened to Mira too" (63).

In translating Mira's poems and reading them, she tries to come to terms with the dichotomy in each person, in each relationship between love and hate, concern and cruelty, conformity and rebellion. She regains her courage and looks forward to a continuation of life with her husband so as to bridge the division. She is a human being who is both courageous and womanly. She is stubborn and independent. She realises the same. True to the social conventions, she had to put up in silence with the violation of her body. She is a contented married woman. Mira comes out with her own opinion on marriage. In one of her poems she writes:

Mira's tragedy is higher in degree. Mira's loveless short life is presented in Priti's shallow modernistic preoccupations. Priti makes a film on sati based on Mira. Urmila is invited to the celebration. The film is "about a woman who's raped by her own husband." Urmila realises that it is Mira's story, which is "exaggerated, coloured, over-dramatised" (26). Thus Urmila is the pivot of the plot connecting all the threads.

Urmila realises from the account of Shakutai, Kalpana, Sulu, Mira, her mother-in-law and Unni her mother that they were denied of the fullness of experience because of marriage. Hence she is forced to take refuge in Dr. Bhaskar Jain's friendship. She tries to find herself in the new relationship with Bhaskar because he is a patient listener to her talk, and gives her the right response. He cares for her emotions and makes her feel complete. Working in the merchant navy, her husband visits home only once a month. Like anyone else, she feels at times growing erotic feeling within her, whenever she comes



across any object of love. Sometimes she finds it hard to control herself and wishes, "I could put my desires into a deep freeze and take them out intact and whole, when he returned" (164-65).

The realisation of this demand of sex by the new woman has been effectively suggested by Deshpande through Urmila's affair with Bhaskar. The conflict between her mind and heart becomes apparent. When her mother objects to her relationship, she defends her decision. The predicament of new woman can be seen when she rejects Kishore just to show that she can live without him, "And yet it seems to me that this responding to Bhaskar is the only way revealing the mushy adolescent with dreams of living happily ever after with Kishore, who's trapped inside me, of finding out what's life when she's gone" (165-66). This feeling of having sex as an adventure has started threatening the age-old institution of marriage. R.Mala, writes "that makes Shashi Deshpande a modernist feminist." (R. Mala, 1991)

The Binding Vine portrays the feelings and emotions between parent and child and between husband and wife. Urmila remembers: "Papa's anger and silence were weapons against which Inni, had no defense. At such times, I could sense her constant reoccupations with his feeling, her groping towards him, but hurt when he rejected these overtures" (81). Urmila finally realises that relationships bind one another and that "each relationship, always imperfect, survives on hope" (141).

The Binding Vine needs to be viewed from a female point of view. Traditionally, women in India have been subjected to male domination. Traditional novels by men represent this reality. But novels by women in modern times project women as independent human beings. Deshpande's characters, though not rebels, are self assertive. In the course of their encounter with the hard realities of life, they learn to gain required amount of strength to cope with the hard realities. Deshpande opines in one of her interviews with Stanley Carvalho, "I find lot men unsympathetic to my writing and a lot of women extremely sympathetic. This is because the world is viewed in different ways by men and women. Women see a mirror image and men see, perhaps, a deformed image of themselves" (Shashi Deshpande, 1990).

One of the achievements of Deshpande in this novel is that solutions to marital



discord are not suggested outside the marriage and family but within the married life of these women. Whether working or non-working, the relationship ends in discontent. The marriage in the case of women turns out to be dissatisfying both physically and spiritually. It creates conflict in a woman as to whether she should take up the path of submission or rejection because both end in a state of discontent.

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