

Sashi Despande’s “The Binding Vine”: An authentic representation of predicament of Women and their Quest for Identity in the Indian Patriarchal Society

Bhagyashree Phukon

(a former student of Department of English, Cotton University, Assam, India)

Corresponding Author: Bhagyashree Phukon

Date of Submission: 29-02-2020

Date of Acceptance: 14-03-2020

I. INTRODUCTION

For a progressive society the need of women along with men is equally crucial, as around half of the world population is composed of women. Although every woman is born with their own individual sovereign rights, most of the time they are not considered as human being, rather as a particular class, attributing some specific characteristics to define them. The position of women in society has varied according to age, region and culture, but this position has never been equal to men for centuries. We believe that, women (and man as well) should not be straitjacketed into some strict roles that cover their inner self and personality; but in reality, the society which is completely driven by patriarchal norms has become so overpowering that women are left with unclear individual identity, rather they grow a tendency to live only for others by becoming the ‘ideal woman’, as if it is the only supposed goal of their lives, which eventually leads up to self denial.

The relationship between society and literature is pervasive and ancient. It has witnessed the role of women evolving through ages; as society keeps changing, the depiction of women in literature has also changed. In the present times literature doesn’t only reflect the marginalized subjugated women but also the ‘new women’, who has been constantly trying to establish themselves as an autonomous human being with their own self identity. In the novels of Sahitya Akademi Award winning novelist Sashi Despande, we have witnessed the predicament of subjugated women and their quest for identity. Despande’s novels are a scornful critique of Indian patriarchal society and also society in general. In her novels we find women in a state of instability, going through mental and physical conflicts, and in the process, striving to establish a new identity as strong self reliant individual. Despande’s *The Binding Vine* deals with the dilemma of modern educated and uneducated middle class Indian women who want to attain their self identity as well as restore their family ties in a realistic way. Similar to her other novels, in this novel also the writer depict the life of women as it is in reality. Despande states about her women characters in an interview to Vanamala Viswanatha: “My characters take their own ways. I have heard people saying we should have strong women characters. But my writing has to do women as they are. Most of the women I’ve known are like that –their decisions are made for them. Due to being over protected, they are people who think one way and do another”.¹In *The Binding Vine*, while revealing women’s struggle to secure self respect and self identity, the author delicately exposes the multiple levels of oppression, including sexual oppression experienced by women in our society.

Objectives

The objectives of this article can be pin pointed as follows-

- To study the predicament of middle class women in modern Indian society.
- To examine the direct and indirect effects of patriarchy upon the day to day life of women and their psyche as well.
- To explore women’s inner quest for self respect and self identity while struggling through life.

II. METHODOLOGY

Descriptive and analytical methods are used in this study.

Analysis

Sashi Despande’s *The Binding Vine*(1993) is quite similar to her other novels, as it depicts the predicament and quest for self identity of middle class female protagonist in a patriarchal world, where she has

miniscule scope to raise her voice. Although the story of *The Binding Vine* superficially appears to be very identical to her other novels, but an in depth study reveals exceptionality and peculiarity lies in it. In all other novels Deshpande has depicted the protagonist with utmost importance and all other characters are used to feature her concerns and feelings. But here, the protagonist Urmi plays the role of a narrator, through whom the writer tries to reveal the sufferings of women from different sections of our society.

The Binding Vine deals with the multifaceted central character Urmi, who is an intelligent, educated middle class woman; employed as a lecturer in a college. After losing her baby daughter, Urmi obstinately embraces misery; at the same time, strengthened by her own tragedy Urmi attains a mental state of internalizing and offering helping hand to the suffered women. Urmi becomes caught up in the discovery of her long dead mother-in-law's poetry, written when she was a young woman subjected to rape in her married life; and in Kalpana, a young girl hanging between life and death in a hospital, who is also a victim of physical hunger of men. By portraying a female protagonist like Urmi, who has to endure different layers of experience which ultimately lead to pain, sufferings, anxiety, insecurity and helplessness of women as a whole, the writer tries to show how challenging it is for a woman to give birth her own self with an autonomous identity in a male dominated society like India.

The writer depicts women's life journey as a constant struggle against the image of herself externally imposed by society. The novel starts with the introspection of Urmi- "we all of us grow up with an idea of ourselves, an image rather, and spend the rest of our lives trying to live up to it. But for me, I suddenly realize as Vanna talks to me, it's been a constant struggle against an image of myself imposed upon me by Vanna".² Vanna, the daughter-in-law and the childhood friend of Urmi, represents the typical Indian women who always want to maintain the tag of 'Ideal Women'. Urmi's vision towards life is quite different from other women, who affirm her independence in each and every judgment of her life. Although she is united in marriage with the man she loved, soon her married life becomes only a familial and social responsibility. Because of the lack of emotional security and true understanding, Kishore, who was her childhood friend and lover, remains only a 'husband' for Urmi. She feels as if she has become only an object of sex for him. For being a merchant navy officer, whenever Kishore goes away from her for a long period of time, Urmi feels intense emotional insecurity; every time when she tries to reveal her mental state, he asserts himself sexually rather than understanding that her desire is not physical what she need is something else. After his every departure she feels as if he has left nothing. This condition of Urmi, full of emptiness and helplessness shows how it is terrible for a woman to live in a barren and empty relationship, just because they are united with 'marriage'.

As Urmi is economically independent and well settled in her life she has developed a kind of self-esteem in herself which makes her unwilling to submit before her husband, moreover she can't bear the submission of her mother Inni and Vanna (her sister-in-law) before their spouses. It is Vanna who can't call her own daughters as she wishes; she even can't adore them because Harish, her husband doesn't like baby talk; moreover in spite of her intense desire to have a son Vanna can't say it to her husband, because the power of deciding how many children they are going to have is only with her husband.

Urmila, the primary figure in the novel connects the stories of Mira, kalpana, Shakutai, Sulu, Vanna, Priti and Inni, which ultimately reveals the difficult world of women of various age and social background. It is Urmi's agony, who mourns over the death of her baby daughter Anu, that interlinks all emotions and themes into one; the death of her child sensitizes Urmi towards the sufferings of others in consequent time. Urmi's narrative includes three major stories- story of Kalpana, who is a rape victim, story of Mira, Urmi's mother-in-law who is again a victim of marital rape and the story of Sakuntala, the suffered mother of Kalpana. But the most assertive story which closely weaves all these stories together is that of Urmi herself. For Urmi it becomes almost impossible to get rid of the memories of her dead infant daughter. Throughout the entire novel she fights with the reminiscences of her baby but also realizes that forgetting is unfaithfulness: "I must reject these memories, I have to conquer them. In this one battle I have to win if I am to go on living. And my victory will carry with it the trait of betrayal. To forget is to betray".³ Urmi also realizes her liability towards her son, who deserves mother's love and affection.

Through the character of Sakuntala, who is full of fear, agony and helplessness, the novelist tries to reveal the bewildering and prejudiced perspective of our society on some sensible issues and its influence upon human mind. As a result Sakuntala bears a kind of mix feelings for her victimized daughter Kalpana; sometimes she is full of love and praise for her and at the very next moment she condemns her for her present condition. Deshpande portrays the character of Sakuntala with enough sensibility; she becomes a perfect example of miserable and dishonorable circumstance of women after being deserted by their husband.

Marriage is a part and parcel of our society and people take it with utmost importance. In spite getting nothing from her own married life except children and witnessing the miserable condition of her sister Sulu, Sakuntala's longing for her daughters' marriage shows the essentiality of it in every woman's life in which they expect security from other men. It is Sulu, an epitome of love, support and submissiveness commits suicide after the revelation of her husband's disgraceful deed with Kalpana.

The story of Mira reveals another picture of women's dilemma contained in marriage. Although in the novel Mira is not a living character, her poetry and diary act as a mouthpiece. Mira's writings expose inner battle of a woman in an unhappy and unhealthy married life. Since Mira's husband saw her, he had "single minded pursuit of an object; marrying Mira".⁴ But she never felt any kind of emotional attachment for him; as a consequence Mira's encounter with her husband becomes not less than rape. Mira's diary further tells about her meeting with Venu a poet, when she gave him some of her poems to read, he said, "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".⁵ Such views of a representative male writer shows the troublesome time that women writers have to face in a phallogocentric society.

Mira's poetry haunts Urmi so much that, in spite of strong objection of her over-attentive mother, Inni and cynical friend Vanna, Urmi decides to translate and publish the poems. In our society, women are brought up in such a stereotypical way that, they start looking at the whole world from male point of view. Urmi, however appears to be the most rebellious of Despande's female protagonists. Being highly conscious of the injustices and inequalities prevailing in our society against women, she makes a positive effort to set things right.

III. CONCLUSION

The novel celebrates women's coming together as fellow friends and companions to make living better. Caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand and self expression on the other, Despande's female characters struggle throughout their life to live like a 'living human being'. In *The Binding Vine*, within the web of loss and despair we can see the flickering of hope; here, the novelist explores the redemptive power of love with keenness and compassion. The novel ends with Urmila recollecting the union of love that furnishes the 'the spring of life' to human existence.

REFERENCES

Books

- [1]. Despande, Sashi, *The Binding Vine* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2002)
- [2]. Sandhu, Sarabjit K, *The Image of women in the novels of Sashi Despande* (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991. Print.)
- [3]. Prasad, Amar Nath, *The New Lights on Indian Women Novelist in English: part 3* (New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2005. Print)
- [4]. Pathak, R.S, (ed) *The Fiction of Sashi Despande* (Creative Books, New Delhi 1997. Print)

Interview

1. Viswanatha Vanamala, A Woman's world..... All the way. Literature Alive. Vol. 1, pp. 8-14. 1987

Footnotes

- ¹Viswanatha Vanamala, A Woman's world..... All the way. Literature Alive. Vol.1, 1987 (p.235)
- ²Despande, Sashi, *The Binding Vine* .New Delhi Penguin, 2002.(p.7)
- ³Despande, Sashi, *The Binding Vine*. New Delhi Penguin, 2002(p.21)
- ⁴Despande ,Sashi, *The Binding Vine*. New Delhi Penguin, 2002(p.47)
- ⁵Despande , Sashi, *The Binding Vine*. New Delhi Penguin, 2002(p.127)

Bhagyashree Phukon. "Sashi Despande's "The Binding Vine": An authentic representation of predicament of Women and their Quest for Identity in the Indian Patriarchal Society." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 25(3), 2020, pp. 05-07.