

Portrayal of Women in Shashi Deshpande's the Binding Vine and Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughter

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Abstract: *The aim of writing this article is to highlight the theme of helplessness on the part of a woman. Whether she is a mother, daughter, sister or wife, the society always desires that she should be docile, timid and submissive. Through 'S Manju Kapur and Deshpande's novels for they are trying to highlight the change towards which our society is moving but still millions of miles need to be covered for this change to be visible. A major preoccupation in recent Indian Women's writings has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationship. In Indian culture and heritage, individualism, quest for identity, protests and concepts of rebelliousness have often remained alien ideas, as far as women were concerned. Women were not supposed to raise voices for their rights, protest against injustice or question the already existing beliefs, customs, rituals and superstitions. They have to merely exist subjected to the patriarchal system. Manju Kapur's 'Difficult Daughters' (1998) stresses on the woman's need for self-fulfillment autonomy, self realization, independence, individuality and self-actualization. Shashi Deshpande's 'The Binding Vine' (1993) is very much similar to her earlier novels, as it sketches her middle-class female protagonist predicament in a male-dominated world, where she has very little scope to give voice to her concerns.*

Key words: *affection, bondage, devotion, society, tradition,*

I. Introduction

The status of woman all over the world, particularly in India, has been undergoing a rapid change in the recent decades. So the image of woman in Indo-English novel is based on the traditional ancient literature of India, which showed woman as a devoted wife or a devoted mother. The imaginative and creative responses of the writers are related to the changing world view and the questioning attitude thereby developed by it. The attitude to women has changed in recent times. Their writings are based not only on observations of external behavior but also on the internal journey in the psychological realm of the feminine sensibilities. A few women novelists like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur make straight journey into the psyche of their women characters that are torn on account of the tensions generated by the discord between the individual and the surroundings. They have started trying to understand Indian women and portray her in their novels.

II. Women In The Binding Vine

Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* (1993) is very much similar to her earlier novels, as it sketches her middle-class female protagonist predicament in a male-dominated world, where she has very little scope to give voice to her concerns. Although the story in this particular novel at the superficial level appears to be very identical to her other novels, but if one explores it deeply he can easily sense the peculiarity in it. In all other novels we find that the protagonist is of paramount importance and all the other characters are used to feature her concerns and feelings. But in this novel the minor characters play a very significant role; the protagonist Urmi plays the role of anchor, it is she who is used by the novelist very cleverly to expose the sufferings of women from different sections of our society.

The Binding Vine deals with the multi-facetedness of its central character Urmi. Urmi is an intelligent, educated middle-class wife, who is employed as a lecturer in a college. Urmi's vision towards life is quite different from other women of our society. She is one who affirms her independence and freedom in each and every judgment of her life. Urmi united in marriage with the man whom she preferred, but is desperate in her married life because of her ego and to some extent Kishore her husband is accountable for it. The problem with Urmi is that she is brimming with confidence, as is financially independent and well settled in her life. Due to this economic stability she has developed a kind of super ego in herself which makes her reluctant to submit before her husband. Moreover, she cannot tolerate the submission of Vanaa (her sister-in-law) and her mother before their spouses.

From the initial days of her marriage Urmi starts feeling that the bond between her and her husband is not that of love and there is lack of emotional support and understanding. Although Urmi knows that for a woman to adjust in a totally new world, love and compatibility on part of a husband is very essential, but on the

other hand Urmi's husband Kishore is the true reflection of the conventional Indian husband, regardless of being an educated Merchant Navy officer. Every time when Urmi tries to reveal her emotional insecurity, whenever Kishore goes away from her, he asserts himself sexually rather than understanding that her desire is not physical what she needs is something else. Urmi is leading an economically and socially secure life like a normal human being even without the support her husband. But sometimes she feels erotic feelings growing within her because she is deprived of true love and she finds it hard to control her wishes.

Urmila is the primary figure in the novel which connects all the threads, in the plot -the stories of Mira, Kalpana, Shakutai, Sulu, Vanaa, Priti and Inni. It is Urmila's anguish, who mourns over the death of her one-year old daughter which intertwines all emotions and themes into one. It is Anu's death that sensitizes Urmi towards the pains and agony of others. Thus her narrative is encompassing of all the three tales broadly -one about Kalpana who is a rape victim, Mira, a victim of marital rape, who is Urmi's mother-in-law, and Shakutai who is Kalpana's mother. The most assertive tale which closely weaves all these tails together is that of Urmi herself, Urmila starts to battle with her loss, with unanswered questions of the past, and an introspection of herself and her marriage to Kishore after she comes across her mother-in-law Mira's poems and after her involvement with Kalpana who had been savagely raped.

Urmi finds it almost impossible to get out of the memories of her dead infant daughter. She fights with the reminiscences of her daughter but also realizes that forgetting is unfaithfulness: "I must reject these memories, I have to conquer them. This is one battle. I have to win if I am to go on living. And yet my victory will carry with it the taint of betrayal. To forget is to betray"(21). She also realizes her accountability and responsibility towards her son who desires her love and affection and watches her anxiously.

The novelist has very sensibly laid bare the fear, anger, helplessness and anguish of Shakuntala. When Urmi escorts Shakutai to her home that night she comes to know about Kalpana from her. What we as reader find that she has kind of mixed feelings for her daughter, that is sometimes she is full of praise and love for her daughter but the very next moment she condemns her for her present condition. The point which Deshpande is trying to make is that it is not the victim who is responsible, but it is society at large which is to be made accountable for such savage acts against woman.

Shakutai is the most unfortunate out of the whole lot, soon after her marriage her husband leaves her in her father's house with an assurance of earning a better livelihood. Even after a lapse of period of six months he did not return, so Shakutai decides to join him in Bombay. But very soon she comes to terms with reality and realizes that he is passive and worthless. Meanwhile she gives birth to three children after which she decides to work for the sake of wellbeing of her children. Despite of all her hard work and efforts to sustain her relationship, her husband deserts her for some other woman. Since her husband has left her she is the one who is to be blamed for anything that goes wrong in the family. The reason being in our society if a marriage fails it is always the woman who is held responsible for such collapse.

Shakutai's sister, Sulu, has her own tragic life. She is very supportive, affectionate and caring and helps her sister a lot who is living a miserable life. She was even ready to take the responsibility of bringing up Kalpana but that seemed beyond the bounds of possibility because her husband Prabhakar had a strong desire for Kalpana. Sulu under extreme pressure from her husband proposed to Shakutai Kalpana's marriage to Prabhakar. Both Shakutai and Sulu herself wanted that Kalpana should marry her mousaji' otherwise they knew somewhere inside that she will suffer for the rest of her life. The result was similar to what these ladies thought; Kalpana took her own decision not to marry him the result being she was brutally raped by the man whom she discarded. Sulu who is a personification of love and submissiveness commits suicide after she comes to know about her husband's fateful deed.

Yet another tale of submission, grief and unhappiness is that of Mira, who Urmi's mother-in-law is. When the novel opens Mira is already dead we come to know about her through her writings. Urmi becomes familiar with her when (Akka) Kishore's step mother gives Urmi her writing masterpieces. After reading and interpreting them Urmi comes to know that arranged marriage did not work for Mira.

It is Akka who tells how Kishore's father saw Mira at a wedding and felt in love with her. Since then he had "single-minded pursuit of an object; marrying Mira"(47). At last their marriage was arranged and approved. But from the starting itself there had been no place for Mira's sentiments and emotions as a consequence her encounter with her husband becomes rape within the institution of marriage. Mira's diary is a glaring revolution of her extreme dislike of the sexual act with her husband, a physical repulsion for the man she married. Taken collectively, her poems and the diary entries pointed out molestation in marriage. When she came to her in-law's house she was christened Nirmala-the first estrangement from her individuality. This brings about how marriage is a loss of self hood and identity for women. Mira's dairy further tells about her meeting with Venu a poet, who later became a grand old man of Indian literature. When Mira 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" (127). These views of Venu are quite insightful of the handicaps and hardships that women writers have to face in a male-chauvinist society.

The poem of Mira haunts Urmi so much that she decides to bring her thoughts back to life by getting her poems published. But when Vanaa Urmi's sister-in-law who is an archetypal Indian pativrata comes to know about this she is infuriated. She feels that this stride of Urmi will destroy and demolish the honor of her family. In fact in our society the women are brought up in such a way that they start looking at the world and interpreting it from the male point of view. Their own individuality, perception and thought process is marred by their own conventional female counterparts.

Urmi, however, appears to be the most rebellious of Deshpande's female protagonists. Being acutely aware of the injustices and inequalities prevailing in the society against women, she makes an effort to set things right. She strongly fights on behalf of the rape victim Kalpana and resolves to translate and publish her long-dead mother-in-law Mira's Kannada poems. She also admonishes Vaana, who is a meek and submissive wife, and encourages her to be more assertive. The novel celebrates women's coming together with other women as friends and companions and sharers of life rather than as rivals for approval by men.

III. Women In Difficult Daughters

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) is a feminist discourse not because she is a woman writing about women but because, as Jaidev puts it she "has understood a woman both as a woman and as a person pressurized by all kinds of visible and invisible contexts". Kapur has taken profound insight into woman's inner turmoil to find a place, an identity and individuality of her own in society. For centuries, women are always back staged by patriarchal world.

The novel is the story of a young woman, named Virmati who is born in Amritsar into an austere and high minded household. She is an educated middle class girl expounds her rebellious ideas against this male-dominated society and tries to gain her identity. She experiences a journey to her inner self. She falls in love with a neighbour, the professor a man who is already married. This story tells how she is torn between family duties, the desire for education and illicit love. This is a story of sorrow, love & compromise.

The novel spans three generations of women and unveils their sense of disillusionment. The three generation of women (Kasturi, Virmati and Ida) symbolize the three stages of Indian independence. Through these three female protagonists, Manju Kapur has revealed the life circle of a woman who is devoted from beginning of her life. As a child, a girl has to do domestic, house hold activities [as Virmati does], after marriage, she has to bear pain to give birth to child [as Kasturi's condition is revealed after having 11 children] and after being mother, her whole life is dedicated to her whole family.

Kasturi, the mother represents the pre-independence and is shown as a victim of the offensive control of patriarchy. Kasturi is being presented as an epitome of motherhood who bears pain and suffering. Virmati, the daughter, symbolizes the country's struggle for independence on macro level. Psychologically, she reveals her rebellious nature against deep-rooted conventions of morality especially for a girl. She undertakes her journey to the path leading to one's individuality but to her, it leaves in the midway with no achievement. Ida, Virmati's daughter is the product of post independence era and establishes herself as an independent woman. She breaks up her marriage as she is denied maternity by her husband. The forced abortion is also the termination of her marriage. Ida by severing the marriage bond frees herself from male domination and power and also from conventional social structures which bind women. She has that strength which Virmati lacks. She starts her journey to find an insight into her mother's past, denies her and revolts against the ways and follies.

A constant sufferer Virmati, nurses a desire of being as independent, defiant and assertive as her cousin Shakuntala. Shakuntala sows the seeds of freedom in Virmati. She symbolizes modernity as not following the conventional norms which limits daughter to an early marriage and then home and family. She encourages her for independence and for equal rights for women, thus epitomizing the post colonial emancipated 'New Woman'. New woman breaks the customs of the tradition bound society. Since the establishment of the society, woman is divided social security, political awareness, and economic liberation.

Kasturi is an example of the typical feminine attitude—to procreate in order to bring about life and pleasure. To run her home, first a joint family and later her own, is happiness for her. Like Kasturi, for Ganga the Professor's wife, marriage is a religious and a social institution, where love is not the basis of marriage. She too has a superb domestic sensibility. However in Virmati, there is a struggle between the head and the heart, the physical and moral; Virmati gives way to her heart and body. Whereas Swarna Lata, Virmati's friend, is a clearheaded, strong woman. She too experiences tension with her parents over the issue of marriage but unlike Virmati she channelizes her energy into a new direction which gives her a sense of group identity.

Through Ida's admiration for Swarnalata, who enters into a wider sociopolitical sphere, the novelist seems to be saying that a woman can maintain her individuality and pursue her interest without threatening the family structures. Thus a woman should basically strive towards a fine interdependent partnership. But if she

feels suffocated, then a voice ought to be raised and there should be a total breaking away, like Ida. But merely transcending societal norms is not enough.

IV. Conclusion

A woman should be aware, self controlled, strong willed, self reliant and rational, having faith in the inner strength of womanhood. A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense. Though independent to some extent, Shashi Deshpande's women characters are firmly bound by the shackles of tradition and seek fulfillment only within the orbit of family and tradition. The Binding Vine presents a female world in which women come together in a feeling of fellowship. In Difficult Daughters, Manju Kapur presented women's emancipation and striving for some space in such a manner that we read not just with our eyes but also with our heart.

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