

Predicament of Women in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande is a sensitive writer who shows her concern for the problems of contemporary middle class woman. In *The Binding Vine* Shashi Deshpande expresses the frustration and disappointments of women experience, social and cultural oppression in the male dominated society. The novel shows how the intelligent and career-oriented woman inculcates the spirit of solidarity among women. Deshpande, in this novel depicts marital rape and agony of a wife.

Key Words: Feminism, marital rape, patriarchy

Shashi Deshpande's '**The Binding Vine**', published in 1994, portrays the loss and despair of women who do not give up but show their strength by hopefully accepting the challenges of life. The novel starts with Urmila (Urmi), a college lecturer, the protagonist and the narrator, sunk in the grief of her baby daughter Anu's death and her mother and Vandana (Vanna), her childhood friend and sister-in-law, trying to console her. But she feels the grief too intensely imbibed in herself to come out of it. She is not ready to understand Vanna's or anybody else's feelings for her nor does she want to have anybody near her, instead she wants to be alone. It is unbearable to her to see people looking at her and tiptoeing about her as if she is — something abnormal, an invalid. She does not even want to overcome the grief by any diversion, nor does she want to leap into the future and think of the time when she will be able to forget the pain, because she thinks that by doing so she will lose her daughter entirely. So, she wants to store her pain and live with that for the rest of her life. Vandana is unable to bear her friend's pain and she does not allow her to be alone and she asks her to cry and let her

grief come out so that she might feel light – hearted. But Urmila wishes to make them realize that it makes her no difference whether being alone or being with them. She is unable to feel even her husband, Kishore's pain as if she has lost her sense of feeling with Anu's death. "Has Anu taken all my capacity to feel away with her? I begin to bang my head against the wall. I can hear the dull rhythmic thud – thud. There's nothing else. No pain at all." (1) She observes herself from other's point of view that they might have taken it as a sign of a breakdown and that is why they wanted Kishore to be with her to prevent her from breaking down. But the next moment she thinks, "What's broken can't be mended. But I'm not going to break." (19) She wants to escape into the past but finally finds herself trapped in the present and they all go to watch a movie on the TV. While talking about movies they come to the conclusion that they are total male fantasies because they are made by men. But she realizes that "The past is always clearer because it is more comprehended; we can grasp it as a whole. The present, maddeningly chaotic and unclear, keeps eluding us." (121) Due to her emotional

imbalance she feels herself suffocating in her dreams and undergoes an attack of asthma. Here she realizes her strong will-power to live, she does not want to die, "It was when I was struggling to breathe that I knew what I was doing ...I was working hard at not dying. Each breath I struggled to take was an affirmation of my will to live." (20) Perhaps this will-power is a binding vine that is connected to one's physical self to keep one alive and when this vine snaps it is all over. But she dare not go to her room at Ranidurg after her daughter's death because she finds a great change between her old self, when she was a girl and new self, when she is a woman who has lost her child. Yet she wants to establish a link between her two 'selves'. "Between the girl who lived in that room and the woman who has lost her child, there is a Chasm so deep it seems to me it can never be bridged. Yet that was me and this is me too ...I cannot get away from that." (97) She is reminded of her earlier happy days in Ranidurg with Kishore. She was fearless, confident and her love filled in her immense strength. But now she had lost it all and instead she is full of fear "...the fear of Kishore never returning home lost in the seas somewhere...; the fear of Kishore turning away from me, a distant look on his face; the fear of his not wanting to come back to me. Yes, that's the thing, that's what I am most afraid of. And I can understand them only too well..." But she kept her feelings to herself and never revealed it to anyone, not even to him. She loses her hope entirely and thinks, "But hope is a fragile support anyway on which to rest the whole of your life. I can do without it. I will have to do without it. I have to live with the knowledge that it's real that Anu's gone, that she will never return." (21) She thinks that she cannot forget her daughter

because by doing so she will betray her. When her mother shows her anxiety for her she gets annoyed because she feels it unnatural for her mother and thinks that she never acted the doting mother with her. But she is reminded of an incidence when an astrologer read the horoscopes of all her family members except her mother's and when she was asked whether she did not want to know her future, she replied, "What's there in my life apart from all of you? If I know all of you are well and happy, I'm happy too". She thinks how her mother did not give any importance to her own life, and will she also become like her mother in future: "Will I become that way too, indifferent to my own life, thinking it nothing? I don't want to. I won't. I think so now, but may be my mother thought like me when she was my age. It frightens me. No, it doesn't, I'll never think my life, myself, nothing, never." (101)

Meanwhile she comes across the poetry and life of Mira, her long-dead mother-in-law and Vandana's step-mother. It seemed to her the story of a man's obsession with her rather than the story of Mira's marriage when it was told by Akka, Vandana's mother, Urmila's step-mother-in-law. Earlier she mentioned her as Nirmala, the name given to her after her marriage. But she could not change herself from Mira to Nirmala as she herself writes in her poem:

"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)

It is remarkable to note here how Urmila's grandfather used to say,

“People’s names are very important.... You shouldn’t take liberties with them.” (119) Akka told Urmila that when she entered that house after her marriage, her sister-in-law told her that her brother was crazy about his wife and after her death it was his son and so all that he wanted now was a mother for that motherless child. Urmila realizes that he really never noticed Vandana which made her to say though unemotionally, “...my father expects nothing from me. In fact, I wonder whether he knows I exist.” (53)

When Urmila comes to know Mira as a writer she compares her early writings with the later ones. Her earlier notebooks seemed to be written, by a girl in her classroom whose life was going smoothly without any burden. While her later poems seemed to be written by a young woman subjected to rape in her marriage who wrote them in the solitude of an unhappy marriage and died giving birth to her son at the age of twenty two. Her lines,

“But tell me, friend, did Laxmi too,
twist brocade tassels round her
fingers
and tremble, fearing the coming
of the dark-clouded, engulfing
night?” (56)

invite a close resemblance with **The Dark Holds No Terrors** and shows Mira’s fear of ‘the dark-clouded engulfing night. Gur Pyari Jandial rightly opines:

“The Binding Vine is Deshpande’s strongest statement regarding sexual violence against women. The novel touches on the delicate issue of marital rape and a woman’s helplessness after marriage to a man she does not love. **The Binding Vine** is a tremendously powerful portrayal of women’s fight to

survive in a terrible, violent world where there is no easy way out.” (2)

Perhaps she was taught by her mother to always obey her husband. She expresses her feelings in this way:

“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.
...
no, growing painfully within
like a monster child was born.” (83)

Mira had neither time nor space for her hobbies and herself. Perhaps she wrote stealthily, soundlessly sitting down on the floor by the window at late night after everybody had fallen asleep. Nobody encouraged her, instead a well – known poet of that time, Venu, discouraged her saying, “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) It shows traditional mindset of a man and the devaluation of a woman by a man. Urmila herself says, “Something comes through when I think of Venu’s poems everywhere and Mira’s voice silenced.” (128)

Urmila herself observes, as a critic, how terrible Mira’s life had been and how comfortable her own life had been in comparison to Mira’s life. Mira’s lines:

“Huddled in my cocoon, a somnolent
silkworm
will I emerge a beautiful being?
Or will I, suffocating, cease to
exist?” (65)

It shows the existential crisis faced by Mira. And Urmila says, “...she had lived a life which, even if normal to most of the women of that time, must have seemed terrible to her. It seems appalling

to me when I think of the choices of my own life, of its freedom. Cloistered in a home, living with a man she could not love, surrounded by people she had nothing in common with ...how did she go on?" (127) When Urmila completes her reading of Mira's poems she feels as if Mira has cleared her emotional life. She is reminded of her brother Amrut's question whether women want to be dominated, he very liberally says that only using physical violence is not necessary for being brutal but even to force your will on others is to be brutal. And now she has got the answer that "no human being wants to be dominated. The most important need is to love. 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. But love makes you vulnerable. Mira realized this; and she was afraid." (137)

Urmila feels that Mira is staying with her in some strange way. Earlier she had been imagining herself the hunter and Mira her prey while reading her poems, trying to reach her through her poems. Now she feels a sudden change in their relationship. She feels Mira taking her by the hand and leading her but she does not know the destination. On her way she tries to look for a resemblance between Kishore and his mother, but she feels that there is something in Kishore she will never reach. Still she does not want to give up hope to continue their relationship. She is reminded of Mira's lines, when she expresses her desire for life that is awakened by the child growing within her and realizes that it is the cause of grief:

"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." (136-137)

And Urmila, feeling emotional crisis, thinks, "Am I to give up this hope? Is this what Mira is offering me?" (141)

Urmila is reminded of Vandana who had known her husband Harish and his family two years before her marriage. Yet she sobbed hugging her when Urmila visited her first time after her marriage and told her that she was all right and her in-laws were also good people but even then there was something that she could not explain and said, "You'll know when you get married yourself." (100) But she could never understand that feeling because she was too lucky to have that kind of feeling like hers. As she herself accepts: "I never knew this feeling I saw on Vanna's face, I see in Mira's poems." (100) But, later, after her marriage, she had a different kind of feeling because Kishore did not stay at home with her most of the time due to his job in the Merchant Navy and she thinks, "...how can Vanna, secure in the fortress of her marriage to Harish, understand what it is like ...marriage with a man who fits into my life a few months in a year and flits out again, leaving nothing of himself behind? Often, after he has gone, I find in myself a frantic grappling for his image, as if in going he has taken that away as well." (164)

Though Kishore earned a lot of money yet Urmila intended to live on the money she earned; while Dr. Bhaskar's mother tells her to give up her job when she comes to know about her husband's job. It shows how Urmila considers it important to be self-dependent but a traditional woman gives no importance to her job.

Vandana's daughter Mandira complains to Urmila that she would never

leave her children to go to work like her mother does, instead she would stay at home and look after them. She is not satisfied with Urmila's explanation that there is their maid-servant, Hirabai, to look after them and retorts that she does not want Hirabai but she wants her mother. Vandana observes her daughter and tells Urmila of the time when her sole purpose of life was to be an ideal housewife because she thought that she would live happily by doing so. Vandana tells her "You know, Urmi, there was a time when all I wanted was to get married, have children and look after my family. I thought that was my happiness." (73) And she blames her mother for filling her up with ideas of a career and all that. She is reminded of all the theories she and Urmila had about bringing up children and compares it with her practical life ...how her children behave with her. Mandira always keeps saying that she should not be working and hurts her. Vandana feels that she deliberately does so because she thinks she can do so. She compares herself with her daughter and says, "Why are these kids so demanding, Urmi? Akka went to work, it was part of my life that my mother was a teacher. I never thought she wronged me by going out, I was proud of her. And I'd never have dared to talk to her the way this child talks to me." (74) Then she complains why does nobody blame Harish for never being around and Urmila tries to console her by saying that men don't take as much care of their children as women do. Vandana reminds her how she was of the opinion that it was so due to the way they (our society) teach and train us. She had accused Vandana of not asserting herself and crawling before him and letting him bulldoze her. She used to think that Vandana followed her husband in everything. "...it's Harish's sense of order

and perfection which is the rock on which Vanna has built her life." (107)

When Vandana comes to know that Urmila told Priti, a third person, about Mira, she angrily asks her why did she do so. Urmila realizes that she did not do so intentionally. They were talking about another case and Priti considered it to be radical and absolutely earth-shaking in the country like India that the judge had ruled that the wife could not be forced into a sexual relationship with the husband against her will.

But Urmila sees it from a completely different angle ...she says that it is a special case and the woman is capable of earning a lot of money. Her parents are backing her because she is self-dependent. She says that the judgment can be appealed against and over-ruled. She argues that law can't change people's lives. She says that the condition of common women of India cannot be compared with that of our woman Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi. As she tells her about the real status of women: "One Indira Gandhi in charge of the nation and a country full of women not allowed to take charge of their own lives.... No, Priti, laws can't change people's lives." (38) And she tells Priti Mira's story to prove her point. Priti gets excited and expresses her desire to make a movie on it. She asks Urmila to make the script because she wanted to have a women's vision through Urmila. When Urmila objects to do so because Mira was Kishore's mother she explains that she was not going to particularize it but she was going to use it as a symbol to focus attention on the things it stands for ...that was women's problem and in this way she was going to generalize it. Then Urmila feels that it is necessary to leave Mira's life and to go on to her poetry to

live comfortably with herself and with those she loved and needed but later she realizes that “it has not been possible. The poems themselves have led me to her diaries and there are passages in the diaries that take me back to the poems. How could I have been so naive as to imagine that I could keep her life and her poetry apart? The diaries and the poems complement each other, the gaps in one are filled by the other.” (99)

Shashi Deshpande has given yet another example of a suffering woman who is also the victim of rape through Kalpana, and of a grieving mother through her mother Shakuntala. Urmila meets Shakuntala in the hospital where Kalpana is hanging between life and death. Shakuntala does not want the doctors to report that it is a rape-case. She is so anxious, almost frantic, about her daughter’s marriage that she thinks that it will ruin her honour as well as the possibility of the marriage of her daughters. She requests Urmila to plead for her, “Ask her, tai, to tell him not to make that report. Even if it happened, what difference will it make now? Why report it? The only thing that will happen is that our name will be mud. I have these two girls...” (62)

It is ironical to see that to Shakuntala it seems as if getting married is so important to a woman even when she herself got nothing except three children out of her marriage. Her husband married another woman leaving her with the responsibility of bringing up her children. She tells Urmila about her longing for a mangalsutra made in gold and later her realization “...the man himself is so worthless, why should I bother to have this thing made in precious gold? That’s been the greatest misfortune of my life, Urmila,

marrying that man.” (110) She tells Urmila her sad story how she waited for him nearly a year to take her away with him and at last she went to him by herself because her father was not a rich man and she could not burden him anymore. It was the worst thing that could happen when she found herself pregnant there. Her sister Sulu looked-after all her three children at home while she worked hard to bring-up her children and to send them to school, to give them better life than herself. In these circumstances she could not refuse when Sulu and her husband asked to take all the responsibilities of Kalpana. She tells Urmila, “I wanted her to have all that I never had ...education, a good life, a good marriage, respect from others. Look at me ...what am I? I don’t want my children to be like me.... Did I do wrong, Urmila, was I cruel to her? I didn’t want her to be born, is that why she’s dying now? Is this my punishment?” (112)

Urmila is reminded of her father guiltily saying her during his illness, “We wronged you Urmila. No, I shouldn’t say “we”; it’s my fault entirely. Yamini always left all the decisions to me. I shouldn’t have sent you away to Ranidurg, I should have kept you with us... I shouldn’t have left you alone with your Aju after Bai died.... That was no situation for a child of fifteen to cope with.... We failed you as parents by not looking after you when Kartik was born. It was wrong to let your mother-in-law do it.” (112-113) Though Urmila was satisfied to live with her grandparents in her childhood and to have her baby there with her sister-in-law, Vandana, and mother-in-law, Akka having them to help her yet she had agonized over why they had sent her away. Later, her mother made it clear that she never wanted her to be sent away to Ranidurg. It is clear here that Urmila’s mother was not given

power to take decision on her own nor could she ever oppose her father. As she says, "It was because I... because your Papa... he didn't trust me, he thought I couldn't... wouldn't look after you properly." (199)

While Urmila observes Shakuntala suffering for her dying daughter she is reminded of her own sufferings and she thinks, "Is that what the living have to do... to carry the burdens of the dying and the dead?" (115) She feels how much she has lost with the death of Anu: "And in an instant the full extent of my loss comes over me. I've lost not just my baby Anu as a child, as a girl, as a young woman.... I feel breathless, aghast with the weight of my loss." (130)

Urmila is reminded of her mother's dreams for her life: "She saw me vaulting out of middle class with marriage, making the kind of marriage that would let me live the life that was her ideal, a 'pearls and chiffons' sort of existence...." (124) Urmila herself dreamt for her daughter: "I will let her soar, I had thought, I will let nothing fetter her, not even my love. She will go far, she will climb high, she will do anything she wants." And her realization: "Would she have rejected this, laughed at me and burdened herself with 'silver toe-rings and tinkling anklets'?" (124)

Mira's mother was unable to do anything to help her and she used to say helplessly that nothing was in her hands. Mira always wanted to ask her mother, "Why do you want me to repeat your history when you so despair of your own?" (126) But she knew that she will never know the answer because she was dead. Urmila correlates her grief with everyone whether it is Mira saying, "Why does this have to happen to me? Or Shakuntala saying, why did it have to happen to my

daughter? And Urmila thinks, "My own question comes back to me... "Why?" (67)

She thinks what her mother wanted for her, what she wanted for her daughter, what Mira's mother wanted for her and what Shakuntala wanted for her daughter but what all the daughters wanted was far distant from their mothers' dreams for them: "We dream so much more for our daughters than we do for our sons, we want to give them the world we dreamt of for ourselves. 'I wanted Kalpana to have all that I didn't' Shakuntai told me. But Kalpana wanted none of her mother's dreams. She had her own. Mira too:

"To make myself in your image
was never the goal I sought." (124)

Urmila herself married the next-door boy who was not upto the expectations of her mother.

Just like other traditional women and according to her status Kalpana's mother blames her daughter for all that happened to her. No doubt she grieves yet she says, "I'm not afraid of anyone", she used to say. That's why this happened to her... women must know fear.' She further adds, "It's her fault. She was stubborn, she was self-willed, she dressed up, she painted her lips and nails and so this happened to her. You should have seen her walking out, head erect, caring for nobody." (145)

It is also ironical to note that the police officer also wants to let it remain just an accident and says that it will do them no good to make it a rape case. Instead of taking stern step against the wrong doer they also blame the girl for what happened to her. They say, "She is unmarried, people are bound to talk, her name would be smeared. For all you know she may be a professional, we see a lot of

that. ...She must have been out with a boyfriend....” (88) Her neighbours blame Shakuntala instead of her husband saying, “What can you expect of a girl whose mother has left her husband?” (147) When the hospital authorities decide to transfer Kalpana to a suburban hospital after four months because there were no enough beds, Shakuntala expresses her difficulty near Urmila and asks for her help because she had neither so much time nor so much money to go there everyday. There was no way out but to tell everything to the press correspondent and to get the news published so that she won't be transferred. After that Shakuntala becomes too embarrassed to face comments of common men as well as the police men. The exposure had been much worse than her rape to Shakuntala. She wishes to die because she is fed up with the life which gave her nothing except troubles. She said to Urmila, “She was a good girl, I swear to you, my Kalpana was a good girl.” (177) In a state of dilemma, she wishes Kalpana to die and feels relief at the thought of her death but the next moment she is full of self-reproach for wishing her own daughter's death.

When Vandana reads this news in the newspaper she bursts out in anger on Urmila for 'exposing' Kalpana like this. She expresses her suppressed anger for Urmila's raking up Mira and her poems too. She is angry because she thinks that people would know about her family affairs and it would bring disgrace on their family name. She asks her in anger what does she want, but Urmila tries to make her understand by explaining how she managed with her grandfather after her grandmother's death; how she managed with Kishore living far away from home most of time due to his job; how she earned money; looked after the children;

her father during his illness; and her mother; and her inner-self was satisfied and considered her smart and competent.

Really! She is the strongest and most competent female character in the novel. She realizes that after Anu's death she had felt different but when she saw Kalpana, Shakuntala, Mira's diary and poems, and meditated on their pitiable condition, she realized that she had been lucky while they never had a chance. She says, “...we can't go on pushing it ...what happened to then ...under the carpet forever because we're afraid of disgrace.... Have I answered your question?” (174)

Urmila succeeds in calming down Vandana by her strong arguments. She comes across an article by a so-called sociologist who writes that there can be no rape because it cannot be done unless the woman is willing and a poet wanting women to forgive the rapist because he does not know what he is doing and the letters that say that rape happens because women go about exposing themselves and after reading all these dirty thoughts expresses her anger saying that 'men's mind are like public lavatories ...full of dirty pictures.' (182) All of Urmila's near and dear ones do not want her to get involved in Kalpana's issue and she thinks that by doing so she would act just like 'snails ...crawling away blindly, ...enclosed inside their shells. But snails get trampled over too, don't they? Squash, and it's all over for them.' (182) Urmila does not think that it is Kalpana who is disgraced by what happened to her but unfortunately common men are not so logical or rational to take it that way. Towards the end of the novel, Shakuntala's sister, Sulu, comes to know that it was Prabhakar, her husband, who

did it to Kalpana and she commits suicide. To Shakuntala, it is a bolt from the blue in her misfortunes. Now she correlates things why Kalpana ran away from Sulu and refused to go back to her again. She regrets for being unable to understand her daughter's feelings. Sulu knew that he had tried to put his hands on Kalpana but she warned her not to tell anyone, not even to her mother. She had no child and she feared that he might throw her out. Shakuntala tells Urmila about her sister, "Nobody should live like that, Urmila, so full of fears. What kind of life is 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..." (195)

It shows that Shakuntala was a bold and courageous woman who wanted her sister to be like that but she failed to understand these things in time. She could neither understand the real condition of her sister nor of her daughter. As she earlier told Urmila: "I thought my Sulu was lucky. I thought when she married Prabhakar, she at least would have a good life. He's a good man, he doesn't touch drink, not even cigarettes.... God has given her no children.... And do you know, he hasn't said an angry word to her about it ...not once." (144) But the reality was just the opposite. Shakuntala loved her daughter too much and Urmila feels the redemptive powers of love... her father's love for her mother, Shakuntala's love for

Kalpana, her own love for her daughter. She is unable to find the answer for Shakuntala's question "What shall I do, Urmila?" (201) Shashi Deshpande gives the allusion of The Mahabharata through Urmila in which the emphasis is given on Dharma yet the poet cries out in despair 'I raise my arms and I shout, but no one listens.' (202)

And when she finds Shakuntala busy with her chores the next morning she thinks, "You can never opt out, you can never lay it down, the burden of belonging to the human race. There's only one way out of this Chakravyuha. Abhimanyu had to die, there was no other way he could have got out." (202) And she herself gets busy in her daily routine and comes to the conclusion, "This is how life is for most of us, most of the time; we are absorbed in the daily routine of living. The main urge is always to survive." (203)

Though earlier she had been alright physically, she felt as if she had lost everything. But now she realizes that death cannot blot out life and her daughter will always be with her, and the link becomes vibrant and alive, erasing the grief that has been with her since Anu died. She is reminded of her father saying "You have to believe in the normality of things. Otherwise living becomes impossible." Perhaps he tried to make her understand that we must try to maintain a discreet balance between reality as it is and the illusion that surrounds it, to make our existence possible.

Notes and References:

1. Deshpande, Shashi, *The Binding Vine*, (Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1993) p-15. All further textual references are from this book, from this edition.
2. Jandial, Gur Pyari, *The Atlantic Literary Review* Vol. 4, No. 3, July – Sept. 2003, p-121.