

Review Article

Realism in the Portrayal of Indian Women in Shashi Deshpande's Novels

Mahesh Kumar

Assistant Professor, Department of English, GDM College, Harnaut, Nalanda, Bihar, India.

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I N F O

E-mail Id:

jmdmaheshkr@gmail.com

Orcid Id:

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7087-2838>

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A B S T R A C T

Shashi Deshpande is one of the foremost novelists who showcased to us the real picture of our society projecting women's subjugation realistically. Her women characters are influenced by the changing times and as such they are not content with the traditional roles which have been assigned to them. The roles of mother, daughter, sister, wife and daughter-in law are reinvestigated by the protagonists of Shashi Deshpande. In the novel women are the victims as they have silenced themselves but, in the end, they come out of their shells of silence and want to articulate themselves. The winds of liberation and change have been blowing and the novels of Deshpande, though not having closed endings, end on the note of not despair but hope. Shashi Deshpande is hopeful that the lives of these myriads of women will definitely transform one day.

The present novel "The Binding Vine" is actually a mirror of the Indian society. It has Urmila as a protagonist who, unlike previous heroines, fights other women's battles. She is a college lecturer and is married to Kishore who works in the Merchant Navy. In the beginning of the novel Urmila is grieving for the loss of her daughter. Her own suffering leads her to recognize the suffering of other women. She reads her mother-in-law Mira's poems which present to her the true account of Mira's life which represent the victimization of many other women. Mira is subjected to marital rape all night. Kalpana, Shakutai's daughter is raped by her own uncle Prabhakar. Urmila sympathizes with her and fights for her when the hospital authorities try to transfer her to a far-off suburban hospital. Urmila is the true embodiment of the female bonding between women and the writer hints that women must join hands to fight their victimization. Once they are united no one can harras them in any manner.

Keywords: Traditional, Protagonist, Articulate, Myriads, Embodiment, Victimization

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande an eminent novelist has emerged as a writer possessing deep insight into the female psyche. Focussing on the marital relationships she seeks to expose traditions by which a woman is trained to play her subservient role in the family. It has resulted in the entry of the middle and upper classes women into remunerative vocations that were largely the preserves of men. The Socio-economic emancipation¹ of women in India has brought up in its train, changes in their status and outlook. The widely effected area of this change has been the vital relationship between man and woman. The concepts of love, marriage and sex have undergone a lot of change. Woman, who was dissatisfied with the inhibiting cultural and sexual roles assigned to her from the dawn of patriarchal India, is now gaining strength to rebel against the traditional and social oppressions. But at the same time, she fails totally reject her social and cultural background. She stands therefore at crossroads caught between tradition and modernity where her many a cherished² dream or desire is demolished and she has to face disillusionment in the dilemma of her identity and cultural captivity.

Shashi Deshpande, in all her novels, has dealt with the problems of the 'New Woman'. Especially, she has concentrated on the theme of women's yearning for individualization and endeavour for equalisation with man. The reality of the modern Indian woman is that even to the basic needs of life like love, marriage and sex, she is in a state of utter confusion because of the traditional and social norms and customs³. Coming out of home she has seen and experienced the world on her own and has therefore developed different attitudes towards the various aspects of life. These attitudes sometimes reject the traditions and sometimes rebel against them. That is why she feels a kind of imbalance between the traditional expectation and her new individual demands.

Feminine Anguish

The novel has a multicity of complex themes but the predominant theme is that of an agony caused by the death of Urmi's daughter Anu, which is introduced in the beginning. It dominates the consciousness of narrator-heroine through the thick and thin of the varied experiences and sensations in the novel. The novelist gives a peep into the Indian psyche by presenting characters that collectively share Urmila's personal agony⁴. Thus the mother's agony is relieved by communal sharing and affections and rise above the European concept of existential agony which is isolationistic and individualistic and hence depressing and deadly. This agony is balanced with the agony of Mira, the mother of Urmila's husband Kishore. She died in the birth of her second child and could not adjust emotionally with the passive egotistical⁵ love of her husband.

Shashi Deshpande is unlike Jane Austen in painting the human spectacle. The later paints the comedy of human life whereas the former depicts the serious, the painful, and the agonizing aspects of life verging on the tragic. Rightly has Iyengar remarked: "*Raji, Shashi and Juliet all three write about the tears of things, the little upset the life the price one has to pay for one's acute self-awareness and the loneliness that become more pronounced as one gets older and older.*"

The Female Protagonist

The Binding Vine deals with the multifaceted protagonist, Urmi. Her one year-old daughter has died and she is unable to forget her because her memories haunt Urmi. She fights with the memories but also realizes that forgetting is betrayal: "*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.*"⁶

She also realizes her responsibility to her living son, Kartika who needs her love and watches anxiously. It is not that she talks of every death of her kith and kin in this way. When her father died, she could bear the shock easily, she says, 'Papa is only a memory, a gentle memory.' But Anu is different when Indu wanted to have a framed photograph of Anu on the wall, she reacts bitterly: "*I don't need a picture to remember her, I can remember every bit of her every moment of her life.*"⁷ How can you imagine I need a picture?" But when her friend Lalita asks how many kids she had, she replies, "Only one a son," and soon she realizes that she has done injustice to Anu: "only one a son... the words keep hammering in my mind. How could I, oh God, How could I? That was betrayal, treachery, how could I deny my Anu? Obsessed with the memories of her daughter, she comes across a photograph of her mother-in-law Mira which is introduced as "Kishore's mother. Kartika's grandmother." The trunk from which she gets the photograph contains many books and diaries of Mira. The poems of Mira are in Kannada and the diary is in English. Inquisitive⁸ to know more about her, she asks Akka about her. Akka tells her that her brother saw Mira at a wedding and fell in love with her.

Urmi notices the difference in handling over of Mira's property to her. When Akka hands over little bits of Mira Jewellery, she says, "They are Kishore's mother's ... I kept them for his wife." But when she hands over the books and diaries of Mira, she says, "Take this, its Mira's." "She did not mention Kishore at all, as if she was now directly linking me with Mira." This shows that a woman loses her identity after her marriage⁹. She is seen either as a wife or a mother who in a way, erases her real self and imposes another alien self on her. The difference made by Akka symbolizes that the poems and dairies are "self-actualizing, whose identities are not dependent on man."

Realism in Portrayal

After reading the poems, Urmi realizes the suffering of Mira, “the woman who wrote those poems in the solicitude of an unhappy marriage, who died giving birth to her son at twenty-two.” In the eyes of Urmi, Mira’s diary, “is not a daily account of her routine life but a communion¹⁰ with herself.” For the time being she forgets her own suffering and tries to probe into Mira’s poetry to visualize the kind of troubled life she has lived. Taken together, the poems and the diary entry connote molestation in marriage. Take for example the following line, “But tell me, friend did Laxmi too, twist brocade¹¹ tassels round her fingers and tremble, fearing the coming of the dark-clouded, engulfing night?” This is further denoted by the dairy entries like the following:

But I have my defences I give him the fact nothing more, never my feelings ... And so it begins ‘please’ he says ‘please’, I love you.’ And over and over again until he has done, ‘I love you’ ‘Love!’ How I hate the word. If this is love, it is terrible thing.”

Such passages embody the psychological fears and physical suffering of Mira. Urmi wants to share this suffering with Vanna, her friend from child and her sister-in-law but she cannot because “I cannot speak of Mira writing to her. That is another pocket of silence between us. One can never see one’s parent as a sexual being, he or she is normally a cardboard figure labelled parent.¹² Urmi remembers the poem behind which lies the man “who tries to possess another human being against her will.”

Don’t tread path barred to you obey, never utter, a ‘no’ submit and your life will be a paradise she said and blessed me.¹³

The same kind of experience is conveyed by Saru, the protagonist of Deshpande’s novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. “A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband.... That’s the only rule to follow if you want happiness, don’t ever try to reverse the doctor-nurse, executive-secretary, principal-teacher role.”

Urmi decodes Mira’s loneliness from the fact that the latter rarely mentioned her family in her poems. This loneliness was a part of her being. When she came to her in-laws’ house, she was christened Nirmala — the first estrangement from her identity, her known self. One of her poems is written in reaction to this horrible incident¹⁴.

“A glittering ring gliding on the rice carefully traced the name Nirmala’. Who is this? None but I my name hence, bestowed upon me.”

But this strong assertion of identity and selfhood remains a private experience; it never becomes public in her life time.

Mira’s diary also mentions her meeting with the rising poet Venu 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 on me.” This is also a kind of brutality because “even to force your will upon another is to be brutal.” This reflects the agony of a creative woman in an androcentric world. It connotes “the handicaps of woman writers in a male-chauvinist society.” This is subordination by domestication.¹⁵ The same kind of English was given a vent by Kamla Das in her poem, ‘An Introduction.’

“Dress in saris, be girl.

Be wife, they said. Be embroider, be cook.

Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in oh.

Belong, cried the categorize.”

It is ironical that Urmi reads Mira’s poems as a hunter to find out the real self of Mira. While reading the poems, she is filled the excitement of a hunter. But soon this relationship changes. It is Mira, “who is now taking me by the hand and leading me.” The centrality of Mira in the fictional world of the *Binding Vine* is further confirmed by the borrowing of the title of the novel from one of the poems of Mira which is about the womb-piercing joy of her pregnancy — the *Binding Vine of love*.¹⁶

Urmi shares the anguish of not only her mother-in-law but also of Kalpana — a girl who becomes a prey to her own relative who molests her. When her mother, Sakutai approaches Urmi, and Vanna, who is a medical social worker, the latter tells her that Kalpana has been wronged by someone. She has also undergone severe head injury and is on the verge of death. Her mother requests the doctor not to inform the police. She further requests Urmi to tell him (the doctor) not to make the report.” Urmi is surprised to see Sakutai, whose husband has already deserted her for some other younger woman, worried about the marriage of Kalpana who is in the words of the doctor, “neither dead nor alive.” But she realizes that woman like Kalpana’s mother finds security in marriage. At least they are “safe from other man.” Marriage in the life of such women acts as ‘purdah’ or view, which serves a “provision of symbolic shelter”.¹⁷

As a mother, Sakutai was afraid of the boys of her chawl because they behave ‘like dogs panting after bitches.’ She had even thought of marrying Kalpana to Salu’s husband Prabhakar who was ‘mad’ after her. Kalpana out- rightly rejected the offer and ridiculed Salu. When she decided to marry a boy of her own liking she was raped by Prabhakar. It is significant to note that Salu was compelled by her husband to make such a proposal. When Salu knows that her own husband has molested Kalpana, she finishes her cooking, gives break-fast and then commits suicide

because she wants to avoid telling a lie to save her husband from the police. Her suicide symbolizes the anguish of the weakened soul of the typical traditional Indian woman. But what M.R. Anand says about the plight of Indian women cannot be fully true: "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 wanton animals who assault any possible victim, when possessed by lust".¹⁸

Though Urmi is accused of being 'traitor' to Mira and Kalpana, she is resolute, like Jaya of *The Long Silence*, to break the 'long silence' of women which comes in different forms — sometimes in the name of the social taboos, sometimes is the name of family. She justifies her stand because she sees these mishaps from the female point of view.¹⁹

The narrative technique is in the first person autobiographical one. Urmila, the heroine narrator, is the pivot of the plot. She connects all the threads of the plot — the stories of Mira, Sakutai, Kalpana, Vanna and Harish, Kishore and Amrut, Inni and Akka, Aju and Baijji and the obscure figure of Mira's husband and Bhaskar and Malcolm. It is Urmila's agony at the death of Anu, which weaves all emotions and all themes into unity. The intensity of her emotions and experiences is powerfully projected.

The chief theme of the novel is the 'Binding Vine' of feelings and emotions between parent and child and between husband and wife. Urmi remembers: "Papa's anger in silence were weapons against which Inni has no defence. At such times, I could sense her constant preoccupation with his feeling, her grouping towards him, her hurt when he rejected these overtures." Urmi's urge and desire to keep Kishore by her side also rebates to the 'Binding Vine' theme and symbol. After Papa's death, the devoted son Ambu is more devoted to Inni; 'Filial piety is gaining on him.' The following lines of Mira's poetry also indicate the earnest symbolical²⁰ import of the title:

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

But how to escape this cord

This Binding Vine of love."

It is love, which is the Binding Vine of life: "The most important need is to love. From something which we can anchor ourselves to this strange world we find this anchor. But love makes you vulnerable²¹." Urmi finally realizes that relationships, always imperfect, survive on hope".²²

The opening lines of the epigraph in part four also suggest the same theme:

"Standing still I scratched,

Stretching out my arms.

Sinking deep into the earth,

Like the Banyan roots,

Sinking the spring of life."

We observe the vision of attachment and detachment, as 'The Binding Vine' views, and yearning to pose the personhood of the women protagonists the reason of suffering and discovering of reality after disillusionment.²³ The dream of the dwelling on 'self' and individual level dies like the Abhimanyu of the Chakravyuha, because he had no way out. Likewise, the modern Indian women are so strangled by convention and customs that their dreams and desires to lead a life of their own free will and fancy, fail and they are bound to be disillusioned. But this disillusionment of the protagonists provides them a fair and fresh way to lead their lives because 'the spring of life' is always there to welcome them. Now she is capable of carrying on life with new hope and energy²⁴.

Shashi Deshpande represents the true cultural ethos regarding the expression of the vision of life in the novel through Urmi's acknowledgement: "After everything passes — grief, shock anger, bitterness ... this remains: that is Worthing or else why would death be so terrible"? This is nothing but a positive faith in life²⁵.

Conclusion

The Binding Vine deals with the multi-faceted protagonist, Urmi. "This novel has got three strands, the stories of three women: Kalpana, who is unconscious throughout; Mira, a poet, who is now dead, and Urmila who discovers Mira's poems and also learns about Kalpana. But Urmila is more than a filter, a medium through whom the other stories come through; she is also part of the overall theme."

Urmi's effort to publicize the gruesome reality of Kalpana's life is an effort to oppose a "culture in which such feminist dreams have been replaced by fundamental patriarchy that divides women into rigid categories based on function."

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