

Delineation of Man and Women Relationships in Shashi Deshpande's Novel, The Binding Vine

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Abstract

Man-woman relationship is a social relationship and it is the base of all other relationships. Indian woman occupies an important place in all human relationships. Outwardly, man-woman relationship appears to be based on mutual understanding and faith, but crush and damage by the evils such as male ego; male-domination and gender discrimination.

The women have been traditionally characterized as ideally warm, gentle and submissive, who are to be kept in subordination to the male members of the family. Manu declares:

Day and night, women must be kept in subordination to the males of the family: in childhood to the father, in youth to her husband, in old age to her sons. Even though the husband be destitute of virtue and seeks pleasure elsewhere, he must be worshipped as god.

When Urmi meets Shakuntala, the mother of a rape victim, Kalpana on her visit to a hospital where Vanaa works. Earlier the mother assumes that her daughter, who is now lying unconscious, has been injured in a car accident. On examination, the doctor informs her that she has been raped, in the process of which she is so badly injured that she is lying like a vegetable neither dead nor alive. The mother's reaction to this news is quite predictable. She tells Vanaa hysterically, "It's not true, you people are trying to blackmail my daughter's name." (Shashi Deshpande, 1992, p. 58.) Later on, catching a hint of the conversation between Vanaa and Dr. Bhaskar, the doctor in charge, she recoils in fear against the word, 'report.' She cries

"No, no, no. Tell him, tai, it's not true, don't tell anyone. I'll never be able to hold up my head again, who'll marry the girl, we're decent people, doctor," she turns to him, "don't tell the police."

The narrator highlights her immediate concern here which is that the rape should remain a secret. In writing about rape, Deshpande has not attempted anything new but the way she has portrayed this sordid drama is very realistic.

Keywords: male-domination, gender discrimination, subordination, sordid

Human experience for centuries has been synonymous with the masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one-sided and incomplete. Woman has

not been defined as a subject in her own right but merely has an entity that concern man either in his real life or his fantasy life.

Since the inception of the feminist movement in the 1960s in the West, much has been written on women, but much still remains to be done to reflect the injustices meted out to women and also to rid the male-psyche of the prejudices and misconceptions regarding them.

Alexander Dumas, the nineteenth century French dramatist, was the first to use the term “feminism” for the movement for women’s political rights. Later it spread across the world to secure complete rights for women- political, social, economic and educational. The movement went from strength to strength and, by the end of the twentieth century, made the complacent society to think anew about the age-old distorted beliefs. The movement could not make much headway in Indian society steeped in religious belief, superstitions and tradition. Though, of late, feminism does seem to have begun influencing a cross-section of the Indian society. Some few Indian writers in English have challenged the hitherto unchallenged man-woman relationship.

In the novel, *The Binding Vine*, Urmi meets Shakuntala, the mother of a rape victim, Kalpana on her visit to a hospital where Vanaa works. Earlier the mother assumes that her daughter, who is now lying unconscious, has been injured in a car accident. On examination, the doctor informs her that she has been raped, in the process of which she is so badly injured that she is lying like a vegetable neither dead nor alive. The mother’s reaction to this news is quite predictable. She tells Vanaa hysterically, “It’s not true, you people are trying to blackmail my daughter’s name.” (Shashi Deshpande, 1992, p. 58.) Later on, catching a hint of the conversation between Vanaa and Dr. Bhaskar, the doctor in charge, she recoils in fear against the word, ‘report.’ She cries:

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The narrator highlights her immediate concern here which is that the rape should remain a secret. In writing about rape, Deshpande has not attempted anything new but the way she has portrayed this sordid drama is very realistic. The characters spring to life and the anger, frustration, helplessness and despair of the victim’s family are brought out evocatively. The narrator, Urmi, escorts the sobbing, Shakuntala to her house on Vanaa’s request and from here begins their association. Urmi visits her regularly to inquire after her daughter and through their conversation we get a gleaming of Kalpana’s life.

Urmila, however, is unable to see the point in blaming Kalpana. She is outraged that the rapist will be allowed to get away scot-free, if the case is not registered as a rape. She tries to reason with Shakutai: “She was hurt, she was injured, wronged by a man; she didn’t do anything wrong. Why can’t you see that? Are you blind? It’s not her fault, no, not her fault at all.” She is unable to convince Shakutai, who keeps saying, “But some-times, I think the only thing that can help Kalpana now is death.” Shakutai who keeps meandering between praising her daughter and criticising or blaming her is “a victim of her own values. Yet she wasn’t born with these values embedded within her mother’s womb. Someone had to shape these values, make her believe that they were her own. Who? Her mother, her mother’s mother, her mother’s mother’s mother? Not at all. It was her father, her father’s father, her father’s father’s father, and nauseam.”

The mother’s reaction, no doubt, is a reflection of the society we live in, governed by age-old patriarchal norms. 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 attached to the way she carries herself, the way she sits, stands, talks and interacts with others. Taking long strides denotes masculinity, and so a girl is told to walk with soft steps, so soft 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 to bring the contours of her body into greater prominence and attract people’s attention.

If a girl is raped, then, according to the rules laid down by society, she is considered to be as much at fault as the rapist, if not more. Perhaps, there can be no greater injustice heaped on women than this. Worse still, the police whose duty it is to bring the culprit to book, prefer to record it as an accident as in the case of Kalpana. Dr. Bhaskar, the doctor in charge of the case, protests in outrage at the case being reported as an accident.

The police officer’s argument, no doubt, aptly sums up the Indian psyche nurtured as it is in a culture which, in general, depicts women as grossly sensuous and licentious. So much so that in a crime as brutal as rape, it is the victim more than the accused who desires to remain anonymous. The ancient Hindu law-giver, Manu, whose philosophy occupies an important place in the Indian tradition and culture, is of the opinion of women that the creator “implanted in them carnal passions, love for ornament, impure desires, wrath, dishonesty, malice and bad conduct.” It is no wonder, then, as S. Indira observes: “Kalpana’s mother Shakutai seemed to be more worried about the scandal which would certainly ruin the family’s name and impair the marriage prospects’ of not only Kalpana but also her second daughter, Sandhya.”

Dr. Bhaskar finds it strange that women like Shakutai who have got nothing out of marriage except children, still live in fear of their children remaining unmarried. He is informed by Vanaa that Shakutai's husband had deserted her long ago for another woman and left her alone to fend for herself and the children. Hence he thinks it is a mystery that Shakutai should hanker after the marriage of her children when it had given her little comfort or happiness herself. As he tells Urmi: "Women are astonishing, I think it takes a hell of a lot of courage for a woman like that to even think of marriage." Urmi replies that women marry in spite of everything because it provides security. She makes a valid point here and emphasises the vulnerability of single women in a social set up as ours, where men and women are expected to follow a rigid code of conduct keeping natural, biological feelings under control.

In spite of all her sympathies, Urmi is unable to do anything for Kalpana. She remains a mute spectator until the hospital authorities decide to shift her to a suburban hospital as beds are in much demand in the crowded hospital. Urmi then decides to take the matter to the press so that Kalpana may get justice. Urmi's crusade for Kalpana does not receive the approval of either Vanaa or Urmi's mother. Nevertheless, Urmi pursues the case. Eventually, the case is reopened and the identity of the rapist is revealed only in the end. However, a perpetuation of the tragedy cannot be avoided as the case draws to a close. The rapist is discovered to be Shakutai's sister Sulu's husband, who, it is later revealed, had always lusted after Kalpana. This revelation shatters Sulu who immolates herself in guilty despair, leaving behind her grief-stricken sister, Shakutai, who had adored her.

Deshpande encroaches upon an entirely untouched subject of rape which is considered a taboo subject by other Indian writers in English.

In *The Binding Vine*, however, Deshpande describes the obsession of a man with his wife and her intense dislike for physical intimacy with him, which finds voice in a series of poems discovered by the protagonist Urmi long after her death.

Many years after her marriage, Urmi is given an old trunk full of books and other odds and ends belonging to her long dead mother-in-law, Mira, by her husband's step-mother, who is referred to as Akka. Akka is also the mother of her friend, Vanaa. While handing over the trunk to her, Akka tells her how Urmi's father-in-law had been attracted to Mira, a college student, and how he had pursued and married her. Perusing the voluminous pile of writing left behind by the young Mira, Urmi fathoms the extent of forced sexual activity Mira was subjected to by her husband. The trunk is full of school note books which Mira had used as diaries, scribbling pads, untidy bundles of paper, a file and an envelope full of photographs. Reading through the cryptic poems and entries in her diary, Urmi is able to reconstruct the tragic tale of a sprightly girl who was condemned to suffer in an incompatible marriage. After a careful study she is able to decipher the essence of the thoughts which Mira had, perhaps, tried to put

down on paper. From the book of poems presented to Mira by her father, it is evident to Urmi that her father was proud of her talent. Mira's photographs and writings resurrect in Urmi's mind an image of a vivacious and intelligent young girl. Her desire to be a poet and her inhibitions about expressing it aloud, her fear of being laughed at, are all obvious in her poems.

Mira, perhaps, symbolises the plight of countless women who face the same situation but are unable to voice their suffering. The invasion of one's body even though sanctified by marriage, can be as traumatic as rape. We come across a similar situation in Shashi Deshpande's short story "Intrusion" which describes the experiences of a honeymooning couple. It is a highly sensitive story where the husband imposes himself on his yet unprepared wife. These experiences evocatively bring out the humiliation experienced by the protagonist who feels her body has been violated by her crass and insensitive husband.

A husband imposing himself on his wife is, however, never publicised at least among the Indians where the Puranas dictate that it is a wife's duty to please her husband in bed.

Urmi is able to feel her pain and anguish years later and connects her sorrow to that of Shakutai's who also has the same thing to say, "Why does this have to happen to me?" Urmi alleviates her grief by discovering and empathising with the sorrow of these women. Since the beginning of time, it had always been taken for granted that marriage provided a means for man to satisfy his sexual urge and to help in the task of procreation, and that woman was only a tool to be used towards that end. The feminist movement initiated in the West, shattered this myth and proclaimed that woman had every right to find fulfilment in the act of sex. Indian women, bred as they are in the culture which demanded their total subjugation however, could not even dream of asserting themselves in this aspect. While Deshpande's Mira represents women who are victims of marital rape, Just as Mira silently subjects herself to the night assaults of her husband, Maya turns a psychological wreck unable to get any solace from her unresponsive husband.

Though the novel, *The Binding Vine*, essentially revolves around the individual tragedies of Urmi, Mira and Kalpana, Deshpande hints at the raw deal faced by most women at different levels-whether it is women from chawls like Shakutai and Sulu, or the urban, educated women like Urmi's mother, Inni, her friend, Vana and her mother-in-law, Akka.

The Indian custom of changing the bride's name is a pivot point of transformation-a complete revamping of any young girl's psyche, so aptly documented in the saga of Deshpande's heroines or protagonists. Mira, who is bound in a marriage against her choice, cringes further when a new name 'Nirmala' is thrust on her. *The Binding Vine*, with its assortment of women who seem to be victimised one way or the other, has prompted reviewers to present vastly contrasting opinions. In the words of Dermot Clinch: "That Long Silence was a gloomy novel but *The Binding Vine* is gloomier still." In contrast, a woman reviewer, Shreya Cheravuri, feels

that there is nothing in the novel to show blatant physical subjugation of women. She says: “The subjugation is not crude enough to be solely physical, though there is an example of that in Mira’s marriage, but also intellectual, sexual and emotional. Still Deshpande does not fall into the trap of women- as victims syndrome. which is an easy one to fall into in any feminist writing.”

In portraying the various women characters, Deshpande shows that they seek fulfilment only within the orbit of family and relationships. The Binding Vine explores important problems of our time without offering any facile solutions. Deshpande’s characters may be independent to some extent but are firmly bound by the shackles of tradition. Urmila, perhaps, is the most rebellious of Deshpande’s women characters. Unlike the protagonists in the other novels written by her, who are aware of the inequalities in society but do not attempt to set right anything, Urmila takes up cudgels on behalf of the rape victim, Kalpana. She is instrumental in publicising the case and getting the police to investigate the matter and find the culprit. She encourages her friend, Vanaa, to assert herself and stop behaving like a door mat.. She also sets herself to the task of translating the poems written by her mother-in-law in Kannada to English and intends publishing them. All this has prompted Indira Nityanandam to write: “The Binding Vine is a refreshing change from the first three novels of Deshpande. Protest comes easily to her protagonist here and there is less agony in attempting to change societal roles and attitudes. The hope for Indian women lies in the happy fact that though there are Miras and Kalpanas and Shakutais, we also have our Urmilas.”(Indira Nityanandam, p. 66 .)

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