

Tradition Vs Transition: A Psychological Study of Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*

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Any discussion of postmodern literature is closely associated with the broadening of the thematic range in Indian English fiction as postmodernism is a term applied to a wide-ranging set of developments in critical theory, philosophy, architecture, art, literature and culture, which are generally characterized as either in reaction to, or suspending modernism. In postmodernism, there is a shift in emphasis from the Gandhian era of village centrism to the city centrism of the post-emergency era. Issues such as identity, hybridity, cultural differences and conflict, analysed by post-colonial critics in the name of East- West encounter, takes a space in postmodern Indian English fiction. As the world has become 'a global village', no culture or society is pure today and thus postmodernism provides way for new types of thinking

. Postmodern writers take their characters and situation both from inside the country and abroad into its orbit and develop them. Scholars who accept the division of post modernity as a distinct period believe that society has collectively eschewed modern ideas and instead adopted ideas that are rooted in the reaction to the restriction and limitations of those ideas. As Bijay Kumar Das in his book, *Postmodern Indian English Literature* says,

“In the Post -1980 era love, sex, and marriage or the failure of it are some of the leading themes in Indian English novel. The description of love and sex is very bold and rather unconventional” (56). Apart from the usual things such as love, sex and contemporary reality, Indian English women novelists produce feminist novels and thereby asserting the rights of women to live their life in their own way. Though the characteristics of postmodern life are sometimes difficult to grasp, most postmodern scholars point to concrete and visible technological and economic changes that they claim to have brought about the new types of thinking and approaches.

Indeed psychoanalysis and literature have always been viewed as two very closely related intellectual disciplines. Literature has actually provided a contiguous field of verification for psychoanalytical propositions. Now psychoanalysis has emerged as a valid tool of literary criticism and gained wide acceptability among the critical and intellectual circles as it is one of the applications of postmodernism. The thing which distinguishes psychoanalytic literary criticism from other approaches is that it usually takes into account those aspects of the works which have been thought as unimportant by the conventional critics. Its practice of integrating these very complicated details into serious discourse has enabled it to come out with new interpretations of literary works. Indian Writing in English seems to be in need of this new and particular approach such as psychoanalysis for it certainly promises to earn it new respectability and wider acceptance on the world literary stage. Indian fiction in English and Indian criticism in English is likely to be immensely benefited by incorporating psychoanalytic formulations into the creative and critical endeavour respectively. Psychoanalytic criticism is scientific to the core and is therefore in keeping with the scientific spirit of the present age.

Women, who constitute half of the world's population, are paradoxically not treated on par with men in all spheres of human activity. In a patriarchal society, woman is supposed to be an ideal wife, a mother and above all an excellent home maker with multifarious roles in the family. A creation of patriarchy that serves the male flair for domination is not based on mutuality but on oppression. In literature, a woman is 'marginalised' or 'silenced' and as a result she has to suppress her real self and lose her identity in a male dominated society.

Earlier days, the role of woman was restricted by her womanhood and therefore, the experience of the repressed female was not reflected in literature. But with the rise of feminism, women became aware of the fact that their inferiority is not ordained in heaven. Especially the emergence of women novelists considerably influenced the change in attitude. Their portrayal of women characters in the novels invariably bears authenticity to their feminist perspective. They stress through their products that women are to be liberated not only from men but also from their own psychological fears and enslavement.

This paper seeks to focus primarily on the psychological exploration of the inner mind of women characters in the novel *The Binding Vine*, written by Shashi Deshpande. The writer being a woman dives deep into the inner mind of the repressed women by virtue of their feminine sensibility and psychological insight and brings to light their issues, which are the outcome of Indian women's psychological and emotional imbalances.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most prominent and accomplished women novelists of postmodern period. As her novels cannot conceal her class identity, they cannot help but betray her gender identity. Deshpande herself admits in one of her recent interviews as it is published in *The Times of India* under the title "Demythifying Womanhood : Novelist Shashi Deshpande talks to Veena Mathews" as, " As writing is born out of personal experience, the fact that I am a woman is bound to surface. Besides, only a woman could write my books- they are written from the inside, as it were" (8). She is modern in her fictional techniques. In her novels, Shashi Deshpande explores togetherness and separation, presence and absence, infact everything that is related to the psychodynamics of relationships. Shashi Deshpande's protagonists are in search of an authentic and distinct life.

The Binding Vine gives an insight into the psychological suffering of the women characters. The novel has its beginning in a personal loss. Urmila known as Urmi, a lecturer, the protagonist of the novel, is grieving over the death of her one year old baby daughter, Anu. Urmi's loss is of a different kind than that of the protagonists of Shashi Deshpande's earlier novels Saru or Indu. They had lost a mother or a mother surrogate from whom they had already been separated. But Urmi's case is different that she has lost her daughter, the one who is always with her and she appears to have a better control over her life and her personal relationships than these earlier protagonists.

As she is deeply affected by Anu's loss, Urmi isolates herself mentally from those closest to her. These include her husband, her mother, mother-in-law and sister-in-law. She has been staying with her mother, Inni at her parental home as her husband, Kishore works for the Merchant Navy and is therefore more of a visitor than a regular member of the household. Kishore too is one of those "absent" husbands that the readers come across again and again in Shashi Deshpande's fiction.

Though Urmi has married a man of her own choice, she is desperate of her married life. Being financially emancipated and having confidence as a Lecturer, she has developed a kind of super ego in herself which denies her to submit before her husband, Kishore. Even she cannot bear the submission of Vanaa, her friend and sister-in-law, and her mother before their spouses. Yet she cannot go away from her nature – bound role, especially the role of the sex – partner. Ultimately, Urmi and Kishore relationship crumbles on account of lack of communication between the husband and wife.

Since the beginning of their married life, Urmi finds that the bond between her and her husband is not that of love. Even at the very first night of their wedding, she feels the distance

from Kishore. She realises that “He looked trapped” (137). Whenever she tries to reveal her emotional insecurity, he asserts himself sexually. Kishore, the archetypal Indian husband never understands the depth of her feeling. As she cannot bear with her husband’s departure, Urmi tries to tell him two times, “Each time you leave me, the parting is like death” (139) but Kishore finds solution in the physical relationship. This incompatibility to understand each other of course ends in alienation.

Earlier in their marriage, Kishore was neither spontaneous nor emotional like Urmi. But after the death of their daughter, he is absolutely uncommunicative. As she keeps distance from the closest, she expects some sort of solace from Kishore as it is also his responsibility as a husband to comfort his wife at this pathetic situation. If Kishore pats Urmila with his consoling words, she can comfort herself in a better way. The relationship between Kishore and Urmi is distinctly manifested through Urmi’s words: “Yes, here it is, the knowledge I spared myself then. Kishore will never remove his armour, there is something in him I will never reach. I have lived with the hope that someday I will. Each relationship, always imperfect, survives on hope. Am I to give up this hope?” (141). As a result she gets repressed.

Urmi is known for her psychological fear and often mental conflicts too. The experience of love and trust has made her more sure of herself than most people. However, her love for Kishore and her marriage to him however have made a difference. This fear may be the result of her repressed feelings. Urmi says,

But somewhere on the way I seem to have lost that confidence.
Now there is fear – the fear of Kishore never returning home, lost
in the seas somewhere as one of his friends was; 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. (82)

Thus a marriage that suppresses Urmi’s human demands, a marriage that denies her fullness of experience leads her to get solace in Dr. Bhaskar Jain’s friendship. When Vanaa, Urmi’s friend as well her sister-in-law, advises her to be more careful about relationship with Dr. Bhaskar, Urmi thinks:

But how can Vanaa, secure in the fortress of her marriage
to Harish, understand what it is like- marriage with a
man who flits 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)

At times, Urmi suffers from a long separation from her husband. This separation sometimes gives her an opportunity to think of another relationship and there are even moments when she overcomes a longing for physical gratification during her husband’s long absence from her and home. Though her friendship with Dr. Bhaskar provides ample opportunity to satisfy her urge and Dr. Bhaskar has declared his love for her, Urmi doesn’t respond to Bhaskar as he expects. Instead, she just holds back and thinks “It’s so much easier, so much simpler, to just think of virtue and chastity and being a good wife” (166)

Urmi’s reaction to Dr. Bhaskar indirectly indicates Urmi’s strong love for Kishore though he fails to do the things as a responsible husband. This is proved when Bhaskar asks Urmi whether she loves her husband; she confesses that she loves her husband very much. The relationship between Kishore and Urmi is really an enigma. Commenting on Urmi’s relationship

with her husband, J. P. Tripathi in *The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande* under the title “The Binding Vine and Indian Ethos” says as follows:

Urmila, the sailor’s wife and college teacher, is more self-reliant and has an identity different from that of her husband; she is self-respecting and does not want to live on Kishore’s money. She is, however, a sensitive vine and need Kishore as an Oak to entwine herself around.” (152)

Though Urmil is leading an economically and socially secure life even without her husband, she feels at other times growing erotic feelings within her like a normal human being. In other way, it can be said that Urmil’s suppressed feelings and desires struggle to find a way out to be discharged. Though she finds it hard to control, she consoles herself as follows: “I could put my desires into a deep freeze and take them out, intact and whole, when he returned” (164-165) Thus, unlike the earlier protagonists of Shashi Deshpande’s novels, Urmil appears to have a better control over her feelings and her personal relationships. The novel vividly depicts the initial trauma and the intense anguish that Urmil goes through and the various stages through which she passes before she comes to terms with the death of her daughter.

While grieving over the death of her daughter, Urmil comes across the poetry written by Mira, her long dead mother-in-law, when she is subjected to physical as well as mental suffering in her unhappy married life. Urmil’s journey therefore is not so much into her personal past though that is also there but into the buried life of her mother-in-law. Urmil finds identification in the poetry and gets involved and finds relief from excruciating pain in the predicament of Mira. Mira’s inner life is made available to Urmil through not only the poems but also through the diary. The entries in her diary provide a glimpse into a troubled life lived by Mira painfully and secretly. Talking about one of Mira’s poems Urmil observes:

Mira was only 22 when she wrote this. she had been married at the age of 18. Since then, she had lived a life which, even if normal to most 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)

At this description, Urmil observes an unhappy woman who assumes the traditional role of a submissive wife, silently living her life without raising questions and without having room for discharging her suppressed feelings. It may be true that Mira’s writings only have given her a vent to her bottled-up feelings and have kept her alive in her husband’s house.

As Mira’s married life is based not on mutual understanding but on force, she has been the victim of rape. What Mira suffers from is generally not acknowledged by our culture as rape, but the legitimate right of the husband to possess his wife sexually, with or without her consent. Mira’s infatuated husband has exercised this right against her will always. Mira’s relationship with her husband is in comatose. Mira’s husband represents the passionate love of men. He never succeeds in developing an emotional bond of love between them. Every day and every moment that Mira spends, there is a cry of rape and anguish. These feelings “runs through all her writing – a strong, clear thread of an intense dislike of the sexual act with her husband, a physical repulsion from the man she married.” (63) In one of her poems, Mira laments:

But tell me, friend, did Laxmi too

twist brocade tassels round her fingers
and tremble, fearing the coming
of the dark-clouded, engulfing night? (66)

Such passages embody the psychological fears and physical suffering of Mira. Mira's marriage is only a 'black clouded' and every night is a haunted night she awaits with dread. She begins to hate the word "love" as it is uttered always by her husband. To her, love becomes a hateful thing and all that she desires is to be left alone. The papers from Mira's old trunk reveal about the relationship she shared with her husband and her feelings towards her husband are almost void. She laments as follows: "I don't mind his anger, it makes him leave me to myself, it is bliss when he does that why can't he leave me alone?" (67)

Urmi understands also Mira's latent feelings that Mira has a deep desire of being recognized as a good creative writer and a poet. This is fulfilled only through the diary and the poems written by her. She uses her pen as a weapon to save herself from abuse, anonymity and mutilation in the prison house of her husband. Every time while reading the poems, Urmi is filled with the excitement of a hunter. But soon this relationship changes when Urmi observes "It is Mira who is now taking me by the hand and leading me" (135) After reading the poems, Urmi realises the suffering of Mira, forgetting the gloomy side of her own life. She forgets her own suffering and tries to probe into Mira's poetry.

Thus Mira stands as a classic example of the multitude of unfortunate women who are forced into a loveless marriage and finally succumb to the lust of their husbands. Urmi's experiences acquire meaning when assessed in the context of Mira's life-story. There is a resemblance in the attitude of Mira and Urmi. Mira, who has worn the armour of aloofness and detachment against her husband, in the end cannot help but get attached to the child growing within her. It awakens in her "a desire for life" (136). As she says in her last poem:

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.
Smiling and joyful, Karna tore off his armour,
his body trailed blood.
Will that courage be mine when, denuded,
I stand naked and bare? (136-137)

To let down one's defences is to make oneself to abdicate the position of power in a relationship. Urmi, who is afraid of a thing that "Kishore will never remove his armour, there is something in him I will never reach" (141), wears the same armour for her own protection against hurt and pain from Kishore and others. Urmi is known for her stubborn nature in taking decision. She too wants to submit as Vanaa and Inni have done but she assures that "But I know that if I walk the way of submission once, I will walk that way forever." (82). The novel has an open ending as far as the relationship between Kishore and Urmi is concerned. They may or may not let down their defences with regard to each other. But in the end of the novel, Urmi lays down her armour before her mother when her mother breaks her silence about the wrong that she has suffered at the hands of her father.

Shashi Deshpande's attitude is always unique that though marriage often becomes a prison for her protagonists, she does not reject it but tries to create more breathing space for herself as well as for other women within the structures of marriage and family. As Kamini Dinesh observes, "The wife, in the end, is therefore not a rebel but a redeemed wife – one who

has broken the long silence, one who is no longer afraid of the dark. She is a wife reconceptualised as woman and an individual ...” (204). Urmi knows very well that each relationship is imperfect, does not opt out of relationship, but attempts in her own way to reconcile the claims of the self with that of the “other”. Thus the novel unfolds into a psychological description of Urmi, a complex character’s final acceptance of life on its own time.

The Binding Vine deserves to be treated as a feminist novel for its focus on the struggling of the interior mind of the shackled Indian women characters. Urmi in *The Binding Vine* is morbidly pre-occupied with the problems of death and rape. And she is a typical feminine voice who struggles through her own gloomy domestic atmosphere, not subduing but revolting, trying to sort out things for herself. Though the novel deals with the traditional things, *The Binding Vine* occupies a significant place in the Indian feminist fiction. Shashi Deshpande seems to be reinserting a ‘particular’ representation. This is highlighted by the use of verbal constructs that are typical of post colonial literature – the center and the periphery, the dominant and the marginalized, the oppressor and the oppressed. But the novel provides room for the analyses of the woman characters in the postmodern perspective too.

In Deshpande’s world, women who do not break their silence contribute to their own oppression and to that of their sex. As Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan observes, “For women to speak rape is itself a measure of liberation, a shift from serving as the object of voyeuristic discourse to the occupation of a subject position as ‘master’ of narrative” (78). If the novel tells us of women’s liberation, it also tells us of their bondage. Urmi manifests her ideas and her understanding of love as follows:

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)

Mira is known for her submission and oppression whereas Urmi is known for her courageous nature to reveal the physical and mental suffering of Mira to the world by publishing her poems. Urmi can rightly be addressed as a new woman. Though she suffers and passes through the gloomy side of her life, she wants to do something as a remedy to others’ sufferings when she comes across the problems of other women like Mira.

The theme of *The Binding Vine* is not the construction of femininity, but its deconstruction. A “deconstruction” is an important textual “occurrence” described and analyzed by many postmodern authors and philosophers. Deconstruction is far more important to postmodernism than its seemingly narrow focus on text might imply. The psychological transformation that Urmi achieves is through the psychoanalytic approaches to gender rather than sociological ones. This transformation Urmi achieves is more through a realization of the multiple and contrary identities which a woman possesses. Through the life of Mira, Urmi transforms herself from abnormal to normal stage by analyzing the happenings centred on the other women characters of the novel. She gets a sort of relief and as an individual, her search for happiness begins. Though Urmi is accused of being a “traitor” to Mira, she is resolute to break the silence of women which come in different forms – sometimes in the name of the social taboo and sometimes in the name of the family honour. By analyzing the life story of Mira and Urmi, one can find critique of the patriarchal ideology which ignores women’s aspirations for individuality beyond the confines of home and family and also these pathetic women’s longing

for true love which binds different human relations, keeps them intact and carries forward the life of human being. The novel of course signals towards the urgency required to change the established indoctrinations for the betterment of women also.

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