

Human Relationships in the Select Novels of Shashi Deshpande : A Bird's Eye View

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most dominant voices among the contemporary Indian writers writing in English. Being a woman herself, she chooses women as the central characters of her novels. Her novels have been categorized by some critics as 'feminist' novels, but, Deshpande is not happy with the classification of her texts. In her defense she claims that she is a woman herself and so, she is able to describe a woman's psyche, woman's predicament more convincingly than a male writer. She feels comfortable in writing about women and so, her characters 'happen to be women'. But, she provides her male characters an equal space along with her female characters. According to her, if any 'feminist' ideology has been traced in her writing that is not been incorporated by her intentionally, but, the readers, critics and scholars have found these things out. In that case, the author has to do nothing.

The focal point of Deshpande's novels is women and their struggles for existence in the rigid Indian society. She is conscious about 'feminism', but, her idea of feminism is unique. Her concept is totally different from what we know about the western concept of feminism. She thinks that the western thought of feminism is not applicable to the women of our country, especially to the women from the middle class society. In a broader aspect the word 'feminism' somehow delivers the idea that it is "a Western concept, rejecting the family and home, hating men and waging a war against them" (Shashi Deshpande:4). Shashi Deshpande emphasizes that feminism does not at all indulge in any of these actions - neither any of these actions is possible in India where women are supposed to be the home-maker. She even does not portray her male and female characters on the basis of master and servant relationship.

Shashi Deshpande has tried to project a realistic picture of Indian society and the middle class educated woman who is financially independent in this novel. All characters belong to the middle class, are sensitive, intelligent, educated and career-oriented. Deshpande endeavors to establish woman as an individual who breaks the traditional constraints and redefines her identity. With the availability educational and vocational opportunities, the educated middle and upper class woman, particularly in urban areas, have become conscious of their rights and responsibilities. Deshpande's women in *The Binding Vine* show this consciousness. Shashi Deshpande takes up for study the issues and problems of contemporary middle class women. These women are aware of the social and cultural problems of the male-dominated society.

The Story is narrated in the autobiographical style. All the events and episodes are narrated as experienced by Urmi who is the central character. The author rarely intervenes to interact with the readers. There is not much progression or happening in the novel as far as plot and action are concerned. The psyches of women belonging to different age groups and different social status have been highlighted. In that sense, there is a lot development in the novel. Shashi Deshpande's *Observation* coheres with Jasbir Jain who claims: The Biological-physiological core is the same; pain and mortality, suffering and oppression affects us in similar ways; social constructs and

institutions also have developed along similar lines as family, marriage and patriarchy. But between this core of sameness and the appearance of sameness (in dress, life styles and the rest, obliterating class differences) and the spread of information, which constitutes a common area of knowledge, there is a whole lot of difference, which works through myths, past histories, body language, gender and customs.

The caste or class factor is more prominent in Indian social system. The caste system refers to the various hereditary social classes because of castes; there are conflicts between the upper classes and the lower classes. In the prevailing male dominated society, women are shown in passive roles of mother, wife, daughter, and sister. But in *The Binding Vine* women are very active and dynamic. *The Binding Vine* explores the inner struggles of Urmi. Urmi, the protagonist represents a set of educated modern women and she also represents upper class. The novel deals with her attempt to assert her individuality and to realize her freedom. It depicts how it brings her into confrontation with family and with the male dominated world and society in general.

Urmi is intelligent and sharp-tongued. Urmi has lost her baby Anu and her grief is beyond consolation and any desire for sympathy. Urmi grieves for Anu despite the fact that she has a bigger boy, Kartik. She is not able to look forward to a future in such crucial time. She tries to convince Vanna how she manages everything. She says: I do not have money, just as it never occurs to her that even our two incomes clubbed together can't run to luxuries like taxis all the time, giving saris to the laundry after just one wear, buying expensive pastries... (94)

Urmi is also preoccupied with the suffering of her long dead mother-in-law Mira, who was subjected to rape in marriage. She also feels for Kalpana, unmarried girl, a victim of rape, hanging between life and death. It is also pointed out that Urmi is depressed by this situation. Urmi is unable to forget her Anu; her memories haunt Urmi. On the other hand, she realizes her duty, and responsibility to her son Kartik who needs her love and care. Therefore, she keeps Shanta to look after Kartik. She says, elucidating the implications of her class and gender in the family: However, Urmi is caught up in the discovery of her long dead mother-in-law's poetry. After reading her poems, Urmi realizes the suffering of Mira. She describes the diary: "This is not a daily account of her routine life, but a communion with herself" (51) Urmila believes in the institution of marriage. She understands the importance of marriage for women and knows that especially for women like Shakutai marriage means a shield from the other men. Urmila explains clearly her views about marriage to Dr. Bhaskar Jain. Urmila is happy with her domestic life and therefore she rejects the proposal of Dr. Bhaskar. Urmila loves her husband Kishore. Commenting on relationship with her husband, J.P.Tripathi says: "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 needs Kishore as an Oak to entwine herself around"² Urmi certainly shows a more positive attitude towards marriage. Though most of the educated, employed women give first preference to marriage and their family life, Urmi wishes to be financially independent and to have an individual identity in the society. She believes that marriage cannot bring happiness unless husband and wife have to surrender their superiority complex and ego. Thus, through Urmi's philosophy, Deshpande has tried to communicate to the readers that in this transitional phase, we need to put some constructive efforts to minimize the gap between two genders and two classes. Dr. Bhaskar Jain is the doctor who had attended Kalpana

in hospital at the time of her plight. That episode opens the first meeting between Urmi and Bhaskar, on subsequent meeting at the hospital, Bhaskar behaves coldly. He just walks away as if Urmi has done something wrong to him. Urmi goes deep into her thought and realizes that Bhaskar is also like all men who would take advantage of a single woman. Tears roll down her face when she recollects how he looked coldly and he walked away showing his indifference. Urmi had fallen in love with Kishore when she was 15. It was the day, when Urmi's grandfather died. It was Kishore, who informed her that her grandfather There is lot of space in their married life. They are capable of showing both attachment and detachment at the same time. There is loyalty and faithfulness to one another. When Bhaskar proposes Urmi and asks her whether she loves her husband, Urmi realizes that she loves him immensely. It is her love for Kishore that restricts her from accepting Bhaskar's proposal. However, Deshpande's implies that Kishore makes Urmi feel that there are certain aspects of his life which are inaccessible for her. She also shows how a woman feels dumped by her husband when he leaves her unmindful of her emotional needs.

The mother-daughter relationship has always occupied an important place in Deshpande's fiction. She does not give much authority to the picture of mother as an angel or deity who is worshiped in Indian society. She does not idealize 'woman' or 'mother' as many women writers do. Deshpande presents us with different facets of the mother-daughter relationship. It is a bittersweet experience with tensions and conflicts, love and cruelty, joy and pain. The conflict between mother and daughter can be, in most cases, just a conflict between tradition and modernity, or a clash between relationships. Yet, Deshpande implies that a woman's economic status and gender often condition her relationship with her daughter. After independence, many middle class families got better education. Education is valued not for its own sake, but for moving up the social hierarchy. Education and social life of lower class people is badly affected due to the oppressive approach of upper class. There is more compelling reason for the education of middle class people. Shashi Deshpande's characters reveal this attitude towards education.

Vanna and Urmi are closer than sisters. The poems of Mira haunt Urmi so much, so that she decides to publish them. But Vanna opposes because she feels that it will destroy the image and honour of her family. This shows how male oriented society conditions women to think to act so as to abide by the sanctions of patriarchy. She believes that a woman has to have a sense of belongingness in a family. Though she is an educated modern working woman her peacefulness justifies the system of belief which treats man as the master of the family and woman as the servant of family under the guiding principle of her master. She also testifies another patriarchal dictum education of children is always is mother's job in an Indian family. Mira is Urmi's mother-in-law. She died at the age of 22 while giving birth to her son. Mira's inner life is available to Urmi through the diary and poems. Mira was only 22 when she wrote poetry. She got married at the age of 18. Since then, she lived a life of normal woman. She was the only daughter of her father. He was proud of her. Mira had been writing poetry since her college days. She had in fact aspired to become a poet. She had even met a promising poet, Venu and had given him some of her poems to read, hoping for perhaps a word of encouragement from him or at least an assurance that she has poetic talent. However, Venu discouraged her. A well-known poet Venu tells her: 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)

Shashi Deshpande's characters have to fight against the male supremacy. Mira tried to write her poetry without a room of her own and in secret because she could never think of any publicity of her poem. She says in her poem:

They called me mad
They, who were entranced,
By a single white ray of light
When I spoke of the magic
Of the seven colours in a prism.(100)

Jasbir Jain comments on the issues of gender embedded in Mira's poetry: In her poems, there is convergence of the universal facts of female existence like desire, childbearing and maternal feelings and specific social conditions like paternal control and male will, which differ from culture to culture, generation to generation and class to class. There is, in Mira's poems, a sense of enclosure, the feeling of being in cocoon, reflecting a child's relation to the mother.

What Mira had suffered from is generally not acknowledged by our culture as rape, but the legal right of the husband to enjoy his sexuality; with or without her permission and Mira's obsessed husband had exercised this right against her will, against her strong dislike of him. Mira belongs to a privilege class because she writes poetry. Mira's story has other implications too; besides the aspect of rape within marriage, primarily there can be of lack of communication between the husband and wife. In male dominated society, a wife's wishes and desires are not given any priority, and social constraints compel them to behave within social framework. Shakutai and Kalpana represent a slightly younger generation than of Urmi and Inni. Shakutai belongs to lower strata of society – the mill workers and domestic servant. Shakutai's husband had deserted her for another woman. Shakutai, since then, had put up with hardships to bring up her three children – Prakash, Sandhya and Kalpana. Kalpana was her eldest child. Shakutai is in a state of shock, when she brings Kalpana to hospital half-alive.

In the case of rape, the social stigma is attached to the girl and her people, and not to the male culprit. Shakutai is more worried about the image and dignity of her family and wanted to protect reputation. She knows that situation is not under her control because Rape, as Adrienne Rich describes, It is not rape of the body alone but rape of the mind as well. The feeling of being victorious and gloating over the act makes the rapist even more detestable. She wants the doctor to report the case as an accident case. Shakutai was afraid of the bad opinion. However, her own experience of marriage has not exactly been a happy one. She cannot think of any other future for her daughters than that to get them married. Like most mothers, she hopes that somehow their lot in marriage would be better than hers. . Jasbir Jain rightly comments on marriage: The expectations from marriage remain the same even if there is a difference of priorities or qualities: protection, economic security, sexual satisfaction, children, and common bond. And problems arise due to estrangement, unemployment, brutal claims of the male or alcoholism. Shakutai (Binding Vine) has had her own share of troubles. Her husband has abandoned her for a mistress. And right from the beginning, it had been a relationship of struggle. Left with her parents after her marriage, she followed him to Bombay on her own where she discovered that he was without a job. Yet, bravely, she continued to work on her marriage, cooked for the men and took up all kinds of available jobs. Shakutai somewhere expresses irritation and anger at Kalpana's beauty, fearlessness and bold/outgoing

nature, all of which she feels invited the trouble for her. Shakutai loudly proclaimed that- “Woman must know fear”. However, there is a certain development in Shakutai’s Character. When she comes to know from Sulu that it was Sulu’s husband, who raped Kalpana. Shakutai would let the world know who real culprit is. She finally accepts the idea that her daughter should get justice. Kalpana is a daughter of Shakutai and she represents the lower class. In the second part of the novel, we are introduced to this character. At the hospital Urmi and Vanaa are, involved with a poor woman. She is in a state of shock and refuses to accept the facts that her daughter has been raped. Instead of feeling indignant and demanding justice for daughter. She becomes defensive as if she has something to hide and ashamed of. She did not want doctor to report the truth about the rape Kalpana is a victim; does not see any possibility of justice. Therefore, victim’s family tends to hide the crime being afraid of the bad name that the family would get. Therefore, Kalpana’s mother is reluctant to report the case as rape case. She appeals to Urmi to convince Dr. Bhaskar about it. The police knew what had happened, they also knew how family members of the victim would react towards the truth and therefore had registered it as an accident case. Police officer refuses to accept her findings and change the first report. In novel Community plays an important part in the development of the personality of an individual. Every individual belongs to several communities at once; some of them overlapping with one another. This creates a very complex pattern of community life in Indian social order. Persons share a consciousness of membership. A membership to a community affects people’s feeling and behavior. Community members must behave according to the norms or standards of the community. Urban Community is a complex and heterogeneous unit surrounded by various castes and a large variety of incomes and occupations. Meenakshi Bharat formulates the community pattern in Deshpande’s novel: In Deshpande’s novel urban men and women are the new migrants, dislocated, homeless refugees from a culture that they cannot identify, a society that has no recognizable markers, entrapped in emotions that have yet to find their names, inhabiting, furthermore, I nnerescapes whose shadow lines entrap them in a miasma of unknowingness.

The novel has memories of a house in Ranidurg, even Urmi and Inni live in the city. Inni, Urmi’s mother who lives in the city, is sophisticated, and beautiful. She always keeps her memory of rural life alive. Dr. Bhaskar Jain is a professional who helps in Kalpana’s case. He is confused at Shakutai’s troubled condition and so much about Kalpana’s marriage. Deshpande depiction of urban community is not limited to middle class but she discovers the lives of lower class who hardly manage to live in this heartless, material world. They face ground realities of oppressive situation and facts. The urban communities have been depicted as a real human beings and not only professionals and working people. Urmi is educated and employed. She plays diverse roles both indoors and outdoors. Urmi is presented in this novel in the family set up as well as outside the family. Urmi is satisfied with her job as lecturer. She says:”I always wanted to teach. I enjoy my classes. “(26) As she is already staying with her mother, Inni and Kishore, her husband works for the Merchant Navy and therefore is not regular member of the household. Urmi is grieving over her dead daughter Anu. But she learns to adjust with critical situation. She gets involved in other people’s life, that is, Kalpana’s case. In Indian society, woman is variously presented as a mother, wife, daughter and sister even goddess. Manusmriti and Dharma shastras have laid down specific rules for the conduct of women. The women were treated to secondary position in all walks of life. But after the independence, the status of women has improved to some extent, particularly in urban areas. The literacy

rate of women has improved. Now a day, women are holding top positions in education, business and politics. However, things have not changed for the majority of women, particularly in rural areas. They are given secondary status in household, offices, social and public places. Women are exploited and harassed in Indian society. Urmi rebels against social issues like Kalpana's rape case. There is more depth and complexity in the choice and treatment of women in the novel as it depicts victims and rebels. The majority of women in the novels are shown to suffer the external forces of economic hardships and manmade calamity. Urmi, in the critical situation proves that she believes that woman should have courage to express themselves and expose the evils of society. She is thus an activist. During her suffering, she faces bitter reality of her life. Her mother, Inni is also a very typical woman isolated from her husband. Vanna and Urmi win sympathy for their courage in facing great odds. Vanna is a social medical worker. But her relation with Harish is based upon a total submission to his wishes. Women of middle class are safe and careless. Their relationship is governed by social and cultural patterns. Such women characters have been shown to be searching for identity, for self-awareness. Urmi is an example of such a woman.

There are several older women characters in the novel. Vanna's and Urmi's mother and grandmothers who had to live with their unfulfilled desires and repressed thoughts are such women. Mira is Urmi's mother-in-law who had unhappy married life. Deshpande's compassionate vision is out of this web of loss and despair and it emerges in strands of life and hope. Deshpande also renders visible the extraordinary stamina and beauty covered in these women's daily lives. In Deshpande's novels, male characters play minor roles. Men are absent or dead. In this novel, Kishore who is Urmila's husband mostly absent as he works in the merchant navy. Urmi's father is dead; nowhere exists in the novel. Her grandfather Aju had committed suicide. Amrut is the only young male who is the brother of Urmi and Kartik is a six years old, Urmi's son. Urmi's father is another male character who had sent Urmi away to his own mother at Ranidurg as a punishment for Inni. He had not changed his mind in spite of his wife's tears. He appears in the novel as a strict patriarch.

Urmila does not show a hatred for males. She hopes for a society where all women are treated equal to men. Mira on the other hand, had suffered in her marital life. Her diary shows that her husband raped her. In our culture, it is legal right of the husband to possess his wife sexually with or without her permission. In case of Mira, she had been forced this right against her will. Mira does not experience of motherhood as she dies after giving birth to Kishore. Mira holds her mother responsible for her life. Being a mother, she never takes decisions about children. Men are supposed to be the decision maker of the family. Mira remembers the attitude of her mother. She knows that she has to confine her life to the four walls of the house. Her feelings were not taken into account. Mira wants her spaces, privacy, and freedom. Infact; she is not unfair to man. Her husband is not lustful either; he marries the second time for the sake of his infant son. Shakutai had suffered a lot in her married life. She had trauma, misery and children from her life. Shakutai considers her daughter as impolite as she was not obedient to her mother's warnings about the male dominated society. Kalpana is unable to surrender before the gender discrimination. Kalpana rejects to live the life of her mother. She faces the bitter reality of life.

Thus, Shashi Deshpande depicts and problematizes various issues of class, gender and community in the novels. She also considers these issues from different vantage points such as Feminism and Marxism.

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