

# Problematizing Gender Identity in the Novel the Binding Vine by Shashi Deshpande

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## Abstract

Gender issue is the prime concern in Shashi Deshpande's novels. But to say that her authorial sweep remains confined to issues pertaining to gender and sex only, is to limit her fictional vision which is integrally holistic and takes into account each and every facet of the flux called life. As evident from socio-cultural scenario across India, many changes have been taking place in the society. But the position of women has remained more or less the same. Majority of women even today reconcile to a life of humiliation due to gender bias while performing roles of wives and mothers in a rigidly custom-bound milieu they live in. Even economically independent women have not been able to free themselves from these conventional shackles that are so retrograde

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Shashi Deshpande strongly feels that socialization plays an important role in the construction of gender. The process of socialization profoundly influences the psyche of girls as well as boys right from their early childhood. In particular, the growth of a girl in Indian society is seen mainly in terms of her attitude and duties towards her family. Shashi Deshpande is perhaps one of the few contemporary Indian English writers who have portrayed the subtle contours of the psyche of girl child with utmost concern and deliberation. The reductive societal perception of a woman's role comprises marrying, bearing children and staying faithful to her husband, and it is still prevalent. Generally men are looked up to, and treated as wiser than women and also as having better knowledge of the world. The discrimination against girls and the ill-treatment meted out to them in the family is a recurrent motif in Deshpande's fiction. There is usually detailed examination of the girlhood of the protagonist who attempts to define her adult self-identity by analyzing her growing years. This process helps her realize that her personality has been determined and defined by her family upbringing characterized by gender discrimination and patriarchal dictates.

This paper takes into account a comprehensive analysis of the gender identity of Shashi Deshpande's female protagonists vis-a-vis the families they grow in along with their male counterparts—their siblings to begin with and their husbands/ partners at a later stage. Shashi Deshpande takes up the issues pertaining to women's suffering, slavery and suppression in the male-dominated society. She excels in portraying a realistic picture of the middle class educated women who despite their financial freedom face problems concerning balancing their role as career-oriented individuals and as wives and mothers. In order to problematize gender identity of Deshpande's female protagonists, an attempt has been made to unearth problems concerning treatment of women in our society in diverse arenas of life—domestic,

socio-cultural and professional. Ernestine Potowski Rose, in her speech at the National Woman's Rights Convention held in 1851 at Worcester (Massachusetts), observes that woman is in every way equal to man and has been man's partner throughout history but is still oppressed, discriminated against and marginalized. She wonders why man should treat her unequal to him. Humanity recognizes no sex—mind recognizes no sex—life and death, pleasure and pain, happiness and misery recognize no sex. Like man, woman comes involuntarily into existence; like him she possesses physical and mental and moral powers, on the proper cultivation of which depends her happiness; like him she is subject to all the vicissitudes of life; like him she has to pay the penalty for disobeying nature's laws, and far greater penalties has she to suffer from ignorance of her far more complicated nature than he; like him she enjoys or suffers with her country. Yet she is not recognized as his equal! (Rose)

As such, woman's treatment as unequal/ inferior to man has no valid basis and is still prevalent in India. Woman has to pay the price of being one throughout her life. Crippled by the social norms, she needs the crutches (in the form of her father, or husband) at every stage of her life. She cannot think in terms of surviving without man and is trained to negate herself, ignore her needs, desires and aspirations a la Sita, Savitri and Ghandhari. Sushila Singh observes:

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 as an entity that concerns man either in his real life or his fantasy life. (Singh 7).

Woman is considered as a symbol of tolerance, love, kindness and faithfulness and any deviation from it is considered as unwomanly/ uncultured.

In *The Binding Vine*, Deshpande has remarkably problematised the status of girls and women in the patriarchal society. The girls are vulnerable to the atrocities committed by the male-dominated world. The point of focus in this novel is "rape"—both within the marriage and outside it. All the female characters are threatened in one way or the other by this possibility. The birth of the girl is not considered good as Shakutai asks Urmī, "Why does God give us daughters?" (60). Mira also wants a son because she does not want the same fate for her daughter as hers, and therefore, addresses the child in her womb as "he:" "I feel the quickening in my womb, he moves - why do I call the child he?" (149).

Obsession with the male child is yet another common factor in several novels. This is another form of gender discrimination as the existence of the female child is by and large ignored. Moreover, a childless woman is discriminated against by men and women equally. In such cases, only women are held responsible which is rather unfortunate. Sulu's acceptance of her husband's threats to throw her out if she cannot give her child is absolutely deplorable and if the child is not male, even then, the woman is blamed which is totally bizarre.

Recollecting the memories of childhood, Urmīla remarks that Vanaa's (Urmī's sister-in-law and childhood friend) father would never notice her as for him "there was only Kishore" (52). Later even Vanaa says: "I wonder whether he knows I exist" (53). The point of the vulnerability of and discrimination against the girl child, her subsidiary status along with her social stigmatizing at all stages of life is prevalent in the cross-sections of the society. Moreover, it "is something which affects the rich and the poor alike" (Sivaraman 134). Inni, Urmī's mother, confesses her own inability to protect her when she is young and vulnerable. Urmīla was sent to her grandmother's house in Ranidurg because her father was annoyed with Inni for leaving the child in a male custody when she had to go out in emergency.

In a male-dominated society, it is difficult to accept woman as financially independent and her role as a co-bread winner in the family. She is expected to perform her primary functions such as looking after the family and children with perfection even if she is working. Due to this, there are problems of adjustment as she remains divided between home and work place. In *The Binding Vine*, Vanaa's children feel neglected. Her daughter, Mandira dislikes being left to the care of maid servant, Hirabai. She tells Urmila thus: "You know, Urmiauntie, when I grow up, I'm never going to leave my children to go to work ..... 'Stay at home and look after them'" (72). Thus even a child has all grudges against the mother just because she observes the world around like this. In utter frustration, Vanaa says to Urmi, "why is it nobody thinks of blaming Harish? He's never around, but it's never his fault" (75). As such, the whole cultural climate as well as social thinking is strongly governed by gender discrimination. The woman is the victim, target and means of exploitation.

The most sensitive issue which the novel takes up is "rape" within marriage and outside it. In both cases, woman is crushed physically, psychologically as well as emotionally. Mira and Sulu are two women in the novel who are physically vulnerable within the secure structure of marriage whereas Kalpana (Shakutai's daughter) becomes the victim of her own Aunt's husband. Viewing rape in the light of "violence and denigration," Indira Nityanandam observes: "Rape has always been a horrible indignity heaped on woman by the male species merely on the strength of brutal forces. This violence and denigration becomes worse when it occurs within the sanctity of a marriage" (Nityanandam 60). In this sense, marriage is no longer a sacred space; it rather conceals so much that is unlawful, inhuman and condemnable.

Take Mira's case for example. An arts graduate, she is married off at the age of eighteen without her consent. Her husband undoubtedly loves her, but to the point of obsession. So much so that the marriage becomes a traumatic experience for Mira on account of forced, one-sided love. Her choked and extremely anguished state of mind is clear from the given lines:

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

As such, Mira hates the word "love" (67). She does not have any affection for her husband and even Kishore is born of a relationship completely devoid of love. At times, she even resists Kishore's forced will to have sex, but would hardly make any difference to him. Mira is left with no choice but to submit physically remaining absent emotionally and never connecting psychologically. As a woman, Mira has no choice and resistance is out of question as it is unimaginable in her situation. Submission of the body in a sense is surrendering your individual self, your being. In such a situation, can life ever become paradisiacal? Mira is satirically suggestive in the following lines: *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.* (83).

The irony is that she cannot share her agony with anyone, not even her mother whose own life had been full of despair and it would only increase her pain. Mira's diary also mentions her meeting with the rising poet, Venu who later becomes a grand old man of Indian literature. When Mira gives some of her poems to him to read, he says, "Why do you need to write poetry? It is enough for a young girl like you to give birth to children. That is your poetry. Leave the other poetry to us men" (127). Urmi feels offended by the intended brutality of this remark. This reflects the agony of a creative woman in an androgenic world who is simply not allowed even to aspire to pursue career/ profession of her choice meaningfully. It also connotes, "the handicap of women writers in the chauvinist society" (Anand 2). The silent effort of Mira

to use language as a means of her redemption may be treated as "a demand for access to and parity within the law and myth making groups in society" (Kalpan 71).

Sulu's state in the novel is most pathetic as she is an utter ignoramus vis-a-vis her rights. She does not know that childlessness does not empower her husband to throw her out on the streets and take another wife as he keeps threatening. Sulu's fear is effectively spelt out by Shakutai as she tells Urmi that "After marriage she changed. She was frightened, always frightened. What if he doesn't like this, what if he wants that, what if he is angry with me, what if he throws me out.. . ? Nobody should live like that, Urmila, so full of fears " (195). This uncertainty and an endlessly gnawing sense of insecurity cripples Sulu whose life is like a faltering pendulum as there is no stability due to the apathetic and callous attitude of her husband after marriage.

In a patriarchal setup, man can get away with anything. Likewise, it is patriarchal attitude that emboldens Prabakar to first make a pass at Kalpana and then demand that she should marry him, and finally raping her. The patriarchal stranglehold is even more obvious when Sulu persuades her to marry Prabakar. Shakutai too leaves the decision to Kalpana instead of objecting to it. People in general consider that women are themselves responsible for everything wrong that happens to them. A "sociologist"(181) in the novel comments: "there can be no rape, because it can't be done unless the woman is willing?" . . . rape happens because women go about exposing themselves"(182). Shakutai also emphasizes that "women must know fear" (148). Shakutai is not willing to register a case as it will bring bad name to the family and none will marry her daughters. The police also try closing the case by treating it as an accident. They also feel that rape cases are messy and troublesome. A police officer tells Dr. Bhaskar, "She's going to die anyway, so what difference does it make whether, on paper, she dies the victim of an accident or a rape? We don't like rape cases, the man said. They're messy and troublesome, never straightforward. But forget that and think of the girl and her family. Do you think it'll do them any good to have known the girl was raped? She's unmarried, people are bound to talk, her name would be smeared" (88). Thus the societal attitude towards the rape victim is not tenable, "If a girl's honour is lost, what's left? The girl's doesn't have to do anything wrong, people will always point a finger at her" (59)

In *The Binding Vine* almost all the women are victims of gender discrimination. Urmi is devoid of mother's love because her father did not trust Inni and blamed her for her carelessness. Inni, on the other hand, longed for her daughter's love but could not go against her husband's decision. Thus, both mother and daughter suffered because of father's decision. This is really ironical that a mother who gives birth to the child does not have a right to take a decision for her child and remains helpless in front of her husband. Vanna, though financially independent is afraid of her husband, Harish. She even avoids calling her daughters by their nicknames as Harish does not like it. Shakutai is beaten up and then deserted by her drunken husband for some other woman. But still Shakutai does not have any regrets as she is happy with the thought that at least her husband is alive. Woman is not safe in this male-dominated society. Kalpana is raped by her own uncle when she refuses to marry him. Indu in *Roots and Shadows*, howsoever modern, has to make compromises in order to save her marriage. Akka, who seems to be a dominating figure in the present, has a painful past as she has suffered a lot at the hands of her cruel mother-in-law, and lecherous husband

In Indian society, women's roles are defined within four walls of the house. She has to perform the daily chores like cooking, cleaning, sewing alongside bearing children. All these roles are culturally constructed but collectively become the code of conduct for women and are used as ploy to harass them. Viewed biologically, we find that there is nothing in the male body which stops men from performing

the above mentioned tasks. If they do, they will rather be able to perform more efficiently and with perfection as their bodies are believed to be stronger than their female counterparts.

Beauvoir's concept of the 'othering' of women gets reflected through sexual aggression on the part of men. Protagonists such as Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Akka and Indu in *Roots and Shadows*, Mira and Kalpana in *The Binding Vine*, and Jaya in *That Long Silence* represent the group of 'otherised' women in the fictional world of Deshpande. What propels sexual exploitation and violence towards women is the assumption that woman is no more than "body"/ "sex." Even her passivity in the sexual act is taken for granted by man which is why Jayant (*Roots and Shadows*) is jolted out of complacency when Indu talks explicitly about her passion. Mohan in *That Long Silence* forces his sexual will on Jaya remaining totally unconcerned about her own will. In addition to sexual exploitation, there are instances of physical violence, beatings, scathing and offending remarks as employed by men to subdue, dominate and hurt women. Characters such as Shakutai, Sulu, Jeeja, Tara and Nayana represent the women who are victims of physical violence. The reason why daughter is separated from mother (Urmi) in *The Binding Vine* is rather silly. Her fault is that of leaving her daughter once in the care of as an old male servant. Rather than understanding the situation, the father takes a cruel decision to send the daughter away deeming that Urmi cannot take care of her and thereby resorting to psychological against the daughter in particular as she turns against her mother for all times to come.

Deshpande's women protagonists are victims of gross gender discrimination prevalent in the society defined and dictated by patriarchal norms. They are ill-treated as daughters initially and later as wives. Gender roles are defined in view of their utility in the male-dominated society and also keeping in mind the safety and security of women who are treated as weaker sex. Even behaviour patterns are governed and determined by gender discrimination. Whereas men can get angry and be violent, it cannot be imagined in case of women, and if at all there is expression of violence on the part of women, it can only be self-directed. In all the novels of Deshpande, patriarchy and the values it perpetuates are criticized explicitly as well as implicitly. Some of the obvious ways that patriarchy uses for domination are sexual and physical violence, mental trauma, verbal and psychological violence. Other subtler forms which have been imbibed by generations and have taken the form of well-established traditions are not so easy to challenge and retaliate against because the victims themselves have internalized these values. These also include well-defined and carefully assigned gender roles

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