

Female–Bonding in Shashi Deshpande’s–The Binding Vine

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Shashi Deshpande is one of the pioneering writers of the day. She has occupied an important place in the field of Indian writing in English by portraying the psychological problems faced by career women in India. She deals with the excesses committed upon the female fold for centuries, leading to their deep, quiet and passive suffering. Deshpande in her novels shows how the protagonists’ revolt against it and try to search their own identity in the hostile world of male chauvinism. She is not for revolt for the sake of revolt but rather in the sector and degree required.

This novel, *The Binding Vine*, tries to conform to the metaphoric structure. The title is appropriate in a number of ways. Its symbolism is ambiguous—that is, the words or phrases connote several things. The *Binding Vine* suggests many bonds in the life of the heroine Urmila. They are, her bond of familial ties of parents, husband and children, her bond of pregnancy, her bond of love for her lost baby daughter, her bond of love for Mira’s poems, her bond of sympathy for the wrongs done to Kalpana and her bond to the chain of untoward circumstances. The beauty of the novel lies in showing all the connotations interplaying with one another and suggesting multiple connotations. We see first the bond of love and then the bond of silence. This novel focuses on the predicament of a typical middle-class Indian woman who wants expression but gets suppression and oppression.

The present paper attempts to trace the concept of female bonding, in Shashi Deshpande’s novel, *The Binding Vine*. This novel is remarkable as it introduces the concept of female bonding. It is nothing but the willingness of one woman to help another woman who is less fortunate. It also gives women courage to express themselves and expose the evils of society fearlessly. It provides solace and comfort when they are in utmost emotional stress and physical stress. Sharing the sorrows, problems, pains, agonies, distresses and sufferings lessen their burden of worries and relieve them from acute mental stress. The novel projects not only female-bonding but also women’s solidarity.

Women are the victims of male domination and subjugation since time immemorial. Women’s self effacement and total

submission is always taken for granted in the patriarchal world. She has no identity of her own and her sacrifice for the sake of the family is not recognized and respected by the family and society. So, she finds it very difficult to survive in such a family which never acknowledges the untiring services rendered by women for the welfare of the family. Agonized at this painful situation she searches for some mental relief which leads her to share and compare her grief with her female friends and female neighbours. Such a sharing of emotional conflicts between the husband and the wife, women’s problems, psychological disturbances, lack of peace and harmony in the family, joys and sorrows provide her with satisfaction and happiness.

Women writers in general speak about female bonding because of the common oppression they undergo. This female unity is based on the awareness that all women are oppressed personally and economically in the family and society. The similarity in suffering is the base for their bonding with each other to find comfort and solace in each other at the time of unexpected sorrowful incidents. In fact, they are able to relate to one another as sisters in their struggle, being fully aware of the difficulties and consequences.

Joys when shared get multiplied, and sorrows when shared get divided. All women in general have common problems, personal problems, biological problems and psychological problems. Female bonding helps women to heal their wounds inflicted upon them by patriarchy and female patriarchy. This kind of female bonding gives them a sense of identity and is a major life force for survival. Enduring all kinds of sorrows in life throws women in a whirlpool of sadness throughout their lives. This bonding not only enables them to share their burden of problems and sorrows, but also helps them to identify the similarities of their problems with others and share their secrets through which they are psychologically relieved from acute stress and tension, thereby lessening the pains and agonies of life. Thus women rely on each other rather than on their men.

They bond with each other in spite of their individual peculiarities and differences. The reason behind bonding of

women is the need for sustenance, sociability, comfort and security. This kind of female bonding helps them to renew their will and regain new confidence to continue life with more energy and spirit. The novel *The Binding Vine* is a solid example.

The works of Shashi Deshpande study the issues and problems of contemporary middle class Indian women. Her protagonists are highly sensitive, clever and smart. Glimpses of her novels reveal how poignantly the protagonists come out of the frustration and disappointment in the patriarchal world. The novel, *The Binding Vine*, (1993) shows how an educated career woman inculcates the spirit of solidarity in the society. The novel depicts the agony of a wife who is the victim of marital rape. She also portrays the plight of women who are raped outside marriage. Such women would rather suffer in silence in the name of family honour. In her essay, 'Sisterhood', Bell Hooks writes:

- Sexism is penetrated by institutional and social structures, by the
- Individuals who dominate, exploit or oppress and by the victims
- themselves, who are socialized to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo. (Hooks, 45)

In her opinion, the male supremacist ideology exposes women as valueless who could attain value only by relation to men. She is keen in attacking the male view that women are natural enemies who do not bond with one another. She stresses women to learn to live and work in solidarity, thereby to bond with one another and face male supremacy. In the context of women's solidarity, Bell Hooks rightly writes:

When woman actively struggles in a truly supportive way, to understand our differences, to change misguided, distorted perspective, we lay the foundation for the experience of political solidarity. Solidarity is not the

same as support. To experience solidarity, we must have a community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite, to build sisterhood. (Hooks, 67)

All that women need is to share with one another the like thoughts, feelings, emotions and the vast reservoir of women's experience, culture and ideas. This novel is a work of women's solidarity, female bonding and value of sisterhood in the male dominated society. The novel analyses several tragedies in the lives of different women. There are multiple misunderstandings among its women characters, particularly between mothers and daughters, causing misery and unhappiness among intimately related women in their families. By the time the misunderstandings and doubts are

clarified, they eventually overcome their own misunderstandings and establish a kind of solidarity among themselves.

Of all the works of the author, this novel occupies an important place as it depicts the women's world. It is a world where women outshine men in terms of their courage, perception and learning to live despite difficulties. These women are unique individuals irrespective of their wealth or poverty. They are bold enough to voice out their displeasure, courageous enough to air out their views and fight against injustices inflicted upon them by the patriarchal system.

Deshpande explores her characters' kinships, relationships and friendships – the "bond" between women – that indeed helps in the shaping of the characters themselves.

This paper focuses on 'female bonding' the bonds of womanhood, which is also a theme in Deshpande's novel. Their common story of exploitation, suffering and support of women help them revive their strength and identity. The female bonding arises out of oppression and exploitation of the patriarchy. Their bonding between women takes place not only among the women of the same age group but also among women belonging to different generations. Deshpande faithfully, authentically, and artistically portrays all the nuances of female bonding in her novel.

Although each woman has her own individual stories and problems, all of them irrespective of their age, background and culture are linked in a way as they collectively share the burden of being females. The solidarity of women characters which is evident in her novels is the real driving force as they manage to survive in an impoverished and threatening neighbourhood by bonding with each other and finding refuge in one another.

In the novel, *The Binding Vine*, Urmila, the protagonist is one who is eager to help other women. Urmi is portrayed as an upper middle class career woman. In the beginning of the novel, she is seen as a grieving mother who has recently lost her one year old baby daughter Anu. The efforts of Vaana, Amrut and Inni to bring the grieving Urmila back to normal life becomes futile. Commenting on Urmi's attitude, S. Indira writes:

- Instead of fighting her pain and sorrows she holds on to it as she believes that to let it become a thing of the past Would be a betrayal and would make her lose Anu completely.
- Like a masochist, she clings to bear pain and allows her memories of Anu. Every small incident floods her with longing and a great sense of loss. (Indira, 22)

Being exposed to the problems, sufferings, pains and agonies of other women, she consequently has become highly sensitive to the despair and sufferings of women in the family and society. Atrocities to women happen both in and out of marriage. After dealing with the theme of rape within marriage, Deshpande deals with the theme of rape outside marriage also, in the episode of Kalpana. Rape is an utterly selfish, cruel and brutal act of the male over the female. It is an act of dominance shown by the powerful male over the powerless female, which is to be condemned. She feels highly sensitive when she finds the same agony present in Shakutai, whose daughter Kalpana lies in comatose state in a hospital after being brutally raped. Both Urmila and Shakutai are almost in the same state of mind. So the mutual sympathy and support between them in coming to terms with each other's grief is remarkable. This female bonding helps them to come out of the trauma of life and gain self-confidence and courage to move on life smoothly.

It is the same sensitivity that makes her read the poems of Mira, her long dead mother-in-law, and understand the mind of the young Mira who is subjected to rape in her marriage. Urmila now becomes a regular visitor to Shakutai's house situated in the slums to inquire about Kalpana's condition. Urmila is angry at the indignity heaped on Kalpana and is eager to report this matter to the police officials. Since it happens to be a rape case, everyone wants to hush up. Urmila explains that Kalpana is not to be blamed but the rapist. Even Kalpana's mother finds it easier to blame her own daughter. "And if you paint and flaunt yourself, do you think they'll leave you alone." (TBV, 146). By writing about rape, Deshpande is breaking the silence of the predicament which women endured silently for centuries in order to protect the family honour. According to Shashi Deshpande

- "Thirty years ago it would never be talked about and I think that to me was the worst thing that it's so bound up with the honour of the family. It's the men in the family who have wronged not the women,
- The disgrace is the women's. I think this is what 'The Binding Vine' is really about: Why is the mother afraid to speak? The disgrace is not the girl's ;
- The disgrace is the criminal's. But that is not how it is because she thinks
- That it will hurt her family. It's really the dilemma which Urmila, the narrator faces because, if she makes it public it's possible the family is going to be effected, and if she does not, you know it's like saying the woman is the one in disgrace, who had done wrong and I find it's very true problem. (Her Story)

The partisan attitude prevalent in the patriarchal society is in the outburst of Shakutai. In the patriarchal world, if a girl is raped for no fault of hers, she alone is criticized and

victimized. Even though she is the mother of the victim she blames her daughter that her bold independence is the cause of the tragedy. Mothers like Shakutai arrive at the conclusion:

- We have to keep to our places, we can never step out.
- here are always people waiting to throw stones at us,
- our own people first of all. (TBV, 148)

The police officer decides to record the rape case as a car accident. The victim is always advised to remain silent and anonymous rather attract notice by making a hue and cry demanding justice. Urmila is angry at the indignity being heaped at Kalpana and is ready to report this matter to the officials. Shakutai begs her not to do that. Urmila explains to her clearly that it is not the fault of Kalpana, but the man who committed it is to be blamed.

- "She was hurt, she was injured, wronged by a man; she didn't do anything wrong. Why can't you see that ? It's not her fault, no, not her fault at all." (TBV, 147).

Urmila is Deshpande's first protagonist who decides to fight another women's battle. Nobody supports her but she boldly protests and decides to take the matter to the press, thinking that Kalpana might get justice. This rape case receives public attention and the government orders a thorough investigation. Very soon there is a public attention and protest outside the hospital. Women from all walks of life support and participate in the protest. The women in the assembly and all local women activists now stand in solidarity in demanding justice. The police investigation brings the rapist Sulu's husband Prabhakar to light.

Such a crusade of Urmila to help Kalpana is hated by everyone. Unlike other protagonists like Saru, Indu and Jaya in Shashi Deshpande's novel, Urmila is the first protagonist who fights for the cause of another woman wholeheartedly.

Ultimately Urmila concludes that women at different levels, irrespective of their social background, are given a raw deal. Urmila, at every turn of the novel, emerges out fully aware of the unequal treatment meted out to women. No other character in Shashi Deshpande's earlier novels is as rebellious as Urmila. The protagonists of the earlier novels are aware of the inequalities in the society but they do not attempt to set them right.

Urmila is of the opinion that laws cannot change women's lives and there are a few women who could appeal or file in a court of law for intimate matters. She values the sanctity of womanhood and marriage. Like the protagonists of Nayantara Sahgal, Urmila too does not show male-hatredness. She realizes the importance of men and demands only changes in them. Ultimately she wishes for a world where men and

women feel equally important and respect each other. When compared to the fate of Mira, Kalpana, Shakutai and Sulu, Urmila regains her courage and lives happily.

Anu, her little daughter has gone, but still she has her son Karthik. She laments the death of her daughter Anu and is inconsolable. Her encounter with the lives of Mira and Shakutai enables her to come to terms with her own tragedy. Female bonding makes life easy and light. Even a dreadful event like death is taken lightly. Urmila and Vanaa help each other mutually in their distress and suffering. Vanaa helps her to come out of emotional crisis. This kind of female bonding makes one woman help the other woman who is less fortunate. This is a positive development in Urmila unlike the other protagonists of Deshpande who are selfish. But Urmila is a selfless and sharp tongued woman with a very strong sense of justice. She has strong feelings and strives for the need of sisterhood among women. She strongly feels that women should be bold and courageous to express their views about life and the atrocities against women. They also should expose the evils that are practiced against the wish of every woman. When Shakutai cries, Urmila understands. "This is how life is for most of us, most of the time; we are absorbed in the daily routine of living. The main urge is to survive". (203).

In this novel, marriage has marred the happiness of women. This does not mean that Deshpande is against marriage. In fact she wants to uphold the idea that likes and dislikes of the brides and grooms must be taken into account for consideration. Nobody should be pressurised into the marital bond; mutual consent is essential, because only that would strengthen and safeguard the bond from breaking down. The combined efforts of men and women could reform the society. Deshpande's epigram in *The Binding Vine* proclaims the same idea:

- Come, my brothers, come, sisters
- Let us join our hands
- A new road, a new way
- A new age begins.(TBV,44)

She wants to create an ideal world where all men and women can live happily in freedom, peace and harmony.

There is no discrimination in class or role boundaries in female bonding. Deshpande has attempted to raise women's consciousness towards other women. In developing good relationship between women in the family and other women within the kinship, the traditional bitterness between them is wiped off. Urmila has a good rapport with Shakutai and Kalpana. Though Vanaa is her husband's half sister, Urmila has a very good relationship with her. They help each other at

the time of distress, problems, pains and suffering. Friendship among women gives them joy, peace, strength and courage. Urmila gains courage by comparing her life with that of the fate of Shakutai, Mira, Kalpana and Sulu.

The novelist prescribes 'female bonding' as a rewarding and redeeming phenomenon in her novels. In this particular novel, she has depicted how the bonding between Urmila and Vanaa enables them to unburden themselves and shapes them to be ready to help each other in times of crisis. Similarly, the bonding between Urmila and Shakutai mitigates pain and renders relief, comfort and emotional security to their souls. Such a bonding also helps them solve the problems in their personal level and cure the social maladies also. In short, the female bonding proves to be a powerful instrument in empowering women and reforming the society to a great extent.

What women do expect is the need to express one's emotions, thoughts and feelings and the need to be heard by the society. Besides her own family problems, agonies and pains, she cares for others. She being selfless in her attitude draws society's attention to her protest and finds less agony in attempting to change societal roles and attitudes. Ultimately Urmila finds out that the bonds of love provide the springs of life for human survival. She not only pokes her nose into other women's problems but also solves it, thereby proving that female bonding is essential for all women to overcome stress in life.

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