

Emancipation of Woman in The Binding Vine

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Abstract

The present study sets out to highlight and incorporate the feminist issues raised by Shashi Deshpande in *The Binding Vine*. This study also attempts to place in a critical perspective the feminist assertion in the novel of modern living Indian women novelist. While attempting to determine the shift in general literary sensibility in the novels the study directs attention on women's awakening consciousness and her confrontation against a male dominated, tradition-oriented society. Though the methods of interpretation vary in their complexity and also in accordance with the problematic of the novelist, the Indian woman being at the center emerges as a human being, essentially Indian in sensibility and likely to remain so in the near future.

Keywords: slavery, subjugation, suffering, suppression, Emancipation, Assertion.

Introduction

In "Sexual Politics", Kate Millett defines sexual politics as the process whereby the ruling sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the subordinate sex. In the first place, she emphasizes the need to study social and cultural contexts if a work or art is to be properly understood. Recent feminist scholarship is alert to the manner in which women's subjectivities are formed by the cultural mores and values. As Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan has remarked, "The construction of women in terms of recognizable roles, images, models and labels occurs in discourse in response to specific social imperatives even where it may be offered in terms of the universal and abstract rhetoric of "woman" or "women" (or the "Indian Woman" as the case may be)...If we acknowledge (a) that femaleness is constructed, (b) that the terms of such construction are to be sought in the dominant modes of ideology (patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism) and (c) that therefore what is at stake is the investments of desire and the politics of control that representation both signifies and serves, then the task of feminist critic becomes what Jacqueline Rose describes as "the critique of male discourse" born of "a radical distrust of representation which allies itself with a semiotic critique of the sign." what is required here is an alertness to the political process by which such representation becomes naturalized and ultimately coercive in structuring women's self-representation."

(Real and Imagined Women, 129)

One may find all varieties of feminist critics, from liberalism to de-construction. This creates disagreements and differences among the feminists. For example, there are de-constructionists like Toril Moi who charge Elaine Showalter and others for their empiricism and bourgeois humanism, while a radical critic like Josephine Donovan feels that deconstructionist theory magnifies the assertion of political identity. There are then feminists who would like to do away with gender differences as they lead to the discrimination against and repression of women, while there are others who celebrate these differences between men and women and even valorize womanhood as a part of their political strategy against male domination.

The western feminists tend to universalize patriarchy and thereby homogenize women especially the world women. As Chandra Mohanty in *Under Western Eyes* points out:

An analysis of “Sexual difference” in the Form of a cross- culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogeneous notion of what I shall call the “third world difference”- that stable, a historical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries.(63)

The greatest drawback of the feminist approach is thought to be its lack of coherent theory or its inability to offer a definition of it. But it should not be considered its minus point. Feminist criticism is a political and humanist approach to literature, which cannot be bound in certain definition, rule or scale. It will keep on changing and evolving to the changing of mores, codes, of social structure, and exigencies of time.

Representation of India women in the image of a Sita or a Savitri or an Ahilya still proliferates and will continue to proliferate in serious literature. Women who are fool hardy enough to go against the traditional role of women as dutiful daughters, devoted wives, and self- sacrificing mothers, are ridiculed for aping the western models, are humiliated and chastised.

Traditional Indian woman wants to break through this dark web and emerge as “New Indian Woman” only to fulfill her duties in more improved manner, and to assist her husband as a partner and to become a nice educated mother though her counterpart may be unduly apprehensive of losing his empire.

The Indian feminist writers had been vividly presenting and are still highlighting this traditional created imbalance. They are doing great job by depicting the conflict of the weaker as has been called from traditions, against the superior, keeping well in mind the cultural and social structure of India. The depiction of modern Indian women in the works of these feminists does not deflect Indian women from her traditional roles and chores but facilitates her easy and efficient performance and thereby vindicates her Indian identity.

As discussed earlier, the exigencies of socio-political and cultural structure of a country gives an impetus and momentum to the conscious writers of the age. Indian English novelists were inspired by the freedom movement and Gandhi’s political ideology. The Indian novelists took upon themselves the responsibility of giving artistic articulation of the problems that beset the common people and their small joys and immense sorrows, the crusade against the tyranny of poverty, illiteracy, suffering, disease, superstition, caste and sex. Resulting in a number of novels the protagonist is a farmer, a labourer, a factory worker, a patient or a virtuous women pitted against a zamindar, a landlord, a factory owner, or a ruthless, callous hardhearted man. It may be aptly remarked that Indian English novelists have fairly succeeded in their efforts to portray creatively in a realistic manner the problems of the age. They not only present the various problems: social, cultural, political, and economics of the contemporary society but also offer solutions in terms of fictional art.

After Independence the subject of novels took a turn due to the developments of intercultural relations between countries and fast developing electronic media and the awareness of human rights and thrust on women education. The status and predicament of women in Indian society set another motivating force for the Indian novelists with a social purpose. Despite the fact that woman can contribute to social regeneration, family welfare she continues to be a victim of social prejudices and male chauvinism. However, Gandhi’s call to the Indian women to participate activity in the freedom movement made them conscious of the much-needed liberation and equality of opportunity in personal, social and political life. Recognizing the potential of women to join their counterparts in their struggle against ignorance, superstition and backwardness, Indian English novelists in general, and women novelists in particular began to think women as legitimate, current and needful subjects for their purposeful social novels. Their Endeavour was to be relevant to their culture by presenting characters and situations rooted in Indian ethos.

Gandhian philosophy and Indians struggle for freedom, and growing fast globalization and steadily growing consciousness among women are the main motivating forces behind the novelists and writers of the present age. A writer, who steps ahead of time in capturing the igniting spark and airs in his work to set it in flames, always wins general approbation.

Among such writers stand distinguished are: Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande. They have been making efforts to pull out Indian woman from the quagmire of her lost identity with the same means, but with diversified idiosyncrasies and variegated aspects. The emergence of women novelists in Indian English literature took place as early as the last quarter of the nineteenth century. But, it was the post-Independence period, which had brought to the forefront a number of noted women novelists who have enriched Indian English fiction by creative release of feminine sensibility and who inspired Indian women to regain their lost battle of equity, comradeship and self-identity. Women have been the central figure of many a literary works in this era. Writers apart from these three renowned novelists under study are Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Kamla Das, Eunice d'Souza, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, Gita Hariharan, Imtiaz Dharker.

Analysis

“Why does God give us daughters.....?”

(Shashi Deshpande, *The Binding Vine* 60)

The Binding Vine (1992): Projects feminist approach of the narrator and the protagonist Urmilla, grieving over the death of her baby daughter Anusha. She is surrounded by the care of her mother. Yamini and sister-in-law Vanna, who is also her childhood friend, is caught up in the depths of long dead mother-in-law Mira's (Nirmala) poetry, written when she was a young woman subjected to rape in her marriage by her husband and in Kalpana, a young girl hanging between life and death in a hospital ward, also raped by her uncle. In this web of loss and despair, her inquisitive vision searches women's "binding vine" for survival and hopes for their better standings in society. Ultimately she finds love, attachment, motherhood, security hope are the binding vines which keep women alive and happiness as Mira's poetry exhibits, lies in submission, acceptance, never to say no to husband.

Urmilla in *The Binding Vine* learnt right from her childhood the patterns of social structure. Jaya in the long silence reconciles to her hapless lot. Indian women are trained right from their childhood to think, to feel, to behave, in terms of their superior lot.

“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.”(*The Binding Vine* 83)

The novel explores the women's vision and her position in society and infuses to rethink her existence. The major characters of the novel are Urmilla, Vana, Mira, Shakutai, Kalpana, Sulumavshi, Sandhya, Baijji (Kamala) and minor characters are Kartik, Mandira, Pallavi Dr. Bhaskar, Prakash Harish, Koshore, Papa Ajju and Priti.

It is certainly an established fact that Male is responsible for the creation of this fear. Woman bears cruelties, suppression, and injustice out of this fear. Fear of disgrace, has been created by male and Shashi

Deshpande through her female protagonist Urmi has attempted to post-mortem this fear. Urmi helps Shakuntala in removing this fear.

Another important aspect of *The Binding Vine* is highlighting the position of women living alone and aloof. They are treated in the society like a coin lying on road every man would like to pick up. This is suggestive of another fear. Doctor Bhaskar seeks liberty of Urmi though an educated middle class women.

It is nonetheless aspect of the *Binding Vine* that Shashi Deshpande has peeped into the problems and fears of lower class Indian woman. Shakuntala is a lower class woman representing and symbolizing masses of Indian women though other novelists portray middle class women in their novels.

Standing still I searched, Stretching
out my arms, Sinking deep into the
earth, Like the banyan roots, Seeking
the spring or life.

(Quotation in *The Binding Vine* P.151)

Shashi Deshpande is different from those novelists who have not taken up the social problems like the evil influence of rape, caste system, problems of down trodden women and dowry. Her novels reveal the variegated facts of women of all classes in modern India and as such assert the full-awakened feminine sensibility. The humiliating experience that undergoes in the process of getting her married, the factors which determine her acceptability viz. beauty, dowry, skill, matching of horoscope, caste, sub caste, colour, and creed are perceptively revealed in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. In the novels, Deshpande has exposed the desperate position of girls. Most of them have no choice in the matter of marriage. Joyce Carol Oates points out:

A woman is like a dream. Her life is a dream of waiting. I mean, she lives in a dream waiting for a man. There is no way out of this, insulting as it is, no woman can escape it. Her life is a waiting for a man. That's all. There is certain door in this dream, and she has to walk through it. She has no choice. (Joyce Carol Oates' *Them*, P.367).

The foregoing discussion based on the biographical and the creative aspects of the novelist throws a good deal of light on their early vision of the life that shaped their creative faculty. It also underlines their concern with the magnitude of issues related to woman's emancipation. In order to have a critical probe into their life's philosophy and general attitude to problems pertaining to womankind the following chapter dwells on the outlook of these novelists in regard to life's vision and how it gets manifest in their writings.

The emancipation of women which Shashi Deshpande discusses in the previous novel *A Matter of Time* has again caught the fancy of the writer in *The Binding Vine*. Women in *A Matter of Time* grapple with their own emancipation. Sumi, the female protagonist, deals with her own catastrophe. She knows that she should not crumble down before the adverse circumstances that have engulfed her life. Picking up the same theme more seriously Shashi Deshpande here in *The Binding Vine*, creates a vine of love, trust, solidarity among the women of different strata of society so that true emancipation can be achieved. The novel *The Binding Vine* is about a lady who fights for other women's cause; an idea which in itself is unprecedented for Shashi Deshpande too.

Starting from her earlier heroines whether they are Sarita, Indu, Jaya or Sumi; no heroine of Deshpande has ever thought of crossing the boundaries of their own lives. They introspect on their lives and redefine their roles but they have never tried to awaken the spirit of feminism among the sisterhood. This very spirit of solidarity, binding and sisterhood is quite remarkable in this present novel. It is Urmila the woman protagonist of *The Binding Vine* through whom Shashi Deshpande thinks about the emancipation of women. Urmila joins hands with other suffering women and creates that vine of love through which women can think of and work for their emancipation. Urmila is the protagonist who is quite unlike the earlier protagonists of Shashi Deshpande. Indu, Sarita, Jaya with the exception of Sumi can only think of their roles and grapple with identity loss which however they are able to understand gradually. These heroines of Shashi Deshpande do not move out of their own lives after coming to terms with their own identity rather they resolve to break silence and redefine their roles. But what Urmila is remarkable for is the fact that she does not keep content with changing her own life. She shares a bond of solidarity with other women and makes them aware of their own rights.

Reputed Indian Lawyer Indira Jai Singh comments:

It is assumed that by marrying a man, a woman has given her consent to sexual intercourse with her husband at any time. Thus even if he forces himself on her, he is not committing an offence (or rape) as her consent is assumed. In this respect, the woman's movement has consistently demanded that the law of rape be changed. A recent judgment of a court in England indicated that rape within marriage could be an offence. Several states in U.S. have specially amended their original law to make it an offence.

The world of *The Binding Vine* is populated with three generations of women. As in the earlier novels of Shashi Deshpande, the plot does not limit itself to pointing out the troubles that the one or two main characters face rather here the concern of the novelist is with the whole lot of women and she holds the strong view that the predicament of women through different generations is identical. Mira's mother, Vanna's mother, Urmila's mother Inni and Mira belong to the first generation of women. Urmila, Vanna, Shakutai and Sulu form the second generation.

In the third generation there are characters like Mandira, Urmila's daughter Anu and Kalpana. The plot moves around all these women. Urmila being the main character binds them all and through her a deep understanding of all these characters can be had. The story of *The Binding Vine* revolves around Urmila who is the female protagonist of the novel. She is a lecturer in a college and is the wife of Kishore who is in Merchant Navy. It is through the character of Urmila that the writer has hinted at the true emancipation of women.

When the novel opens Urmila as Urmila is fondly called is mourning the loss of her daughter who has recently died. All her family members try to console her but her heart is never at ease. Her mother Inni, her sister-in-law Vanna and her brother Amrut strive hard to wean her away from the loss that has engulfed her. But she finds no solace in any of their advices which she believes are useless. These advices seem hollow to her as what she believes is that forgetting one's own child is a treachery which she would never dare. She lapses in a loss from where she finds it really very hard to bounce back into life. She cannot leave the dead behind and move on in life. The trauma for her is too much and it hangs heavy on her. Mira's urge of being a recognized writer and its failure finds expressions as:

Huddled in my cocoon, a somnolent silkworm,
Will I emerge a beautiful being?
Or will I, suffocating, cease to exist? (*The Binding Vine*, 65)

The Problems of women, which were, till now considered to be centrifugal i.e. to break the chains of bondage and captivity and to be free; are now reversed to centripetal i.e. to regain her self-identity. Through the eyes of these women writers, one visualizes a different world till now not projected in literature. Women, who were till then treated as second class citizens are assigned their due place in the novels of these novelists. The novels of these novelists present a picture of the impact of education on women, her new status in the society and her assertion of individuality. The works of these three novelists discussed here can be well compared to Canadian novelists' like Shashi Deshpande affirms that her characters take their own ways and that her "writing has to do with woman as they are". (Deshpande interviewed p.108) She does not portray her woman characters stronger than they actually are in real life. Woman as presented by her is an incomplete self, a particle being. Her woman character is in need of someone to shelter her, be it her father, brother or husband. This makes a demarcation between Nayantara's views where she says women need men to meet out biological needs. Her female protagonists compromise with their counter parts after realization that it is not wrong with male but there is wrong in the social structure. Her views on woman's subordination position are similar to those of Maitreyi Mukhopadhyaya in *Indian Women: Change and Challenge in International Decade 1975-85*: It should be emphasized that the poor status of women,. Their oppression and exploitation cannot be examined as an isolated problem in Indian society. Although the status of women constitutes a problem in most societies in rigidly hierarchical and inequitable social structure which exists in India, the relative inferiority and superiority of various roles is much more clearly defined. The inequality and subordination of women is an instrument or function of the social structure." (p.82)

Shashi Deshpande's women characters are tolerant, obedient and submissive. Certainly they are portrayed ordinary middle class women in Indian Society, but at the same time a feminist awakening and resistance is visible and notable in their feelings and conduct. They are not aggressive, rebellions but tolerant silent, modest assertive but not subdued in any sense. Even in silence Indian women, as presented by Shashi Deshpande , asserts the issues indispensable for the liberation of woman issues relating to her education, financial independence and that control over her sexuality and the moral choice. *The Binding Vine* is a refreshing change from the first three novels of Deshpande. Protest comes to her protagonists 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, here are Mira's and Kalpana's and Shakutai's, and we also have our Urmila's.

Shashi Deshpande's approach is more pragmatic than Anita Desai's and Nayantara Sahgal's in the portrayal of her female characters. Her female protagonists are traditional as can be seen in Meena Showadkar's statement: Traditionally, the Indian woman accepted the frame work of the family with a blind faith, and rarely showed a rebellious trend. She continued to be docile, self-sacrificing patient, loving and capable of suffering....they suffer, submit and adjust themselves to circumstances. This aspect of the woman's life has been portrayed by the women writers with sensitivity and instinctive understanding."(Shirwadakar, p. 118.)

But the shift and change delineated in them by Shashi Deshpande is gradual, asserting their individuality with strong attitude and a sense of freedom and conviction. They are vitalized with a sense of humanistic existence before they compromise. Her female protagonist does not return to her husband's home fearing that "in a traditional society, any woman who leaves her home is considered immoral," but realizing her own potential to adjust and accommodate in the existing circumstances and simultaneously asserting her own existence as a human being having voice, courage standing and sustenance, realizing if an educated woman is sunk in such torpor, society suffers more. Margaret Atwood, Margaret Lawrence and Arithavan Herk all these writers write of life as viewed by women and contemporary life affecting women.

Conclusion

All Indian women are virtuous, loyal, and chaste and strivers and aspirers, towards freedom, towards goodness and towards compassionate world. Their virtue is a quality of heart and mind and spirit, a kind of untouched innocence and integrity. It is man who corrupts woman and dichotomy of traditional moth-eaten beliefs which treat a dumb woman honourable and virtue has been the noble ethical principle in the hands of men. Women are considered as property, not persons.

If chastity is so important and so well worth preserving it would be easier to safeguard it by keeping men in seclusion not women. Nayantara Sahgal also emphasizes that women need men biologically at the same time. She says. "No doubt we need lovers but not a constant presence, a constant dependence on man". What she is trying through her work is to change people, to reach people and change their way of "thinking, Attitudes, and emotions"- and also to dismantle the image of "modern Sati" who remains, suffer and immolate her.

Woman in general and the educated new Indian woman in particular have been on paradoxical position. She has been the key person, the master figure in the family; and yet she has lived the life of slavery, subjugation, suffering, suppression. However, now she has started becoming conscious of her rights and responsibilities, her distress, and destination.

Women are victims of male lust and unwilling to report the case only for the reason that there are other sisters in the family likely to be married, reflects the plight of Indian woman who can't even go for justice. The characters whether conformists, non-conformists, introverts or extroverts, they present dilemma of Indian woman and expose the social evils amply and draw attention towards the injustice and cruelties against women.

The novelist has displayed that without breaking the conjugal bonds by divorce or separation; Indian woman can live afresh and still maintain her self-expression and identity. She can assert her existence as a human being and still live in harmony and love, unlike the western women.

A detailed study of the novelists reveals their depiction of visible and invisible dilemma and agony of Indian woman and the social injustice resulting out of patriarchal, male dominated society. They have shown an admirable perception and a deep understanding in portraying subjects concerning women's equality, liberty and equal opportunity and choice of selection. The portrayal of female protagonist's exile and return signifies that no outward support or sustenance required and the potential and strength to assert ones identity comes from within.

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