

Book Review of Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*. Experiences of Daughterhood and Motherhood



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Shashi Deshpande (1938) was born in Dharwad, daughter of the renowned dramatist and Sanskrit scholar, Shriranga, who is described as a Bernard Shaw of Kannada theatre. At the age of fifteen she went to Bombay, graduated in Economics, then moved to Bangalore where she gained a degree in Law. The early years of her marriage were largely given over to the care of her two sons, but she took a course in journalism and for a time worked on a magazine. Her writing career only began in earnest in 1970, initially with short stories, of which several volumes have been published. She is the author of four children's books and so many novels, the best known of which are, *The Dark Holds NO Terror* (1980), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence*, (1988), which won the Sahitya Akademi award. *The Binding Vine* (1993), *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Small Remedies* (2000), *Moving On* (2004) and *The Country of Deceit* (2008). Shashi Deshpande lives in Bangalore with her pathologist husband.

Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* (1993) is a story of mothers and daughters, of their fight for selfhood and self-definition in a man's world and of their quest for asset in their woman-to-woman affairs, their common oppression and their shared individualities. Rooted mainly in the domestic sphere, the novel presents a variety of women characters – Baiajji, Inni, Urmi, Vanaa, Akka, Mira, Priti, Kalpana and Shakutai, all fused together by their experiences of womanhood, daughterhood and motherhood. Even, male characters like Kishore, Harish, Amrut and Bhaskar are sufficiently personalized and live through their

characteristic behaviour, action and words. The novel is organized largely through four mother-daughter relationships – Urmi’s ambiguous relationship with her mother Inni; Urmi’s bereaved motherhood caused by the unexpected death of her baby daughter Anu; Urmi’s relationship with Mira as a substitute daughter through the reading of her poems, and Urmi’s close understanding of the mother-daughter tie between Kalpana and Shakutai. In the novel there are also some other mini mother-daughter narratives of several characters like Mindira, Vanaa and Akka. Urmi holds a pivotal position in the novel. The plot takes shape and comes alive through her consciousness and the reader has no optimal choice but to judge others as Urmi wants them to be judged. Urmi is an urban, educated middle class woman of contemporary India. She is a lecturer. She appears to be active and smart. Urmila has been sent away in childhood to live with her grandparents in Ranidurg, Urmi's relation with her mother Inni is strained and she is often rude to her. There is no malevolence, only anger in Urmi's heart, that her mother had intentionally sent her to Ranidurg so as to be free from the accountability of a girl-child. This misunderstanding clears towards the culmination when Urmi learns the actual facts. It is her grandmother Baijji who awards a sense of fixity to her life along with her juvenile friend Vanaa. When the novel opens we meet an angry, brooding and impatient Urmi. She is sensitive and keeps on thinking of her daughter. In fact, she does not want to forget the pain. "This pain is all that's left to me of Anu, without it, there will be nothing left to me of her; I will lose her entirely" (p. 9). Married to Vanaa’s step-brother Kishore whose own mother, Mira, had died in childbirth, Urmi is introduced to Mira through Vanaa’s mother, Akka, who hands Mira’s trunk of papers to Urmi as her daughter-in-law’s an heirloom. Through her papers, her photographs and especially her poems, Mira provides to Urmi a comradeship that she had failed to receive from Inni: “...Mira in some strange way stays with me, I know she will never go....It is Mira who is now taking me by the hand and leading me.” (p.135). She can construct Mira through her writings and know her as meticulously as she can know herself – her love for books, passion for poetry, aspiration to poetic excellence, her unhappy marriage and the forced physical associations, her only marital joy being felt at approaching motherhood. And yet, it is only after Urmi gets involved in the stranger, Kalpana’s tragedy that she can fully apprehend the depth of Mira’s pain. Seeing Kalpana’s assaulted, violated body, Urmi unconsciously realizes that what had happened to Kalpana had been Mira’s fate also. Mira writes of her mother’s lifelong advice to

her: “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.” (p.83). Shakutai, blaming Kalpana for her misfortune she says: “We have to keep our places....I warned Kalpana, but she would never listen to me....That’s why this happened to her...women must know fear.” (p.148). Urmi discards her mother’s ideals of beauty and fashion and smashes Inni’s dreams of an upper-class marriage of her daughter by marrying the boy-next-door; Vanaa surprises her school-teacher mother with her decision to get married and settle down to family life; Vanaa’s still young daughter Mandira rebels against her mother’s ways and promises to be ‘not like her’ when she grows up and Kalpana and Mira pay vicious prices for daring to surpass their lot. The circle must come round and where the mother stands today in confrontation with an unequal world, the daughter must stand tomorrow: “Whose face is this I see in the mirror, Unsmiling, grave, bedewed with fear? The daughter? No, Mother, I am now your shadow.” (p.126). Urmi says: “The past is always clearer because it is more comprehended; we can grasp it as a whole. The present, maddeningly chaotic and unclear, keeps eluding us.” (p.121). The progress of the novel is, among other things, Urmi’s progress in her journey towards self-exploration. Through the stories of Mira, Kalpana, Sulu and Shakutai, Urmi comes closer to understanding her role as a mother/daughter. She, who had been separated from her mother in childhood and managed to achieve a psychological disinterest from her, learns the impossibility of shuddering off that bond. As Inni breaks down to recall her own individual tragedy to Urmi - her unpreparedness for motherhood, swift childbirth and tormented separation from her daughter following her father’s fury at seeing his daughter entrusted to a male servant - Urmi has the final revelation “The room seems full of the echoes of an old conflict....” (p.199). Urmi realizes with torment that Mira, Kalpana, herself and all women were undergoing their mother’s congenital suffering. That was why perhaps Mira had desired for a son so that she would not have to bear “this constant burden of fear” (p.150). for a daughter. But bearing a son does not cap off Mira’s pain in her past. Mira and Akka both become the victims of their husband’s compulsive love – one for too much of it and the other for too little, just as Kalpana falls a victim to her uncle Prabhakar’s lust and infatuation, and Inni to her husband’s concern for his daughter’s safety. Urmi is frequently hurt by Kishore’s insecurity in his love for her while Bhaskar’s presumptuous love is unacceptable. In a world where heterosexual relationships are unequal, unsatisfying, and often lethal, it is a woman-to

woman bonding that makes existence and hope possible for these mothers and daughters. The heritage of these women is that of feebleness, subservience and failed attempts; it is the vine of dependence and loss that binds them all but this, as Urmi, finally realizes, is also the vine of love, emotions and of a collective hope. With her daughter's death, Urmi had lost hope entirely: "That's what haunts me now, the smell of hopelessness. I've lost hope entirely....But hope is a fragile support anyway on which to rest the whole of your life. I can do without it. I will have to do without it" (p.21). But her painful memories find a partner in the memories of Mira, Shakutai, Akka and Inni., the mother-daughters who, in the face of their gravest losses had the courage to convert their hope into their asset. They loved and lost but life sustained with their hope of a better tomorrow. The binding vine of love, for all its susceptibility, weakness and pain, cannot be escaped. It is this breach that *The Binding Vine* is founded on but as the various stories of the mother-daughters weave themselves with Urmi's memories and her stream of consciousness, the weakness of the binding vine becomes a strength, the strength to love despite loss and to find in the shared victimization a new companionship and hope. Urmi can now realize how Inni, Akka, Mira and Shakutai had survived it all and how perhaps, she, Vanaa and Kalpana were going to live through it. It was in their shared heritage of womanhood, of love, silent hope and beautiful memories that lay what Mira described as 'the spring of life' (p.203).

References

Deshpande, Shashi. *The Binding Vine*. Penguin Books, 1993.