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## **Shashi Deshpande and Indian Feminism**

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Feminism is a doctrine or movement that advocates equal rights for women. Feminism as a movement is about women living on equal terms with men and not pushed down, by law or by culture, into a subservient role. However, with development of time, feminism has been established in India, setting aside the patriarchal predominance to certain extent. Leaving aside the crusaders and activists of the social and political scenario, perhaps enormous body of work on feminism is also accomplished through Indian English literature. But prior to realizing a closer look into feminist literature in India, it is essential to understand the crucial concept of the term 'feminism' in the context of India, beginning from its inception.

Feminism in Indian English novels is not at all a new-fangled concept and over the years many new writers who have broken into the literary circuit and have successfully created a reader base for themselves. Indian women writers, composing their thoughts in English range from an array of people like Toru Dutt to Kamala Das and from Sarojini Naidu to Suniti Namjoshi, Arundhati Roy to Shashi Deshpande. After absorbing a variety of influences in the last fifty years, after dealing with an array of themes and thoughts, a new poetic and literary expression has been created by them. It must be kept in mind that literary creation by women need not be conceived only as feminist creation. Women writers have often raised their voice against social and cultural principles that constrained their liberty and perpetrated institutional seclusion of women. In most cases, the write-ups are written in a confessional and personal note, where their composition acts as a social document as they are themselves sufferers and also agents of social revolution.

The first wave of feminism took place in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, emerging out of an environment of urban industrialism and liberal, socialist politics. The goal of this wave was to open up opportunities for women. The second wave began in the 1960's and continued into the 90's. This wave unfolded in the context of the anti-war and civil rights movements and the growing consciousness of a variety of minority groups around the world. In this phase, much energy was focused on passing the Equal Rights Amendment to the constitution guaranteeing social equality regardless of sex. Whereas the first wave of feminism was generally propelled by middle class white women, the second phase drew in women of different colors and developing nations, seeking sisterhood and solidarity. The third wave of feminism began in the mid- 90's and is informed by post-colonial and post-modern thinking. A post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality is central to the third wave ideology.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the serious novelists who is not after gimmicks. There is an honest voice, very severe about the story being told and its style. She is one of the rare writers with little posturing. Her novels usually have women as the protagonists. Deshpande shies away from the label of a 'feminist' writer. She is of the view that in calling her novels feminist, one straitjackets the works; imprisons them with the label. She feels that while she is feminist, her novels are novels. She did not write her novels as a debating voice or to develop a thesis in a debate. She feels her novels are open examinations of the experiences of people in specific setting.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the famous contemporary Indian novelists in English. Basically she writes about the situation of women and their failures in the fast changing socio-economic milieu of India. She writes about the conflict between tradition and modernity in relation to women in middle class society. Her novel *That Long Silence* won her the Sahitya Akademi Award. Deshpande has presented modern Indian women's search for their definition about the self and the society and the relationship that are central to women in her works. Her novels deal with the women belonging to Indian middle class. She deals with the inner world of the Indian women in her novels. In *The Binding Vine*, Urmila establishes a communion with herself and tries to reconstruct the tragic tale of a sprightly girl, who suffers and writes poems in the solitude of an unhappy marriage.

Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* is about Urmila; an educated middle-class wife grieving over the death of her one-year old daughter Anu and in the process becomes very sensitive to the sufferings and sorrows of people. The narrative comprises of three tales, one about herself, the other about Shakuntala, a rape victim's mother and Urmila's mother-in-law, Mira, a victim of marital rape. Deshpande has presented Urmila as a chaste wife whose sympathy for the less fortunate women is sparked off by her daughter's death. Life is a process, which demands change and not the status quo. The rejection of the mother in a way is necessary for the assertion and development of a daughter's personality. However, when it is the daughter's turn to become a mother, she discovers in her turn, that she cannot escape the binding wine of love and the fears and vulnerability that come in the wake of love. Urmila, who has rejected her mother's dreams for herself, cannot help succumbing to the same weakness as that of her mother's:

I wanted so much for Anu, now it's all gone, . . . We dream so much for our daughters than we do for our sons, we want to give them the world we dreamt of for ourselves. 'I have wanted Kalpana to have all that I hadn't', Shakuntala told me. But Kalpana wanted none of her mother's dreams. She had her own (124).

The real feminist in Urmila comes out through her words. No one got the life they dreamt in this world. Comparing to men, women are more unfortunate. Freedom is not the denial of the rules and regulations of society but acquiring what they supposed to get. Mira, in fact, had wanted to ask her mother "why do you want to repeat your history when you despair your own" (126).

Urmila, the central character is not only a wife but also a mother. Recently she lost her girl child and her husband Kishore is not with her to share her feelings. She decides to make changes in her life to get relief from the pain. One day in a hospital Urmila meets a domestic worker, Sakuntai. She is moved by Shakuntai's story. Sakuntai's daughter is in ICU. She is raped brutally. Meantime Kishore's step-mother hands over some confidential documents to Urmila. The document belongs to Kishore's mother, Mira. Realizing others' tragedies she tries to cope up with her own tragedy. Not only the death of Anusha but also the absence of her husband and her childhood experience makes her life an unhappy one.

*The Binding Vine* is a refreshing change from the earlier novels of Deshpande. Shashi Deshpande takes a bold step forward in projecting a woman's biological needs and also raises the question of women's rights over her body which can't be violated even in marriage. *The Binding Vine* discusses heroine's sexuality, her 'passion' and explores working women's needs of the head, heart and further down the anatomy.

In *The Binding Vine*, Urmila, the protagonist is a college lecturer. She is not radical but she tries to live on her own. Through her eyes we can see different types of Indian woman around her. Urmila is married to a naval officer, Kishore. She is capable of looking after her family with her job in the absence of her

husband. In the opening of the novel, we find Urmi grieving over the death of her one-year-old daughter Anusha. Vanna, friend and sister-in-law of Urmi pacify her. Vanna says: "Anything, just speak, don't keep it bottled up with in you. Why don't you cry, Urmi? It's unnatural not to cry" (13). Urmi is full of grief not only because she loses her child but also because of the absence of her husband at this juncture in life. Not only a woman but also men desire for the presence of their loving ones at the time of agony or happiness. But here Urmi's desires are shattered and she tries to suppress everything. She even wants to die. After her long silence she realizes that there is no room for agony. The absence of Kishore contributes to frustration and loneliness in her life but she intelligently overcomes those problems like any modern woman does. She takes stern decision to stand strong and live for her boy child, Karthik. She believes she can manage everything. Her inner mind assures her that she is smart and she holds strong that inner courage to live on her own. In the fast growing world, there is no time to stop. Urmi tries to adjust with the laws

The novelist has evocatively laid bare Sakuntala's agony, anger, helplessness and fear. Sakuntala's character is presented in a realistic and naturalistic way. The society finds fault with the raped girl just like Sakuntai did. Rape is not only the rape of body but also the rape of mind. Urmila, the protagonist comes to the shocking revelation that the society wishes to close rape case files and the rapist is free from acquisition. The general attitude towards a rape case is as that of Shakuntai: "Okay, she was raped. But publicizing it isn't going to do anyone good. It's going to mean trouble for everyone, the girl, her family" (88-89). Society is not at all interested in sympathizing or empathizing with the victim but plainly says that without a woman's willingness no one can rape a woman. Sakuntai is an uneducated woman but she is also a mother. Urmi realizes that even the mother doesn't want a case to be registered. Sakuntai says:

You people are trying to blacken my daughter's name. . . . don't tell anyone. I'll never be able to hold up my head again, who'll marry the girls, we're decent people. . . . even if it's true, keep it to yourself, doctor, don't let anyone know of it. I have another daughter, what will become of her? (58-59)

We can see there is a gap between the upper class, middle class and the lower class. But in the case of women the problem seems to be the same but in a different manner. Whatever happens, it is the woman who suffers. Sakuntai is the embodiment of helplessness. She believes she can't live with the burden of "shame" which her daughter brought home. When Urmi tells her that Kalpana is hurt, she is injured and wronged by men and she is not responsible for anything happened to her, Sakuntai fails to understand the logic behind her words. As a suppressed woman she tells, "But sometimes, I think the only thing that can help Kalpana now is death" (178).

Shashi Deshpande depicts a typical Indian woman who lives in the clutches of oppression and suppression. *The Binding Vine* explores important problems of our times. Deshpande's characters may be independent to some extent but are firmly bound by the shackles of tradition. Mira, Urmi's mother-in-law and Kishore's mother had died in child birth after four years of marriage and she is a woman who sticks to tradition. She is a traditional Indian wife. She looks after her husband. She never disobeys him. But Mira dislikes him strongly. She is like a slave to him. Mira lives as an instrument for his sexual gratification. Rape is violence and it becomes worse when it occurs within the sanctity of wedlock. Mira's poems are all about this cruelty. Mira writes poems in secrecy. She never publishes them but keeps them in her box. Her poems are her suppressed feelings and agonies:

But tell me friend,

Did Laxmi too twist brocade tassels?  
Round her finger and tremble,  
Fearing the coming of dark-clouded engulfing night. (66)

She wishes to be free from the rules of tradition or the clutches of unfair marriage. Mira never receives any understanding or empathy from her husband. Society considers marriage as a means of security because it provides women safety from other men. One of the primary projects of modern feminism has been to restore women's bodies, appropriated long ago by a patriarchal culture, to them. Because the female body is the most exploited target of male aggression, women have learned to fear or even to hate their bodies. Consequently, women often think of their bodies as a form or fragmented pattern evident in Shashi Deshpande's Mira. This abuse represents for women a reminder of her degradation and of her inferior status. As a subject to repeated rapes in marriage women try to ignore and to annihilate their bodies. Mira tries to express her emotions through the lines of her own poems, her secret agonies. Shashi Deshpande expresses the intensity of oppression through the wounded women Mira. Mira in her poems writes: "I feel the quickening in my womb, he moves, why do I call the child He?"(149)

Urmila is determined to publish the poems of her mother-in-law, Mira instead of thinking about what her skeptical friend, Vanna and her mother the solicitous, Inni would feel if she publishes those poems. Vanna fears those poems will bring disgrace to their family. Akka, Kishore's step-mother, is a silent person who dare not express what she feels. She fears the male dominated patriarchal society. Mira dares to write about the sexual abuse of her husband but Akka is a person without voice.

Urmila discovers the problems women face in the society. She is the product of third wave of feminism. Shashi Deshpande's writings belong to the third phase of feminism, the female phase. Urmila is really a modern Indian woman because she stretches her hand towards other women like Mira, Sakuntai, Kalpana and Vanna. Even though she is not a feminist she identifies with agonies of others. Urmila is one who interacts with society. She is a college lecturer. But she is aware of the problems of Indian women. Her relationship with Sakuntai gives a new perspective to her world of thought and she discovers the limitations and taboos of her own society. Urmila is rebellious and courageous. She tries to file a case against the culprit. The honest portrayal of Urmila's sufferings and other women sufferings, disappointments and frustrations make the novel a powerful feminist work.

Shashi Deshpande is not an avowed feminist, though she occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists who concern themselves with the problems of women and their quest for identity and self discovery. Shashi Deshpande is critical about the marriage system and depicts it through the lives of the characters. According to Urmila, those marriages are really cold-blooded affairs. They take place without the consent of the girl.

The term feminism does not always mean the same. It may change according to society or differ with people. In common usage, feminism means equality but in Indian society equality is a rare thing. There may be rules and regulations to protect equality but the mind set up of people cannot change any law. Just like any other women writers of India, Shashi Deshpande is also a product of new education system. Shashi Deshpande says that women are like "binding vine" and they must have some tree of love to bind. They are all human beings and no one can live alone, there must be some one or something to love. Most of the characters in *The Binding Vine* are married but marriage becomes a meaningless act when it pushes a woman to frustration and darkness.

Women's marginalization is not a new thing. But to speak out and act against that is a difficult task because it is deeply rooted. Shashi Deshpande's characters struggle to defy the traditional, patriarchal

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norms of society, and attempt to realize and preserve their identity not only as women but also as human beings.

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