

## Daughters of Mothers, Mothers of Daughters: The Heritage of Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*

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The present paper seeks to explore Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* in terms of its intricate web of mother-daughter relationships that constitute the fabric of the novel's structure. What does being a mother's daughter and a daughter's mother imply in a hegemonic man's world is the question that Deshpande attempts to articulate through the various daughter-mothers in the novel. The heritage that these women pass on generation after generation is that of dependence and yet the tenacity with which the dependent vine clings and survives is the triumph of womanhood.

"All our mothers teach us is what they have learned in the crucible of sexism. They cannot give us a sense of self-esteem which they do not possess. We must learn to interpret anew the experience our mothers have passed on to us, to see these lives in terms of struggle, often unconscious, to find and maintain some peace, beauty and respect for themselves as women."

An important achievement of the Second Wave Feminist movement had been the reevaluation of the mother-daughter bond and an assessment of its centralization in the family and social structure as well as in the development of the female personality. The urge by feminists like Rich to uncover the voices bespeaking this most precious of female relationships received an overwhelming response from women writers all over the world. The voices have come ringing out of the abyss of silence, documenting the pains, pleasures, struggles and misunderstandings that shade the knowledge of motherhood and daughterhood, "a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, pre-verbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other."

In the realm of Indian Women's Writing, however, the mother-daughter relationship has surprisingly received scant attention. In a land where the birth of a daughter has invariably been a cause for social and religious lamentation, it is strange that women have not come forward to assert the strength and closeness of mother/daughter-hood. The mother's daughter scarcely makes her appearance in Indian fiction and when present, the relationship is either embedded too deep in the central narrative to be overt or too steeped in stereotypes to offer any newness. Of the few Indian women writers who have taken up this closest of female bonds in bold thematic and structural terms in their oeuvre, the figure of Shashi Deshpande markedly stands out.

"In discovering other women, I have discovered myself," says Deshpande and indeed, her fictional attempts are her labyrinthine paths towards the exploration of womanhood, towards a celebration of the self, the body, the small hard-earned victories and the perennially undaunted strength of women. This is not to say that Deshpande is in search of the Essential Woman or that her women figures have no variety. They are presented with all their idiosyncrasies and in their full-blooded and full-bodiedness. What remains largely unchanged is their victimization, their suppression, their individual, social and cultural failure as human beings, fated by their gender. And yet, these women do not give up hope. They are mothers, grandmothers, daughters, sisters and friends and in their female relatedness and diffuse bondings, there is a strength, a tenacity, that of the binding vine which, with all its fragility, clings on, and flourishes.

Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* (1993) is a story of mothers and daughters, of their struggle for selfhood and self-definition in a man's world and of their search for strength in their woman-to-woman relationships, their common victimization and their shared identities. Rooted

largely in the domestic sphere, the novel presents a gamut of women characters – Baiajji, Inni, Urmi, Vanaa, Akka, Mira, Priti, Kalpana and Shakutai, all bonded together by their experiences of womanhood - of daughterhood and motherhood. The novel is structured largely through four mother-daughter relationships – Urmi’s uncertain relationship with her mother Inni; Urmi’s bereaved motherhood caused by the sudden death of her baby daughter Anu; Urmi’s relationship with Mira as a surrogate daughter through the reading of her poems, and Urmi’s close understanding of the mother-daughter bond between Kalpana and Shakutai. Interspersed between them are the mini mother-daughter narratives of several characters like Prity, Vanaa and Akka. The central consciousness in the novel is that of its narrator Urmi or Urmila’s. Having been sent away in childhood to live with her grandparents in Ranidurg, Urmi has developed an ambivalence in her relationship with her mother, Inni whom, although she does not reject, she fails to identify with. It is her grandmother Baiajji who grants a sense of fixity to her life along with her childhood friend Vanaa. Psychologists define attachment as a process of interaction between a child and his/her primary caregiver (usually the mother), a process which fostered at birth contributes to the child’s intellectual, emotional and social growth. In Urmi’s case, attachment has been split between the parent-figure Baiajji and the confidante-figure Vanaa, both of whom fail to complement within themselves the role of the mother which subsumes both functions. When the novel opens, Urmi is grieving over the loss of her eighteen-month-old daughter Anu, a grief and an emptiness that cannot be filled till she experiences a connectedness with her mother and the other women in the novel whose lot it is to silently suffer.

Nancy Chodorow writes:

“...the experience of mothering for a woman involves a double identification (Klein and Riviere, 1937). A woman identifies with her own mother and, through identification with her child, she (re)experiences herself as a cared-for child....Given that she was a female child, and that identification with her mother and mothering are so bound up with her being a woman, we might expect that a woman’s identification with a girl child might be stronger.”

Seen in psychoanalytic terms therefore, Urmi’s grief over her lost daughter is also her childhood grief for the loss of her mother with whom a psychological association had been renewed through her mothering a daughter. Urmi harbours a deep-seated though unexpressed grudge against Inni for having separated her from motherly love. “...she never was the solicitous mother, was she?” she says to her brother Amrut, brushing away his words about Inni’s concern for her (p.25).

She is grieved with the memories of her mothering of Anu which are also, psychoanalytically, the memories of her pre-oedipal relationship with her mother:

“...I can smell her sweet baby flesh...my breasts feel heavy and painful, as if they are gorged with milk....I can feel her toes scrabbling at my midriff.” (p.21).

The loss of her daughter leaves her with an absolute emptiness – “As if the core of me has been scooped out, leaving a hollow” (p.17). The dead can never return to the world of the living and Urmi can only fill this emptiness with the realization of and by empathizing with the mutual and cyclical nature of suffering in the lives of both mothers and daughters.

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 legacy. Through her papers, her photographs and especially her poems, Mira provides to Urmi a companionship 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 intimately 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 impending 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 battered, violated body, Urmi instinctively realizes that what had happened to Kalpana had been Mira's fate also. Mira and Kalpana, generations apart, had both been bent against their wills to the wills of men who wanted them. How does it matter that one suffered within the institution of marriage and the other outside it. There is something common in their fates which manifests itself before Urmi again and again. Now begins her proper initiation into womanhood as she, through the stories of Mira and Kalpana's distraught mother, Shakutai enters the world of women where the semiotic mysteries of the hitherto broken pre-oedipal mother-daughter bond begin to disclose themselves to her and help her towards a greater understanding of mothering, suffering and life.

Deshpande very successfully uses the technique of orality to relate the different temporal, spatial and causal planes in the novel in her attempt to link her women as in a musical harmony. Shakutai's oral effusiveness of her hopes and despairs in the privacy of her one-roomed house and Mira's poems, written significantly in her mother-tongue Kannada rather than English, open up for Urmi an intergenerational female world where she experiences at once, the pains of both motherhood and daughterhood, pains denied to her in their completeness by loss of both mother and daughter. Rich says:

“We are none of us, ‘either’ mothers or daughters; to our amazement, confusion and greater complexity, we are both.”

And indeed, it is the recognition of this dual identity that constitutes the heritage of *The Binding Vine*. Mira, the daughter of the bulky woman who, in the family photograph, seems as if “she's unused to being centre-stage, and would be more comfortable being in the background” (p.64) wished to defy her mother's victimization through her high poetic aspirations: “To make myself in your image/ was never the goal I sought” (p.124). Shakutai's daughter, Kalpana was no different. She refused to be tied down to her mother's hopes for her and filled with the vitality of reassuring youth, she sought to define herself through independence, fearlessness, beauty and love. Both daughters and mothers remained unfulfilled in the only way that was possible in a patriarchal world and Mira, despairingly asks: “Mother...why do you want me to repeat your history when you so despair of your own?” (p.126). This is a world of failed mothers and failed daughters, of a cyclical chain of victimization which refuses to break. On the one hand is the mother who, as Susie Orbach points out:

“To prepare her daughter for a life of inequality, the mother tries to hold back her child's desire to be a powerful, self-directed, energetic, productive human being.”

while on the other hand is the daughter who refuses to identify with “a devalued, passive mother...whose own self-esteem is low.” Rich says:

“Many daughters live in rage at their mothers for having accepted, too readily and passively ‘whatever comes’. A mother's victimization

does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman....The mother's self-hatred and low expectations are the binding rags for the psyche of the daughter."

Mira and Kalpana too wished to defy these 'binding rags' but so did their mothers. The feelings of these women, separated by time, class and cultures home into Urmi's understanding like the different stanzas of a song, each successive stanza building upon the last. 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 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).

It is Urmi's destiny to be the receptor of all voices and to experience the agony of both the mother's daughter and the daughter's mother. She reflects:

"We dream so much more for our daughters than we do for our sons, we want to give them a world we dreamt of for ourselves....Do we always turn our backs upon our mother's hopes?" (p.124).

In the world of *The Binding Vine*, the daughters rebel against their mother's shadow, only to conform to it later. Urmi rejects her mother's ideals of beauty and fashion and shatters Inni's dreams of an upper-class marriage of her daughter by marrying the boy-next-door; Vanaa shocks 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 bitter 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 detachment from her, learns the impossibility of shaking off that bond. The firm ego boundaries that she had built around herself begin to give way but it is not until the reason for that childhood separation is disclosed that the boundaries stand completely broken and the knowledge of the past that she inherits, clears her chaotic present. As Inni breaks down to recall her own personal tragedy to Urmi - her unpreparedness for motherhood, hasty childbirth and agonized 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). She can see on her mother's face "the terror she had felt then, as if she has carried it within her all these years" (p.199). And with Inni's supplication for forgiveness - "I wanted you with us...I wanted you with me..." (p.200), Urmi finally absolves that "girl-mother of long ago" (p.200) of all blame that she had psychologically cast on her. The bond is restored, the importance of the child to the mother has been brought home to her. Mutuality has been achieved and as Inni rests unburdened, Urmi suddenly feels the armour of her assumed self falling away from her, leaving her psychologically naked, acutely vulnerable. Agonized, angry and relieved all at once, she recalls her anguish at being sent away and the theories she had mentally constructed to justify the decision. But the truth confronting her was so simple - the pain was a heritage binding together generations of mothers and daughters. It was the pain of m/othering - the daughter's 'othering' of the mother who had failed to give her child a safe, independent space in a man's world even as she had aspired for it herself in daughterhood; and the mother's 'othering' of the daughter from her aspirations to make her conform to the norm and assure the best that could be available to her in a limiting society. Urmi's realization of the inescapable bleakness and hopelessness of the situation, of the bottomlessness of the chasm, brings to mind the words of Saritha, Deshpande's protagonist in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*:

"Do we travel not in straight lines but circles? Do we come to the same point again and again? ...is life an endless repetition of the same pattern?"

Urmi realizes with anguish that Mira, Kalpana, herself and all women were undergoing their mother's inherited suffering. That was why perhaps Mira had aspired 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 seal off Mira's pain in her past. It breaks loose of its temporality and replicates itself in the pain of Inni, in the fate of Kalpana, in the hurt of Urmi. Deshpande's feminism in the novel, however, exudes forth only in muted colours. The man-woman relationship can never be disowned, both emotionally and culturally and where love is a common human emotion, so is cruelty, and the presence of one, as Urmi herself remarks, does not necessarily rule out the other. Deshpande's men are patriarchal but they are weakened and prompted to cruelty by love. Mira and Akka both become the victims of their husband's obsessive 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 fatal, it is a woman-to-woman bonding that makes survival and hope possible for these mothers and daughters. The heritage of these women is that of weakness, 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, of emotions and of a shared 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 an ally in the memories of Mira, Shakutai, Akka and Inni., the mother-daughters who, in the face of their gravest losses had the courage to transform their hope into their strength. They loved and lost but life continued with their hope of a better

tomorrow. The binding vine of love, for all its vulnerability, weakness and pain, cannot be escaped. It manifests itself in all our closest relationships and flourishes with hope.

Arcana writes:

“The oppression of women has created a breach among us, especially between mothers and daughters. Women cannot respect their mothers in a society which degrades them; women cannot respect themselves.”

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 understand 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).

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