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Female Bonding: A Strategy of Survival in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*

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Shashi Deshpande is one of the well known contemporary Indian women novelists. Her novels show her genuine concern for women. Her women characters, belonging to different class and age, are true to life. They appear to be more life like and more akin to the educated, middle class and urban Indian women of today. They are aware of their situation/limitations in male dominated society as well as are aware of their self. That's why they are introspective by nature. Caught between tradition and modernity, and family and career, they try to make life possible and to harmonize their relations with others. For this, they adopt different strategies. Some adopt silence as a weapon and other give voice to the voiceless. Shashi Deshpande's novels lay emphasis on human relationship. Human relationship comprise man-woman relationship, parent-child relationship, brother- sister relationship and woman-woman relationship. The present paper attempts to study woman-woman relationship within family and outside the family and to emphasize the value of female bonding in male-dominated society. In India, male as well as female writers have highlighted antagonistic attitude of women towards the other women. In real or fictional world, women can be seen perpetuating patriarchy directly or indirectly. The fault is not theirs but of their surroundings which develops such kind of thinking.

Woman-woman relationship, positive or negative, is of paramount significance especially in the life of a woman. Shashi Deshpande portrays sweet as well as sordid relationship among women characters. Sarbjit K. Sandhu observes, " Besides generation gap, a gap in the mother daughter relationship is also highlighted" (52). The analysis of her novels makes it clear that daughters are antagonistic towards their mothers because the mothers always force them into traditional traps. They push them into world of subjugation and submission willingly or unwillingly.

Besides estranged relationship between mother and daughter, and mother -in-law and daughter-in-law, Shashi Deshpande has successfully presented a bond of companionship among women. During the moments of crisis and lack of essential support from male

counterparts the binding vine of sisterhood helps women to overcome their confusion, fear and frustration. In the feeling of sorrow and sympathy, a sense of identity is struck. A.G Khan rightly says that the basis of their bonding is “shared oppression and victimization” (162).

Urmi in *The Binding Vine* becomes more sensitive after her daughters death. Her pain motivates her to listen to other women around her who have their own tragic tales to tell. In the context Siddhartha Sharma comments, “Had she not undergone such a personal loss, perhaps she would not have any concern with the others” (47). She develops a unique relationship not only with the living persons but also with the dead going through her mother-in-law’s diary, she comes to know the tragic tale of a sensitive woman who was forced into loveless and an incompatible marriage. One of the entries in dairy reveals Mira’s aversion to the forced physical relation with her husband and her psychological fear “of the coming of the dark clouded, engulfing night” (66). She writes:

And so it begins, ‘please’, he says,
‘please I love you’. And over and
over again until he has done, ‘I
love you’. Love! How I hate the
word. If this is love it is a terrible thing (67).

The diary reveals her desire for identity as she writes, “Will I emerge a beautiful being? / Or will I, suffocating, seem to exist” (65). Aruna Sitiesh rightly comments “She (Mira) lived a life which, even if normal to most of the women of that time (the early 50’s), must have seemed terrible to her. Why only of that time? Even today with all our education and enlightenment, women are not allowed to nurture such thoughts. Not allowed by women themselves” (200). The husband of Mira possesses her physically and never bothers about her emotions. Their marriage is not a marriage of minds. Mira’s poems appeal Urmi so much that she wants to draw society’s attention to the bitter experiences of Mira by publishing them but her sister-in-law rages against her for the sake of family’s honour and for the fear of exposure. Urmi’s intention makes it clear that she realises her responsibility towards the voiceless (women), “They never had a chance. It is not fair, it is not fair at all” (174).

The Binding Vine projects Urmi’s sensitivity to other women’s problems. Urmi not only supports them but also tries to make them aware of their individuality. Like Urmi, her sister-in-law, Vanna, is an educated lady but there is a temperamental difference between them. She is a submissive wife, having no view of her own. Her dreams, desire and decisions are shaped by her husband. After the birth of a second daughter, she expresses her desire to Harish for a

son but he decides to have no more children. Surprisingly, she changes her mind very easily and accepts “He is right” (81). Urmi gets terribly irritated at, Vanna’s constant refrain “Harish says”. She wants Vanna assert herself, “You let him bulldoze you, you crawl before him...” (81). Urmi’s attempt to make Vanna aware of her individuality is a fine example of sisterhood.

There is no doubt that female bonding is of paramount significance especially in life of a woman belonging to the weaker section of society. Urmi meets Shakutai, mother of a rape victim (Kalpana), when they are all alone. She stands with them and convinces Kalpana’s mother to stop blaming Kalpana for being raped. No doubt, Shakutai loves her daughter but feels that Kalpana’s bold independence is the real reason for her tragedy.

“Cover your face decently. I kept telling her.

Men are like animals. But she went her way...

It is all her fault” (147).

Unable to change or challenge her own patriarchal mindset, she accepts “Women must know fear” (148). Surprisingly, she is more worried about Kalpana’s marriage than justice for her. That’s why she does not want to inform police,” don’t tell anyone ... Who’ll marry the girl”. These lines reflect her agony, helplessness and fear. In such a crucial movement, Urmi comes forward to provide moral support to Shakutai. She wants justice to be done to Kalpana. That’s why; she takes the matter to the press despite opposition from her close relatives. Due to wide publicity in the newspapers the authorities of the hospital decide not to discharge Kalpana. Not only this, but she also pays regular visits to Shakutai’s home to drive out clouds of misunderstanding from Shakutai’s mind. She convinces her

She was hurt, she was injured, wronged by a man; she

didn’t do anything wrong. Why can’t you see that ?

Are you blind? It is not her fault, no, not her fault at all” (147).

Urmi gets the case reopened and with this the identity of the rapist is revealed. With the passage of time, Urmi becomes confidant of Shakutai. She tells Urmi how she had married a worthless and jobless man and how she and her three children were deserted by her husband for another woman. Shakutai without any hesitation, lays bare her heart, “That’s been the greatest misfortune of my life, Urmila, marrying that man” (110). Sharing of experiences and thoughts helps them to learn from each other. The illiterate Shakutai imparts wisdom to Urmi at the end of novel that one cannot escape, “There is only one way out of this *Chakravayuha*. Abhimanyu had to die, there was no other way he could have got out” (202). That is to say, life has always to be made possible by facing harsh realities.

Thus, Shashi Deshpande attempts to emphasize the cathartic effects of female bonding. With the binding vine of sisterhood, Urmi succeeds to overcome the pain of her daughter's death and Shakutai gathers strength to face the reality. Undoubtedly, female bonding proves to be a sweet and sheltering tree for the women characters of Deshpande. They not only share secrets of life but also support one another by conveying life- sustaining message, "The main urge is always to survive." (203)

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