

SHASHI DESHPANDE'S PROJECTION OF BINDING VINE ALONG WITH RADICAL FEMINISM

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ABSTRACT

Women as the protagonists of novels may be heterosexual or lesbian and appear to act in an antisocial way; much of their revolutionary spirit is initiated by conflict with patriarchal values, battles about dominance and submission, self-punishment and despair before gender norms. All these lead towards love and friendship between women. Blood and Blood explain.

KEYWORDS: *Antisocial Way, Patriarchal Ideology*

INTRODUCTION

The genre reflects a radical polarity of experience. The intensity of the heroine's anxieties and punishment on the one hand, and, on the other, a great sense of regeneration of freshness, when lovers successfully break through into their unique new spaces (Blood and Blood 105).

For older women the road towards self-understanding leads through by their increased relationships with other women. Thus Indu in *Roots and Shadows*, Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sumi in *A Matter of Time*, and Madhu in *Small Remedies*, like the women in the novels of Doris Lessing, Zona Gale, or Rosamond Lehmann, all develop a new attitude, towards other women. This does not mean not a turning away from sensuality and relationships but, rather a wider world for the human mind to explore.

Motherhood has always been a prominent concern of feminists. While Simone de Beauvoir considered it a means of keeping a woman in emotional and physical bondage, Nancy Chodorow in *Reproduction and Mothering* found in mothering the basis of the entire structure of gender differences. That is how Deshpande deals with this aspect of women's existence. She handles the issue fleetingly, but with her characteristic authenticity.

The Binding Vine projects the two central issues of female bonding and resistance to patriarchal ideology. The pain of the death of her baby, daughter, Anusha, seems to motivate Urmila, the central character, to reach out to other women around her who have their own tales of suffering to tell. In suffering, a unique sense of fellowship is stamped out not only with the living but also with the mute and the dead. Urmila feels for Shakutai and her young daughter Kalpana, who has been brutally raped and is lying unconscious, and for Mira, her own dead mother-in-law who had suffered rape in marriage. The name Mira recalls the historical Mira Bai, who may be considered a feminist, who rejected the norms of the patriarchal society. Urmila reminds of mythological Urmila, who is Lakshman's wife who spent fourteen years waiting for her husband, though the protagonist in the novel is a feminist who believes in feminine bonding as the source of her existence. Shakuntala is named after mythological Shakuntala who rejected the offer of her husband to live with him and

independently gave birth to her son Bharat. Feminine solidarity or female bonding runs as a strong undercurrent in the novel. As Nina Auerbach writes, it “[...] celebrates women’s coming together with other women as friends and shares of life instead of as rivals for approval by men” (Chatterjee 147). It is also a story of mothers and daughters, in which Urmila grieves for her baby-daughter who is dead and Shakutai for Kalpana who is dying. There are other pairs of mothers and daughters, like Urmila and her mother Inni, Vanaa and her mother Akka, Vanaa and her young daughters, and each of these relationships, in spite of their difference, conveys the idea of the bonding vine. In the feeling of sorrow and sympathy a sense of identity is struck. Urmila remembers Mira’s cry of despair and says:

How clear it comes to me across the years. Her cry of rage and anguish. Why does this have to happen to me? Why did it have to happen to my daughter? Shakutai asked me. Why? My own question comes back to me-Why?

Here there is a clear need to find answers, and to identify one-self with other women.

Urmila rebuilds the story of Mira’s life from her poems and diaries, and insists that Mira is not a symbol but a person and thereby refuses to typify her, in an effort to construct a female tradition. She says, “We had to know our mothers and grandmothers to know our situation” (135). Sharing of experience and supporting are an essential part of bonding, as seen in Urmila’s keen interest in reconstructing Mira’s harrowing experience; Urmila says. “It is Mira who is taking me by the hand and leading me...” (135). The title of the novel too reflects its predominant theme. It presents a female world in which women come together in fellowship. Vanaa, her mother Akka, and Urmila’s mother, Inni, rally round Urmila in her tragedy. Urmila runs to Vanaa’s aid when her children need care. She stands by Shakutai in her hour of grief. Shakutai, Kalpana and Sulu, belonging to the working class are further pushed to a subaltern status as they are deprived of even the privileges of class, caste and education enjoyed by Urmila, who is able to help Shakutai to speak for Kalpana. In her relationship with all these women, Urmila is able to develop the binding vine of womanhood in love and sympathy which functions as a strategy of empowerment. Descriptions of celebrations of events specific to women’s experiences, like Bajajji’s Chaitra, Gouri Haldi Kumkum, the first pregnancy reinforce this Urmila remembers:

They seem to me, even now, like an idyll, those two months we spent in Ranidurg, Vanaa, Mandira, the two newborn babies and I – with Akka the matriarch who looked after us all. Nothing existed but our physical needs and these were all fulfilled. It was a primeval, innocent world (114).

Although this appears to conform to Erikson’s concept of the biological inner space of the female structured by child-rearing, and home-making and nurturance, yet the novel does not stop here but extends to include female psychological inner space as well, which is developed in a bid for establishing the specific identity of womanhood.

The mothers and daughters in women’s fiction seem to be enacting the various aspects of the Earth Mother Goddess, who was virgin, maternal figure and old woman at one and the same time. The third figure in the triad is the “devouring mother” (Millett 216), represents the wise older mother’s knowledge of the best moment to let her go for her children, a moment that, if delayed, can lead the maternal element to become destructive. She also controls death and rebirth. The fully matured feminine personality comprehends all three elements and can bring any one of them into play at any time.

The Dark Holds No Terrors deals with the negative aspects of mother-daughter relationship. This helps Saru to create her own identity. Saru has had to face gender discrimination in the treatment she receives from her parents during her childhood. Dhruva, as his name might suggest, being attention of the family lies upon him. Saru was held responsible for the death of her brother and has developed a feeling of. Besides, she thinks:

I was an ugly girl. At least, my mother told me so. I can remember her eyeing me dispassionately; saying [...] you will never be good looking. You are too dark for that. (61)

Saru hates her to such an extent that she says: "If you're a woman, I don't want to be one." (62) As she grows up resentment and hatred drive her to leave home and obsessively seek success in medical college. There she falls in love with a boy and marries him against her parents wishes her mother being an old traditional orthodox woman does not want her daughter to get married to a person who is from a lower caste. Saru revolts against her parents and runs away to get married to whom she loved. As she had always felt insecure in her parent's home, her marriage to Manu is a means of that love and security which she had always lacked in life. He is the ideal romantic hero to rescue her from an insecure loveless existence. And she is hungry for love.

Her mother did approve not her marriage, and wanted her not to return to her parental home. "I know all these 'Love Marriages'. It's love for few days, and then quarrels all the time. Don't come crying to us then.", "To you? God, that's the one thing I'll never do. Never!" (69) Throughout her life, till her return to the parental home, she bears the burden of a love less marriage just to prove her mother wrong.

Indu in *Roots and Shadows* opposes the mother figure through out her life, marries Jayant against her wishes and struggles to prove her decision to be right. In her rejection of her mother, she also discards meaningless rituals like circumambulating the Tulsi plant, and refuses to undertake such rituals which are meant to increase the life span of her husband. The rejection is an indication of her autonomy and her capacity to see her life independent of her past. She even hates at some of the natural biological function of the female associated with the mother and from her childhood develops dislike towards her body. She does not have a child and fears to have one. She comments: "The truth is I will have no child that is not wholly unwelcome" (72). She constantly fights against her womanhood because it was trust on her ungracefully and brutally. The day attained puberty; she was told in a crude manner that she could have babies now. She is disgusted with the incident, and she develops an aversion towards all bodily functions. Indu cannot understand how a woman could breastfeed her child in the presence of another human being. Deshpande's feminism here seems to be radical, where the protagonist Indu discards the biological function of the female.

Annis Pratt has shown how archetypal patterns in women's fiction contains the potential; for personal transformation and that women's novels constitute literary variations on pre-literary folk practices that are available in the realm of the imagination even when they have long been absent from day to day life.

For the centuries women novelists have been gathering, around camp-fires where they have warned with tales of patriarchal horror and encouraged with stories protagonists undertaking quests. They have given maps of the patriarchal battlefield and of the landscape of ruined culture and have resurrected codes and symbols for use of potential power. (Pratt 23)

In *That Long Silence*, silence is used as an archetype to describe strategy of survival. Deshpande through her novels has highlighted the weight of the long silence which connotes the very world of the Indian women. Her novels present an over-abundance of minor characters who spend a lifetime in a muted existence, while her educated and intelligent protagonists, inaudible under the weight of silence, awaits to break it, Silence therefore can be a mark not of repression but a strategy.

The aim of Kusum in *That Long Silence* is to become an ideal-self effacing woman. She emphasizes the femaleness with exaggerated modesty. The ways she pressurizes herself into pleasing people and her failure to do so, proves to be a great set-back for her. Her undertaking silence results in her madness. Her longing to be with her family and their indifference towards her affects her marital equilibrium. Nayana, the sweeper in *That Long Silence*, continues to get pregnant in the hope of giving birth to a male child. In her silence, she gives into her husband's demand for a son even though she truly loves her daughter and was happy to bear female children.

Mohan's sister Vimala's childlessness makes her silently listen to her mother-in-laws' taunts. Her suffering results from an ovarian tumor with metastases, because of which she bleeds to death, but never finds a voice. Jaya's maidservant, Jeeja too surrenders to unthinking silence, which helps her to go on living. Married to a man who turns drunkard and tortures her for money, Jeeja accepts all this brutality with a poised silence and single-mindedly goes on living. Jaya fails to understand her silence as she says:

There had been days when she had come to work bruised and hurt, rare days when she had not come at all. But I had never heard her complain. What had surprised me then, what still surprised me, was that there seemed to be no anger behind her silence (47).

Jaya's Saptagiri Aji also lives a life of silence, strictly adhering to the traditional code of conduct of a widow; she had chosen a life of severe abstinence from comforts and luxuries. Silence dominates her as she spent her days in the confines of her room. Her refusal to lead a normal life shows her conformity to age old traditions, which expect a woman to give up all comforts and pleasures of life after husband's death. Jaya as a child was uncomfortable in her company.

Aji, a shaven widow, had denuded herself all those things that make up a woman's life. She had no possessions, absolutely none, apart from the two saris she wore. Her room was bare, except for the large bed on which my grandfather had slept, a bed on which my grandfather had slept, a bed which, ever since I knew it, was unburdened by a matter [...] Aji herself sat on the bare ground and slept on a straw mat at night (50).

Jaya's neighbor in the Dabar flat, Mukta also maintains silence. After her husband, Arun is killed in a train accident. Mukta devotes her life in maintaining her money between her sharp-tongued mother-in-law and her rebellious children, Neelima and Satish. She silently endures her mother-in-law and the complaints of her outspoken daughter. Her own self has no importance and she never expresses her loneliness and frustration.

Mohan's mother in *That Long Silence* is a woman caught in a hopeless situation where in she is verbally, physically and sexually abused by her husband. Tired by his irrational demands like wanting his rice "fresh and not, from a vessel that was untouched" (32) even at midnight, she slogs the whole day in front of the fire. Even though her lungs and eyes are choked with smoke yet she could not speak a word in protest. One such night she mutely witnesses the food thrown at the wall for there was no fresh chutney. She calls up Mohan asks him to get fresh chillies from market. In the middle of the night she begins preparing the food again. Unfortunately, for her son, Mohan who had seen his mother toiling everyday to

keep up with the demands of her husband, she was tough, because she had silently endured. But it is Jaya, his wife, who understands her mother-in-law better, even though she has never seen her, is surprised by Mohan's reaction and feels:

She saw strength in the woman shifting silently in front of the fire, but I saw despair. I saw despair. I saw despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender. (32)

Jaya realizes the futility of remaining silent and decides to break the silence. She decides to start the "Seeta" column again, which will expose the problems of the women. The writing has a quasi-autobiographical structure. Seeta foregrounds the writer, struggling to turn her experience into literature. Moreover, the voice of the central protagonist, if not presenting itself directly as the novelist's own voice, frequently offers itself as representative of women in general, firstly claiming sexual experience as a vital train of all women's experience sometimes also making generalities as to the oppressive nature of that experience.

One of the primary motivations of the novel has traditionally been a projection of the social situation and the reflection of social consciousness. Literature reveals principally three sets of relationships: human beings in relation to the Universe, individual in relation to society, and man in relation to woman. In other words, the novel is a document of social criticism tends to reflect the contingent reality in an aesthetic fashion.

POST COLONIAL APPROACH TO FEMINISM

After independence, changes in the socio-economic conditions have changed the patriarchal attitudes to gender, and this contemporary change is reflected in literature too. Indian writers, in their works present an image of women who is totally different from the image of the past, according to which woman was viewed as a weak vassal, while woman has consolidated her position, she refuses to submit to a man in a servile manner. This has led the creative writers to re-define the man-woman equation. From this point of view Deshpande's work is post-colonial.

Postcolonial writing has been described as an act of rereading and an approach that offers perspective so issues related to colonialism. As a critical concept, it recovers resistance of various kinds and attempts to explain the presence of the silenced voice in any dominant discourse and makes it possible to interpret a text. Postcolonial criticism draws attention to issues of cultural difference in literature and focuses on issues of gender, class and caste. It illustrates that the strategies of marginalisation are used even in other power structures. In this context, it is possible to read in the novels of Shashi Deshpande strategies of representation of traditional stereotypes of the Indian woman. About the postcolonial approach Diana Brydon writes:

We colonized form a community, with a common heritage of oppression and a common cause of working towards positive social change. To recognize what we hold in common is not to underestimate our differences, but to provide us with a contest for understanding them more clearly (Brydon 6).

If the same logic is used to understand the gender issue, in a broad sense Deshpande's work may be seen as a search for an authentic feminine discourse in which the community for women with a 'common heritage of oppression try to understand themselves and work towards a positive social change, finding their individuality. Her novels reconstruct aspects of women's experience and attempt to give voice to muted ideologies. It is true that she does not talk about issues like nationalism, imperialism, and so on, "but on her own admission what she has been doing in her novels is charting the inner landscapes of women" (Sebastian 143), where she provides her women characters a chance to understand themselves. Deshpande consistently explores "the nature of the female world and outlook", and reconstructs "the lost or suppressed

records of female experience” (Sebastian 140). She identifies femaleness as a thematic shift of attention in feminine goals and aspirations. Her attempt to echo “the loneliness of the gendered subaltern” and give voice to the silenced voices constitutes part of the decolonizing feminism.

Here it may be observed that Stephen Selmon’s location of “resistance as the important mode for writing in postcolonial literature” (Sebastian 128) opens up another road of reading Deshpande’s work. She constructs fictional narratives of women’s worlds especially in Indian social milieu; representing different aspects of the female psyche trapped within physical and psychological enclosure and yet attempts to transcend their boundaries.

These narratives function as modes of women’s experience underlining its resistance, subverting and undermining the traditional hierarchies in a subtle manner, and at the same time, open up a space where the marginal can come into being and retain its difference (Chatterjee 6).

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