

**JOURNEY OF THE MODERN MAN TOWARDS AUTHORITY: A STUDY
OF THE PROTAGONISTS IN SHASHI DESHPANDE’S NOVEL IN THE
BINDING VINE**

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Abstract

In the present paper, it is proposed to study mainly the fiction of Shashi Deshpande with the reference to the male representation and the intersection of class and community in Indian social system. The issues of class and community did not largely perturb Indian society in pre-independence period. However, the Indian English novels produced after independence depicted a successful paradigm shift to reveal the social changes.

Contemporary Indian English novel portrays images of male protagonists confined to rigid tradition and orthodoxy. The novels produced after independence show that the western culture has been partly assimilated by Indians. Post Independence Indian society also witnessed a new social order coming into existence. It was also to see the emergence of new patterns of class structure and the formation of new communities according to the changing patterns of life.

In this study, therefore an attempt will be made to scrutinize Shashi Deshpande’s novel to show how she is conscious of the male hegemony that has come up in the contemporary India. The study is based on the hypothesis that Shashi Deshpande’s novel effectively depicts the class structures and communities of modern India. Male class hold a central place in shashi Deshpande’s novel. The novelist presents an analysis of social strata along with various conflicting phases, which they generate. It becomes more

interesting, hence, to analyze the impact of male class and community in her novel.

Keyword: male representation, class, community etc.

Shashi Deshpande has tried to project a realistic picture of Indian society and the middle class educated woman who is financially independent in this novel. All characters belong to the middle class, are sensitive, intelligent, educated and career-oriented. Deshpande endeavors to establish woman as an individual who breaks the traditional constraints and redefines her identity. With the availability educational and vocational opportunities, the educated middle and upper class woman, particularly in urban areas, have become conscious of their rights and responsibilities. Deshpande's women in *The Binding Vine* show this consciousness. She acknowledges that higher class and lower class or male or female gender can come together and they are closely interdependent. She has presented a variety of such images in her novel *The Binding Vine*. Shashi Deshpande herself has strong convictions about class and community. She believes that in a society, as traditionally male dominated as the Indian Society is, women have difficulties to find their identities. However, the modern Indian men, as represented by the characters of Shashi Deshpande's novels are definitely working towards the goal of defining their identities.

She deals with the middle class women who represents the majority and covers a wider area in the modern Indian society. There are working women who, most of the time, are out of the family and come in indirect contact with society as in *The Binding Vine*. Her novels deal with the Indian middle class women's turmoils, predicament, and frustration and their pregnant silence. Shashi Deshpande in fact, is interested in the whole society; but some how, being a woman herself; she confines to the limited range of experience the gender affords to her. Hence, she tries to identify with the mundane realities and complex structure of society as perceived by women. She explores the class struggle of Indian society and social order that triggers the class struggle. Her characters represent a group of declassed women, a set of educated modern women as well as educated traditional women. Her novel deal with social strata and depicts conflicts of women with family, with the male world and society in general. Deshpande has also highlighted the class struggle and sufferings of the emerging class of Indian women. Her characters raise many questions regarding the conventional definition of class and community.

Deshpande reflects a convincing picture of the contemporary middle class women and their community. She implies that inspite of the education, opportunities and economic independence; women are victims of domestic injustice and customs of our society. She also feels that the writers of the contemporary world have to move away from the historical romance and mythical stories and they need to present the different class and community of their immediate circumstances. Shashi Deshpande is a very recent writer in Indian English literature. Her contribution to Indian fiction is remarkable. She depicts the changes in the society in her novels very minutely. This chapter studies class and community as projected in the novel *The Binding Vine*.

The Binding Vine focuses on the predicaments of women from a woman's point of view. It also focuses on the themes of marital relationship, mother-daughter relationship, social kinship and family relations. Urmi is the central character. She has lost her two-year-old daughter, Anu. Her family members – mother, brother, son, sisters-in-law, husband and friends, step mother-in-law – try to support her during the period of her sorrow.

The Story is narrated in the autobiographical style. All the events and episodes are narrated as experienced by Urmi who is the central character. The author rarely intervenes to interact with the readers. There is not much progression or happening in the novel as far as plot and action are concerned. The psyches of women belonging to different age groups and different social status have been highlighted. In that sense, there is a lot development in the novel. Shashi Deshpande's observation coheres with Jasbir Jain who claims:

The Biological-physiological core is the same; pain and mortality, suffering and oppression affects us in similar ways; social constructs and institutions also have developed along similar lines as family, marriage and patriarchy. But between this core of sameness and the appearance of sameness (in dress, life styles and the rest, obliterating class differences) and the spread of information, which constitutes a common area of knowledge, there is a whole lot of difference, which works through myths, past histories, body language, gender and customs.¹

The caste or class factor is more prominent in Indian social system. The caste system refers to the various hereditary social classes because of castes; there are conflicts between the upper classes and the lower classes. In the prevailing male dominated society, women are shown in passive roles of mother, wife, daughter, and sister. But in *The Binding Vine* women are very active and dynamic.

The major characters in the novel are educated and emancipated. These characters have sacrificed their personality like traditional women. Deshpande's characters are not only feminist heroes but also women struggling to attain their own liberty and voice.

The predominating social problems and themes in *The Binding Vine* emerge from the situations that depict the change from the traditional mode of living to modern. Deshpande deals with the socio-political tensions in which the Indian woman is trapped despite being educated and employed, even economically independent. She implies that mere financial freedom is not enough for woman's liberation.

Dr. Bhaskar Jain is a successful doctor in all respect and the only son of wealthy parents. He is also good in music – plays a tabla. It provides a contrast to his professional qualifications. Dr. Bhaskar Jain is the doctor who had attended Kalpana in hospital at the time of her plight. That episode opens the first meeting between Urmi and Bhaskar, where they both just exchange a smile.

The second time they meet is at the beach and subsequently after walking together for some time, he offers her company till home. On reaching, he accepts Urmi's offer to go up to her house. There he tries to be a little bit casual. He behaves freely, asks about Anu, and says that he also had a twin sister who died at the age of 13. He says that he wished that he should have known her before Anu's death. He tries to sympathize with her situation by making some sentimental remarks. Then, their discussion turns to Kalpana and Kalpana's need to get married. There is a growing friendship between Urmi and Bhaskar though Vanna and Inni do not approve of their meeting and going out very often. One day Bhaskar invites Urmi for lunch and she asks: "It's that this place is supposed to be shamefully expensive. Isn't it?" He responds: "That's all right. I can afford it...It's my father who has money. He's very matter-of-fact about it..."(116). This conversation indicates the gendered difference in their respective attitudes towards money and luxury.

Dr. Bhaskar is the only son of wealthy parents and he is a successful doctor. His profession shows social parameter of success. Besides land and property, his medical profession is important for him in deciding his social status. He talks about his idea of marriage and expresses his desire as the deflected sensibility of his mother:

‘My mother think of any girl refusing me! Ha !’ He is smiling now, but there’s a kind of self-mockery in it. ‘I’ m the only son of rich parents, a highly qualified man – how can any girl refuse me? No, no, it can’t happen, it’s impossible. My mother wants a “Sweet, homely, fair, convent-educated girl” for me, and she’ll get her, never fear.’ (160)

Hidden in Bhaskar’s expectations is the patriarchal stereotype of an ideal wife. Bhaskar’s mother gets very restless when she meets Urmi. She troubles her with a barrage of questions as if she is interviewing a prospective bride for her son in Urmi. She puts direct question, nearly demanding answers. However Bhaskar justifies his mother’s bluntness:

She’s is very business-like about it. She’s got a list of eligible girls from our community. Whenever a girl gets married, she strikes off her name. And she’s always including new names in her list. She has their photographs as well’ (160).

Bhaskar’s mother asks Urmi to leave her job, as her husband is working in Merchant Navy. She tries to link herself to Urmi by referring to their respective dead daughters and by speaking about their sons. It is later in that meeting that, she realizes after talking with Bhaskar that he has assumed the role of lover in Urmi’s life. He tells her that he loves her and wants to marry her. He also asks openly about her husband that why she had never spoken about him. He asks whether she loves her husband and Urmi feels cheated. She gets angry with Bhaskar for over-stepping his role. She feels angry for herself for closing her eyes and ignoring all warnings that Inni and Vanaa used to give her. Bhaskar also feels cheated and when he realizes that Urmi was still in love with her husband. This incident also shows how a woman’s choice friend is conditioned by the rigid role of a wife, which she has to play.

On subsequent meeting at the hospital, Bhaskar behaves coldly. He just walks away as if Urmi has done something wrong to him. Urmi goes deep into her thought and realizes that Bhaskar is also like all men who would take advantage of a single woman. Tears roll down her face when she recollects how he looked coldly and he walked away showing his indifference. Jasbir Jain comments on his inability to make a constructive relation in life:

Bhaskar has lost his twin sister and, with her, the ability to play the tabla. He keeps on strumming at the table, almost a compulsive action, but one that yields no music. It is as if a shadow play is going on. At a psychic level, he feels that he has absorbed her energy into himself and is now a complete Leo. It is, at one level, a symbolic representation of bereavement; one takes on something from the dead – their habits, desires, goals – and loses something of oneself – one’s own aspirations and independence, and subordinates them to the other.²

Urmi had fallen in love with Kishore when she was 15. It was the day, when Urmi’s grandfather died. It was Kishore, who informed her that her grandfather ‘Aju’ was dead. She sleeps after being tired and depressed and when she wakes up, she finds Kishore sitting by her side. It was at that precise moment she fell in love with him. There is love, appreciation,

tolerance and patience in their relationship. Kishore being a naval officer was away at ship for most of the time. Each time he left Urmi, she is overcome by a kind of terrible feeling. She always wanted to tell him: “Don’t leave me and go. Each time you go, the parting is like death” Urmi and Kishore have a healthy sexual life too. They understand each other’s preference and very carefully, they live for each other even while living for themselves. However, Kishore has a mystery about him. Urmi knows he would never remove his armour. There is something in him, she thinks, she will never reach. She always lives with the hope that some day he will come. Urmi feels that her marriage is different. She tells:

marriage with a man who flits into my life a few months in a year and flits out again, leaving nothing of himself behind? Often after he has gone, I find myself a frantic grappling for his image, as if in going he has taken that away as well. Then he returns and we pick up the course of our lives from the moment of his return. Both of us behave –at least he’s always done and I have learnt to do so – as if there is only this present. Neither the past nor the futures have any place in our life together; we reject both. (164)

There is lot of space in their married life. They are capable of showing both attachment and detachment at the same time. There is loyalty and faithfulness to one another. When Bhaskar proposes Urmi and asks her whether she loves her husband, Urmi realizes that she loves him immensely. It is her love for Kishore that restricts her from accepting Bhaskar’s proposal. However, Deshpande’s implies that Kishore makes Urmi feel that there are certain aspects of his life which are inaccessible for her. She also shows how a woman feels dumped by her husband when he leaves her unmindful of her emotional needs.

In *The Binding Vine*, Shashi Deshpande presents middle class educated characters. Author herself belongs to middle class background. Majority of Indian society comprise middle class people. After independence, many middle class families got better education. Education is valued not for its own sake, but for moving up the social hierarchy. Education and social life of lower class people is badly affected due to the oppressive approach of upper class. There is more compelling reason for the education of middle class people. Shashi Deshpande’s characters reveal this attitude towards education. The Relationship between Vanna and Harish is that of unequal or male domination. It is Harish’s sense of order and perfection, which is the rock on which Vanna has built her life. There is a kind of remote control over Vanna of Harish. Even when he is away from home, Vanna wants to do things according to the time set by him. She does not have her own decision and priorities. She is a very obedient, very dependent wife. Harish has a habit of timeliness and he never prefers choice. He never likes jokes. Vanna knows it and therefore ignores them. Vanna is thus a very submissive wife.

Vanna and Urmi are closer than sisters. The poems of Mira haunt Urmi so much, so that she decides to publish them. But Vanna opposes because she feels that it will destroy the image and honour of her family. This shows how male oriented society conditions women to think to act so as to abide by the sanctions of patriarchy. She believes that a woman has to have a sense of belongingness in a family. Though she is an educated modern working woman, her peacefulness justifies the system of belief which treats man as the master of the family and woman as the servant of family under the guiding principle of her master. She also testifies another patriarchal dictum – education of children is always is mother’s job in an Indian family. Vanna is traditional even when she is an educated social worker by profession. She has one daughter but she wanted to have a son. Harish decides to have no more kids. Vanna accepted the

decision taken by Harish. She never raises her voice within her family. Her passive acceptance of Harish's decision indicates the politics of husband wife relationship. Vanna, tries to compensate her defeat by getting involved with a poor woman, Shakutai, in the Hospital.

Families are built on marriage and relationship. Her own uncle rapes Kalpana – her mother's sister's husband named Prabhakar. Sulu is totally submissive. Prabhakar dominant because Sulu is childless woman. Therefore Kalpana was Sulu Mavshi's pet. Shakutai and her family; they were in Bombay trying to make living. Sulu and her husband take charge of Kalpana but Kalpana runs away from them. The girl of this lower class are abused and ill-treated by their own relative. However the traditional values are so deeply rooted in the mind that they just tolerate injustice but never raise any voice. Male-dominated tendency have generated in social system. Men and women think differently because they have been taught to think of that direction. Shakutai recalls: "I thought my Sulu was lucky. I thought, when she married Prabhakar, she at least would have a good life." But Sulu's happy married life becomes chaotic. Innocent Kalpana is made the victim of lust of Prabhakar. Sulu can't handle the situation. This heinous act directly affects Sulu and Kalpana and indirectly affects Shakutai. Shakutai had thought of marrying off Kalpana to Sulu's husband Prabhakar who was mad after her. This development indicates that Sulu was compelled by Prabhakar to make the marriage proposal. When Sulu understands that her husband has raped Kalpana, she commits suicide because she wants to avoid telling a lie to save her husband from the Police. Sulu is typical traditional Indian woman. Her suicide reflects woman's mentality and her timid nature to the reality.

The novel has memories of a house in Ranidurg, even Urmi and Inni live in the city. Inni, Urmi's mother who lives in the city, is sophisticated, and beautiful. She always keeps her memory of rural life alive. Urmila is Shashi Deshpande's first character who plans to fight another woman's battle. Urmi's friend Vanaa and her mother Inni cannot understand her deep involvement with the Kalpana. Urmila, with the help of media person Malcom, presents Kalpana's case in the press. This issue attracts the attention of people and therefore government orders the investigation. Priti had led a lonely life abroad. One day, Priti and Urmi watch a movie on T.V. The movie was cut off from reality. Movie and films are a part of the social process but some time reality of life is depicted in it. Priti would like to work on reality, that is, script of Mira's life. But Priti is silent about her mother who is a depressive alcoholic. Urmi decides to live Mira's story alone. Deshpande shows the different mentality of two women and how a film can be used to reflect the real images of woman's life. Vanaa is a very simple character. She desires her children to speak their own language. She is conscious about language because she believes that one's thoughts and expressions governed by language. Those reveal her understanding of the importance of language in shaping one's culture.

Dr. Bhaskar Jain is a professional who helps in Kalpana's case. He is confused at Shakutai's troubled condition and so much about Kalpana's marriage. Deshpande depiction of urban community is not limited to middle class but she discovers the lives of lower class who hardly manage to live in this heartless, material world. They face ground realities of oppressive situation and facts. The urban communities have been depicted as a real human beings and not only professionals and working people.

Urmi is educated and employed. She plays diverse roles both indoors and outdoors. Urmi is presented in this novel in the family set up as well as outside the family. Urmi is satisfied with her job as lecturer. She says: "I always wanted to teach. I enjoy my classes." (26) As she is already staying with her mother, Inni and Kishore, her husband works for the Merchant Navy and therefore is not regular member of the household. Urmi is grieving over her dead daughter

Anu. But she learns to adjust with critical situation. She gets involved in other people's life, that is, Kalpana's case. She says, "After Anu died, the voice stopped. Then I saw Kalpana, I met Shakutai, I read Mira's diary, her poems. And I've begun to think yes, I've been lucky, that's all. While these women... You understand what I'm saying, Vanaa? They never had a chance. It's not fair, it's not fair at all. And we can't go on pushing it what happened to them –under the carpet forever because we're afraid of disgrace." (174)

Little Mandira believes that woman's primary duty is to take care of her family. She tells Urmil, 'when I grow up, I'm never going to leave my children to go to work.' (72) In spite of belonging to the modern, educated urban society the roles of Indian women have been limited to the care of their family and children.

Vanaa, Urmil's sister-in-law lives life usual to the desires of her family. Her husband Harish has great control over her. Yet Urmil and Vanaa have advantages and social mobility because of their learning and upper class background and are in a better position to analyze the social reality.

In Deshpande's novels, male characters play minor roles. Men are absent or dead. In this novel, Kishore who is Urmil's husband mostly absent as he works in the merchant navy. Urmil's father is dead; nowhere exists in the novel. Her grandfather Aju had committed suicide. Kishore's father is also dead who was Mira's husband. Amrut is the only young male who is the brother of Urmil and Kartik is a six years old, Urmil's son. Urmil's father is another male character who had sent Urmil away to his own mother at Ranidurg as a punishment for Inni. He had not changed his mind in spite of his wife's tears. He appears in the novel as a strict patriarch. When Urmil has severe attack of asthma and loses consciousness. Harish, Vanaa's husband attends to her and she recovers. Harish too is a dominant person. When Vanaa wants second baby, she tells Harish about her desire to have a son. Harish decides to have no more children and quotes population figures. Vanaa always thinks that Harish is always right. Harish is aggressive and orthodox who allows little space for his wife in their lives and he wants to maintain their family honour through patriarchal order.

Urmil does not show a hatred for males. She hopes for a society where all women are treated equal to men. Mira on the other hand, had suffered in her marital life. Her diary shows that her husband raped her. In our culture, it is legal right of the husband to possess his wife sexually with or without her permission. In case of Mira, she had been forced this right against her will. Jasbir Jain explores the mindset of Mira's husband:

Kishore's father was a man of single-minded pursuit when he married Mira; he went through all the manipulations that the system forced on him. He couldn't propose directly, he couldn't ask his parents to take the proposal to her family. And 'so he went at it deviously'. And when she died, he turned all his attention to his son.³

Prabhakar is a man and ordinary non-professional. He does not touch alcohol and does not smoke. His wife Sulu is childless and Prabhakar is interested in the youthful Kalpana. He encashes upon his status as man of good manners to make sexual advances to Kalpana. In Indian society, one finds a gender bias. Women are given secondary status. The women do not get opportunities for career advancement in our society. Even in family, gender difference marks all relationship. Son has a superior status than daughter in family. Upbringing of children is always considered mother's duty in such a society. Even a working woman is expected to fulfill her duties towards home and her children. Shashi Deshpande depicts shades of a woman's life in

the novel in this social scenario. Urmi is woman who has to keep on changing her role. Her relationship to Kartik is not controlled by gender discrimination. Urmi rightly states: “I don’t know. Sometimes I think it’s who take parenthood seriously; men don’t, not to the same extent, anyway.”(76)

Vanna tries to gain her father’s attention and love but all her efforts are useless when she knows that her father gives preference to his son. Father does not expect anything from Vanna because she is a daughter. This gender discrimination is one of the inhuman tendencies in Indian society. Inni also longs for her daughter. Inni being a female herself is unable to look after her child properly

Mira writes in one of her poems the pressure on a woman to bear a son:

I feel the quickening in my womb,

He moves-why do I call the child he? (149)

Why do I call the child he? Yes, Mira, why? Why did you want a son? Is it because you were frightened of bearing this constant

Burden of fear for your daughter as well? (150)

Mira does not experience of motherhood as she dies after giving birth to Kishore. Mira holds her mother responsible for her life. Being a mother, she never takes decisions about children. Men are supposed to be the decision maker of the family. Mira remembers the attitude of her mother. She knows that she has to confine her life to the four walls of the house. Her feelings were not taken into account. Mira wants her spaces, privacy, and freedom. Infact; she is not unfair to man. Her husband is not lustful either; he marries the second time for the sake of his infant son. Discussing gender, Catherine Stimpson says:

Simply speaking, gender is a way of classifying living things and languages, of sorting them into two groups: Feminine and masculine. However, no system of classification is ever simple. Cultural laws of gender demand that feminine and masculine must play off against each other in the great drama of binary opposition. They must struggle against each other or complement each other, or collapse into each other in the momentary, illusory relief of the androgynous embrace. In patriarchal cultures, the struggle must end in the victory of the masculine; complementarily must end arrange itself hierarchically; androgyny must be a mythic fiction.⁴

Shakutai had suffered a lot in her married life. She had trauma, misery and children from her life. Shakutai considers her daughter as impolite as she was not obedient to her mother’s warnings about the male dominated society. Kalpana is unable to surrender before the gender discrimination. Kalpana rejects to live the life of her mother. She faces the bitter reality of life. Thus, Shashi Deshpande depicts and problematizes various issues of class, gender and community in the novels. She also considers these issues from different vantage points such as Feminism and Marxism.

Shashi Deshpande’s novels ‘*The Binding Vine*’ reveals similar class system and communities. The protagonists in the novel represent the middle class and they show urge for upward social mobility and interest in better education. Urmi, the protagonist in “*The Binding Vine*” represents this middle class. They also represent the community of educated, employed urban women who have their financial, independence and better freedom of choice. Shashi Deshpande makes such the focal character of her narratives and juxtaposes other character with

them to show how higher social class male gender and urban society afford certain privileges in Indian society.

However, Shashi Deshpande focuses the middle class women though she depicts men and women of lower economic strata; they merely provide a contrast to the main characters that are invariably picked from the middle class or upper middle class. Though Shashi Deshpande is not insensitive to the problems and the realities of women from the lower class, her focus seems to be women as a community. In her novel, women of all class are marginalized though degree of marginalization differs from person to person.

Novels of Shashi Deshpande also bring to light the specific behavioral pattern of people belonging to different class and community. The indifferent attitude of Shakuntal towards crime of rape is typical of her class. Shashi Deshpande also brings out the social sites where class and community intersect. She indicates in '*The Binding Vine*' that certain social and individual behaviors are common to class and community. Marginalization of female, for instance, is seen in all classes and communities.

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