

# Marginalization of women in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*

Dr. Bulbul Gupta<sup>1</sup>, Anil Kumar Shabharwal<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, Department of English. M.M. College. Modinagar, Ghaziabad, UP, India

<sup>2</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, M.M. College, Modinagar, Ghaziabad, India

Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received on: 21 Mar 2025                      Revised on: 15 Apr 2025                      Accepted on: 20 Apr 2025                      ©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).                      Keywords – Marginalization, denial, oppression, submissive, orthodox, patriarchy.</p>	<p>The paper aims to depict Social Marginalization by which individuals particularly women are systematically pushed to the edges of society and are denied equal access to opportunities, resources and power. To do so, <i>The Binding Vine</i> authored by Shashi Deshpande is studied and analyzed wherein the novelist has intensely critiqued marginalization of women in a deeply entrenched patriarchal Indian society. The present study elucidates how women across different generations and social strata are systematically oppressed, silenced and denied agency, primarily by way of sexual and physical violence, denial of personal and professional identity and societal pressure to conform to traditional and submissive roles.</p>

Marginalization which is a significant feature of Indian society has been defined variously by different writers and critics. According to Michael Kollmair and Ghana S. Gurung, the term *marginality* is often used to study the economic, political, and cultural domains in which underprivileged individuals find it difficult to get resources and fully engage in social life. In other words, marginalized individuals may be neglected, excluded, or disregarded in social, economic, political, and legal contexts; as a result, they are susceptible to changes in their means of subsistence (Gurung and Kollmair 1). As stated by Sommers et al, "*Socio-economic marginality is a condition of socio-spatial structure and process in which components of society and space in a territorial unit are observed to lag behind an expected level of performance in economic, political and social well-being, compared with average conditions in the territory as a whole*" (Sommers et al. 8). The concept of marginalization is well defined by the above-mentioned definitions, which are used in many settings, demonstrate how elusive and complex the idea of marginalization is. Let's talk about some characteristics of marginalization to help better

understand the meaning and concept. Although classes and groups may be excluded from the prevailing societal hierarchy at the regional level, whole societies may sometimes be marginalized on a national and international scale. In some situations, the same group may be marginalized in one nation while they are not in another. Additionally, during different phases of life, marginalization rises or falls. For instance, women, children and young people may become less marginalized as they age, adults may become more marginalized as they age, and single mothers' marginalized status may shift as their children mature. At one time, people or groups may have a high social standing, but when society changes, they no longer have their position and become marginalized. As a result, marginalization is a dynamic and complicated phenomenon that is connected to social standing.

A number of Indian women writers have taken up the issue of marginalization in their works. Writers beginning from Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu to Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri and Shashi Deshpande have challenged

patriarchal conventions and given voice to issues like identity, gender and marginalization. Globally acclaimed writers like Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri and Shashi Deshpande emerged in the later half of 20th and initial half of the 21st centuries. They have bravely tackled a vast range of topics, from feminism to marginalization, often fusing the political and the personal. By claiming their identities and using compelling stories to participate in international discussions, Indian women authors are still redefining the literary scene today.

Shashi Deshpande, a leading woman novelist on the Indian literary horizon, is concerned with women's issues. Caught in the whirlpool of tradition and modernity, her heroines undergo big mental trauma in their quest for identity. A close study of *The Binding Vine* (1993) would unearth as how well and how far Deshpande has been capable to give voice to long silences of the marginal women. *The Binding Vine* sketches her middle-class protagonist struggling in a male dominated world, where she has made bold attempts at giving voice to the disappointment and defeat of a woman. The blurb of the novels says, "The narrator in *The Binding Vine* is the clever sharp-tongued Urmil, grieving over the death of her baby daughter and surrounded by, but rebuffing, the care of her mother and her childhood friend, Vanna. Yet in this web of loss and despair are the glimmerings of hope. Shashi Deshpande explores with acuity and compassion the redemptive powers of love." As she herself states, "One of the themes of the novel was about controlling women's minds and bodies" (Deshpande, *Women's*, 26).

However, the story of *The Binding Vine* appears to be very much similar to her other novels. Various feminist issues like traditional attitude imposed by man rape, violence, harassment, sexual assault, concept of marriage, etc. are found floating in *The Binding Vine*. It can also be observed that the illogical and age-old traditions, which are ironically followed by men and women in this novel, are bondage on their mental growth as an individual. While in all other novels, the protagonist is of great importance and all the minor characters are used as a subject to show their concerns and feelings, in *The Binding Vine* even the minor characters play very significant and important roles. The novel, with its classification of women who seem to be exploited at every stage of

their lives by following the absurd traditions and illogical patterns, has prompted critics to present broad opinions.

All the incidents, episodes and events are narrated by Urmil (Urmil), who is the central character of *The Binding Vine*. The novel, written in autobiographical style opens with Urmil mourning over the death of her daughter, Anu. The physical and mental states of women belonging to the different age group and different social strata, cultures, traditions have been highlighted in this work of fiction. Shashi Deshpande's observation overlaps with Jasbir Jain, who claims:

The biological-physiological core is the same; pain and mortality, suffering and oppression affect 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 differences which works through myths, past histories body language, gender, and customs. (245)

In *The Binding Vine*, Shashi Deshpande depicts how a life would be lived under the influence of absurd, age-old, and illogical traditions. Mira, Urmil's mother-in-law, is a classic example of those unfortunate women who are forced into a loveless and ruthless marriage, and finally have to give up to the lust of their husbands. In this regard, Mira's own mother advises 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. (*The Binding Vine*, 83)

It is only through Mira's diary and poems that Urmil gets to know about her troubled marriage. She comes to know from Akka, sister-in-law of Mira, that how Kishore's father had chased and married Mira. The poems and entries in the diary are proof enough for Urmil to conceive the forced sexual activity Mira had to undergo in an incompatible marriage. By her poems and diaries, Urmil seeks to establish a communication with her and reform the tragic story of a sprightly girl. Naikar observes:

Urmil is not a radical feminist but one who tries to make the best of her life by hardening to face the harsh realities of life. Besides, Deshpande has taken a bold

step forward by exploring the working women's needs of the head, heart, and anatomy. (126)

Urmila understands that Mira was a favourite daughter of her father, who was proud of her intelligence, skills, and talent, which made him present Mira a book of poetry on her birthday. Mira's photographs and writings display in Urmila's mind an image of vivacious and intelligent girl. Her desire to be a poetess and the inhibitions about expressing it aloud and her fear of being laughed at, are all obvious in her poems: "Huddled in my cocoon, a somnolent silkworm will I emerge a beautiful being? Or will I, suffocating, cease to exist?" (65).

Therefore, her questioning about her anxiety, fear and uncertainty are all felt in her heart and in her poems which are true manifestations of her latent feelings. She anticipates that the society will never allow her to be a poetess. Besides it, Mira's writings reflect the extent of forever sexual activity resulting in rape in her married life.

"It runs through all her writing- a strong, clear thread of an intense dislike of the sexual act with her husband, a physical repulsion from the man she married" (63).

Perhaps her situation truly reflects the unspoken agony of many such unfortunate women who suffered from this mental and physical trauma. The invasion of one's body, even though sanctified by marriage can be as traumatic as rape. This experience evocatively brings out the humiliation experienced by Mira, who feels that her body has been violated by her husband.

According to Adrienne Rich, "It is not rape of the body alone but rape of mind as well" (61).

In other words, the narrator makes a clear statement at the false and illogical tradition of our society. But there are some absurd traditions which define that it is a wife's duty to please her husband in bed. Traditionally it is believed that a wife should serve him like a slave, give him proper advice, forgive all his sins, feed him like a mother, and serve him like a prostitute in the bed. Even in the midst of vulnerable pain and fear, Mira is aware of the new found love for her unborn child. But Mira is unfortunate even in this - she dies in childbirth "... having bled to death within an hour after her child was born" (136).

In the process, Mira dies during childbirth after four years of a loveless, ruthless, and meaningless

marriage. Every day she spends her life in a cry of rape and anguish. All these feelings run through her writings. She feels that each erotic feeling is something like the sting of a scorpion to be borne by women in silence. In one of her poems and diaries Mira laments: But tell me, friend, did Laxmi too twist brocade tassels round her fingers and tremble, fearing the coming of the dark-clouded, engulfing night? (66)

But it is Urmila who understands Mira and her situation. Urmila states, "I've worked hard at knowing Mira, I've read her diaries, gone through her papers, absorbed her poems, painfully, laboriously translated them into English. And now, I tell myself, I know Mira" (174).

In this regard, it may be said that Urmila and her thinking pattern is very different from other female protagonists of Shashi Deshpande, because she fights for others. As the novel opens with Urmila grieving over the loss of her dead infant daughter Anu, she tries to fight the loss and feels that forgetting this loss would be equivalent to betrayal. She states, "... No, I must reject these memories, I have to conquer them. This is one battle I have to win if I am to go on living. And yet my victory will carry with it the taint of betrayal. To forget is to betray" (21).

S.Indira Nityanandam opines "It is her intense attachment to her daughter that becomes the cause of her suffering" (22). The story further unfolds the efforts of her friend and sister-in-law, Vanna, her brother, Amrit, and her mother, Inni. But Urmila could not be persuaded because she thinks that any consolation is too petty to be compared to her grief. Urmila understands that Mira did not have a single chance to enjoy her life. Urmila knows that the life which seems normal to her mother is terrible to her and to most of the women of her age. But Mira is not like other women. Urmila amazes to know how Mira could survive a life denied of choices with a man whom she could not love and doesn't have nothing in common to share with. She thinks, "Perhaps it was her writing that kept her going, that kept her alive" (127). But none of the members of family ever bothered and cared about her emotions and feelings.

She voices to her inner self in her diaries and poems. Urmila's interaction with Shakutai, her sister, Sulu and her daughter, Kalpana, brings her to light the manner in which the stereotype traditional culture is

operative in the sexual differences of men and women of the lower strata of the society. "Mira's intended question for her mother is an implied question for all those who expect their daughters to be bound by tradition and play the conventional roles of daughter-in-law, of wife, and mother, whatever may be their situation." (Khan, 165)

On the other hand, when Shakutai, Kalpana's mother, assumes that her daughter has been injured in a car accident, Urmila is shocked. After examining Kalpana, the doctor informs that she has been brutally raped. The mother's reaction of a typical stereotype Indian mother is quite predictable. Most Indian mothers would react in the same manner as they all are concerned about their daughter's wedding. Later on, catching a hint of the conversation between Vanna and Dr. Bhaskar, She turns in fear and cries: 'No, no, no. Tell him, tai, it's not true, don't tell anyone, I'll never be able to hold up my head again, who'll marry the girl, we're decent people, Doctor,' she turns to him, 'don't tell the police'. (58)

Shakutai does not want to file a complaint to the police station because a victim of rape is, in her views, a loser on two counts. First, she has been brutally raped; secondly, according to some absurd norms, the victim is labelled as a characterless woman. If a girl is raped, then according to the absurd traditions laid down by the society, she is considered as a slut. But it is not her fault. Urmila realizes how society undermines the sympathy of the mother for her daughter. The mother, like the rest of the society, blames her daughter for her hopeless state. Shakutai has been deserted by her husband for some other women but apart from that she is very anxious to get Kalpana settled. Mira, too, was a victim of physical abuse years ago, but the mother did not dare defy the unfounded and irrational norms of society. Shakutai in extreme pain and deep sorrow goes to the extent that why daughters are born. She remarks; "Why does God give us daughters...?" (60).

This statement candidly depicts the mental depression of a mother. In Deshpande's book *Writing from the Margin* (2003), she is of the view: When women undertake their journey in pursuit of self-knowledge, they do not start light... we are already burdened with a baggage that has been given to us. The fact is that we don't start with a picture of ourselves on a clean slate. Inscribed on it already are things told to us by others

that determine our behaviour, ideas, expressions, and dreams. (87)

In male dominated society, the case of rape, the victim is thought to be as much at fault as the rapist. The same happens with Shakutai, who used to praise her daughter before she was raped and now condemns her for the very things. She remarks: And I have to listen to such words because of this girl. She's shamed us, we can never wipe off this blot. And Prakash blames me. What could I do? She was so self-willed. Cover yourself decently, I kept telling her, men are like animals. But she went her way. You should have seen her walking out, head in the air, caring for nobody. It's all her fault, Urmila, all her fault... (147)

But Shakutai seems hard to be convinced. The fact is that she is under the influence of values supported by absurd norms of male dominated society. It may be said that, Shakutai, who keeps meandering between praising her daughter and criticizing or blaming her, is victim of her own values. Yet she was not born with these values embedded with her mother's wombs. Someone had to shape these values, make her believe that they were her own. Who? Her mother, her mother's mother, her mother's another mother? Not at all. It was her father, her father's father, her father's father's father, her fathers' father's father. (Malik, 9)

However, Urmila's concern for helping Kalpana does not receive the approval even at her own home. So far, the protagonists in Shashi Deshpande's earlier novels have fought for their own lives. But Urmila is first one who decides to fight another woman's battle who has lost her dignity to the unfounded norms and absurd tradition. She succeeds in annulling Kalpana's transfer to another hospital. Back to home, Urmila's friend and sister-in-law, Vanna, and her mother, Inni, cannot understand her deep involvement with Kalpana. In spite of facing many odds, Urmila pursues the case and it is reopened and the identity of the rapist is revealed ultimately in the end. The rapist is discovered to be Shakutai's sister Sulu's husband, Prabhakar, who had always lusted for Kalpana.

Here, it can be added that marriage is the only means of security for women. Urmila is of the opinion that marriage is a necessity for women and especially for women like Shakutai, marriage means security. Shakutai remarks; "Sometimes, Urmila, I think I was cruel to the girl; but I did it for her. I wanted her to

have all that I never had- education, a good life, a good marriage, respect from others" (112). Mira and Sulu are those women who are physically vulnerable even within the secure structure of marriage.

It seems that Shashi Deshpande has projected the same idea already expressed by Simone de Beauvoir that, "Marriage subjugates and enslaves women and it leads her to aimless days indefinitely repeated towards death without questioning its purpose" (500).

It can be understood that marriage for women means to surrender their self, their dignity, their freedom to men. But, at the same time, Urmila is in the institution of marriage and does not find an end of it. To Urmila, happiness in her marriage was magical, while to her mother it means security. It is this martial bond that makes Urmila reject Bhaskar's proposal. She understands the importance of marriage. She clearly explains her views about marriage to Dr. Bhaskar Jain. She loves her husband, Kishore. Urmila confesses, "I love my husband and therefore, I am an inviolate..." (164). Commenting on the relationship with her husband, Tripathi says: Urmila, the sailor's wife and a college teacher is, more self-reliant and has an identity, different from that of husband: she is self-respecting and does not want to live on Kishore's money. She is, however, Kishore as an oak to entwine herself around. (45)

Analyzing the condition of women in marriage within the social codes and norms, Urmila further reviews her own marriage with Kishore. She had gone against her members of family and friend, Vanna, to marry him, but she had walked out on him on the wedding night as Kishore felt trapped. Therefore, it can be observed that Urmila is the only woman character in this novel who does not follow the absurd norms and traditions of the society. Regardless of these rituals, Urmila dreams of building her relationship with Kishore on companionship and understanding. But Kishore's job in the merchant navy disrupts her dream of a normal life. She feels frustrated with his short visits as she never finds time to develop an emotional relationship. The long separation from him often fills her with physical longing to have him permanently by her side. "Each time you leave me, the parting is like death" (139). But soon she realizes that sex is only a temporary answer and all her feelings remained unfulfilled.

She remarks, 'Go back to sleep,' he said. He was kneeling by me, his face close to mine, but the closeness was only physical. His voice was cold. I could see the goose bumps on his shoulders, his chest. I did not look into his face, I was afraid of what I would see. I turned round and fell asleep. And woke up only when he shook me awake and said, 'We have to go back, Anu is not well' (140).

Thus, Urmila is leading an economically and socially secure life like a normal human being without her husband's support. But sometimes she feels erotic feelings growing within her because she is deprived of such feelings and she finds it hard to control her wishes. As she says, "I often wished I could put my desires into a deep freeze and take them out, intact and whole, when he returned" (164-165).

Urmila's dissatisfaction with the situation between she and her husband, Kishore, leads her to revolt against the traditional limitations of a wife and asserts her needs. In Dr. Bhaskar, she finds a friend who understands the emotional upheaval she is undergoing. Here, Deshpande is trying to make a point that money cannot curb the needs of a person to be pampered and cared within a relationship. It is this vacuum in her life that leads the advancement of her friendship with Dr. Bhaskar. Nityanandam suggests, "His knowledge of the communication gap between Urmila and her husband makes him hopeful" (156). But as has been cited elsewhere, Deshpande's men and women seek equality, support, and freedom by not overstepping the social norms and codes. Even if Urmila is tempted, she could not uproot herself from her traditional background. Besides her love for Kishore, she has a firm hold on her marriage. The amount of hurt and trouble affects her affair with Dr. Bhaskar. It will cause her to choose the simple and respectful life of fidelity. To overcome her temptations, she finds it much simple to just think of it. She remarks, "It's so much easier, so much simpler, to just think of virtue and chastity and being a good wife" (166).

Urmila is not happy with the way a girl loses her real name after marriage under the effect of unfounded social customs. The Indian custom of changing the bride's name is a pivotal point of losing her social equality and identity. Mira, who is bound in a marriage against her wishes, cringes further when a new name is imposed on her. She exclaims: Nirmala,

they call, I stand statue- still. Do you build the new without razing the old? A tablet of rice, a pencil of gold can they make me Nirmala? I am Mira. (101) It can be said here about Deshpande that Her own struggle as a writer to focus on women's issues, problems and experience is equally symptomatic of the resistance to feminist expression that prevailed in India in the middle of the 20th century. Deshpande has looked into women's changing perspectives and their search for freedom within family as a mode of strength. (Karkun, 195)

The level of submission, practised by female characters in the interest of safeguarding their marriages, is hinted in the glimpses offered into the marriage of Vanna and Harish. Urmila is aware that women at different levels, irrespective of their social backgrounds, are given a raw deal. Urmila is furious at the way educated women submit themselves to safeguard their marriage. Vanna's constant repetition of 'Harish says' irritates Urmila and she reprimands Vanna "Assert yourself. You don't have to crawl before him, do you?" (80). Vanna tells Harish about her deep desire to have a son. But he quotes some populations figures in front of her and expresses utter surprise that she should be one of those women who crave for sons. And then he tells her that he is not sure that the next child would be a son.

Besides that, Vanna still feels that she would not have minded taking a chance. When Urmila tried to speak on behalf of her husband: Why can't Harish help? He comes home so tired. Urmila says, "You know, Vanna, what you're going to become, coping with everything the way you are? 'What?' 'A Superwoman.' 'Good! And doesn't that make Harish a Superman?' No, a Superbrat" (81).

Another example of illogical traditions and customs is the marriage of Akka, who is made to marry a widower and a child's father. Even before her marriage, she is warned that her prospective husband had been obsessed with his wife, and after her death he is now concerned only for his son. In fact, he marries only so that his son can have a mother. Listening to Akka narrating the story of her and Vanna, Urmila thinks, "The cruelty, the enormous cruelty of that silenced us" (47). This example clearly describes the fate of many women who socially accept marriage under family pressure which states that marriage is the only goal in a girl's life. She is not given

any choice to decide what is good and bad for her. Sunita Reddy rightly remarks: "Deshpande shows how the institution of marriage can sometimes shatter the self-confidence of a person and transform a vivacious girl into a fearful and nervous woman" (104). Hence, Deshpande stands with ordinary women who face life's vagaries, get suppressed and depressed under the effects of absurd customs which deny them the right of self-determination. Yet they reconcile with life with an improved, mature, and rational outlook on life. Deshpande reflects a special ability to investigate the depth of human heart and gives expression to the feelings buried there. Her novels are primarily a revelation of the inner consciousness of a character. Therefore, she uses stream of consciousness technique as the mode of narration in the novel. It may be said that *The Binding Vine* is a story of three lives. It is a sane post-mortem of several tragedies in the life of different women. Her writing [Deshpande's] furnishes mirrors of authentic female experience and examines the lives of half a dozen women to drive home the point what drives women to become hysteric, escapists scapegoats, and discusses the compulsions which compel them to silence, suicide and death while delivering a child. (Khan,162)

The female characters are shown as victims of absurd social customs, which deprived them from social equality. They are denied what they deserve to enjoy their lives. But it is not that men are entirely absent, but they felt their presence by exercising their power over women, especially with their wives. In fact, most of the male characters presented in this novel play negligible role. The palpable presence of Kishore's father in the novel is felt 41 through Mira's diaries and poems. Other male characters like Kishore, Dr. Bhaskar, are not given much weightage. Deshpande's intention behind presenting these male characters as minor figure is quite clear. Her interest does not lie in delineating full-fledged male characters. Rather she presents them mostly as agents who use and spread patriarchal norms and structures. *The Binding Vine* is a strange world where men and women can be seen searching for their identity. Women want to liberate themselves from the clutches of absurd tradition and customs, men want to liberate themselves from the unknown and strange hold of their persona as man. But they never get what they want because they are

holding back by the moral codes of society. It is the world in which women outshine men by their clear perception of things around them, their courage to cope with their surroundings, their ability to forge an alliance among themselves and learn to live. Thus, we see that *The Binding Vine* throws a flood of light on the personal tragedy of Urmila, the protagonist, to concentrate on victims like Kalpana and Mira – victims of man's lust and women's helplessness. Urmi narrates the pathetic odyssey of Mira, her mother-in-law, who had been a victim of marital rape in marriage. Mira, in the solitude of her unhappy marriage, writes poems, which were posthumously seen, translated and published by Urmi. She also gives voice to Shakutai, a pathetic character, who has been deserted by her husband for another woman. The worst part of her life is her daughter, Kalpana's brutal rape by sister, Sulu's husband, Prabhakar. Urmi takes up and gets on Kalpana's behalf and brings Prabhakar, the culprit, to book. Here, Deshpande raises the issues of hitherto ignored issue of marital rape. Although she is not a renowned feminist, Shashi Deshpande holds a place of kudos among the contemporary female novelists.

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