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## Representation of Female Characters in Shashi Deshpande's Novels: *Small Remedies* and *The Binding Vine*

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**Abstract:** Shashi Deshpande's novels are centered round female characters who play a vital role in establishing social harmony and prosperity. She depicts the miserable plight of the contemporary middle-class, urban Indian women who find themselves confused between the opposing forces of “modernity” and “tradition”. Her novel, *Small Remedies* focuses not only on a single woman character but on three women from three different backgrounds but with common plight of tragic suffering and alienation. The novel is structured as a biography within a biography. It is about Savitribai, the famous classical singer who has become old now. It is also about Leela who overcomes her personal tragedy to serve the poor workers of a Bombay suburban locality. The novel is also the story of Madhu who narrates and apparently builds a link between the other characters. Her another novel, *The Binding Vine* explores themes of rape, human relationships, woman's bonding, death and fear. It is also based on the story of two incidents of rape - one is marital rape while the other is the rape of a young Indian girl by one of her relatives. This also deals with the personal tragedy of Urmi who suffers both as a mother and as a wife. Urmi's role as a mother is like an oak and her daughter, Anu, is like a creeper around her. However, as a wife, she faces a reverse situation - she is a sensitive vine and she needs her husband, Kishore as an oak to wind herself around and seek support. The novelist passes on the message through her novel to the Indian women that until the women have the courage and come ahead to make their own way of success, they will not achieve the status. One has to struggle hard and fight courageously to get and preserve the independent identity. No doubt, there are many problems but these may be overcome if there is hard determination and real will to resist.

**Key Words:** Alienation, Trauma, Conviction, Consciousness, Panacea, Perennial, Attachment.

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### Introduction:

The striking feature of Deshpande's novels is the representation of women belonging to particular class of the Indian society in very realistic way. Her female characters are mostly life-like and their condition is very much pathetic and deserted. Therefore, her novels are centered round female characters who play a vital role to establish social harmony and prosperity.

Deshpande depicts the miserable plight of the contemporary middle-class, urban Indian women who find themselves confused between the opposing forces of “modernity” and “tradition”. In the beginning, the problems of Indian women were more of an emotional nature with the attachment to home and family. The novelist understands the plight of Indian women, and writes about them realistically and faithfully representing their authentic voice. Her realistic presentation of women's lives and her sensitive understanding of their suffering and its root cause, combined with her skill to present them, authentically makes her a novelist with rare skill. As a distinctive writer, she rarely portrays women as they should be: she rather seems to have a keen interest in portraying women as they are. In an interview, she tells Vanamala Viswanatha as “My characters take their own ways. I've heard people saying we should have strong women characters. But my writing has to do with women as they are.” [Ranjitha, H. *The Changing Image of Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande*: 21]

### **Representation of Female Characters in *Small Remedies***

Deshpande's novel, *Small Remedies* which was published in 2000, reflects the changing attitudes in the lives of Savitribai, Leela, Munni and Madhu, the narrator herself. It is written as a life story within a biography with the writer Madhu. It also reflects dissimilar stages of women such as the individual-self, women's rights, motherhood, common violence. etc. The novel, *Small Remedies*, focuses not only on a single woman character but on three women from three different backgrounds but with common plight of tragic suffering and alienation. The novel is structured as a biography within a biography. It is about Savitribai, the famous classical singer who has become old now. It is also about Leela who overcomes her personal tragedy to serve the poor workers of a Bombay suburban locality. The novel is also the story of Madhu who narrates and apparently builds a link between the other characters.

Madhu slowly gets involved in lives of the people around her. She realizes that loss, loneliness and grief are quite common in the life and these are the reality of life through which everyone has to pass away. One must not stop the journey of life being entangled with obstacles. Besides, there is way out of all these provided one has the courage and understanding to go ahead despite all these problems. Through Madhu, Deshpande presents a courageous woman who leads a life full of difficulties, humiliations and frustrations but moves along on her own terms. To Deshpande, life is an internal voyage resulting in glorious surrender before the force of truth. As Madhu attempts to write the biography of Savitribai she experiences the truth. She remembers her frustration when her son is lost. Her broken heart, while talking about her son's death, proves to be cathartic for her. And so she opens up and tells Hari of her mindless waiting for her son and carefully avoids talking about her fights with Som. She feels sorrowful of not being there at this final moment. She expresses her anguish as:

I can't come to terms with my ignorance of those days. I am obsessed by the need to reclaim them from the darkness. Sometimes I think I could have borne his death if I had been able to be with him, to see him die. We have a right to share it, the most profound human experience of death, with those we love, we have a right to be with them, to travel part of the way, even if we cannot go all the way. But I was deprived of it. I don't know, I will never know how he faced the moment. [Deshpande, Shashi. *Small Remedies*: 305-306]

As the story unfolds, Madhu moves back and forth in time drawing out remembering and retelling the stories of Leela, her aunt, and Bai and Munni, Bai's daughter. With flashback and stream of consciousness technique Bai's story gets written. Besides, it is Leela's biography as well. Both Leela and Savitri were the rebels of their time who dared to dream and to achieve freedom. Through Madhu's eyes Savitribai can be seen and there is also an opportunity to have a glance into Madhu's life and of all those associated with Leela, her rebellious aunt, Joe, an excellent human being, Tony, a lively friend, and Som, the stereotypical husband. Munni had rejected everything associated with her mother - music, genius, ambition and freedom, but her identity laid only in being an ordinary woman belonging to respectable family. Madhu relates Bai's pain as:

Whatever the reason, however successfully she has managed to turn her back on her past and her child, I have to wonder: what happens to her in the dark hours of the night? What happens when she wakes up in the middle of the night, that terrible time when you hear the voices of your dead, when they come back to torment you with the wrongs you did them and confront you with your guilt ---- what happens to Bai then? Does she not face the stark truth at that time, the truth that confronts me every moment of my life --- the futility of life without children? [ibid.: 54]

Deshpande deals with the inner world of the Indian women in her novels without probing deeply into the novelist's conviction of what would serve as the ideal panacea for her different kinds of challenges her characters have had to contend within the given situations. Leela retains her identity as an individual, which is evident in her return to the Maruti Chawl home after Joe's death among the mill-workers and worked for their welfare. When her first husband Vasant died, she took up a job and educated her brothers-in-law. Hence, she refuses to return to her

parents' home, consequently her relations with her own family is cut and it is only her determination and strength that make her successful. Despite being a Brahmin widow, she rebels against traditions and loved a Christian man and married him after fifteen years. She waited for so many years to marry Joe because she wanted his daughter Pavla's permission, but Pavla did not agree to it. In spite of Pavla's objection and the barriers of caste, religion, tradition, language, lifestyle and a holistic child, they found fulfilment in each other and made themselves marry.

Madhu's memories of her personal life cannot exclude memories that she does not consider important. She wants to erase the scars of her past. Some wants them to see in their original form. He wants to cure himself in the process of curing his wife by re-visiting the original site. So, Som says: "Tell me the truth, tell me the truth", [ibid.:258]. Madhu says, "But what does he mean by the truth?" [ibid.: 259]. Madhu's realization frightening and irritating as shown by the following words:

I know what the truth is that Som wants from me: that it has not happened, that I was a virgin when he married me. I begin to understand the truth that he could, perhaps have born: that I had been raped forced into the act, that I was a victim, not a participant. But I could not give him any of these things, they were not true. [ibid.:260]

Deshpande's novel, *Small Remedies* is multidimensional with death at its foreground, music at its background and the complexities of existence as its thematic basis. Structured as a biography within a biography, it is a profound piece of writing about love and loss, grief and hope, rebellion and sacrifice. Savitribai's scar of having been rejected by her own child and the agony of rejecting that child is safely hidden behind her rigid refusal to speak of Munni, her own daughter. Madhu makes effort to probe the depths to understand the suffering woman or mother but the aged singer determinedly avoids it. It seems Madhu is trying to discover herself by constantly remembering her personal grief and aligning it with Savitribai's strength in concealing her own sorrow. This is how she reinforces a pro-woman vision and asserts her solidarity with another suffering woman. The biography of Savitribai is not the story of heroism that attracts Madhu; it is the mother in Bai, the woman in her who suffers in silence, struggles and triumphs through her life.

Through *Small Remedies*, the novelist passes on the message to the Indian women that until the women have the courage and come ahead to make their own way of success, they will not achieve the status. One has to struggle hard and fight courageously to get and preserve the independent identity. No doubt, there are many problems but these may be overcome if there is hard determination and real will to resist. For instance, Madhu is ambitious right from the beginning to have an honourable place in the society but circumstances through which she is to pass is not favourable. Though it is tough, she never allows herself to be lost. She completed her graduation without parental support. She is not discouraged when her chastity is molested by her father's friend. When her son died at the age of seventeen; she gets derailment for the time being but she comes to the sense and makes the career with dignity. She continues to read and work hard by keeping her son in her heart. As a biographer of Savitribai, her only writing can repair a girl's hymen or restore a dead child to life. Her art of writing is one of the small remedies that can have both a condition and the consequences of recovery.

Deshpande makes an honest portrayal by projecting Bai and Munni as failures due to their denial of a certain part of their lives. In death, Munni is identified as the daughter of the woman she detested. Munni, in spite of her determination, fails to attain self-realization as instead of accepting her true self, she denies the truth of her birth, her identity given by her parents; so she leads towards a life of illusion and deception. After separation from Ghulam Saab, Bai appears again as a married woman wearing her old Mangalsutra. Though her efforts point out her achievement yet her life is spent in struggling to regain the identity she had lost. Bai ignored the part of her life that is Munni, the illegitimate child of herself and Ghulam Saab, who is alienated right from her childhood because of her parents' unusual relationship. However, Madhu and Leela's ability to accept the facts of their life enables them achieve success in their quest. The female characters of this novel, *Small Remedies* try to live life on their own terms, resisting its vagaries with stony silences, balanced self-assertion, and immersion in the arts and

they are--- music for Savitribai and writing for Madhu. They gain inner vision and the strength to reconcile after pain and suffering.

### **Representation of Female characters in *The Binding Vine*:**

Deshpande's another novel, *The Binding Vine* is about Urmila who is also known as Urmi, a woman who is grieving on the death of her infant daughter. She becomes involved in the lives of two other women who have experienced violence and loss. The novel explores themes of rape, human relationships, woman's bonding, death and fear. It is also based on the story of two incidents of rape—one is marital rape while the other is the rape of a young Indian girl by one of her relatives. This novel is also regarded as a "Stream of Consciousness Novel". This also deals with the personal tragedy of Urmi who suffers both as a mother and as a wife. Urmi's role as a mother is like an oak and her daughter, Anu, is like a creeper around her. However, as a wife, she faces a reverse situation--- she is a sensitive vine and she needs her husband, Kishore as an oak to wind herself around and seek support. The novelist narrates the tales of generations through Urmi. The pathetic lives of other women victims of the apathy of family and society like Mira (Urmi's mother-in-law) who being a victim of marital rape lives in the solitude of her unhappy marriage; Mira's mother could not stand by her daughter; Shakutai has been deserted by her husband for another woman; Shakutai's elder daughter Kalpana has been brutally raped by her sister's husband, Prabhakar. Moreover, there are Akka and her daughter Vanaa, and Vanaa and her daughter Mandira who struggle hard to negotiate their lives in the emerging situations.

At the grievous state of the loss of her daughter Anu, Urmi is drawn into the lives of three different women - Shakutai, the mother of Kalpana, a rape victim whom she meets at a hospital where Vanaa, Urmi's sister-in-law, works. Shakutai's daughter has been admitted to the hospital. There is a report from Dr. Bhaskar that Kalpana has been brutally raped. Kalpana's mother Shakutai refuses to believe that her daughter has been raped. Shakutai's reaction is that of a typical Indian mother bred in an oppressive male-dominated society. She cries in fear and agony. She is sobbing in a traumatic state. Urmi escorts her to their home and then she starts her association with her. From her regular visits Urmi comes to know about Kalpana, a working woman and Shakutai expresses her opinion about her daughter as:

She is very smart, that's how she got job in the shop. Kalpana even learnt how to speak English. People in our Chawl used to laugh at her, but she didn't care. When she wants something, she goes after it, nothing can stop her. She's stubborn, you can't imagine how stubborn she is. Pride gives way to resentment. And she's secretive, she never tells me anything. She didn't even tell me how much her pay was, can you imagine that? Me, her own mother. As if I was going to take her money away from her! I don't want anything. All I ask is that she helps me out. She does, I'm not saying she doesn't but she grumbles. And, can you believe it, she gives her father money more easily than she gives me. She doesn't grumble at that, even though she knows he will use it for gambling. [Deshpande, Shashi. *The Binding Vine*: 92]

Shakutai does not want the complaint of rape to be lodged with the police, as she understands that if she does it, a much greater injustice awaits her and her daughter. A rape victim is a loser on two counts: first, the victim has suffered the trauma of rape, and secondly, the society looks down upon such a victim as a characterless woman which ushers in a much miserable plight.

In *The Binding Vine*, another story of miseries and sorrows is that of Urmi's late mother-in-law Mira who was forced into a marriage when she was college going ambitious and aspiring teenager. She hated her mother for not saving her from this unwanted alliance and for remaining only a silent witness of her marriage saying, "Nothing is in my hand". As her husband hardly understood her feelings, she could not love her husband. She had aversion to physical intimacy with him and yet she had to put up with his obsession for her. Her mother was happy to see her married and pregnant, however, she never shared her sorrows and disappointments with her. Unfortunately, she died at the age of 22 while giving birth to her only son, Kishore and then her husband took Akka as his second



wife. Mira's poems which Urmi finds in an old trunk full of books and a few other things from Akka reveal for innermost feelings and remind the readers of her predicament as an educated modern woman. Mira's diary among the books which Urmi finds in the trunk is not a daily account of her routine life but a communication with herself.

The novel, *The Binding Vine* mainly revolves around the individual tragedies of Urmi, Mira, Shakutai, Kalpana, and Vanaa, the novelist, subtly hints at the suffering of numerous other women in a sexist society. The gross unfairness of Indian society against women is evident in the unhappy marriages of Inni, Mira, Akka, Vanaa and Sulu. Both Mira and Akka, the first and the second wives of Urmi's father-in-law, were victims of rape within marriage. After Mira's death Urmi's father-in-law remarried Akka just to provide a mother to his son. The way of putting the story of Mira and Akka is noteworthy as Deshpande carefully and successfully juxtaposes by intertwining the story of these two suffering women. Perhaps, their sufferings might be different that Mira suffered because of too much obsessive love of her husband while Akka suffered because of the lack of the same. Through Mira's poems and diaries Urmi comes to know about the pain and suffering of her dead mother-in-law. There may be so many women like Akka who are not able to articulate their suffering. Women are subjected to rape outside marriage. Through her women characters, the novelist exposes the harsh realities that women have been subjected to in the world of masculine domination.

In a society like India women have to sacrifice their aspirations and professions for the sake of the family. Urmi is preoccupied with the suffering of her long-dead mother-in-law subjected to rape in marriage and the unmarried girl Kalpana also the victim of rape. It is pointed out that love has the capacity to redeem human values. *The Binding Vine* also deals with the multi-facetedness of Urmi. She is unable to forget the death of her one year old daughter because her memories haunt her. She keeps fighting with the memories but she also realizes that forgetting is betrayal: "I must reject these memories, 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". [ibid.:21]. Urmi realizes her responsibility to her living son Karthik who badly needs her love and watches anxiously. Mira's silent effort to use language as a means of her redemption may be treated as 'a demand for access to and parity within the law and myth-making group in society'. She uses her pen as a weapon to save herself from abuse, anonymity and mutilation in the prison house of her husband. It is also an ironical Urmi reading Mira's poem as a hunter to find out the real self of Mira. Urmi is filled with the excitement of a hunter while reading the poems. But soon this relationship changes; "It is Mira who is now taking me by the hand and leading me..." [ibid.: 135].

The novel, *The Binding Vine* is a multi-dimensional narrative about family bonds, human relationships, women's right to their body and the need to speak out to see right and wrong. Urmi feels that relationships can be wholesome only when people themselves are whole. When she studies the fate of Mira, Kalpana, Shakutai and Sulu, Urmi regains her courage. She learns to accept freedom and advantage of her life as a gift and decides to be content with her- life with a hope that her husband Kishore will remove his armour of withdrawal one day and thus pave the way for her to reach him. *The Binding Vine* represents a female world in which women come together in a feeling of fellowship. Urmi is able to forge the binding vine of womanhood in love and sympathy which functions as a strategy of empowerment in her relationship with other women.

Deshpande shows the perennial truth in *The Binding Vine* of how all the human beings in life—parents and children, relatives and strangers, men and women-- are bound by the vine of emotional attachment and struggle to enjoy the beauty of life and overcome the ugliness in various ways. In spite of all the difficulties and obstacles caused by the patriarchal society, those women endeavour to channelize their emotions in different ways because of their strong urge to survive. Thus the novelist offers an affirmative vision thereby upholding the ultimate goodness, beauty and truth of life. The novel ends on a note of optimism as Urmi broods over "the spring of life" we all look for. Both the novels *Small Remedies* and *The Binding Vine* reflect Deshpande's views on women's liberation and individual liberty and both ends with positive note even though all the female characters have suffered in the process of attaining their rights of womanhood in this Age-old culture of male dominated society.

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