CHAPTER 6

THE BINDING VINE

Shashi Deshpande is one of those sensitive thinkers who perceive the various dimensions of human experiences to establish serious conclusions about the plight of the individual against the unbearable conventions of society. She conceives the plots of her novel speculating on the position of women in relation to social paradigms and established religious practices. The silent and subjugated position of women provoked strong narrative situations in her novels where she made efforts to tear the veil of illusion versus reality, idealism versus apathy of society. She now and again establishes that with the awareness of female freedom, a new consciousness has prevailed to resist the forces of oppression and injustice. However, she no longer defends the cause of rebellion and violence but seeks the spaces for the sublimation of suppressed feminine sensibility.

Her female protagonists alienate from traditional images and seek alternative spaces in the form of professional competence and it subsequently contributes to constitute a voice of resistance. Her women characters in spite of being the victims of patriarchal conventions are self willed, capable enough to meditate over their own existence, endowed with a vision to carve out their own spaces.

Shashi Deshpande categorically accepts that through the struggle of her female protagonists, she is making a search to discover the individuality of woman. She desperately admits that for a woman there is no respectable criterion of moral values and her presence is not more significant than that of an inanimate object in which there is no affirmation beyond utilitarian motives. She asserts:
It is very difficult to explain. I have a very strong feeling that until very recently women in our society have been looked upon just as breeding animals. They had no role in life. I have a strong objection in treating any human being in that manner. Women have been so dispensable in my mother’s family that one could see women dying and immediately the men getting married again. I could see that the female life had no value at all. The whole chronology of their life centers on child birth. They would say this happened when my first child was born, this when I was pregnant and so on. It used to mystify me. Does nothing happen in your life other than having children? ("Denying the Otherness" 2)

She exposes the illusion of the abhorable reality that the female functions like child birth and child rearing are the causes of neglect and humiliation for woman in society. Her intellectual abilities are neither to be encouraged nor to be acknowledged. The entire social framework is constructed with the assumption that woman’s role as a wife and as a mother is the culmination of feminine desires and she has no right to assert her voice beyond the obligations of motherhood. Simultaneously, the horror is evident that identifiable framework of female spaces has become a safe cocoon for the filthy reflections of male passions.

The idealism associated with natural functions of menstruation, pregnancy, child birth is the essential grounds for sexual colonialism prevalent in Indian society. Woman is adorned as Goddess but she is denied the right of an individual. An Indian thinker like Swami Vivekananda accepts:
In India woman was the visible manifestation of God and her whole life was given up to the thought she was a mother and she must be ‘Chaste’. No mother in India ever abandons her offspring .... The girls in India would die if they like American girls were obliged to expose their bodies to the vulgar gaze of young men. (506)

Such rigid convention of motherhood is the honour of femininity but it is obviously a humiliation of woman’s individuality and self respect. Shashi Deshpande defies this idealism with uncompromising resentment:

The stress laid on the feminine functions, at the cost of all your potentials as an individual enraged me. I knew I was a very intelligent person, but for a woman, intelligence is always a handicap. If you’re intelligent, you keep asking Why, Why and Why and it becomes a burden. I was quite proud also. May be too much of thinking has made me express a sort of dislike for the purely physical aspects of feminine life, making it seems as if I am totally against the feminine functions, which is not the truth of all. (“The Writing of a Novel” 49)

Shashi Deshpande, in spite of her indignation at the humiliation of womanhood, no where encourages the cult of ‘withdrawal’ and ‘complaint’ but develops the aesthetics of self assertiveness for self preservation.

The novel *The Binding Vine* published in 1993 is a novel that admits complex structure with multiple layers of suggestions focusing on the illusions of man and woman relationship. It is basically concerned with the obsession of a young mother Urmi who is chief narrator in the novel. She is professionally a lecturer in a college. She appears as an agonized mother, craving for the loss of her own daughter, Anu. The
untimely death of Anu comes as a serious shock to the maternal sensibility of Urmila. After Anu’s death, a sense of guilt grips her conscience and the idea of personal happiness without Anu becomes a betrayal for her. Reflecting on her masochistic attitude, S. Indira Comments:

Instead of fighting the pain and sorrow, she holds on to it as she believes that to let go that pain to become a thing of the past would be a betrayal and would make her lose Anu completely. Like a masochist, she clings to her pain and allows her memories of Anu, every small incident to flood her with longing and a great sense of loss. (22)

However, beneath the anguish of lost motherhood of Urmi, Shashi Deshpande reflects on the issue of undesirable and torturous sexual relationship, the horrors of rape, the apathy of society and the hollowness of the institution of marriage. Urmi reflects on the various events in the novel as the spokesman of the writer’s point of view to articulate the voice of other women characters who lead invisible existence in the shadows of shame and silence.

The eternal silence of the infinite crowd can be categorized as the silence of ignorance, despair, surrender, anger, protest, pain or combinations of any of them. Each of the marriage is marked by silence. “Silence is a symbol of oppression, while liberation is speaking out, making contact. Contact is what matters. A woman who lies or who is silent may not lack a language, but she does not communicate” (Cameron 7).

Thematically as well as ideologically Deshpande’s novels exhibit this sort of oppression. Urmi finds it difficult to cope with her marriage to one who fits into her life a few months a year and goes out again leaving nothing for herself. The very first night instilled in her a sense of the distance between them. His parodying of marriage as a
trap supported the trapped look on his face. It was her strong determination to prove him wrong that made her walk out of her nuptial bed the very first night. Despite their years of familiarity the first walkout remains undiscussed. The permanent detached look on his face stifles her emotions. Lack of communication makes their relationship crumble. Her attempts to articulate her emotional insecurity during his absence are answered by an assertion of his sexuality. But it remains only a temporary answer. Experience forces her to realize her inability to remove Kishore’s mask: “Kishore will never remove his armour, there is something in him I will never reach” (BV 14).

Silence stretches between them. Marriage suppresses her human demands. Like any other normal human being Urmi too is haunted by erotic feelings during the long absence of her husband. The intensity of her bodily hunger during his absence is not communicated. When love degenerates to a mere physical affair, woman withdraws silently to her cocoon never revealing her needs to him.

However intricate this network of familial relationships may be, the reader is struck from the beginning with the importance given to the individual in this novel. The outside world, represented in the story of Kalpana, a victim of rape, justifies the personal crisis and finally convinces and strengthens the narrator’s own feelings. The narrator, Urmila, is a subaltern if we consider her as a gendered subject. But she also occupies that in-between area where she is enabled to talk because of her class, her education, her role as a college lecturer, her unique position of being married but yet not being married (because her husband Kishore is absent for long periods of time).

Urmila takes upon herself the act of introspection, of speaking for Mira and Kalpana who are the women who ‘cannot speak’. But this speaking on behalf of others takes place only after a crisis in her own life- the death of her daughter Anusha.
It is the crisis as well as her lonely attempt to come to terms with the death of a daughter that sets her apart from the other woman Priti, who takes greater interest in the issues bothering the women of the Indian sub-continent. The novel is consciously raising many questions about the women in the Indian society, and the story of the rape victim who belongs to a totally different class is not just a subplot. But there are also many things which seem to be incidental, to have been mentioned in passing, which still question the choice of one story – the story of Kalpana – as a story in support of the narrator’s own movement towards some kind of self-fortification. It will be very interesting to trace these tangential figures in the narrative pattern of the novel *The Binding Vine*. Before such an attempt is made, it is necessary to read the story of Mira along with the story of Urmila.

Deshpande argues how the invasion of female body “even though sanctified by marriage, can be as traumatic as rape” (Reddy 97). Forced sex in marriage is not wrong to the traditional male psyche governed by the dictates of Manohar (*DHNT*). The poems and diaries of Mira, Urmila’s mother-in-law echo the age old cry of women silenced and suppressed under the veneer of marriage. The voluminous pile of writing left by Mira, enables Urmila to reconstruct the tragic tale of a bud withered before blooming in an incompatible marriage. Urmila finds in Mira a predecessor to herself who tries to hide her true self. The diary reads: “I give him the facts, nothing more, never my feelings” (*BV* 67). The ill-matched marriage sowed in her only distance for love, when it was misunderstood by her husband as mere lust or physical passion. He never realized the need to develop an emotional bond with the sensitive girl before expressing his passion for her body. The objectification of her body instilled in her only fear about the dark, clouded, engulfing night. While Saru and Mira silently suffer rape in marriage
Shakutai, a woman belonging to the lower strata of society, is forced to remain silent about the rape on her daughter for fear of social stigma.

Urmii is herself a victim of personal loss but she analyses her loss in the background of the life conditions of two women of her own family – Mira, her own mother-in-law and Kalpana, an unfortunate teenager who becomes the victim of rape. Present is represented by Urmii but the past echoes in the silence of Mira and future is focused in the suffering of Kalpana. In the novel *The Binding Vine* there is an extension of her vision asserting that woman is expected to register her voice of protest to shatter the bondage of patriarchal conventions. Indira Nityanandan remarks:

*The Binding Vine* is a refreshing change from the first three novels of Deshpande. Protest comes easily to her protagonist here and there is less agony in attempting to change societal roles and attitudes. The hope for Indian women lies in the happy fact though there are Miras and Kalpanas and Shankuntalas, we also have our Urmilas. (66)

Shashi Deshpande admits that maternal instincts are invariably integrated in feminine sensibility and to impose them as a societal obligation is undesirable and irrational. Urmila is endowed with excessive love for her lost daughter but she is not ready to bear the sight of humiliation of humanity in the name of feminine virtues. Subhash K.Jha, who writes in a review on the question of woman’s right over her body which cannot be violated even in marriage, makes a very suggestive observation about the message woven in the texture of the novel *The Binding Vine*:

*The Binding Vine* is one of the few contemporary Indian novels to discuss its heroine’s sexuality, her passion with a measure of unrepentant concern. In this novel Deshpande travels much further
down the road in exploring the working women’s needs of the head, heart and further down the anatomy, than her earlier novels. (19)

The novel *The Binding Vine* is positively a fearless attempt to tear the veil of illusion related with the matters of crime of sex, rape, physical torture and mental insecurity. Urmila, the protagonist is conscious of herself dignity and independent identity. The central plot of the novel revolves round the anguish of Urmī at the loss of Anu and the suffering of Kalpana as a rape victim. The presence of Kalpana becomes a substitute of Anu in the life of Urmī. Looking at Kalpana, Urmī feels an exceptional relief because death might have emancipated Anu from the turmoil which Kalpana and her mother were suffering.

The novel begins with the pathetic exposition of the agony of Urmī who is helpless to compromise with the condition in which she was placed after the death of her daughter Anu. For her to forget is to betray. She finds herself in an unbearable emptiness, “When a child dies, there’s so little left. After you’ve tied and put away the clothes and the toys, there is nothing only emptiness” (*BV* 20).

In this state of mental crisis, two events take place in the life of the Urmī that is discovery of the poems of Mira, her dead mother-in-law and her encounter with Priti, a lawyer who makes arguments about the provision of protection provided by law to women against the tortures done by men. The presumption that the fate of women can be improved by the process of law makes no impression on Urmī. The clutches of social conventions and social prejudices are obviously beyond the provisions of law. Law is crippling against the issues where woman is conditioned to accept her identity as weak and miserable. Her conditioning in male dominated society is that she can’t think even at the level of bodily ego. In the matter of sexual
relationship, woman has to play the role of a passive partner. Priti argues, “This is a beginning, once you know the law can help you- if one woman can win the right to her own body” (32). This idealism projected by Priti is beyond the realism of Urmi who is convinced that long established practices of society not only colonize the body but also the mind. It is not a matter of privileges and provisions but also of faiths, ideologies and mind sets. Urmi declares, “One Indira Gandhi in charge of the nation and a country full of women not allowed to take charge of their own lives …. No, Priti, laws can’t change people’s lives” (38). It is through Urmi that Shashi Deshpande recognizes the inadequacies of male created ideologies and struggles, for the spiritual, economic and social inequality of women who are sexually colonized and biologically subjugated. Her perceptions have come close to the observation of Sarah Grimake:

Man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort; but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. He has done all he could do to debase and enslave her mind. (10)

The narrative vision of Shashi Deshpande is directed to expose the long smothered wall of the incarnated psyche of her female protagonists imprisoned within the four walls of domesticity, drifting between tradition and modernity. Here Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak clearly points out that the sections that perceive no change in their life even after political independence can be called the subalterns. Because of the additional burden of patriarchy, she coins a new critical term for women, ‘The Gendered Subaltern.’ Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot know her condition and

...
speak. According to her, the subaltern lives in a space where it is impossible to have the control of the means of communication which enables one to break the silence and voice out one’s protest. This novel *The Binding Vine* shows how the subaltern woman is silenced in various ways. However, in the end, the protagonist helps this subaltern woman to speak in her own voice.

Spivak’s definition of the subaltern as sections that remain disempowered after the event of political independence becomes doubly true when applied to the gendered subaltern. In *The Binding Vine* women who are separated by a very wide chasm of social, economic and educational differences fall in the same category of the gendered subaltern. This proves that there is no uniform category that can be identified as the gendered subaltern. This also shows that in a particular social class, it is possible that men will enjoy the benefits of political power, but the women will continue to be subordinate.

In the novel *The Binding Vine* the five women characters whom can be intended to consider as the gendered subaltern, Akka and Mira belong to the upper class, while Shakutai, Kalpana and Sulu are from the working class. Mira has to suffer because her husband is obsessed with her and his idea of love is restricted to the body. His obsession is the source of her grief. She fears the coming of the night. Not only is she forced to suffer quietly, but even the act of writing, through which she gives an outlet to her suffering, has also to be carried out stealthily. She has to get up at odd times of the night to write her poems and diaries. One remarkable thing about her writing is that her diaries are in English and the poems in Kannada; the poems, thus, can pass as a work of imagination without being necessarily linked to Mira’s life. The diaries, on the other hand, are a record of facts; if they were read by anyone, she
would have been in trouble. This is why she chooses English, a little known foreign language in her surroundings. If Mira does not even have the freedom to write in a language of her choice, we have to admit that she is deprived of fundamental rights. The Indian constitution recognizes freedom of expression as a fundamental right. And yet Mira has been deprived of it. This makes her a subaltern woman.

Akka is another subaltern woman who has to suffer for entirely different reasons. After Mira’s death, her sister-in-law unambiguously suggests that what her brother wants is a mother for the orphaned child. Earlier, when Mira was alive, she was his obsession; but now, as she is dead, it is the child, Kishore. This means that Akka’s husband married her for the sake of the child and had no interest in her. Naturally, throughout their married life, he neglects her. If obsession was the cause of Mira’s suffering, negligence is the cause of Akka’s grief. Akka, who shows equanimity even when Vanaa, her daughter, goes away after marriage, is driven to tears while telling Urmı and Vanna about the life of Mira. In spite of her husband’s deception and indifference, Akka has no choice but to remain silent. This deprivation of basic marital rights and her inability to fight it out makes her subaltern.

In the second group of women, we find Shakutai, Kalpana and Sulu. Shakutai’s suffering begins with her marriage. Her husband never takes up a regular, permanent job. He has a mistress and neglects his children. Shakutai becomes the breadwinner of the family, looking after two daughters and a son. She is also worried about her sister Sulu who is childless, with a drunkard husband. To make matters worse, her daughter Kalpana is raped. When she comes to know of this, she insists that the rape should not be placed on record because in the kind of society in which we live, virginity is the most cherished goal for a woman. Shakutai knows that if the truth about Kalpana is
revealed, it will be impossible to get her married; they will lose whatever dignity they have. Not only that, but even her younger daughter would not find a husband. All this comes to her in a flash and she requests the doctor not to report the matter to the police. Shakutai is aware of the injustice that has been done to Kalpana; yet she has to remain silent on account of social conditions. Although the law gives her the right to punish the offender, she cannot turn to it in practice. This inability to use the right that law has conferred on her makes her subaltern.

Kalpana is raped not by a stranger but by Prabhakar, the husband of her aunt. It is patriarchy that permits Prabhakar to first make a pass at Kalpana, and then demand that she should marry him, and finally rape her. Although Kalpana is aware of Prabhakar’s intentions, she remains silent, fearing that her mother and Sulu will put blame on her. In a patriarchal set up, man can get away with anything. Kalpana is aware of this and hence chooses not to open her mouth. The patriarchal stronghold is even more obvious when Sulu persuades her to marry Prabhakar, and Shakutai, instead of objecting to it, leaves the decision to Kalpana. She knows that Prabhakar cannot legally marry two women, yet doesn’t put her foot down. Her subservience prevents her from protesting or protecting. This inability to convert knowledge into power makes her subaltern.

Although the story of Kalpana touches Urmila forcefully because it is also the story of the daughter-who-would-have-been. The narration of this story is the most effective in its exposure of the fear of a woman belonging to Shakutai’s class. It reveals the paranoiac fear of a woman who is caught in the circle of strict morality that her society demands of her. Kalpana is one of those girls whose morality is decided by her class. “Girls of that class” (BV 98), says the police officer who reports the case as being
an accident. But Shakutai in the beginning refuses to accept that her daughter could have been raped. Shakutai’s –“don’t tell anyone, I’ll never be able to hold up my head again, who’ll marry the girl, we’re decent people” (143), reveals the control that a traditionally patriarchal society has on the women in India. It is a statement which combines many issues and reveals the frightening importance given to chastity of the woman and to the necessity of marriage in order to fulfil the life of a woman.

It is ironical that the same Shakutai is finally manipulated by Urmila into telling her story to journalists in order to prevent Kalpana from being transferred to another hospital. In the face of the fervent pleas of Shakutai, the actions and words of the doctor Bhaskar, of the journalist Malcolm and even Urmila’s act of persuading the mother to let the public know of the injustice caused to her daughter seem too cruel. It ultimately looks as if all of them are endorsing the view of the police officer: “girls of this class” (98). For the rational and educated doctor, the journalist and the lecturer, women like Shakutai must be incomprehensible, with their fear of the daughters not getting married or with the fear that they would not be able to hold up their head again.

In such a societal framework, with its traditional rigidity and economic disparity, it is not so much that the girl is expected to be chaste as that the girl is to be considered chaste. Shakutai’s “don’t tell anyone is more of a plea that the rest of the world be kept in the dark about the rape of her daughter” (Trinh 68). It is this fear of society and the expectations of this society which dominate the lives of the women like Shakutai, and it is the same fear which makes living almost impossible for them, thus giving them the status of the subaltern. The false confidence given by a scientific education as in the case of the doctor or by his post in the police department as in the case of the police officer, or by her convictions as in the case of Urmila, is unknown to them.
It is in the light that Urmila’s final observations become problematic. That Shakutai could get on with her daily chores in spite of her traumatic experiences which she had, leads the narrator to think of the “Chakravyuha – the strategic positioning used in the great battle of Mahabharatha” (Rajan, “The Feminist Plot,” 77). To think that there is no way out of this burden of belonging to the human race is to give an extremely bleak picture and this does not go well with the impression of Urmila which one gets earlier in the book. Or is Urmila incapable of measuring the extent of fear that Shakutai has for the expectations of the society? At the end, Urmila’s reference to the spring of life somehow does not give the reader the note of harmony, which perhaps, it is intended to give:

I race through my chores in the next one hour-cooking, getting ready for college, looking through my timetable, my notes, preparing Kartik’s lunchbox. This is how life is for most of us, most of the time; we are absorbed in the daily routine of living. The main urge is always to survive ... but what terrible things we do in the process of surviving. and yet, I think of Vanaa, heavily pregnant, sitting by me, holding my hand during the pains before Kartik was born, I remember Kishore’s face when he first saw Anu, I think of Akka crying for Mira, of Inni’s grief when papa told her about his illness, of Papa’s anguished face watching her, of the touch of grace there was in Shakutai’s hand when she covered me gently at night while I slept, of the love with which she speaks of her sister, of Sandhiya ... is this it, the spring of life Mira was looking for? (BV 203)
From Shakutai’s own account of Kalpana, she was not satisfied with the daily routine of a girl belonging to that class. Shakutai’s logic as summarized by Urmila is simple and there is a casual relationship between the various things which happen: “She was stubborn, she was self-willed, she dressed up, she painted her lips and nails so this happened to her” (142). Urmila gets angry when the mother seems to be suggesting that it was all her daughter’s fault. This anger at the unjust way in which rape victim is handled, however, clashes in the end with her act of winding off of the story without a further reference to Kalpana.

For Kalpana the main urge was not just to survive and the daily routine was obviously much more than cooking or getting ready for college. The subaltern seems not only to be silent at the end, but even a sympathetic woman who tries to soothe the mother, who gets angry with the injustice of all this, who in her own way tries to help, but is unable to reach this silent subaltern. It is here that we will have to go back to the words of Shakutai “Women like you will never understand what it is like for us” (148). In spite of the crisis in her own life and the sympathetic leanings of Urmila, is the chasm between the two classes to which these two women belong too great to give rise to dialogue?

The impossibility of representing the subaltern that Spivak speaks of is seen here in the incommensurability of the experiences of these two women in turn which is a result of the wide gulf created by the differences in their contexts. Yet one can find out that the silence of the subaltern operates at different levels here. If the mute image of the raped woman shows us the difficulty for a feminist in reaching across to the subaltern woman-especially the woman in pain-the silenced story of Akka, who intrigues and yet does not get a chance shows us that the form of sub-alternization of
the woman changes even when the socio-cultural context is the same. Akka does not have the privilege of being a writer. Does the woman who belongs to the middle-class upper-caste context lose her voice because there is no medium through which she can represent herself?

But even among these subalterns, the lowest in the hierarchy is Sulu, who has neither Shakutai’s financial powers nor Kalpana’s wisdom. She does not know that her childlessness does not empower her husband to throw her out on the streets and take another wife, as he keeps threatening her. Full of fear and insecurity, she withdraws even at the sight of Urmi. She believes that it is a serious limitation on her part that she cannot bear Prabhakar’s child. This feeling caused in her by patriarchal values that she has imbibed, weakens her; she tries to persuade Kalpana to marry Prabhakar so that she can at least continue to stay in the house. She fears that if Prabhakar takes some other woman, she will become a destitute. Later on, when she comes to know that her husband has raped Kalpana, she immolates herself. Her ignorance is the cause of her silence; political independence has failed to teach her that childlessness is not necessarily the fault of the woman.

Mrinalini Sebastian asks the question “Why is there no talk about rape in marriage in the case of Akka?” (159), and goes on to look at the manner in which Mira is articulate and Deshpande privileges her, and the blurb on the Virago edition. Mira’s articulateness is located within the larger question of ‘can the subaltern speak?’ which Gayatri Spivak has posed. Deshpande’s treatment of rape, in Sebastian’s view, is located within the framework of the politics of publishing. Sebastian asks the question, “In order to get published and to get published in the West, should the preoccupation of the third-world woman novelist be such themes as rape in marriage?” (Sebastian 159).
Both questions deserve attention once they have been posed. Why is Mira privileged? Is it, as Sebastian thinks, because she writes poetry? Spivak had asked the question whether the illiterate peasant, the tribal, the marginalized were eloquent enough to have a voice against the epistemic violence initiated by imperialism, which reduced the colonized subject to the position of the ‘other’. Spivak herself goes on to relate insurgency with articulation and writes, “In the semioses of the social text, elaborations of insurgency, stand in the place of the utterances” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 28). Mira’s body rebels and refuses to live, the poetry she writes is no longer enough to sustain her. Akka’s body does not rebel because she has been stopped from dreaming of other worlds, she bears her fate.

Urmí notices the difference in handing over of Mira’s property to her. When Akka hands over little bits of Mira’s jewellery, she says, “They are Kishore’s Mother’s ... I kept them for his wife” (BV 46), but when she hands over the books and diaries of Mira, she says, “Take this, it’s Mira’s, she did not mention Kishore at all, as if she was now directly linking me with Mira” (48). This shows that a woman loses her identity after her marriage. She is seen either as a wife or mother who in a way erases her real self and imposes another alien self on her. The difference made by Akka symbolizes that the poems and diaries are “self-actualizing, whose identities are not dependent on men” (Wendy 95).

After reading the poems, Urmí realizes the suffering of Mira “the woman who wrote those poems in the solitude of an unhappy marriage, who died giving birth to her son at twenty-two” (BV 48). In the eyes of Urmí, Mira’s diary “is not a daily account of her routine life but a communion with herself” (51). For the time-being she forgets her own suffering and tries to probe into Mira’s poetry to visualize the kind of
troubled life she had lived. Taken together, the poems and the diary entries connote
molestation in marriage. Take for example the following lines:

But I have my defenses; I give him the facts, nothing more, never my
feelings ... and so it begins. ‘Please,’ he says, ‘Please, I love you.’ And
over and over again until he has done ‘I love you.’ Love: How I hate
the word. If this is love it is a terrible thing. (67)

This sort of passage embodies the psychological fears and physical suffering of
Mira. Urmi wants to share this suffering with Vanna, her friend from childhood and now
her sister-in-law but she cannot, because “I cannot speak of Mira, of Mira’s writing, to
her. That is another pocket of silence between us. One can never see one’s parent as a
sexual being; he or she is merely a cardboard figure labeled ‘parent’” (83). Urmi
remembers the poem behind which lies the man “who tried to possess another human
being against her will. 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” (83).

The same kind of experience is conveyed by Saru, the protagonist of Shashi
Deshpande’s The Dark Holds No Terrors: “A wife must always be a few feet behind
her husband ... that’s the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage. Don’t ever
try to reverse the doctor-nurse, executive-secretary, principal-teacher role” (124).

Urmi decodes Mira’s loneliness from the fact that the latter rarely mentions her family
in her poems. This loneliness was a part of her being. When she came to her in-law’s
house, she was cherished Nirmala – the first estrangement from her identity, her
known self. One of her poems is written in reaction to this horrible incident:

A glittering ring gliding on the rice

Carefully traced a name ‘Nirmala.’
Who is this? None but I,
My name hence, bestowed upon me,
Nirmala, they call, I stand statue-still,
Do you build without erasing the old?
A tablet of rice, a pencil of gold
Can they make me Nirmala? I am Mira. (98)

Mira’s diary also mentions her meeting with the rising poet Venu who later become a grand old man of Indian Literature. When Mira gave some of her poems to read, he said, “Why do you need to write poetry? It is enough for a young woman like you to give birth to children. That is your poetry. Leave the other poetry to us men” (127). This is also a kind of brutality because “even to force your will upon another is to be brutal” (133). This reflects the agony of a creative woman in an androcentric world. It connotes “the handicaps of women writers in a male chauvinist society” (Anand 2). This is subordination by domestication. The same kind of anguish was given expression by Kamala Das in her poem “An Introduction”:

Dress in Sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said, be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. oh belong, cried
the categories. (45)

This is a scheme of depriving woman of imagination and the power of communication. It would not be out to place to see what Cora Kaplan says in this context:

To be a woman and a poet presents many women poets with such a profound split between their social, sexual identity, their human
identity and their artistic practice that the split becomes the insistent subject, sometimes overt, often hidden or displaced, of much woman’s poetry. (70)

The silent effort of Mira to use language as a means to her redemption may be treated as “a demand for access to and parity within the law and myth-making groups in society” (BV 76). She uses her pen as a weapon to save herself from abuse, anonymity and mutilation in the prison house of her husband. The poems of Mira haunt Urmi so much that she decides to resurrect her by publishing them. But when Vanna comes to know about this plan, she is enraged. She feels that Urmi is a traitor who will destroy the honour of the family by publishing the poems. “It is as if the knowledge of what her father did, has threatened something, disturbed the inner rhythm of her being, so that there is a sense of disharmony about her” (181). In fact, male-oriented societies nourish women in such a way that they start looking at the world and interpreting it from male point of view. Urmi shares the anguish of not only her mother-in-law but also of Kalpana – a girl who becomes a prey to her own relative who molests her. When her mother Shakutai approaches Urmi, and Vanna who is a medical social worker, the latter tells her that Kalpana has been wronged by someone. She has also undergone severe head injury and is on the verge of death. Her mother requests the doctor not to inform the police: “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” (58).

She further requests Urmi “to tell him (the doctor) not to make the report” (62). Urmi is surprised to see Shakutai, whose husband has already deserted her for some other younger woman, worried about the marriage of Kalpana who is, in the words of the doctor, “neither dead nor alive” (86). But she soon realizes that women
like Kalpana’s mother find security in marriage. At least they are safe from other men is what she thinks. Marriage in the life of such women acts as “Purdah or view which serves a provision of symbolic shelter” (Come Up and Be Dead 78). As mother Shakutai was afraid of the boys because they behave “like dogs panting after bitches” (BV 146). She had even thought of marrying Kalpana to Sulu’s husband Prabhakar who was mad after her. Kalpana out rightly rejected the offer and ridiculed Sulu. When she decided to marry a boy of her own liking she was raped by Prabhakar. It is significant to note that Sulu was compelled by her husband to make such proposal. When Sulu knows that her own husband has molested Kalpana, she finishes her cooking, gives breakfast to her husband and then commits suicide because she wants to avoid telling a lie to save her husband from the police. Her suicide symbolizes the anguish of the weakened soul of the typical traditional Indian woman. But what Mulk Raj Anand says about the plight of Indian women cannot be fully true:

No woman in our land is beyond the threat of rape, because of the suppressed energies of the male, through the taboos of patriarchy, which deny sex before marriage and make male young – young into wanton animals who assault any possible victim, when possessed by lust. (34)

Though Urmi is accused of being a traitor to Mira and Kalpana, she is resolute to break the silence of women which come in different forms, sometimes in the name of the social taboos, sometimes in the name of the family honour. Through her relationship with Shakutai and with Mira (through the latter’s poetry), Urmi has also been able to finally let go of the hurts of her childhood, and looked at her mother and the other women in her life with compassion. The exploration of the commonalities
and differences in inter-class and inter-generational oppression, the examination of the intersections of gender and class as experienced by Indian women, point at an attempt to articulate notions of community and parameters of solidarity, and simultaneously suggest strategies of resistance.

The attempt to map out strategies of resistance in an Indian context is clearly visible in Deshpande’s work. “She tries to examine and deconstruct the binaries. Deshpande’s work could also be read as a ‘metaphorical critique’ of the demands of a postcolonial terminology itself” (Shivaram 179), which relies on construct such as the centre and the margin, the dominant/hegemonic and the silenced/subaltern. Further, her work can be seen as an exploration of the resultant textual implications for postcolonial women writers. Therefore, a critic such as Shivaram reads her works as an implicit statement about the often contradictory “position of Third World women in an influentially male reading of postcolonial theories” (180).

Nasta posits that postcolonial women writers often write novels of “becoming” (xix-xx), where the voices of women from all sectors of the society are explored; voices which often link and bridge the oral/literary mode and which frequently use a multiplicity of vision as a means of telling the story of a previously unwritten history or culture. The protagonist/narrator is almost always a woman, and the woman herself is not merely:

a passive recipient of an identity created by these forces. Rather she herself is part of the historicized, fluid movement, and she therefore actively contributes to the context within which her position can be delineated … thus the position of woman can be actively utilized as a location for the constructing of meaning, a place from where meaning
is constructed, rather than simply a place where meaning can be discovered. (Carlston 236)

In the light of this analysis, Deshpande’s work can be read as falling within a broadly postcolonial-feminist framework. But while she does attempt to examine various ideologically encoded binaries such as speech/silence, modernity/tradition, male/female, oppressor/victim, dominant/resistant, central/marginal, majority/minority etc, the politics of this strategy can be problematic, particularly in terms of class analysis, and raise such questions as: as poor/working class women used as agents for middle-class self-realization? How does the narrating persona speak for her class ‘others’? For example, it is Urmi, the middle-class, educated narrator in *The Binding Vine*, who leads Shakutai, the poor, illiterate woman, to an understanding that rape is never ‘deserved’, that her daughter has not ‘shamed’ the family by asking for it. As Susie Tharu and Lalitha. K states:

Liberalism upholds the idea of individual responsibility and freedom, social justice and compassion for the underprivileged. Therefore its methods of operations are charity and social service aimed at helping the oppressed, but not at treating them as agents. (33)

The protagonists of Shashi Deshpande enter into marriage with the hope that the marriage would provide them respect, security and status in the society but unfortunately, they get disappointed and subsequently disillusioned. Deshpande celebrates the major exploration of her protagonists by transcending the boundaries of the female gender. Her characters experience the gravitational pull of patriarchy and tradition. The women characters struggle to redefine their role and identity in the light of feminism. The analysis of the feminism is of paramount importance to see how
each of these protagonists starts to think and feel differently from other women and use their potentialities in a new perspective.

The earlier protagonists of Shashi Deshpande seek their own salvation. Thus Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* fights to bring the husband-wife relationship on an equal footing where there are no “hierarchies, oppositions like superior/inferior, high/low, and man/woman” (Vrinda 26). Indu in *Roots and Shadows* is worried about her interactions with the varied personalities in her large family and her resolution to overcome her own personal crisis. Jaya in *That Long Silence* copes with her own suffering, silence and surrender and wins her freedom as an individual. Contrasted with all these is Urmi who gets so involved with Mira that she decides to translate Mira’s poems into English, analyze them in the light of the entries in her diary, edit them, and finally bring them to the world by publishing them. Thus she decides to give Mira her own voice.

She does the same for Shakutai in a different way. Silenced through patriarchy and ignorance, Shakutai does not have the courage to fight injustice. Urmi prepares Shakutai to talk to a journalist friend about Kalpana’s proposed transfer to another hospital. The newspaper report changes the situation dramatically. There is a women’s fear protesting against both the offender as well as the hospital authorities. Shakutai and her family appear on TV and the police too look seriously into the matter. This support changes Shakutai’s own attitude; instead of blaming Kalpana for applying makeup and being reckless, she begins to see her as the victim that she really is. After Sulu’s death, Shakutai asks Urmi whether she should inform the police about Prabhakar. Urmi tells her to take her own decision. This is not escapism, but an attempt to enable the subaltern to decide things for herself. Thus Urmi teaches Shakutai to use democratic
medium, the press to redress the wrong done to her and also to take her own decision. In the process, she empowers Shakutai.

Yet it is true that Urmila is not like Priti. She cannot be rejected as the liberal feminist with fixed ideas of postcolonialism. The distinction is made clear from the beginning. Both of them belong to the same section of society. But they differ in their ability to be sensitive, to be even self-critical. Again, what is fascinating is the author’s ability to register the fears and the joys of the subaltern. There has already been a reference to those gendered subjects who are incidental to the narrative of this novel. The narration of the scene where Urmila goes and watches the movie which is being telecast talks a lot about this ritual of week-end screenings of the regional movies as well as movies in the national language. And the realism of the family collected around the TV is so true that one cannot but admire the writer’s sensitive observation, and the irony hidden beneath this representation:

I have a sudden understanding of Rekha’s fascination with this movie world, so far from her life as a drudge in people’s homes. She is already rapt, though it’s only the commercials as yet; when the movie begins, she will be wholly lost, ready to give the response in demands. Vanaa and I settle down and we are all of us grouped about the TV as usual-Inni elegantly dressed, as if prepared to go out, Rekha, on the floor by her, Vanaa sprawling comfortably, the two younger children about her. (BV 31)

The household drudge sitting on the floor close to the ladies of the house who are comfortably placed and elegantly dressed, is too familiar a picture for many Indian readers. In fact, it is so familiar that the irony behind the image of Rekha
sitting on the floor and forgetting herself in the dream world offered by the commercial movies in India may go unnoticed by the reader. It is this sensitivity in representation which ought to get noticed by the critics of the realistic mode of writing. The subtle irony here is not to be taken as a questioning of the structures of Indian society with its expanding middle class, but it is at least critically registering – echoing, as Spivak would say “the equanimity with which social structures can be taken for granted” (In Other Worlds 152).

Priti, who takes interest in the feminist issues, is lucky because she has to come back to India. “I thank God everyday that I can leave this drudgery to someone else” (BV 36), says Priti, while she helps Urmila wash the dishes. For Urmila this remark by Priti might signify one more instance of her shallow interests, but Priti is not the only one who leaves the drudgery to others. Both Urmila and Vanaa, good examples of women:

Who have been partially liberated because of their professions, their educational qualifications and because of their urban existence, have been able to become what they are because there has always been someone else to do the difficult and irritating household chores.

(Sangari 24-25)

Her attention to the minor details of day-to-day life reveals to us that in a country like India, it is not simple for a woman to be interested in causes and issues. It is not simple because very often talking about justice to one group of individuals involves exploiting another group of individuals. That the author notices this aspect of the woman belonging to her own class is something which should not be overlooked. Urmila can go to the hospital everyday and be with Shakutai because her mother and Rekha are there to
look after the irritating daily routine chores. Vanaa can work in the hospital because there is a Hirabai to look after her children. These are the people who are tangential to the narrative but who are as silent in the narrative as the raped girl herself.

In her different reading of the story of Narcissus and Echo, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says that the subaltern woman is like Echo who is cursed to say what others have said. She has no voice of her own. She also suggests that the feminists should not merely tell their own stories and becomes Narcissus, but should help Echo to find her own voice. This is precisely what Urmi does for Mira and Shakutai. Thus Deshpande, in her novel, has created for us an “imaginative female historiography” (Palkar, “Of mother and Daughter” 170), which attempts to fill in the gaps found in Third World/Indian/postcolonial women’s social and cultural history.

It is the silence of these tangential figures which needs to be explored further. When societal structures are so tightly fashioned, when rumors are feared more than actual events (as in the case of Shakutai), the luxury of commitment to a cause is allowed mainly to those who are willing to overlook their own roles as the exploiters. The apparently symbiotic relationship between the maid servants and the career women does not hide the unequal power relationships inherent in this system. This relationship of imbalance does not only rest on money, but also on the ability to talk, to articulate. A Mira’s story becomes mysterious, intriguing and worthy of the label ‘rape in marriage’, worthy of being considered an issue – because it is written, because she is a poet unlike Akka, and Akka herself is absolutely silent about her marriage to the same man. Mira’s story is built upon the silence of Akka.

In the same way, the narrative which gets heard— it could be a book which consciously considers a woman’s life, it could be a narrative of feminism, it could be
a narrative asking for the restructuring of the society, it could be a narrative demanding radical questioning – is also a narrative which is built upon silence. To belong to the class that cannot afford the gadgets which are taken for granted in the First world, and still to be interested in getting heard is then impossible without one’s turning away from the silence of another section of the society. In such a situation, even an act of registering the silence becomes important and in the narrative of *The Binding Vine*, it is the silence of the subaltern which needs to be heard.