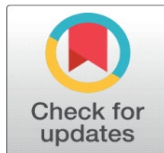


EDUCATION AS LIBERATION: JOURNEY FROM SILENCE TO SELFHOOD IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THE BINDING VINE*

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ABSTRACT

[Deshpande, S. \(1993\)](#) represents a new phase in her development as an artist, where silence is no longer an end but the beginning of a profound journey toward selfhood and social consciousness. In this novel, Deshpande crafts a powerful narrative that redefines education as a process of inner awakening, empathy, and liberation. The protagonist, Urmila, becomes a conduit for the suppressed voices of women silenced by societal norms, particularly through her discovery of Kalpana's tragedy and Mira's poetic anguish. Her journey from grief to awareness marks a movement from passive suffering to active engagement, where listening, reading, and reflecting function as acts of learning and unlearning. Urmila does not rebel with loud defiance but with quiet resistance refusing to be complicit in the culture of silence. In doing so, she transforms into a support system for other marginalized women, allowing their stories to be heard and acknowledged. Education, in *The Binding Vine*, is thus portrayed as a liberating force that empowers women to reclaim their narratives and identities. It is through this inward and outward journey that Urmila and the reader discover the strength to break the cycle of silence and walk toward a more self-aware, compassionate existence.

Keywords: Education, Liberation, Shashi Deshpande, Selfhood

1. INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande stands as a prominent and influential voice among contemporary Indian women writers, celebrated for her deep and perceptive portrayal of the complexities of middle-class women's lives in modern Indian society. Through her fiction, Deshpande skillfully explores both the external realities and the inner emotional landscapes of women, shedding light on the constraints imposed by a patriarchal system. A significant aspect of her literary contribution lies in her critique of the male-dominated social order and her sensitive depiction of women's struggles with identity, autonomy, and suppressed desires. Her narratives often center on female protagonists grappling with feelings of confinement, voicelessness, and disillusionment. While her earlier novels, such as *That Long*

Silence and *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, present women who tend toward passivity and compliance, her later works like *The Binding Vine* and *A Matter of Time* mark a thematic and character shift. These novels introduce female figures who, though not overtly rebellious, display a deeper awareness, resilience, and willingness to confront social hypocrisy. Deshpande's fiction, therefore, captures an evolving journey—from silence to self-expression, from submission to introspection and personal growth—reflecting broader transformations in the discourse on gender and selfhood in Indian literature.

2. EDUCATION: A GATEWAY OF LIBERATION

Unlocking the doors of self-conscience and leading to the path of selfhood is a long journey. Apparently, reaching the ultimate step of acknowledgement is challenging but satisfactory. Human race has been gifted with the power of thinking and knowledge. Moreover, knowledge can only be attained through education. Education, it can be formal or informal, individual or societal. Hence, education could be defined as the transmission of knowledge and character traits.

Education is a gateway of liberation. It is the mode of expressing one's inner skills, knowledge, character trait and also what one aspires throughout his life. It acts as a weapon for the person who wants to share his suppressed trauma. Therefore, we can say that on one hand the education leads to a person to express his knowledge and skills and on the other hand it gives voice to his suppressed conscience.

In the era of Indian literature, Shashi Deshpande's works extend the exploration of the immense inner lives of women, their silence, suppression, oppression and ultimately liberation through education. Hence, we clearly see that education has given wings to the women in her novels so as to release their suppressed emotions and sufferings. Education proves to be an incredible tool which allows women to make their existence possible even after their death. It has given voice to them through their intelligence.

Flipping the pages of the famous novel '*The Binding Vine*', authored by Shashi Deshpande a renowned Indian novelist, it has been noticed that her style of writing is at supreme level.

In the novel the central character Urmila, a college lecturer, marks a significant shift from the protagonists of Shashi Deshpande's earlier novels. Unlike the more submissive female figures in *That Long Silence* or *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Urmila demonstrates early awareness of the restrictive nature of traditional roles and the emptiness embedded in routine existence. From the outset, she resists silent conformity, instead choosing to become a voice of empathy and resilience—a symbolic "binding vine" for other women struggling under similar conditions. As she reflects, "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" (203).

Urmila's journey is not just personal but deeply relational. After losing her young daughter, Anu, she develops a heightened sensitivity to the unspoken grief of others around her. She becomes a listener and a witness to the muted voices of women like Mira, Sulu, Vanaa, Shakuntai, and Akka—each bearing the weight of a patriarchal society that has conditioned them to internalize their suffering. Bell Hooks, in her essay "Sisterhood," rightly observes that "sexism is perpetrated by institutional and 'social structures', by the individuals who dominate, exploit or oppress; and by the victims themselves, who are dominated, exploited or oppressed;

who are socialized to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo.”

Deshpande's narrative explores this complex entanglement where women often act within, and sometimes enforce, the very systems that confine them. Yet, Urmila's growth into a symbol of compassion and agency reflects a broader possibility—that of collective healing. As the novel moves forward, it celebrates the quiet strength women possess, their capacity for endurance, and most importantly, their ability to forge meaningful bonds with one another. Urmila's insight that love alone can bridge pain and nurture growth propels her to embrace a new vision of humanity—"a new road, a new way a new age"—where empathy and solidarity become the foundation for survival and renewal.

3. THE SILENT SUFFERERS

Urmila is well educated dealing with the pain of losing her daughter. 'Anu' Urmila's daughter recently dies in an accident as a result Urmila is suffering with suppression of her huge loss. Urmila admits to herself that the memory of her daughter will remain with her forever. Therefore, it's impossible for her to consider her dead from her memory. This thing she can't omit from her life. It becomes very hard for her to answer that now she is the mother of only one child 'Kartik'.

She allows herself to deal with the challenges in the society to take risks when she wants to bring changes in thinking of commoners. This has been found when Kalpana, a character who is the victim of rape, is a girl who is admitted in the hospital and is surviving at the verge of life and death. Shakutai, Kalpana's mother, is worried about the defamation of her daughter. Possibly, she allows neither herself nor the police to believe what is true. She repeatedly says Kalpana's condition is the result of an accident instead of accepting the truth probably she knows that the society won't accept her daughter if they know that she has been raped. Urmila is musing about it so deeply that she gives voice to the incident through her friend who is working in a newspaper. She convinces the mother of Kalpana by using her intellectual skills and makes her realize that hiding the truth from the society won't help Kalpana in anyways. Therefore, it was not Kalpana who was at fault. Consequently, to help Kalpana, a crowd of women come for the noble cause extending for the helping hand.

Then comes the character Mira, who has already been discussed earlier in this article. Although she is a mother-in-law, she should be acknowledged as a person who has endured immense suffering. A girl in her teenage years is always asked to make herself in such a way that she doesn't look attractive. Such thinking only portrays the narrow notions of the society in which we live in. Use of lipstick is not applicable for her. After she is assaulted by one of her relative only, it's she upon whom the finger is raised by the member of society including police who is not ready to help her in the case.

4. EDUCATION LEADS TO SELF-AWARENESS

In *The Binding Vine* (1993), Shashi Deshpande presents education not merely as academic learning but as a vital force that leads to self-awareness and awakening. The protagonist, Urmila, a college lecturer, embodies this theme. Through her intellectual engagement with literature and her reflective mind, Urmi becomes deeply aware of the societal structures that imprison women and begins a personal journey toward understanding herself and the women around her.

Education, for Urmila, becomes a lens through which she interprets not only texts but also the world. Her exposure to poetry, especially the haunting verses of her deceased mother-in-law Mira, brings her closer to the silenced emotions of other women. Urmila reads Mira's diary and poetry and recognizes the pain and suppressed identity within those lines. The diary becomes an educational tool in itself—a text that teaches Urmila about the suffering endured silently by many women. As Urmila reads, she realizes: “The words, the poetry, had been wrung out of her, out of a suffering that had never had any other outlet.”

This moment of realization through reading represents a powerful transformation. Urmi begins to understand that education is not about detachment but about engaging deeply with others' experiences. By reading Mira's poetry, she starts seeing the invisible threads that bind women across generations. This is not formal education alone, but an awakening—a feminist education that enables her to see the social construction of gender

Shashi Deshpande also portrays the classroom as a space of reflection. Urmi is not a passive teacher; she is constantly questioning, discussing, and reflecting. Her educational background allows her to think critically about the patriarchal structures embedded in the lives of women like Shakutai, who accepts her daughter's rape as fate, or Kalpana, who lies unconscious and voiceless. Through her critical mind, Urmila can challenge these structures. She says: “If we keep silent, we allow it to happen again and again. Silence becomes our complicity.”

This awareness is deeply rooted in Urmi's capacity to think, question, and speak. Her education has empowered her not to accept the status quo blindly. The novel shows that when women learn to read, write, and reflect, they also learn to name their oppression—and that naming is the first step to resisting it.

Moreover, Deshpande shows that education allows for empathy and solidarity. Urmila does not retreat into intellectual detachment; instead, she becomes a “binding vine” connecting with other women through understanding and shared experience. It is through her reading, writing, and teaching that she comes to this role of a compassionate mediator. In *The Binding Vine*, Shashi Deshpande affirms that education is not just a tool for professional growth but a path toward inner clarity and collective awakening. As Urmila grows in awareness, she embodies Deshpande's belief that knowledge, reflection, and empathy can help women confront their grief, question silence, and ultimately find their voice.

5. EDUCATION AS A MEANS OF RESISTING INTERNALIZED PATRIARCHY IN THE BINDING VINE

Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* powerfully explores how education acts as a tool for resisting internalized patriarchy. In the novel, the divide between silence and speech, submission and resistance, is often drawn along the lines of awareness that education brings. Women who remain bound by patriarchal codes tend to suppress their own voices and those of others, whereas education becomes a means through which women begin to challenge this conditioning.

Shakuntala, the mother of Kalpana a young rape survivor embodies internalized patriarchal values. Despite her daughter's suffering, she chooses silence, believing that speaking out would bring shame to the family. Her refusal to let others speak on Kalpana's behalf reflects a deep-seated belief that a woman's dignity lies in her silence, even when she has been wronged. This belief, however, is not questioned by Shakuntala due to the lack of emotional or intellectual space to reflect something education could have helped foster.

Urmila, the protagonist, stands in contrast. Her education has equipped her not just with literacy but with the critical tools to reflect on injustice and respond to it. She does not remain passive but becomes a voice for Kalpana. Her self-awareness and ability to empathize with others are sharpened through her exposure to ideas, literature, and personal reflection.

Even Mira, Urmila's late mother-in-law, who lived in a more conservative era, finds a subtle form of resistance through her poetry. Though her life was marked by suppression, her writings reveal the depth of her inner struggle and her quiet rebellion against imposed roles. In *The Binding Vine*, Deshpande suggests that education formal or self-taught plays a crucial role in helping women unlearn patriarchal norms, gain perspective, and choose expression over silence, thereby reclaiming agency over their own narratives.

6. THE TENSION BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

In *The Binding Vine*, Shashi Deshpande explores the tension between tradition and modernity, especially through the contrasting characters of Shakuntala and Urmi. Shakuntala, Kalpana's mother, symbolizes traditional Indian values deeply rooted in patriarchy and silence. When Kalpana becomes a victim of rape, Shakuntala chooses not to speak out or seek justice, instead internalizing the pain and suffering as a private matter. Her response is shaped by years of social conditioning that encourage women to suppress their trauma to preserve family honor. This reaction reveals the limitations of traditional thinking and how it hinders emotional healing and social justice. In contrast, Urmi represents a modern, educated woman who believes in confronting injustice and advocating for victims. Though she grieves the loss of her own daughter, Anu, Urmi channels her pain into empathy and activism. She supports Kalpana's right to justice and refuses to stay silent. Her education has given her the tools to think critically, process trauma, and challenge oppressive norms. Through this contrast, Deshpande underscores that modern, educated perspectives can liberate individuals from outdated traditions that perpetuate silence and suffering. The novel thus reflects how the clash between traditionalism and modernity shapes women's choices and their journey toward liberation.

7. CONCLUSION

In *The Binding Vine*, Shashi Deshpande offers a deeply moving narrative that reveals how education can serve as a powerful tool for resisting internalized patriarchy and initiating psychological liberation. Through characters like Urmi and Mira, the novel illustrates how educated women begin to question inherited roles of silence, submission, and emotional repression. Unlike Shakuntala, who suppresses her daughter Kalpana's trauma in the name of social propriety, Urmi refuses to stay silent. Her education enables her to analyze, empathize, and speak out—not only for Kalpana but for herself and other women trapped in similar cycles of suppression. Mira's poetry becomes another act of resistance; her written words, preserved over time, reflect a voice stifled in life but alive in art. Deshpande subtly asserts that education is not limited to formal schooling but extends to emotional and moral awareness, storytelling, writing, and the courage to confront difficult truths. Thus, *The Binding Vine* is not just a story of suffering—it is also a testament to the strength of knowledge and introspection. It concludes with a quiet but firm affirmation that change begins within. Education, in this context, is the first step towards inner

freedom and the eventual dismantling of patriarchal chains that bind generations of women.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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