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Crossing the *Laxman Rekha*: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's Women in *The Binding Vine* and *Small Remedies*

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Abstract

The aim of this research paper is to illustrate how Shashi Deshpande's women dare to step across the *Laxman Rekha* (norms) of patriarchy and reinvent themselves though not always completely successful or without pain. Sita in the *Ramayana* was held responsible for not obeying her brother-in-law and crossing the *Laxman Rekha* (a magical circle of protection), the consequences of which was her abduction by Ravana and then the war that had to be waged by Ram to rescue her. Sita was ultimately banished from her marital home due to suspicions voiced about her character by one of Ram's subjects. She went away to a forest. Similarly when a woman, after marriage leaves her mother's house, she is expected not to return to her maternal home though she is humiliated in her marital home. Why are Indian women even today expected to be a Sita? Why does society compare common women to mythical characters and myths and ancient role models? This paper focuses on

how women in Shashi Deshpande's novels *The Binding Vine* and *Small Remedies* attempt to reinvent themselves and cross the patriarchal *Laxman Rekha*.

Keywords

Shashi Deshpande; *The Binding Vine*; *Small Remedies*; Patriarchy; Gender Boundaries.

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Laxman Rekha in modern Indian parlance refers to a strict convention and rule, never to be broken. It often refers undesirable consequences if the ethnical limits are traversed. For instance, Sita from the epic *Ramayana* was held responsible for not obeying her brother-in-law and crossing the *Laxman Rekha* and was abducted by Ravana, the demon king of Lanka that resulted in the war between Rama and Ravana, to rescue Sita. Before accepting Sita, Rama ordered that she has to prove her chastity by the ordeal of fire. She went through the trial by fire but the flames did not consume her. She was deemed pure. When Rama returned to Ayodhya, his subjects refused to accept her as their queen. How could a woman who had lived under another man's roof sit beside Rama? They considered Sita as impure, unworthy for queen-ship. To uphold the family honour, Rama was obliged to abandon Sita though she had not committed adultery. The illustrative character Sita is a precaution to the Indian womanhood and serves as a warning rather than an example for the modern Indian women. Citing the example of Sita, Indian girls and women are warned never to cross the *Laxman Rekha* that represents the threshold of social propriety for a woman in Hindu society. 'Stepping out' brings dishonor, shame and ultimately leads to social ostracism. The main doorway of a Hindu house is the physical manifestation of *Laxman Rekha*. In an orthodox set up, a woman is expected to remain indoors all the time. She could 'cross the threshold' only twice in her life: once as a bride on the way to her husband's

house and the second time as a corpse on the way to the crematorium. 'Stepping out' for any other reason brings disgrace to the household which suspects that woman is of loose character.

Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* (1993) presents physical violence within the family, within marriage, experienced by several women – Mira, Kalpana and Urmi's mother Inni. Mira, Urmi's dead mother-in-law and Kishore's mother wants to be a poet but she becomes a rape victim within the marriage. Kalpana too shares the same fate; but she is a victim of rape, outside of marriage. These are linked indirectly to Urmi who introspects and evaluates her own life. *Small Remedies* (2000) is about rebellious women who have shaped their own destiny as the nation was moving forward and breaking out the colonial rule. Female acts of rebellion, a woman like Leela, who joins the communist party in 1930-40s, Savitribai who leaves her home to fulfill her desire to become a professional singer, are linked indirectly to Madhu who too introspects and evaluates her life.

Shashi Deshpande has delineated the lives of many women, living together, enclosed within domestic spaces and enduring different forms of male coercion, power and self-destruction. Her heroines try to become free from the gender inequality they experienced at home; yet going against the tradition causes a serious sense of guilt and trauma. There is a deceleration of the narrative movement as the death calls for a review, a revaluation and understanding of one's life. In *The Binding Vine*, Urmi has lost her baby daughter, Anusha and in *Small Remedies*, Madhu's teenaged son Aditya dies in an explosion on a bus in Bombay during a riot. Sorrow and agony are common to both protagonists, but their projections are different - Urmi takes interest to help other women i.e. Kalpana and Shakutai and Madhu busies herself in writing a biography on Savitri Indorekar, a famous classical singer. Both women adhere to their main objects and links which govern their life totally.

Deshpande's women dare to cross the *Laxman-Rekha* of patriarchy and this is reflected in Mira and Kalpna's case in *The Binding Vine*. Mira, a bright and creative college girl is compelled to marry against her wishes. Mira's marriage to a man whom she does not love makes her a victim of lust. Mira is subjected to rape inside marriage. Their marriage is just physical in nature and not a marriage of minds and hearts. Thus, frustrated with the physicality of marital life, Mira tries to attain her true identity by writing beautiful poetry. That is the only way to escape from the sense of isolation and emptiness of her humdrum life but unluckily she dies while delivering her child after four years of loveless marriage. Urmi reads the pages of Mira's poems and can easily guess her suffering through her own feminine imagination. These feelings "runs all through 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" (*The Binding Vine* 63). To her sex becomes "the sting of scorpion to be borne by women" (Lakshmi 6). Urmi thinks perhaps it was her writing that keeps her going. She wants to translate and publish Mira's poem in order to immortalize her in the world of art. That is the way of paying the tribute to her dead mother-in-law.

Shashi Deshpande has discussed rape in an aspect which is generally not discussed or even accepted as a rape at all. As Kate Millet has put rape as follows: "Rape is an offence, one male commits upon another - a matter of abusing 'his woman'" (Millet 63). She has also projected the rape outside marriage. Kalpana, a young woman hanging between life and death in a hospital ward, is raped by her mother's sister's husband, Prabhakar. Shakutai, Kalpana's mother believes that Kalpana herself is responsible for her tragedy on account of her own adamant nature, recklessness, exhibitionism and limitless freedom. Sulu, Shakutai's sister and the rapist's wife, after knowing the reality, commits suicide.

Urmila, is also fretful of her married life like Shakutai and Mira but in a slightly different way. Her husband, Kishore, is an officer in the Indian Navy who therefore is away from home for long periods. After the death of her baby daughter Anusha, she withdraws from Kishore and creates an emotional border and does not let her husband come too close. She has a fear of losing her husband somewhere in the seas. She is afraid of it so she wants to submit herself to Kishore but she knows that “if she walks the way of submission once, she will walk that way forever” (*The Binding Vine* 82). Though she is not satisfied in her sex life with her husband, she does not accept the proposal of Dr. Jain. She, thus, happens to be a sensitive woman rather than a radical feminist and can be taken as a mouthpiece of the novelist.

Urmi understands how self-confidence of a vivacious girl can be shattered by the Indian marriage system which transforms her into a fearful and nervous woman. But Sivaraman observes: “Urmi is different...wants to assert herself and not crawl before man” (Sivaraman 136). Urmi has to be content with Inni’s skepticism, Akka’s hurt and Kishore’s reaction when the poems are published. Yet, she strongly believes that, “women should have the courage to express themselves and expose the evils of the society: it’s not fair, it’s not fair at all. And we can’t go on pushing it- what happened to them- under the carpet forever because we are afraid of the disgrace” (*The Binding Vine* 174). Even in Kalpana’s case, Urmi, with the help of her journalist friend, Malcolm, gets the news published in the local newspaper. As a consequence, Shakutai gets wide publicity and responses from the public and they are ready to help her by finding the rapist who has committed heinous felony.

Small Remedies by Shashi Deshpande is divided into four episodes as follows: Savitribai’s episode; Leela’s episode; Meenakshi’s episode; and Madhu’s episode. The first three episodes form the background of the novel and last episode forms the foreground of the novel which interlinks with all three episodes.

Savitribai Indorekar, the classical singer of Gwalior Garana, is devoted to music and is an epitome of strength and courage who challenges the Hindu tradition and law books, especially the oppressive *Manu Smriti*. She was born in an orthodox Hindu Family with the silver spoon and was treated as a ‘piece of jewel’. She has lived a sheltered life, a daughter-in-law of a Maharashtrian Brahmin family and a mother of her child Meenakshi. Her father-in-law realizes her genuine passion for music and encourages her to learn. She has developed a relationship with Gulamsaab – a tabla player during her course of learning. A woman with such a background elopes with a Muslim tabla player and lives in a strange town with her daughter Munni. By breaking all the barriers of caste and marriage codes, she challenges the laws of Manu. Savitribai’s father-in-law too had a mistress but nobody could ask him because he was the head of the family. Rule could be modified for the daughters; sometimes they are purely out of affection, but daughter-in-law carry the weight of the honor of the family, its reputation, its Izzat (*Small Remedies* 220). Savitribai has to sacrifice her married life, as well as her only daughter Munni and finally her relationship with Gulamsaab in the last days of her life. “Both Gulamsaab, her lover and Munni, her daughter, were no longer part of her life” (*Small Remedies* 167). She is a lone traveller in the journey of life. But after a long struggle, she has created her own space, individual identity as an artist amidst the male dominated society.

Savitribai’s life is a monument for Madhu - Dr. Som’s wife and Aditya’s mother. Madhu has another identity as a journalist who “has to work on Savitribai’s life to sculpt with words” (*Small Remedies* 164). When she comes to Bhavanipur, she faces emotional crisis after the death of her son Aditya. The emotional bond and trust between her and her husband has gone. Som though an intelligent man guided by the society, questions on Madhu’s chastity and her serenity. Madhu expects him to be a friend to understand and share the truth of her life but as Chandru says, “Men and women can never be friends.

Men can be brothers, fathers, lovers, husbands but never friends” (*Small Remedies* 254). Though honest and innocent, Madhu is put on a trial by Som because she is a woman. Madhu is completely heartbroken and decides to live alone but that is not so easy in the patriarchal world.

Leela, an unconventional woman belonging to the pre-independent period, struggles against tyranny of colonialism. She is Madhu’s maternal aunt and a communist in real sense. She has broken many conventions and has provided support to many destitute women. When her husband Vasanth dies, she takes up a job and supports her family. She works for the welfare of the poor tuberculosis patients. During this period, she comes into contact with Dr. Joe, a widower with two children who later becomes her second husband. Leela strongly believes in communist ideology and does not hesitate to speak against the party. Despite her hard work in the party, she is not duly recognized by the party. She says, “It seems you have got to become a widow for them to remember that you exist” (*Small Remedies* 224). It is through Madhu’s version that Savitribai’s life and the illuminating saga of Leela are brought to the forefront. Both characters Savitribai and Leela have paved their path on their own; they reject tradition, social patterns and customs to achieve their goal. Through the character of Savitribai, Shashi Deshpande spreads the message, “Be your own light.”

In spite of the difficulties and obstacles caused by patriarchal society, these women endeavor to channelize their emotions in different ways because of their strong urge to survive. Having entered into a maze from which nobody can escape, they want to make the best out of their life by strengthening themselves to face the harsh realities of life.

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