

**Unbinding Silence: Exploring the Wild Zone, Gynocriticism and Women's
Voices in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine***

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Abstract

This paper examines Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Binding Vine* through the theoretical framework proposed by Elaine Showalter in her essay "Feminist Criticism in the wilderness". Showalter's concepts, such as gynocriticism, the muted group, and the wild zone, about double-voiced discourse helps us understand women's writing as a unique literary and cultural tradition. By applying these concepts to Deshpande's novel, this study sheds light on how female experiences, especially related to silence, grief, solidarity, sexual violence and social oppression is discussed in the narrative. This study focuses on Mira's secret poems are like voice emerging from "wild zone". It looks at how Mira uses images from the female body and writes in two languages to express herself, it showcase the complexities of women's cultural and linguistic identity. Through Urmi's journey of reading and translating these text, this paper highlights the gynocritical method of entering a wild zone to understand it and make it to the mainstream. By Urmi's reading of Mira's poetry and connecting it to Kalpana's trauma, this study examines how the novel focus on shared female experiences. This paper focuses on how novel portrays female solidarity and invisible threads linking women's experiences across generation, which gynocriticism help us recognize as female literary tradition.

Key words: Showalter, Gynocriticism, Wild zone, Deshpande, Female voice, Women's vision

Introduction:

For a long time, women's writing was ignored or overlooked and has been judged by male standards. Women writers were expected to follow certain rules and their experiences within marriage, family, emotional life were often seen as not much important. Feminist critics challenged this kind of inequality and argued that women's writing should be

understood through women's own emotions and experiences. One such influential feminist critic is Elaine Showalter, who gives importance to understand women's writing from their own perspective. In her essay *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* (1981), Showalter invented the term "Gynocriticism" focusing on, "the study of women as writers, and its subjects are the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition." (185)

This paper also examines the concept of "wild zone" which Showalter has borrowed from Edwin Ardener, it represents the space of female experiences that lies beyond patriarchal understanding.

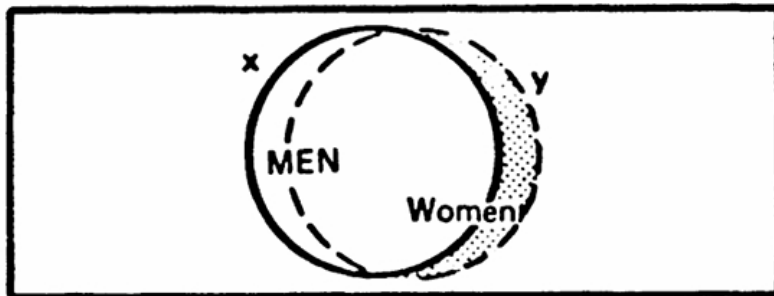


Fig. 1. Ardener's model of dominant and muted groups (Showalter 200).

In this diagram circle x represents male or dominant group and circle y represents women or muted group. The overlapping area shows cultural space of men and women. The crescent outside the x circle shows the "wild zone". In the novel it appears as shared emotional experience of women.

Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Binding Vine* explores the lives of women and the pain they suffer in a patriarchal society. The novel focuses on women's emotions, creativity, struggle, and how their voices are often ignored. It also highlights how women's creativity and individuality are often suppressed and they are expected to endure pain quietly in the male dominant society.

Two important characters of the novel are Urmi and Mira, though Mira already dead never really appears in the novel, she gains her identity through her works, which are her diary and poetry. Another character is Urmi who reads the works of Mira and connects her struggle and sufferings with other females. Though both of them belongs to different generation it explores about generational struggle of women in the society.

This paper examines Urmi's journey of interpreting Mira's poetry, giving it a "women's vision" which is a kind of enactment of Showalter's theory. Urmi uncovers the meaning of Mira's poetry, through this process Deshpande showcase even though women's voice is silenced it continue to survive by the act of recovery, interpretation and female solidarity.

The epigraph of the novel is from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* "What were the use of my creation, if I were entirely contained here?" raises a key question for Mira. She is trapped in a loveless marriage and she is denied of her literary expression. Brontë like Mira wrote secretly and created amazing work despite the obstacles. This epigraphs suggests Mira's struggle is a part of a bigger picture of creating art despite being held back.

Mira's poems serve as epigraph of each sections in the novel. This plays a very important role as it establishes the thematic framework and also helps to convey the idea that women's lives are interconnected with the same sufferings and emotional struggles. It represents wild zone consciousness as it reflects that we only get echoes and not the full voice. The first epigraph highlights how women's experience get lost when it is forced into mainstream expression. In the second epigraph she questions the romantic notion of marriage and asks whether even Laxmi trembles "fearing the coming of /the dark-clouded, engulfing night," (56 Deshpande). The third epigraph is about the way she feels stuck while the nature continues its cycle, it reflects her emotional transformation. The fourth is about how she is trying to search a way to grow and find herself again like a "bunyan tree" searching for water.

Showalter emphasizes on the idea that women's writing comes from the brain. She disagrees with Gilbert and Guber's notion about writing is male dominated creative process and asks rhetorical question "If the pen is a metaphorical penis, from what organ can females generate texts?" (Gibert &Guber, qtd in Showalter 187). The similar kind of question is raised by Venu, a celebrated male poet to whom Mira and even Urmi's father admired a lot. When Mira gathered the courage to show him her poetry, he responded, "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" (Deshpande 127). His comment shows how patriarchy limits women's creativity and biologically reduces it to reproduction only.

Mira's writing represents what Showalter calls "double-voiced discourse" it simultaneously speaks within and against dominant tradition. Her poem "Huddled in my cocoon, a somnolent silkworm / will I emerge a beauteous being? / Or will I, suffocating, cease to exist?"(Deshpande 65) silkworm is both biological and artistic metaphor, silkworm produces silk (text) from body. It answers Venu's remarks that her body's potential is not

just children but self-becoming. Her other poem “no, growing painfully within / like a monster child was born.” (Deshpande 83) shows birth as a rebellion and oppose to marital expectations. It also shows painful birth against forced submission and violence within marriage. Here she transforms biological confinement into a metaphor of self-generation and rebellion, Venu who wanted her poetry to be children is a “monster child” her own powerful voice and agency. In both these poems she uses the body as a writing tool to resist patriarchal control. Her writing represents the expression of her inner self. The idea to which Showalter agrees to Nancy Miller that Women’s writing emerges from embodied experience and not from her body, “the body of her writing and not the writing of her body.” (Showalter 190)

Later in her poem, she represents her body not as a site of patriarchal trauma but as a vast creative ocean. “Tiny fish swimming in the ocean of my womb...Will that courage be mine when, denuded/I stand naked and bare? By invoking Buddha and Karna myth she transforms her pregnancy into a philosophical conflict. She refuses to let patriarchy define motherhood as duty and she compares it to warrior’s battle. While her other poem shows her fear of repeating the maternal cycle without escape, “Whose face is this I see in the mirror,/ unsmiling, grave, bedewed with fear? / The daughter? No, Mother, I am now your shadow.” (Deshpande 126) It is about haunting resemblance to the mother, and loss of individuality and about daughters fears inheriting mother’s fate.

Her poem “Green sari draped about meI walk / but, oh mother, I stumble, I fall / my arms sink heavily by my sides.” (Deshpande 125) is about women wearing green sari and jewelry talking to her mother about her unhappy married life. The “stumble” shows she is about to fall and feels despair because she is carrying an unwanted child. The couplet “Fixed forever in our places,/ face to face the two of us, /like Siva and his nodding Bull.” (Deshpande 82) Uses mythical allegory where Shiva represents patriarchal law and Nandi, the devoted vehicle represents obedience. It portrays how women are kept in a submissive position, especially in marriage and it is exposed in myth and culture also.

The poem “Shall I surrender to this Maya-world / dancing peacock, displaying its feathers? / Or shall I, defying the market world / retreat into my shell tortoise-like?” (Deshpande 98) puts a woman at cross-roads, where she can either surrender to flashy decorative world and be socially expected wife or she can resist the world like tortoise and hide in her own isolated world. Another poem “They called me mad / They, who cocooned themselves / in bristly blankets and thought themselves warm / when I spoke of my soul that boiled and seethed. // They called me mad / they, who were entranced / by a single white ray of light / when I spoke of the magic of the seven colours in a prism.” (Deshpande 100) showcase when a women refuse to fir in a role proposed by society she is labeled as “mad”.

The prism here represents the “wild zone” where men can only see the “white ray” the only one domestic role set by them for women, while her poetry is of seven colours, space of complex, vibrant female experience to which they don’t have access.

Her declaration in the poem “Nirmala, they call, I stand statue-still. / Do you build the new without razing the old? / A tablet of rice, a pencil of gold / can they make me Nirmala? I am Mira.” (Deshpande 101) shows how she was given the name Nirmala at marriage, kind of act to replace her identity to be live as submissive wife. But she secretly records her true self in her poetry as “Mira”. Urmi respects her choice of self-naming and she chooses to call her “Mira” and not “Nirmala”. Even though she is trapped in a difficult marriage, her poetry becomes a way of shouting and representing her true self.

Urmi also notes that Mira’s voice was scornful and angry and never wrote love poems as expected by any female writer. The lack of love poetry is like a conscious rejection to the limited space given to women poets. *Mira wrote rebellious poetry but her voice is not heard, Urmi reflects on this cruel irony that “Something comes through when I think of Venu’s poems everywhere and Mira’s voice silenced.” (Deshpande 128) Showalter points out that women’s texts were not preserved and were ignored and destroyed making women’s literary history invisible.*

Women like Mira lacked “a room of their own” forcing them to write in secrecy as Urmila imagines: “Perhaps it was her writing that kept her going, that kept her alive. When and where did she write? Certainly she could never have had, in that house, a room of her own. Except at night. Yes, I imagine it was there that she wrote, late at night, after the man had gone to bed. I can see her stealthily, soundlessly getting out of bed, sitting down on the floor by the window perhaps, forgetting everything while she wrote.” (Deshpande 127) It showcase how domestic operation limited creative freedom. The contrast between Venu and Mira also represents gendered literary hierarchy.

While reading Mira’s works Urmi noticed that Mira has written poetry in English and her diary in Kannada. The diary written in English is a reflection to emotional realities of her life, like the records the meeting with Venu, her fear to become a shadow to her mother, her loveless married life and philosophical ideas. English in a way gave her distance and analytical tool to process and rethink about her experiences. Her Kannada poems are reflection to raw emotion, it is simultaneous acceptance and rejection to patriarchy in her mother tongue. They are about female identity, motherhood and traditional assumption about marriage, it represents the “wild zone” of female experience.

The diary and poems have complementary relation as mentioned by Urmi, “How could I have been so naive as to imagine her life and poetry apart? The diaries and the poems complement each other, the gaps in one are filled by the other.” (Deshpande 99) This interplay creates bilingual subjectivity and a way of thinking and expression that changes and moves between languages and perspectives.

As Mira’s poems belong to “wild zone”, it need careful unpacking to understand their full meaning. It required translation, interpretation and “women’s vision” provided by Urmi. When Priti, a friend of Urmi asks for a “women’s vision” Urmi laughs it off, as she believed it’s not just about being a woman by nature. She got epiphany while watching cinema in which women was admiring herself, she realized that it is a man’s vision, then she learns to tell the difference between male’s look and a women’s experience.

Urmi first thought she was the hunter and Mira is the prey. Then Mira through her work takes her hand and guide her. She reads Mira’s diaries and poems and then translates her poems into English and she states, “And now, I tell myself, I know Mira.” (Deshpande 174). The translation required to live inside Mira’s thoughts, which only Urmi could do. The translation makes her truth accessible to larger audience, as now from “wild zone” it is part of mainstream.

Mira’s poems helped Urmi overcome her personal grief as at the beginning of the novel she is deeply affected by the death of her infant daughter which leads her to withdraw from her usual life. Mira’s poems provided her a vision to reexamine the lives of women around her and she becomes aware of the hidden struggles faced by women. Urmi’s reading of Mira’s poems gives it a recognition of Mira’s sufferings and connects it to broader struggles faced by women. As after reading Mira’s poem she realized “what has happened to Kalpana happened to Mira too” (Deshpande 63) Kalpana, the young rape victim lying in coma cannot speak at all, but her body inscribed by violence becomes a text. Urmi struggle to challenge male dominated narrative that try to silence Kalpana’s experience. Kalpana’s story like Mira’s poem is silenced, Mira and Kalpana’s stories shows hoe women face violence both at home and outside. Urmi and Priti’s support highlights the need to fight against the system that silence women and shows importance of women standing together.

Conclusion:

The “Binding Vine” is about female literary tradition that gynocriticism tries to recover. The vine has several strand that includes, generational chain which connects Brontë to Mira to Urmi to Kalpana and all the female of different generation. Textual strand uses the writing like epigraphs, poems, diary and memories to connect shared struggle of women. Embodied chain represents shared physical experience and Ritualistic chain includes shared

practices among women. The vine crosses generation, centuries and language but the suffering is same.

The vine connects Mira's unspoken pain and trauma to Kalpana's silenced body. Urmi has to speak aloud of their suffering to break the silence, this makes the "wild zone" from a place of being ignored to a safe space where women's hidden words can be heard and grow. The novel answers the Brontë's epigraph by showing Mira's poem which were kept hidden for decades before finally reaching a reader. The use of her creation binds us to her, and her to us, urging us to keep speaking what has been silenced. The vine grows on.

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