

## CHAPTER-IV

### **SHASHI DESHPANDE: ARTICULATING THE DILEMMA OF THE POSTCOLONIAL INDIAN WOMEN**

The writings of Shashi Deshpande, nine novels, six collections of short stories, four books for children and a screenplay, prove that she is one of the most prolific women writers in English in contemporary India. Recipient of a string of literary awards, including the most coveted Sahitya Academi Award in 1990 for her novel That Long Silence (1989), her works have been translated into a number of languages: German, French, Finish, Dutch, Danish etc. But as a writer she always prefers to remain in the backdrop, not wishing to draw much attention, perhaps the reason being that as a writer she is rooted more deeply in the Indian social and psychic reality than her predecessors. She “never wrote from the point of view of “marketability”, no exotic themes to attract the West, no adapting her style to target readership” (Myles : 2006:64). Even writing to her was “never a literary exercise, it was just a means of self-expression” (Ibid:63). In an interview to Lakshmi Holmstrom, in 1993, she herself states:

I am different from other Indians who write in English; my background is very firmly here, I was never educated abroad. My novels don't have any Westerners, for example, they are just about Indian people and the complexities of our lives... My English is as 'we' use it (cited in Pathak (ed.): 1998: 249).

In another interview, this time with Vimala Rama Rao, in 1997, she even designates Anita Desai's vision of India is that of “a foreigner's” (Journal of Indian Writing in English, 25/1-2,1997:133). She finds most of Mrs. Desai's

novels lacking in the “density in human relationships” (Ibid), which she values so highly.

Deshpande's novels contain so much that can be regarded as the staple material of feminist thought -- women's sexuality, the gender roles, self-discovery, and so on. But she can be called a 'feminist', if at all, only in a certain specific sense. Her interview with Lakshmi Holmstrom throws significant light on her stance:

I am a feminist. In my own life, I mean. But not consciously as a novelist. I must also say that my feminism has come to me very slowly, very gradually, and mainly out of my own thinking and experiences and feelings. I started writing first, and only then discovered my feminism. And it was much later that I actually read books about it (cited in Pathak (ed.): 1998: 248).

Moreover, Deshpande believes that no amount of theorizing will solve women's problems in India:

To me feminism isn't a matter of theory; it is difficult to apply Kate Millet or Simone de Beauvoir or whoever to the reality of our daily lives in India. And then there are such terrible misconceptions about feminism by people here. They often think it is about burning bras and walking out on your husband, children, etc. I always try to make the point now about what feminism is not, and to say that we have to discover what it is in our own lives, our experiences. And I actually feel that a lot of women in India are feminists without realizing it (Ibid:248-49).

This is a highly sensible approach. Deshpande, unlike hard-core feminists, does not agree that being a wife or mother is something that is unnecessarily imposed on a woman. According to her, "It's needed" (Deshpande interviewed, Vimala Rama Rao: Literature Alive, 1/3: Dec, 1987:13). Hence, she craves for "a greater sense of balance" (Ibid). She says :

Maybe I want to reach a stage where I can write about human beings or not about women or men... For I don't believe in having a propagandist or sexist purpose to my writing (Ibid).

If her writings present such a perspective, it is, to quote her again, only a "co-incidence" (Ibid:14).

About women being the focal point of her writing, Deshpande herself states:

Most of my writing comes out of my interest and long suppressed feelings about what is to be a woman in our society: it comes out of the difficulty of playing the different roles enjoined upon me by society, out of the knowledge that I am something more and something different from the some total of these roles. My writing comes out of my consciousness of the conflict between my idea of myself as a human being and the idea that society has of me as a woman (Deshpande :1998 :9 ).

This is obviously a Jane Austen like spirit that she is not ready to move beyond her familiar fields. She really expresses only those feelings which she knows best out of her own experiences. Any careful reading of her women protagonists would definitely reveal the confusion and dilemma of people like her, that is the postcolonial Indian women, who are torn between the twin

pressures of tradition and modernity. However, her characters always appear victorious by their inner strength which is lacking in the women of Anita Desai. Hence, she expresses an extension–self of Kamala Markandaya. But unlike Markandaya’s women, who feel “unconscious” desire, Deshpande’s women always make conscious efforts to find their place in this hostile world. Hence, the present chapter aims to study some of these women in order to show Deshpande’s definite difference as a feminist novelist in Indian context.

Deshpande’s first published novel The Dark Holds No Terrors (1980) tells us the story of a marriage on the rocks. Sarita (called Saru), the protagonist of the novel, is a two-in-one woman, who in the daytime is a successful doctor and at night a terrified “trapped animal” (195) in the hands of her husband, Manohar (called Manu). The novel opens with Saru returning after fifteen years to her father’s house – a place she had once sworn never to return to – unable to bear the sexual sadism of her husband. The rest of the novel is a remembrance of things past and a brief confession to the father with whom she hardly communicated before. In fact, the stay in her father’s house offers Sarita a chance to review her relationship with her husband, her dead mother, her dead brother, Dhruva and her children, Renu and Abhi. Hence, her subjugated knowledge about the power relations between herself and the other members of her family finds an outlet which ultimately makes her a courageous woman to whom the dark no longer holds any terror.

The novel is remarkable for its exploration of the inner landscape of Sarita’s psyche. Sarita is a highly self-willed woman and her problems ensue because of her outsized ego and the innate love for having an identity of her own. She defies traditional codes at the slightest threat to her importance since that is what she missed and craved for in her paternal home. She recalls that her problems had started right from her childhood. They became quite serious after her younger brother Dhruva’s death, which is referred to in the

novel by A.D. (After Dhruva), which symbolises the prelapsarian and post-lapsarian life for her. His death overshadows all other memories of her life as if that was the point of her fall. She remembers how she was treated second to Dhruva. She recalls her dialogue with her mother :

Don't go out in the sun. You will get even darker.  
Who cares ?  
We have to care, if you don't. We have to get you married.  
I don't want to get married.  
Will you live with us all your life ?  
Why not ?  
You can't.  
And Dhruva ?  
He is different. He's a boy (45).

She remembers that it was only once in a year, that is at the time of 'Puja' that she was "more important than Dhruva" (50). Otherwise it was he who dominated her everywhere. There was always 'puja' on his birthdays, but none on her birthdays. After his death her birthdays were not celebrated even. She recalls:

After Dhruva's death, there were no more celebrations.  
My birthday was passed over in silence, both at home  
and at school (153).

It was only on her fifteenth birthday that she got a gold ear-ring from her mother as her birthday present.

Saru's mother continuously accused her of Dhruva's death and cursed her: "Why didn't you die? Why are you alive and when he is dead?" (29-30).

This left a traumatizing effect on her. In fact, she had become a nonentity long before she left her mother's home. She remembers: "I just did not exist for her. I died long before I left home" (27). In fact, through this and other examples in the novel, Deshpande conveys an important message that suppression, subjugation and exploitation of women are not only confined to the male-female relationship but exist between a female-female relationship as well. Saru remembers that when she wanted to study in a medical college, her mother had been against her studies. Though unsuccessful, her mother tried her best to persuade her husband not to send her to a medical college :

You don't belong to that [ moneyed] class. And don't forget, medicine or no medicine, doctor or no doctor, you still have to get her married, spend money on her wedding ... Let her go for a B.Sc. ... you can get her married in two years and our responsibility will be over (130-131).

This reflects that girls are seen as belonging to a different family altogether and their socialization always stresses their future roles as wives. As Veena Das comments:

Daughters are comparable to something kept in trust for another ('amanat'). You have to care for them, love them, and you will be held responsible for them but you are destined to lose them. Once a daughter is properly married and goes to her own house it is like a debt that has been paid (Das, Veena:1992:93).

Thus a girl has to adjust herself twice: first in her father's house, and then in the father-in-law's house. Goffman terms these as the " primary adjustment" and the " secondary adjustment". These adjustments, especially the latter, put different kinds of bondage or "role playing" on the girl (Goffman 1968).

However, Saru succeeded in persuading her father to send her to the medical college. There she was a sincere student to whom "college meant lectures in the morning, practicals in the afternoon, exams at every six months" (44). But as fate would have it, she encountered Manohar there and fell in love with him. Manohar or Manu was "one of the known names" (43) in the college for his cultural activities. He was a budding writer as well, "a poet of promise, with some poems already published in magazines" (43-44). Hence, Saru defied her parents and entered into marriage with him because she was quite happy to find such a versatile genius as her husband, through whom her "age old feminine dream of a superior conquering male" (47) had been fulfilled.

However, Saru became a famous doctor and Manu turned out to be simply a Lecturer and this made her socially and economically his superior. Slowly "an affected indifference" (36) started gleaming through his tone because there were nods and smile, murmured greetings and 'namastes', but they were only for her. "There was nothing for him. He was almost totally ignored" (Ibid). In fact, the esteem she earned around her made her inches taller and him inches shorter. Earlier "he had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband" (Ibid). The ego clash became inevitable, and Manu's simmering inferiority complex burst out on the day a girl had come to interview Saru and asked him the following question:

How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but the bread as well ?(182).

Since that day Manu became a sadist. He teased her in bed and behaved normally during the daytime "as if he had two split personalities – one of Dr.

Jackal and the other of Mr. Hyde" (Pande, K.M.:1998:53). First, she thought that such a terrific experience was a nightmare but the bruises on the body negated her. Bewildered by the ensuing failure of her marriage she even thought of leaving her job and to be simply his housewife because she could not bear the shattering of her dream –“the eternal female dream of finding happiness through man” (112). But Manu retaliated: “And how will we live?” (81). He could not bear letting the children go to third-rate schools wearing cheapest clothes. So she continues her job. But she is torn from within. She expresses her anguish through the imaginary advice given by her at the girls’ college:

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... Women’s magazines will tell you that a marriage should be an equal partnership. That’s nonsense. Rubbish. No partnership can ever be equal. It will always be unequal, but take care that it’s unequal in favour of you (124 ).

In her staying at her father’s home, Saru receives Manu’s letters but opens none of them. Later she hears the news of his arrival to take her back. She wants to leave her father’s house in order to avoid her encounter with him. She feels “the desperation of trapped animal” (195-96) because of the realization that she has no home at all. She remembers how many times she had thought of committing suicide but could not translate that into action. Now she has a feeling of abnegation because there has been no way open to her – neither in the present nor in the past. However, suddenly it is as if she is “vouchsafed a vision” (200) which her mother had just before her death – the vision of the mythical Duryodhan awaiting his enemies and ready to face them

boldly. She remembers Madhav's words: "I cannot spoil my life because of that boy [his brother Satish]. It's my life after all" (189). As a sort of coincidence, she realizes that she is also powerful enough to join the fragments of her splintered personality:

They came to her then, all those selves she had rejected so resolutely at first, and so passionately embraced later. The guilty sister, the undutiful daughter, the unloving wife... all persons spiked with guilts. Yes, she was all of them, she could not deny that now. She had to accept these selves to become whole again. But if she was all of them, they were not all of her. She was all these and so much more ( 201).

Saru realizes that she had been a puppet because she had made herself one, because she had been afraid of proving her mother right. Ready to go to see her child-patient, she tells her father that if Manu comes, he should be asked to wait for her. This is a significant step in the revitalization of her relationship with her husband. The wife in the end is obviously not a rebel in the radical sense of the term but a redeemed wife, one who is no longer afraid of the dark. It is this point of enlightenment which brings to the fore the lines of the Dhammapada, given as an epigraph to the novel:

You are your own refuge;  
There is no other refuge.  
This refuge is hard to achieve.

However, it is not only Saru who suffers in this androcentric world. She remembers the suffering of her grandmother who had been deserted by her husband but had never complained. "It's my luck, she said, my fate. It was written on my forehead" (62). Saru's own mother also did not have "a room of her own". Her father tells her that "Silence had become a habit for us" (181).

This silence, which symbolises lack of communication between Saru's parents, is praised by Maikaki, who calls Saru's mother (Kamalatai) a brave woman, who never complained:

She never told anyone about what was happening to her. The amount she ate... I tell you, a sparrow would have eaten more. Your father never noticed because she never ate with him (99).

Hence, this silence demarcates the confines and outlines the margins. This suggests that women constitute a muted group, the boundaries of whose culture and reality overlap, but are not wholly contained by the dominant [male] group. Once Saru's mother asked Saru " Why am I, a fat, old, unwanted woman left alive when he [her husband], so useful, so much wanted was taken away ? Why am I alive when he is dead ?" (69). This shows that widowhood is the worst calamity that an Indian woman has to face. Hence, Saru thinks her mother to be a lucky woman because she died a 'sughagan'.

Saru's classmate Padmakar tells her that he hates his wife because "she cannot talk about anything but servants and children. And prices... She never has her food until I go and have mine, she cooks just what I like and she never calls me by my name" (120). Saru tells him that he has a woman who is a good wife and a good mother and he should be satisfied with her. The contrast between the attitudes of Padmakar and Manu symbolises the two sides of the same coin. It is a commonplace observation even today that many a man expects his wife to be educated and modish and yet to have the traditional qualities of devotion and submissiveness.

Saru's classmate Smita is a contrast to her. After her marriage she had to become first Geetanjali and later Anju because " he [her husband] chose it

himself when we got married" (106). He did so because he had been reading Tagore those days. Smita further tells that her husband "hates anyone calling me Smita now" (Ibid). Smita has to face in her married life not only anonymity but also economic problems. She has to borrow one hundred rupees from Saru because he has given her "just enough to buy a small gift for the baby" (107). She tells Saru: "You don't know how lucky you are not to have to ask anyone for money" (Ibid). This shows that marriage brings different kinds of constraints on a woman which go on erasing her personality into oblivion.

However, though Saru's suffering is like that of the other women in the novel, yet she is different from them in that she becomes her own protégé. Unlike other women, who bear suffering like the torture of Sisyphus, she gathers strength not to surrender, not to run away from the problems, not to commit suicide, not to be behind the symbolic 'purdah' or veil -- in a word, not to accept defeat. Rather she accepts the challenges so as to prove herself a good daughter, a good wife, a good mother, a good doctor and a good human being – not from the phallogocentric point of view but from her own 'female' viewpoint. Thus she is a revisionist questioning the adequacy of accepted conceptual structures, trying to provide an alternative. Thus the Saru of the opening section of the novel who had visualised herself as the archetype of Sudama going to an all-powerful male (her father) for support, ends up as a self-sufficient woman who goes to Manu not to seek help but to complement him.

Indu, the protagonist of Roots and Shadows (1983), is also a 'rebel' just like Sarita. She, a journalist, falls in love with Jayant and is bold enough to marry him against the wishes of her family. With him she also, like Sarita, dreams a sense of completion and wholeness:

I had felt incomplete, not as a woman but as a person. And in Jayant I had thought I found the other part of my whole self (51).

But soon she gets thoroughly disillusioned finding that marriage does not bring her the desired “completeness”; rather she starts losing her identity because of the dominance of the husband-figure following her all around like a dangerous shadow. To quote her:

When I look in the mirror I think of Jayant, when I dress I think of Jayant... Always what he wants, what he would like, what would please him ... Have I become so fluid, with no shape, no form of my own? (34).

She observes that in all her actions she tends to please Jayant and he, in his turn, fully exploits her emotions in mercenary deeds. For instance, he forces her to follow the orders of the editor only because they need the money, while she dislikes this because she wants to work according to her own conscience. In a state of confusion, she also, like Sarita, returns to her natal home, which again provides Deshpande’s protagonist to reveal her subjugated knowledge about her self.

Indu’s discourse reveals that behind the failure of her marriage there lies a total lack of emotional rapport between herself and Jayant. She confesses to Naren :

It shocks him to find passion in a woman. It puts him off..  
When I am like that, he turns away from me. I’ve learnt my lesson now. And so I pretend, I’m passive. And unresponsive. I’m still and dead. And now, when you tried to kiss me, I thought... this is Jayant. that’s all I am, Naren, not a pure

woman. Not a too faithful wife. But an anachronism. A woman who loves her husband too much. Too passionately. And is ashamed of it (83).

This paradoxical situation is the outcome of the fact that Indu is nourished and reared by a tradition-ridden society:

As a child they had told me I must be obedient and unquestioning. As a girl they had told me I must be meek and submissive. Why? I had asked. Because you are a female . You must accept everything, even defeat, with grace because you are a girl, they said, for a female to live and survive ... And I ... I had watched them and found it to be true. There had to be, if not the substance, at least the shadow of submission (158).

She feels that she has been pretending many things. She surrenders to Jayant not out of love but because she does “not want conflict” (159). She also feels that she initially clung tenaciously to Jayant and to her marriage only because she was “ afraid of failure” (Ibid). She wanted to show to her family and the world that her marriage was a success, and so she had to put on the mask of an obedient and subservient wife:

And so I went on lying, even to myself, comprising, shedding bits of myself along the way. Which I meant that I, who had despised Devdas for being a coward, was the same thing myself. I had killed myself as surely as he had done (Ibid).

Indu's problematic of “becoming” thus expresses Deshpande's feminist polemics against sexual and gender roles imposed upon women in a patriarchal malist culture which reduces women like Indu to a mere thing or a

mind-less body because her feminine instinct for articulation is suppressed (Swain: 1998: 95). Ever ready to please Jayant, Indu acquiesces to all his desires. She realizes that she doesn't exist for her but only for Jayant, the archetypal male, imperialistic and subjugating. Hence, she feels in her a sense of existential insecurity. As a lacerated woman she rails at her family and the malist world where a girl is always is "set apart from the others" (81):

This is my family. These are my people. And yet... I hate them. I despise them. They're mean and petty and trivial and despicable. I had always told myself... I won't be like them... I won't live like them. And I thought... I've got away. But to what, Naren?... Are we doomed to living meaningless, futile lives? Is there no escape ? I'm afraid, Naren... I'm afraid (160).

With Naren she develops an adulterous relationship, but that is also nothing more than a mere shadow to her. He has no permanent place in her memory. Hence, she decides to go back to Jayant. It is she, she feels, who is to blame for the marital discord in their lives. She has created a hell out of a heaven. She, being a narcissist, "had locked herself in a cage and thrown away the keys" (85). She realizes that marriage had stunted and hampered her individuality because she had regarded it as a "trap" and not a bond. Now she realizes:

But what of my love for Jayant, that had been a restricting bond, tormenting me, which I had so futilely struggled against? Restricting bond? Was it not I who made it so? Torment? Had I not created my own torment? Perhaps it was true... There was only one thing I wanted now... and that was to go home... the one I lived with Jayant. That was my only home... I would put all this behind me and go back to Jayant...

I knew I would not tell Jayant about Naren and me ... That had nothing to do with the two of us and our life together. But there were other things I had to tell him. That I was resigning from my job. That I would do the kind of writing I had always dreamt of doing (187).

Thus Indu's uncompromising and paradoxical feminine self that frantically longed for self-expression, finally finds its roots in the home and with her husband. Shadows disappear from her vision and she sees the clear light of day with the realization and discovery of her authentic female self. In the end comes the realization that freedom lies in having the courage to do what one believes is the right thing to do and the determination and the tenacity to adhere to it. That alone can bring harmony in life. The meek, docile and humble Indu of the early days finally emerges as a bold, challenging, conscious and rebellious woman. She resigns from her job, thus defying the male authority, hierarchy and the irony of a woman's masked existence. Her self-discovery is the frightening vision of the feminine self's struggle for harmony and sanity. She comes out of her emotional upheaval, and decides to lead a meaningful life with her husband. The home she had discarded becomes the place of refuge, of solace and consolation. Now she knows herself. She has found her roots as an independent woman, a daughter, a mother and a commercial writer. She begins to see life in a new light:

Yes, the house had been a trap too, binding me to a past I had to move away from. Now, I felt clear, as if I had cut away all the unnecessary uneven edges of me (204).

Indu now feels a sense of hope of existence. Negating the idea of non-existence, she says :

No, there is no such thing. To accept it will be to deny the miracle of life itself. If not this stump, there is another. If not this tree, there will be others. Other trees will grow, other flowers will bloom, other fragrances will pervade other airs... I felt as if I was watching life itself... endless, limitless, formless and full of grace (202).

The novel thus ends with a note of affirmation. Indu asserts her individuality as a woman and also as a partaker in the endless cycle of life. Through the character of Indu, Deshpande registers her awareness of the "arrest to feminine development brought about by an economic system given to sheer materialistic happiness and inhabited by philistines like Jayant, and a patriarchal family-structure which produce in women dependency, insecurity, lack of autonomy, and an incomplete sense of their identity" (Swain: 1998:96). Indu lives to see life with the possibilities of growth; she has discovered the meaning of life in her journey to individuation.

In That Long Silence (1989) also, Deshpande concentrates on the lack of communion in marital relationship. Jaya, the protagonist of the novel, here recalls her seventeen years old married life nostalgically. Seventeen years before she was married to Mohan, and in this long time she has lived with him at different places, and they have two children, Rahul and Rati, while the third was aborted. This time she is alone at home because her husband has gone out for a short period to clear himself of charges of business malpractices. This offers her enough scope of time to 're-view' her life. She tries to write about herself and her family in an attempt to break the "long silence". And as she recapitulates her married life, she realizes the frustration, alienation and an overall emotional trauma that she has undergone with several of her adolescent dreams related to love and marriage being irretrievably shattered.

At the very outset of the novel, Jaya describes her married life as in the following lines:

A pair of bullocks yoked together ... a clever phrase, but can it substitute for the reality? A man and a woman married for seventeen years. A couple with two children. A family somewhat like the one caught and preserved for posterity by the advertising visuals I so loved. But the reality was only this. We were two persons. A man. A woman (8).

To any perceptive reader this image of a pair of bullocks yoked together suggests a world of meanings. It means that the bullocks so yoked share the burden between themselves but no one knows whether they love each other or not. The image of the beasts performing the duty mechanically undermines the husband wife relationship, who are supposed to be united in marriage for love and not for leading a mechanical life terminating in mutual hatred and distrust (Das, B. :1998:127).

For this long seventeen years, the role of a wife for Jaya was only to stay at home and look after the children, without any contact whatsoever with the world outside. Mohan had even discouraged her to write, which was her passion:

It hadn't mattered to Mohan that I had written a good story, a story about a couple, a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body. For Mohan it had mattered that people might think the couple was us, that the man him. To Mohan, I had been no writer, only an exhibitionist (44).

Hence, Jaya gave up writing because she could not take the risk of annoying Mohan, lest that could break her marriage. In fact, she was really scared of

hurting Mohan and of jeopardizing the only carriage she had, that is her marriage. But, at the same time, she was also fed up with the routine-work like changing the sheets, scrubbing bathrooms and cleaning the fridge.

Here Deshpande uses another apt image of a worm crawling into a hole to describe the state of Jaya, a budding writer dwindling into a stereotyped Indian housewife:

Even a worm has a hole it can crawl into. I had mine -- as  
Mohan's wife, as Rahul's and Rati's mother (148).

This idea is again reinforced in course of Jaya's recollection of the past. Jaya indulges in self-pity and feels that she was even "prodded out" of her "warm and safe hole" of domesticity (173) because theirs was a loveless married life, which caused the wife and the husband to drift away from each other. They "lived together but there had been only emptiness" (185) between them.

Mohan has crushed not only the writer in Jaya, but the woman in her as well because he neither loved her nor encouraged her. Jaya has every reason to be bitter with him for he has been responsible for her misery. With a straightforward language, gentle irony and matter-of-fact tone, Jaya recalls their relationship as wife and husband:

Sensual memories are the coldest. They stir up nothing in you. As I thought of those days of my feelings, and then looked at the man lying beside me, to two other people, not to the two of us lying here together.... In fact, we had never spoken of sex at all. It had been as if the experience was erased each time after it happened; it never existed in words...

First there's love, then there's sex – that was how I had always imagined it to be. But after living with Mohan I had realised that it would so easily be the other way round.

Love ...? Yes, what else could I call it but love when I thought of how I had longed for his physical presence, when I remembered how readily, almost greedily, I had responded to his touch? What else could I name it when I thought of the agony it had been to be without him, when his desires, his approval, his love, had seemed to be the most important thing in my life? It seems to me now that we had, both of us, rehearsed the roles of husband and wife so well that when the time came we could play them flawlessly, word-perfect (95).

Jaya tells us that they are yet to live as husband and wife. In fact, nothing can be more frustrating and depressing than this experience of futility.

Hence, the image of "a pair of bullocks yoked together" comes again in her mind. She rejects the image of traditional suffering women like Sita, Savitri and Draupadi, and says:

No, what have I to do with these mythical women? I can't fool myself. The truth is simpler. Two bullocks yoked together ... it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful; and what animal would voluntarily choose pain? (11-12).

This disgust of living with a man who does not love the woman the way she expects him to do is, in fact, a burning problem what educated women face in our contemporary society. But the thought of desertion by the husband unnerves Jaya because she has not yet cast off the role of a traditional Indian

woman. Through Jaya's Character Deshpande thus expresses an ambivalent attitude of contemporary educated and independent-minded Indian women, who can neither reconcile themselves to a situation when their husbands ignore them and crush their ambition in life nor can they cast off their husbands because the "husband is like a sheltering tree" which they cannot afford to live without.

Irony is the chief device used in the novel to explain the behaviour of the characters. For instance, when Mohan gets the job of his choice, Jaya never questions the means by which he gets it. She avers:

If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly. I did not want to know anything. It was enough for me that we moved by Bombay, that we could send Rahul and Rati to good schools, that I could have the things we needed... decent clothes, a fridge, a gas connection, travelling first class. And, there was enough for Mohan to send home to his father – for Sudha's fees, Vasant's clothes and Sudha's marriage (61-62).

Moreover, like average Indian girls, Jaya's problems started not at marriage only, but from her very birth. Jaya recollects that in her parental home, Ramukaka (Jaya's parental uncle) sketched their family tree: "Look Jaya, this is our branch. This is your grandfather – your great grandfather – and here is father, then us –Laxman, Vasu and me. And here are the boys – Shridhar, Jaanu, Dinkar, Ravi..." (142). Jaya questions this parental tree: "I'm not here !" Ramukaka gets irritated and says : "How can you be here? You can't belong to this family. You have no place here." (Ibid).

The novel, however, records a steady progression of women emancipation because the protagonist of the novel undergoes a kind of transformation through self-recognition. She makes an introspective study in the end and, like Lear, asks a question: "What have I achieved by this writing?" and gets an easy answer: "Well, I've achieved this. I'm not afraid any more. The panic has gone. I'm Mohan's wife, I had thought, and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife. Now I know that kind of fragmentation is not possible" (191). Having realized her position, now Jaya would not accept the earlier image of a pair of bullocks yoked together, signalling a loveless couple :

Two bullocks yoked together – that was how I saw the two of us the day we came here, Mohan and I. Now I reject that image. It's wrong. If I think of us in that way, I condemn myself to a lifetime of disbelief in ourselves. I've always thought – there's only one life, no chance of a reprieve, no second chances. But in this life itself there are so many crossroads, so many choices (191-92).

The traditional Indian wisdom stands Jaya in a good stead at this juncture of life. The words from the Bhagwatgita, ( the final words of Lord Krishna to Arjuna): "Yathecchasi tatha Kuru" (Do as you desire) appeal to her after she gains knowledge. She comes to realize that life can always be made possible. The earlier impulsive Jaya becomes a mature woman, and with her realization "the wheel has turned a full circle" and the shadow that befell between the wife and the husband tends to disappear.

In The Binding Vine (1992), Shashi Deshpande's clarion call to modern Indian women becomes more loud and clear. The patriarchal, chauvinistic and indifferent Indian male role is totally challenged here, and the innermost

recesses of a woman's heart are brought to light through the perspectives of the protagonist, Urmi. Death of her second child here forms the occasion for her journey into the past, into her real self and even into the future, and the experience is one which minutely analyses all the relationships which a woman in the Indian society is subjected to. The keynote of the novel is struck right at the beginning where Urmi determines not to be plaster cast into a stereotyped image by people around her. If an accidental fall from a cycle and the consequent injury and anxiety make her fear a restriction in her freedom, an existential experience such as death plunges her into morbidity and a masochistic mood which is devoid of all positive values. The gradual progress of the self through darkness, revolt and reconciliation is what is traced through a narration of Urmi's experience.

Urmi fails to compromise with the loss of the baby even as several years roll by. She has other children too, but the bondage between her and the lost child is as strong as not to be snapped merely by the physical absence of the child. When Sakutai, the uneducated, dependent mother of Kalpana, the girl who was raped, asks her how many children she has, she feels guilty in mentioning that she has only a son. But Sakutai's reaction to this information is: "Why does God give us daughters?" to which Urmi explodes vehemently: "Don't say that" (60). Here Sakutai's statement is symptomatic of the usually oppressed woman's reaction to femininity. Elsewhere, afraid of the consequences of proclaiming rape on her daughter she gives an analysis of the society's attitude towards the victims of rape. She says:

If a girl's honour is lost, what's left? The girl doesn't have to do anything wrong, people will always point a finger at her (59).

She has other daughters who will be victimized because of the rape of their sister.

The vulnerability of the girl child and the subsequent social stigma is something which affects the rich and the poor alike. Inni, Urmi's mother, confesses her own inability to protect her when she was young and vulnerable. Urmi had been sent to her grandmother's house in Ranidurg while she was a child. The reason for this separation was a puzzle to Urmi herself, but during a moment of closeness and confidence Inni blurts out the truth:

Do you know, why we –why your Papa sent you away to Ranidurg? I was frightened of you, Urmi. I was too young. I was not prepared to have a child. And you were not easy, you used to cry all the time, I didn't know how to soothe you. Diwakar was good with you, he was better than me, but Papa said, "How could you leave her alone with a man!" He had been with us since I was a child, that's why Mummy sent him to help me, he was so gentle, but Papa said, "He's a man." (199).

Another instance of gender discrimination in the novel is that while recollecting the memories of her childhood Urmi remarks that Vanna always laughed at the jokes of her father "so that he would notice her. But he never did. For him there was only Kishore" (52). Later Vanna also accepts: "I wonder, whether he knows I exist" (53).

In the case of Kalpana, her mousi's husband was the culprit. Sakutai wants Urmi to take away her daughter Sandhya. She cries out :

Take her Urmila, take her away with you. I can't look after her,  
I don't want her, I'll destroy her like I did Kalpana. Take her to  
your house, keep her there, I'm not fit to look after her (192).

In fact, both Inni and Sakutai, representatives of traditional Indian womanhood, despair about their inability to protect their younger ones. Urmi, the educated, liberated woman with her social contacts and confidence, is the role model in whom they place the hope.

Mira, Urmila's mother-in-law died after giving birth to Kishore, Urmi's husband. Her diary and poems, discovered decades later, reveal to Urmi that she was subjected to rape in marriage. Urmi learns that Mira's husband had seen her at a wedding ceremony and at once fell in love with her. As he could not directly make the marriage proposal (custom forbade it), he got a mutual friend to do that. The proposal was accepted and the marriage was settled. It was, however, a disaster for Mira. Her poetry becomes so pathetic at times that even Akka, her husband's second wife, is moved to tears after reading a poem about a newly married couple. Urmila wonders:

*Akka who hadn't cried when her husband died, who had been stoical while Vanna sobbed like a child when she went to Bombay to study, who had been calm even when Vanna got married and went away – why had she broken now? (48).*

From the diary it becomes clear that she intensely disliked the sexual act with her husband; she felt a physical repulsion from the man she married. She hated the very word 'love':

*How I hate the word. If this is love it is a terrible thing .I have learnt to say 'no' at last, but it makes no difference, no difference at all. What is it he wants from me ? I look at myself*

in the mirror and wonder, what is there in me ? Why does it have to me ? Why can't he leave alone ? (65).

Urmi realizes that " What has happened to Kalpana happened to Mira too" (63). Mira was raped by her husband, while Kalpana is raped by a man who is like her father. What pains Urmi is that such things are never reported to the police. They are often treated as accidents for the sake of the girl's and her family's reputation, or they are rigorously suppressed.

However, Mira's diary cannot be read only as a record of frustrated passion of a sensitive woman. It was rather a form of resistance to her through which she retained her individuality in the face of brutal patriarchal powers. After marriage, as it was customary, Mira's name was changed to Nirmala. For her it was a complete loss of identity. In one of her poetic creations she wrote :

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 (60).

However, Urmi could never imagine that her mother-in-law had suffered so much emotionally, and though her lips were silent, her pen spoke just like Jaya in That Long Silence. Urmila longs for the emotional pleasures of home and family which are so evasive. Kishore, her husband, works elsewhere, comes home for brief periods and their love is only physical, not emotional. She is in a dilemma when Dr. Bhaskar Jain proposes to her knowing her marital status. She was aware that she had already entered the "chakravyuha" from where it was difficult to escape. Urmila realizes :

(one) can never opt out, (one) can never lay it down, the burden of belonging to the human race. There is only one way out of this "chakravyuha". Abhimanyu had to die, there is no other way he could get out (102).

Yet in spite of all difficulties, physical and emotional, a woman has to survive.

Shashi Deshpande has thus portrayed in this novel essentially a woman's world where men are present only by the power they wield over their wives and daughters. Hers is a world where women suffer numerous losses but cope up with each crisis with the passage of time. Women have the aptitude for survival. In fact, suffering and pain are sometimes necessary to develop one's self and one's individuality in particular. In fact, The Binding Vine is the only novel in which Shashi Deshpande has used poems to narrate the tragic tale of marital discord. Mira's poems are lyrical in nature. The poems also paint a graphic picture of tradition-bound Indian society. It is a fine means of raising one's voice in protest against some age-old social norms. About the novel Gur Pyari Jandial has aptly stated:

The Binding Vine is Deshpande's strongest statement regarding sexual violence against women. The novel touches on the delicate issue of marital rape and a woman's helplessness after marriage to a man she does not love. The Binding Vine is a tremendously powerful portrayal of women's fight to survive in a terrible, violent world where there is no easy way out (Jandial:2003:121).

The patience, stoical courage coupled with the calm tenacity of passive resistance is the forte of Deshpande's women characters. Perhaps, these are also features which give them a distinguished place in a world dominated by male aggressiveness.

In her later novels such as A Matter of Time (1996) and Small Remedies (2000), Deshpande continues to write on the same issues, but nowhere were they so straightforward as in The Binding Vine. A Matter of Time is a novel that spans the lives of four generations of women, narrating the story of Manorama, Kalyani, Sumi and Aru. Manorama, the domineering mother of Kalyani, is largely responsible for the tragedy that descends upon Kalyani. Though Kalyani survives all the cruelties inflicted on her, still she fails to give her daughter, Sumi, a happy marital life. Since Sumi's husband deserts her for no apparent reason, Aru, one of her children, witnesses, from her very tender age, the strained man-woman relationship in a family. Her experience is the same as that of Raka in Desai's Fire on the Mountain. But Aru is different from Raka because there is no element of radicalism in her. Rather she becomes a lawyer so that she may fight the injustices inflicted on women. She even joins a woman's activist group so that it gives her a platform to voice her anger and frustration against a tradition bound society. Hence, the novel is largely about Aru's quest for identity. The unhappy lives of Kalyani and Sumi serve for her as the stimuli to refuse a suffering fate, designated for Indian women.

In Small Remedies (2000), we find Madhuri, the narrator protagonist's reminiscence of the lives of two ladies, one is her aunt Leela, and the other is her childhood neighbour, Savitribai Indorekar, who was a famous singer. Standing at the backdrop of her broken marriage with Som, she recollects the memory of these ladies who faced many of the life's odds with enormous courage. Hence, though the novel begins with the sentence "This is Som's story", it is in reality the story of Madhuri's journey in life in which aunt Leela and Savitribai serve as the pathfinders. The lives of these two ladies instill courage in her; she discovers her true self through introspection, recovers

from her state of confusion and gains mental plenum. She decides to write the biography of Sabitrabai, and about her purpose she says :

I've begun thinking that in writing about Bai, I'm writing about Leela as well. And my mother and all those women who reached beyond their grasp. Bai moving out of her class in search of her destiny as a singer, Leela breaking out of the conventions of widowhood, looking, for justice for the weak, my mother running in her bare feet, using her body as an instrument for speech –yes, they're in it together (248).

Madhuri knows that for their breaking of the norms these women “paid the price” (Ibid), but being self-conscious, she is confident enough, like other Deshpande heroines, to face life. Madhuri concludes that there may not be complete and big remedies to bring a woman out of her claustrophobic existence, yet small remedies do exist and one has only to make a search for them. She truly believes, “...loss is never total” (324).

Thus from the traditional roles of daughter, sister, wife and mother Deshpande's protagonists emerge as individuals in their own right. They achieve this not by being brazen feminists or iconoclasts, but by a gradual process of introspection and self realization. These protagonists are neither rebels nor conformists, neither trail-blazers nor self-effacers. Deshpande herself calls them “middle of the road kind” (Roots and Shadows :187). Faced with the dilemmas of life, they seek a path that allows them individual freedom and growth even within the constricting environments of a traditional upper-class family. In their reaction to role conflict in a patriarchal society, they show the strength to achieve their goals of self-realization. From a state of passive acceptance they move to one of active assertion. Without succumbing to societal pressures and without breaking away from accepted, traditional,

social institutions they really succeed in being individuals. Hence, they are more akin to the women characters of Kamala Markandaya than those of Anita Desai.