Modern Women and Traditional Society
CHAPTER – II

MODERN WOMEN AND TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

Indian women novelists started with the projection of the traditional image of women. But as times changed, the portrayal of the image of woman became realistic with a focus on her sense of frustration and alienation. The characters created by the women writers were torn apart by the conflicting forces of tradition and modernity. In this connection Shashi Deshpande occupies a unique position among the contemporary Indian Women novelists in English. In her novels one can notice with realistic experience the various issues and problems like tradition and modernity, struggle for freedom and identity and struggle between family and career.

Shashi Deshpande’s novels have special emphasis on women’s problems. Her novel That Long Silence (1989) won her Sahitya Academy Award for 1990. It is an absorbing tale of an Indian house wife caught between modern and traditional society. The title itself very clearly indicates the protagonist’s silence throughout her life.

“In That Long Silence, Shashi Deshpande delineates the delicate swings of mood, the see-saw moments of joy and despair, the fragments of
feelings perceived and suppressed, the life of senses as well as the heart-wrenching anguish of the narrator protagonist Jaya, a housewife and a failed writer" (Swain, 1995 : 64). The novel depicts the life of Jaya at the level of the silent and the unconscious. A sensitive and realistic dramatization of the married life of Jaya and her husband Mohan, it portrays an inquisitive critical appraisal to which the institution of marriage has been subjected to in recent years. It centres round the inner perception of the protagonist, a woman who is subtly drawn from inside, a woman who "finds her normal routine so disrupted that for the first time she can look at her life and attempt to decide who she really is" [King, 1988 : 97]. But could she?

The question, "who am I?" [That Long Silence, 69] haunts her so obsessively that she fails to find herself. She is "an utter stranger, a person so alien that even the faintest understanding of the motives of her actions seemed impossible" [TLS, 69]. Hence her agonised cries - "I can't hope, I can't manage. I can't go on" [TLS, 70]. In such a stifling and suffocating domestic ambience and patriarchal set-up, she finds her female identity effaced. Her feminine dilemma is expressed in her vacillating state of mind: "I could and couldn't do, all the things that were womanly and unwomanly...[ TLS, 83]. Jaya is Suhasini and also "Seeta", the pseudonym she assumes to write columns about the plight of the middle-class,
housewife. Both "Suhasini" and "Seeta" are as Jaya says, "the many selves waiting to be discovered ... each self attached like a Siamese twin to a self of another person, neither able to exist without the other"[TLS, 69]. Hence if life is "to be made possible" [TLS, 193], she is to live neither as "Suhasini" or "Jaya", nor as "Seeta" or "anti-Kusum". She is to live but not in fragments.

Seething discontent within and without make her bounce upon the spring-board of life, she loses all hold on it and keeps on oscillating in opinions and choices, yet to decide "who she really is" [King 1988 : 97]. Deshpande reveals the consciousness of Jaya through an exposition of her mind in the process of thinking, feeling and reacting to the stimuli of the moment and situation. In doing so, she goes on to assert the feminine psyche of the protagonist, to break away from the stranglehold of a quagmired social fabric rooted in patriarchy which repels as it attracts. In her tiny old flat in Dadar, Bombay, Jaya lives like an introvert, often given to brooding and reminiscing with a lot of self-reflection in order to discover her true self.

Memories plunge in often linked by the ambivalent association of ideas. Each incident, a mini-story, a fiction in itself, imparts an unexplored vision to the narrative. The dejections and disappointments of unrequited
selfhood, the illusions and pinings of love and the yearnings for companionship make up the stream of Jaya’s consciousness. Recalling the ions of her split self entangled in her memory, she creates a world of harmony, a world of fantasy, understanding, authentic selfhood and a composite self: “Ours has been a delicately balanced relationship, so much so that we have even snipped off bits of ourselves to keep the scales on an even keel” [TLS, 7]. Jaya is not totally a silent and mute sufferer. She is an actor participant as well as an observer in the novel. She steps out of the narrative action as a witness as it were, a critic to perceive the tenor of the story filtered through a female consciousness:

Sensual memories are the coldest. They stir up nothing in you…. These emotions and responses seemed to belong to two other people, not to the two of us lying here together ... whatever my feeling had been then, I had never spoken of them to him. In fact, we had never spoken of sex at all (TLS, 95).

The witnessing critic in Jaya is perpetually probing and protecting her autonomy. She revolts but in silence. Silence was her natural condition. When her husband, Mohan, talks about women being treated very cruelly by
their husbands which he calls strength, she passionately bursts into rumination:

He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire, but I saw despair. I saw a despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender (TLS, 36).

In the words of Walter Allen, Shashi Deshpande endeavours "to render current existence as reflected in the consciousness of her heroine". [Allen, 1967 : 3] Veena Sheshadri says in her interview:

Why the author has chosen a heroine who only succeeds in evoking waves of irritation in the reader? Perhaps it is because a competent writer like her is never satisfied unless she is tackling new challenges. Also, she believes in presenting life as it is and not as it should be; and there must be thousands of self-centred women like Jaya, perennially gripping about their fate, but unwilling to do anything that could result in their being tossed out of their comfortable ruts and into the big, bad world of reality, to fend for themselves [That Long Silence, Literature Alive, II, I (1988, 94)].
Jaya is a modern predicament and the flood of consciousness that ensues out of it is a silent stream of thoughts and feelings. She knows pretty well that in order to get by in a relationship one has to learn a lot of tricks and "Silence is one of them.... You never find a woman criticizing her husband, even playfully, in case it might damage the relationship" [Cunningham, 1988 : 6]. Jaya succumbs and surrenders to Mohan without revolting. Silently she wills to his will. She never says 'Yes' when her husband asks her whether he has hurt her. She endures everything, tolerates all kinds of masculine oppression silently: "... in the emotion that governed my behaviour to him, there was still the habit of being a wife, of sustaining and supporting him" (TLS, 48). Hence, it is Jaya who makes "the first conciliatory move ..." (TLS, 82). A dominating husband and a suffering wife - that is her tie with Mohan. She does not immediately react to the situation but the reader is insinuated through the flashback technique used by the author especially at critical junctures in the psychic life of Jaya. Lying solitary in her room, her mind shuttles between the past and the present and thus covers the whole span of her life. At times Deshpande executes the stream-of-consciousness technique to project the psychic reverberations of her characters in order to make the story more real and authentic. Her heroines like Jaya are rebels but only passive ones whose incarcerated
lamentations are but cries in the wilderness, "mute and desperate calls to restructure the groove of society" (Menon, 1993 : 32). Rebellion and suffering in Jaya has a proclivity for being transmuted into an artistic expression. In her there is an inner need for creativity and fulfilment but this creative expression in her is inhibited due to lack of privacy, of sheer physical space to reflect and work in. Virginia Woolf attributed woman's lack of creativity to her not having a room of her own. Nayantara Sahgal recalls that until she wrote Rich Like Us in the United States on a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, she never had a room of her own where she could write undisturbed and "where there are no interruptions" (Sahgal, 1987). In case of Jaya, strong social and family pressure stifles her creativity and holds all creative activities in subservience to her role as a homemaker. Jaya says, "Like a disease, a disability I had to hide from everyone" (TLS, 97). Her urges are silent and mute pinings passively manifested in moments of crisis and in "chaotic sequence of events and non-events" (TLS, 167) that made up her life. She is silent because, "It was so much simpler to say nothing. So much less complicated" (TLS, 99). The metaphor of silence for her is a retreat, a defence mechanism which helps her to express herself more comprehensively and artistically.
Jaya being renamed as Suhasini after her marriage is not a case of the loss of identity since Jaya and Suhasini are the two facets of the same coin and these two collateral names of the Deshpande protagonist are symbolical in their socio-familial import. Jaya, her premarital name means 'victory' and Suhasini, the post-marital name given to her by her husband means "a soft smiling, placid motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped" (TLS, 15). Jaya is a woman who adjusts and accommodates unlike the modern women who find themselves "forced into the background by the claims of culture" and hence they adopt "an inimical attitude towards it" (Freud, 1939 : 73). She is not the structurally patterned woman of the traditional Indian Society where woman was chiefly confined to the hearth and man to the world, where woman was the follower and man the leader, where woman was the sufferer and man the ordainer. She does not want to be a "Sita following her husband into exile" or a "Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband" or a "Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails..." (TLS, 11). She believes that there is pain in hostility, and rebellion is anguish and agony. Hence, she adopts a subaltern and subservient attitude:

No, what I have to do with these mythical names? 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? (TLS, 25).

In this way Jaya attempts to demythify/demystify her actions through
the animal imagery of "two bullocks yoked together" (TLS, 11). But she is
never safe when yoked. So she flounders to break out of the yoke:

Stay at home, look after your babies, keep out the rest of the
world, you are safe. That poor idiotic woman Suhasini believed
in this. I know better, now I know that safety is always
unattainable. You are never safe (TLS, 17).

Jaya's self-questioning attitude comes as a split in the narrative. She
broods over the metaphor of the "Sheltering tree":

A sheltering tree. Without the tree, you are dangerously
unprotected... equally logically and vulnerable. This followed
logically. And so you have to keep the tree alive and
flourishing, even if you have to water it with deceit and lies.
This too followed, equally logically (TLS, 32).
There is hardly any communication between Jaya and Mohan, neither verbal nor emotional. Mohan wanted a well-educated and cultured wife, not a reciprocating and loving one. So he resolved to marry Jaya when he saw her speaking fluently:

You know Jaya, the first day I met you at your Ramukaku's house, you were talking to your brother, Dinkar, and somehow you sounded so much like that girl. I think it was at that moment that I decided I would marry you.

An intellectually idealised and cultured husband like Mohan finds Jaya a square peg in a round hole. There develops disheartening silence between the husband and the wife. Mohan's queries remain unanswered by Jaya for she is unable to find a word of response: "I racked my brains trying to think of an answer" (TLS, 31). Jaya's inner turmoil is so tense and acute that words fail her desire for articulation. She is unable to speak her trouble out for she is a woman who faces the suffering of her life and the opposition of the milieu in the true spirit of ideal Hindu womanhood where obedience and loyalty has degenerated to the state of dogged subservience. Hence her life becomes chaotic.
Temperamental incompatibility between Jaya and Mohan accounts for their incommunication and quizzical silence. Could a modern woman nestled in tradition like Jaya understand a traditionalist like Mohan who is rooted out and out in customs and whose repressive use of silence pressurises Jaya into conformity with his expectations? The discord in their temperamental outlook is so great that they fail time and again to understand each other. Deshpande presents here not a woman who has a desire to revolt but the one who ultimately reconciles to her hapless lot. Having failed to discover the truth, she remains silent and reticent revealing her most personal and private thoughts in her writings. Mohan wonders as to how could women be so rebellious and esoteric, so angry and recalcitrant. To him it is unwomanly to be angry for it is against the ideals of feminism (if by feminism we mean humanism and anti-fascism):

A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There is no room for despair, either. There is only order and routine, today. I have to change the sheets tomorrow, scrub the bathrooms the day after, clean the fridge... (TLS, 147, 148).
The role of a wife restricts rather circumscribes women's self development. The role of a mother does it even more and "sometimes women play their roles not so much because they want to, as because they have to in order to survive economically and/or psychologically. Virtually all women engage in the feminine role playing" (Tong, 1993, 208). It is against this encoded and pre-ordained role of a woman that Jaya revolts. For her, "in this life itself there are so many cross-roads, so many choices" (TLS, 192) but a married woman has a few or practically no choice left to her save what her husband wills and desires. But Jaya's is a life of instincts and urges. Unlike other married women slavishly tagged to tradition, she has her own say. She unfurls and unburdens herself to activate the creative impulses smothered within her artistic self. "The act of unburdening herself through self expression" observes Kamini Dinesh, "becomes for her a creative process. It is not merely a reliving of particular moments of the past but a coming to terms with herself..." (Dinesh, 1993 : 33).

Jaya and Mohan hardly spoke to each other of love and sex. Love-making for them was a silent and inarticulate affair:

God, how terrible it was to know a man so well. I could time it almost to the second, from the first devious wooing to the
moment he turned away from me, offering me his hunched back

*(TLS*, 85).

Jaya recalls her married life with nostalgia. She was married to Mohan and lived with him at different places till he went away from her to clear himself of the charge of business malpractice. She gave birth to two children and the third child was aborted.

She recalled her relationship with innumerable relatives and friends with compassion and understanding. She tried to come to terms with herself by trying to write about herself and her family and was determined to break *That Long Silence*. The novel ends with the return of her son, Rahul, the promise of Mohan “to return” on Friday morning and Jaya changes the ideas of their marriage after learning the truth that ‘Life has always to be made possible’.

Behind this story of the novel lies the ground swell of frustration in married life of the protagonist, who failed to be closer to her husband mentally. She suffered from isolation. Despite her marriage with Mohan and subsequently becoming a mother of two children, she was lonely. Her husband could not understand her feelings and, as a result, she was torn from
within. Shashi Deshpande uses a beautiful image to describe Jaya’s married life:

A pair of bullocks yoked together... a clever phrase, but can it substitute for 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. (TLS,8)

To an Indian reader the image of the pair of bullocks yoked together suggests a world of meanings. It means that the bullocks so yoked shared 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 united in marriage for love and not for leading a mechanical life terminating in mutual hatred and distrust. Jaya could not continue her writings as Mohan discouraged her, “I gave up my writing because of you” (TLS, 8), she said to Mohan. She was deeply distressed to know that the writer in her could not come to light because of her husband. She says:
I had known then that 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. (TLS, 144)

She did not take a risk to annoy Mohan lest that should break her marriage. She says ironically:

Perhaps, if Mohan had been angry, if he had shouted and raged at me, if he had forbidden me to write, perhaps I would have fought him and gone on but he had only shown me his hurt. And I had not been able to counter that. I had relinquished them instead, all those stories of hurting Mohan, scared of jeopardizing the only career I had (TLS, 144).

A loveless married life which caused the wife and the husband to drift away from each other resulted in total failure. Jaya complains bitterly:

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong. I’ve failed him. He expected something from me, from his wife and I’ve failed him. All these years I thought I was Mohan’s wife; now he tells me I was
never that, not really. What am I going to do? What shall I do if he doesn’t come back? (TLS, 185).

And concludes: “Nothing, Nothing between us. But after his death, nothing between me and Mohan either. We lived together but there had been only emptiness between us”. (TLS, 185).

Mohan has crushed both the woman and the writer in Jaya as he neither loved her nor encouraged her. Jaya has every reason to be bitter with him, for he has been responsible for her misery.

Jaya tells us that they were merely rehearsing the roles for the future, when they could actually live like husband and wife. They are yet to live as wife and husband even after seventeen years of their married life. Nothing can be more frustrating and depressing than this. The irony is not missed upon the readers. In India the relationship between the wife and the husband is not only cordial but also intimate and enduring. To any perceptive reader the relation between Jaya and Mohan is an epitome of failure and an emblem of disgust, disappointment and depression. This is so because there was no love between them.

This disgust of loving a man who does not love the woman the way she expected him to do, is a burning problem that educated women have to
face in contemporary society. The thought of desertion by the husband, however, unnerves Jaya, for she has not yet cast off the role of a traditional Indian woman. Through Jaya's character Shashi Deshpande has thus described the ambivalent women who can neither reconcile themselves to a new situation when their husbands ignore them and crush their ambition in life nor cast off their husbands simply because the husband is like a sheltering tree they cannot afford to live without. That Long Silence attempts to break the silence imposed upon women and their experiences by an overpowering male-dominated Indian society. The epigraph complements the novel. On the one hand, it expresses the suppressed longings, emotions, aspirations and prospects of women down the ages, on the other, it challenges the men to change and to give women their due position and rights:

If I were a man and cared to know the world I lived in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy the weight of that long silence of one-half of the world.

The novel depicts oppressed women and oppressive men. But more importantly, it makes a strong case for women asserting and speaking out, breaking the silence whether or not there are men who can give them their due. As with the protagonists of the other novels, Jaya finds herself in the
midst of a domestic storm. Her normal routine is disrupted by the investigation into her husband’s corrupt practices at office. As a result, Jaya and Mohan have to disappear into exile, ("like Ram and Sita"), from their posh Churchgate flat into a small apartment in Dadar, where they had once lived soon after their marriage. Away from her husband in a depressed state of mind and her children on a holiday, Jaya finds her existence so altered and disturbed by the changed circumstances of their life that for the first time she begins to question herself. Her husband has lost his status, and she, her identify as a result. Traditionally a woman has an identity only as her father’s daughter, her husband’s wife, or as her son’s mother. Her inward quest makes her realize that:

The real picture, the real “you” never emerges. Looking for it is as bewildering as trying to know how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces. (TLS, 1)

She finds it difficult to define her real ‘self’ because so far she has been defining herself differently with different people. She has no individuality, so much so that she cannot even decide at which point to begin. In the prologue to the novel, she attempts to sum up her entire life, after weeding out what she thinks are irrelevant facts and concentrating on
the most ‘important’ ones: “I was born. My father died when I was fifteen. I got married to Mohan. I have two children and I did not let a third live” (TLS, 2). She sees herself only as a daughter, wife and mother. The mention of an abortion, however, strikes a discordant note in the text as it points to something outside the norm. It indicates a conscious choice on Jaya’s part to proclaim control over her body because she has undergone the abortion without her husband’s knowledge.

Since her early childhood Jaya had designed her life according to the desires of the members of her family. In those days, for example, the titillating music of Lata Mangeshkar allured her but since her father had fascination for Palusker and Faiyaz Khan, the film music was banned in her house, and her father’s remark "what poor taste you have, Jaya" made her feel ashamed of herself. She had neither courage nor will to justify her own choice, and this was the beginning of her predicament.

After her father’s death Jaya’s brother persuaded her to get married to Mohan, an engineer, whose only desire was "to get married to a girl who can speak good English" (TLS, 90). This was the most disastrous compromise in her life. Totally engrossed in this process of adjustment and compromise, she tramples on her own desires and ambitions. She decides to emulate the
women of Mohan's family, for she feels that there lay "if not happiness, at least consciousness of doing right, freedom from guilt" (TLS, 84). Happiness, certainly, is beyond her reach as is evident from the repeated use of the imagery of "two bullocks yoked together" (TLS, 11-12) by which she means herself and her husband.

Adjustment and compromise are, no doubt, the signs of maturity but every compromise shatters her individuality into pieces. Mohan tells her to please the chief engineer's wife and despite her disapproval and disinclination, she concedes to his wishes. But she is shaken when Mohan charges her for being neutral to him, adding that he never "mattered" to her (TLS, 118). She transforms herself so much that she, who had been a pampered, bad tempered only daughter of her parents, changes entirely. The never ending series of compromises, makes her realize that "it is not that life is cruel, but that in the process of our birth we submit to life's cruelty" (TLS, 92).

Jaya domesticates herself and accepts the stereotyped role of a housewife who is "nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support" (TLS, 177). A sharp contrast can be noticed between unmarried Jaya and married Suhasini, as her husband called her. Jaya is optimistic and full of
vivacity, intellect and creative upsurge. She is fully aware of her own potentiality and poetic talent. Her nostalgic recollection of her father’s words and her own self - concept inculcate in her an optimistic approach towards life and herself. “You are not like the others, Jaya”, her father had said, and she agreed that “she would get the Chatfield Prize, or Ellis prize, or go to Oxford after her graduation” (TLS, 136). The same Jaya becomes different when she stops writing in order not to displease her husband. Instead of expressing her true emotions and ideology she shifts to convenient style of writing, something that could be published easily in a weekly column. This reversal perplexes herself and she expresses her dissatisfaction to Kamat who asks her frankly: "Why didn't you use that anger in your story? I will tell you what is wrong with your story. It's too restrained. Spew out your anger in your writing, woman, spew it out" (TLS, 147).

Jaya, a devoted and loving daughter and sister, is totally different from "soft, smiling, placid and motherly Jaya (TLS, 15-16). She is a personality spilt between what she is and what she could be. Consequently, she finds a relief in self abnegation that highlights her maladjustment in married life. As a married woman she is expected to play versatile roles: those of wife, mother, a submissive and perfect housewife and so on. The truth, however, is that she was taught that husband is like a "sheltering tree"
(TLS, 184), and from the very first day of their married life, she has tried to make his life comfortable by "keeping her mind off the office life, like Gandhari bandaging her eyes" (TLS, 61). Now discernable cracks are visible in her mental and emotional equilibrium.

Jaya, already mother of two kids, aborts her third pregnancy and feels guilt and remorse. Her guilt weakens her image of modern woman. Here Shashi Deshpande has presented the anti-feminist traits in her character, as the basic principle of feminism is to take self decision in this matter. For a feminist, her fundamental right is to control her own body and reproductive capacity. Confused in her love-hate relationship, Jaya is unable to confess anything to her husband. They are living together because they have no other alternative.

Jaya's friendship with Kamat is perhaps her most valuable asset. Kamat is the man on whom Jaya always leans in case of any emotional crisis for he understands her better than herself. She reveals her wounded psyche, her depression and anger to him which she can never do in the presence of her husband. She tells Kamat that she can only be "neurotic, hysterical and frustrated as there is no room for anger in my life, no room for despair either" (TLS, 147). She seems to be achieving meaning and totality in
Kamat's company when she acts as a person and not as a woman as she otherwise does. He advises her. "Take yourself seriously woman, and work if you want others to take you seriously" (TLS, 148). The desertion of the dying Kamat is the greatest flaw in Jaya's character, and by projecting it Deshpande makes her a poor, shadowy, pathetic and, to some extent, even detestable figure.

Shashi Deshpande’s second novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is about a well-educated, economically independent woman’s search for her identity which leads to uncover the dormant strength in human beings. It is the story of Sarita (called Saru) and her relationship with her parents and her husband and her agonizing search for herself. It is the story of a marriage on the verge of breakdown and of a woman who has been made acutely conscious of her gender since childhood.

The novel opens with Saru returning to her parents’ house after a gap of fifteen years. She had walked out once, with a vow never to return. Nevertheless, she returns to seek refuge, unable to bear the barbarism of her husband. Her stay in her parents’ house gives her a chance to review her relationship with her husband, her mother, her children, and her dead brother, Dhruva. The novel derives its strength, however, from the stark
presentation of Saru’s childhood, her trauma of being an unloved child and the equally stark presentation of her marriage to a man who is consumed by an inferiority complex which manifests itself in the form of sexual sadism.

Saru is apparently well-settled as a doctor and happily married with two children. On accidentally learning about the death of her estranged mother she decides to return home after a gap of fifteen years. The narrative structure of homecoming has its advantages in offering situations which allow the protagonist to journey back in time to recapitulate childhood experiences, to give voice to silent terrors and secret feelings of guilt, and to relate the present to the past. This narrative device also enables the writer to manipulate the movement from the present to the past and vice-versa.

Years ago, Saru had deserted her parents in a fit of anger to marry a man of her choice. She then had romantic dreams of a young girl, the dream of achieving complete freedom through a man. But, now, standing in front of her parents’ house she feels like ragged Sudama standing at the palace gates.” (The Dark Holds No Terrors, 11) She is only vaguely aware of what she has come to ask for. “It was not to comfort her father that she had come. It was for herself” (TDHNT, 37, 38). Homecoming gives her an opportunity to reflect on her life and realize how in her quest for freedom to be herself
she has merely exchanged one role for another and in the process has become ‘just a ventriloquist’s dummy’. (TDHNT, 18) She knows that somewhere on the way she has lost contact with her real self which now lies obscured if not completely lost. “And behind this fear, the uneasiness that comes from losing something. No, not losing it, but being unable to find it because I’ve hidden it to keep it safe. Hidden it so well that I can’t find it myself now” (TDHNT, 19). She must peel away the multiple layers of roles in which she has saddled herself before she can arrive at the truth about herself.

As Saru remembers her childhood experiences in the familiar surroundings of her parents’ home, the novelist, through deft manipulation of the narrative, reveals the origins of her identity crisis. Whatever opportunities her middle class background provided for happiness and personal expansion were spiked, Saru feels, by the oppressive dominance of her mother who insisted on her conforming to the traditional way of life. She took no interest in Saru’s education and personal advancement. Instead she constantly snubbed her for one thing or the other, denied her the love and attention which Dhruva, her younger brother, was given. No Puja was held on her birthday and she was not allowed to go around freely like Dhruva. Her mother made unkind remarks about her dark complexion without
realising how her words would affect the child. And so Saru grew up feeling herself an unwanted, unloved and insecure child. Watching Madhav’s (a student who lives with her father and helps him with household chores) fair skin she is forcibly reminded of an incident:

  Don’t go out in the sun. You’ll 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’s different. He is a boy. (TDH, 40)

One can understand why Saru kept telling Dhruva “Don’t call me Sarutai” (TDH, 30). This form of address reminded her of her gender, and this identity confuses her. Dhruva’s accidental death by drowning became turning point in Saru’s life. Her mother with her characteristic insensitiveness blames her for his death “You did it. You did this. You killed him…. Why didn’t you die? Why are you alive, when he’s dead?” (TDH, 173). The guilt clung to her and had haunted her like a ghost all these years.
To Saru life after Dhruva’s death seemed too “dreary and dull.” But she was determined not to follow the life pattern of her mother, rather, she wanted to be as unlike her as possible. “To get married, and end up doing just what your mother did, seemed to me not only terrible but damnable” (TDH, 127). The crisis which Saru experienced could perhaps be resolved by acquiring a personal identity. She had once seen a lady doctor in a crowd who stood apart from others with her dignified demeanour and commanded attention. Saru resolved to be a doctor, hoping that a professional career would be “the key that would unlock the door out of this life’” (TDH, 126). She did not mind the hard work that the preparation for a medical career entailed. “I had to work hard, to be a success, to show them ... her... something. What? I didn’t know. But I had to make myself secure so that, no one would ever say to me again... why are you alive?” (TDH, 44). Behind her determination to be a doctor was the intense desire to prove her mother wrong. If her mother disapproved of the medical career it gave her all the more satisfaction to have her way. It was, in a way, an act of rebellion, a step towards her liberation from a stereotyped existence. Atleast this is how Saru saw it. The bubbles of illusion would take some time to burst and confront Saru with a new crisis.
At home, Saru as a growing girl had known community rituals, customs, social and religious ceremonies, but her need of love and security had remained unfulfilled.

Even when studying medicine Saru felt some part of her yearn for love and affection, the satisfaction that comes from close emotional contact. This explains why she felt pulled towards Manu when she happened to meet him in the Medical College canteen one day. True, she looked at Manu through the dreamy eyes of a young girl who had wished that one day a fairy tale prince would appear and marry her in spite of her dark complexion. In the intermediate College where Saru had studied, Manu was “one of the known Names” (TDH, 43), admired for his debating and dramatic talents, and was the centre of talk in the Ladies Room. Besides, he was a budding writer and poet. The chance meeting flowered into a mutually fascinating friendship, and when Manu proposed to Saru she could hardly believe it. She deserted her parents to marry him, but she was still troubled by the fear that the loving words might turn out to be untrue and then she would know she was never loved.

The initial years of her marriage are sheer bliss when she thinks that she is the luckiest woman on earth. As S.P. Swain (1995 : 35, 36) observes,
“She marries to attain autonomy of the self and to secure the lost love in her parental home. Manu is her saviour, the ideal romantic hero who rescues her from her insecure, wooden existence in her maternal home. Her marriage with Manu is an assertion on and affirmation of her feminine sensibility”.

In her initial euphoric state, Saru thinks: “I was hungry for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love. Of my being loved. Of my being wanted.” *(TDH, 40)* Bound by her middle-class inhibitions, Saru does not permit herself any physical contact with Manu until they are married. But after her marriage, she revels in the act of love with a wild abandon:

After the first moment of apprehension... a purely physical response, or lack of it, rather... there was never any withholding in me. I became in an instant a physically aroused woman with an infinite capacity for loving and giving, with a passionate desire to be absorbed by the man I loved. All the cliches I discovered were true, kisses were soft and unbearably sweet, embraces hard and passionate, hands caressing and tender, and loving, as well as being loved was an intense joy, it was as if little nerve ends of pleasure had sprung up all over my body. *(TDH, 40)*
Ironically, it was her success as a doctor that cast a shadow on their married life and disrupted the harmony. She became the object of admiring attention of her neighbours who came to her regularly for advice and help. She felt “exhilarated with the dignity and importance that my status as a doctor seems to have given me” (TDH, 30). Her aspirations soared. She wanted to have her own consulting room in the same place where other eminent doctors were located. One night Manu behaved as if he had desperate need of her but when he tried to possess her he failed. All efforts of Saru at rationalizing away the event as “It was his failure. It had nothing to do with her” (TDH, 79) failed to calm her troubled conscience. Earlier in the day she had told Manu that her boss whom they called Boozie had offered her a loan and now she could have her own consulting room. She had expected Manu to say something, to ask “why”, but he kept silent. As Saru grew in social esteem and became the main economic support of the family, Manu’s behaviour began to change. The warmth between them cooled off. Saru was assailed by feelings of guilt. It was she who had persuaded Manu to give up writing poetry, abandon the plan of starting a journal, and instead take up the job of a lecturer in a local college, thinking that it was a more respectable job for the husband of a doctor. Her professional work kept her away from home for the better part of the day.
and she knew she was neglecting her home, her husband and children. It was a tactless remark of a friend of Saru which finally precipitated a crisis in her marital life. Saru and Manu met her in a store and told her they were planning a holiday in Ooty. And she quipped they could think of Ooty because Saru was a successful doctor. “How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but the bread as well?” (TDH, 30). A psychologically hurt Manu, smarting from a sense of being dominated, tried to assert his manliness by assaulting her that night. It is the sense of an emotional togetherness that validates the sex act. Earlier Saru had treasured the moments in bed with Manu. “I was insatiable, not for sex, but for love. Each act of sex was triumphant assertion of our love. Of my being loved. Of my being wanted. If I ever had any doubts, I had only to turn to him and ask him to prove his love for me” (TDH, 35).

The simple need to be independent eventually becomes a demand of the inflated ego and takes shape as the love for power over others. When Saru wins Manu’s love, she sees it as her victory over the glamorous Padmini. The dream of total submission to “a superior, superhuman male,” working with him, for him and being his subordinate is only a transient stage in the emotional growth of her personality. “There was no ‘I’ then, not as yet, craving for recognition, satisfaction. The craving, which when it came,
was always accompanied by a feeling of guilt if the ‘I’ dared to over-reach a male, as if I was doing something that took away shreds of my feminity.”

*(TDH, 47)*

When the society confers so much importance on the doctor in her she proudly wears it on her sleeves, whereas it leaves Manu thoroughly insecure and Saru happily aware of the fact:

When we walked out of our room, there were nods and smiles, murmured greetings and namastes. But they were all for me, only for me. There was nothing for him. He was almost totally ignored...the human personality has an infinite capacity for growth. And so the esteem with which I was surrounded made me inches taller. But perhaps, the same thing that made me inches taller, made him inches shorter. He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband.

She could no longer admit the idea of being “a small boat towed by a larger ship” but is happy to be the larger ship itself.
To outshine others and be a resounding success is the be all and end all of Saru’s life, and that end seems to justify the means. Her socializing with Boozie “the fairy godfather” is a calculated move in that direction. She has no moral qualms about allowing herself to be the raw material in the hands of Pygmalion to be shaped into perfection, a Galatea. That accounts for her rapid climb from an ordinary general practitioner to the Assistant Honorary at a suburban hospital and then to having private consulting rooms of her own.

It is not service-mindedness that impels her on to progress. Saru is interested in the economic and social status the profession offers. The “dingy two-roomed flat” is not her conception of life and she will not bring up any child to “a life of deprivation”. When she realizes that the disparity of achievement between them is part of the domestic problem, she easily decides her priorities - she is in no mood to undo what she has carefully built up.

Manohar has once had “an aura of distinction” about him as a promising poet and as the effective Secretary of the Literary Association, Debating Union and Dramatic Society. As a macho figure, he takes the girls by storm. Saru was engulfed by his presence too. Her dumbness and even
inconspicuousness when Manu commands silence at the rehearsal of a play he is directing is only a dramatic promise of assertion later. Saru marries him only when she meets him as an equal - “movie actor one time on top” but now clinging to a monthly paid job. Her admiration of Manu gives him the necessary confidence and his unreserved response in turn pleases her ego. The life that they begin together eventually becomes a power race of two egoistic people in which she overtakes him effortlessly. It does not take her long to realize that Manu is no “Shelley” after all and that he is totally burnt out. Her respect for him wanes when she recognizes him to be a failure. Manu is no ordinary male chauvinist. He has absolutely no reservations about considering his wife as an equal and as a person. But when her success begins to highlight his failure, he degenerates. In her attitude, we find not just an ordinary feminine itching for domination but a total indifference to Manu. In her self-centred march to progress, she nullifies Manu’s existence and reduces him to a “zero.” All the men she relates to are weak-willed men like Padmakar Rao and her father, for whom she has no great respect. The career becomes an indispensable crutch as it gives her so much importance and power over others.

There are three problem incidents that are frequently evoked by Saru from her bitter memory in a fragmentary fashion in the first three strands of
the novel. These strands are woven together in the last section. These three incidents regulate and even control Saru’s happiness. The first one is Saru’s interview for a special issue on career women brought out by a woman’s magazine. The interviewer’s casual query to Manu—“How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?” (TDH, 182) undermines Manu’s confidence totally. His sense of insecurity starts with the explosion in the nearby factory. The lover in him dies when the neighbours wake up to the fact that Saru is no ordinary housewife but an important doctor. But it reaches the point of culmination with the interviewer’s query and a friend suggesting that a holiday tour could be possible if one had a doctor wife.

Unable to come to terms with the fact that he is a failure in life, Manu lets his wounded male pride manifest itself in the form of sexual sadism “the hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar body.” (TDH, 102) Bed is the only place where he can assert his animal power over her. Manu becomes a mean, loathsome fellow when he basks in her glory by day. Married to a practising neuro-pathologist, Shashi Deshpande presumably has intimate knowledge of the neurotic world of the likes of Manu. But she shows remarkable restraint in the depiction of these scenes and spares readers the clinical details. Though Saru’s career is
Manu's problem, he shudders at the suggestion of her giving up the job and tries mediocre tricks of cajoling her by offering to take her out for a movie. He cannot think of going back to "the shabby way of life" with cheap clothes and third-rate schools for the children. He lets pass her relationship with Boozie with half-shut eyes. When Saru goes away to her father's house, he writes to her and plans to come and take her back home as if nothing had gone wrong and that the marriage had given him "life-long right to affection, love and respect."

Saru's gradual change in attitude towards Manu and their marriage corresponds with her change in attitude towards sex. She finds "the aggressive, virile masculinity" a mere facade and the recent beard a mask to hide, to add something, to assert the thing he lacked. As an ardent admirer of Manu, she used to find others in the college "faceless, nameless nonentities." Now she attributes his photographs in the magazines to his own editorship. This is indicative of the change in her perspective. Now the world around her and her place in it become so significant that his place in her life becomes relatively unimportant.

The crux of the problem is presented as a preface in the novel. The whole section is italicized except "him." The novelist grants the hurting
“him” no human dignity and the reference to him proceeds in this plane: hands-lips and teeth-body-stranger-protean monster-my husband.

The second moot point that is evoked in the novel with bitterness is Prof. Kulkarni’s (Manu’s one-time image-builder at college who had encouraged their marriage) message from and of her mother. He bears the tidings of the mother’s death and her total rejection of Saru in a casual unconcerned manner: “Daughter? I don’t have any daughter. I had a son and he died. Now I am childless...I will pray to god for her unhappiness. Let her know more sorrow than she has given me.” (TDH, 178) The mother had successfully erased Saru from her household with the exception of a photograph only because Dhruva was in it too. The refusal to see the doctor daughter even while dying of cancer reiterates the idea of total rejection. Saru’s obsessive remembrance of her mother is indicative of both her sense of guilt and her sense of defeat. Death seals off all possibilities of straightening things. Dead or alive, Saru sees the mother sapping her of all happiness and asks herself, “Why should she matter dead when, she had never mattered alive?” (TDH, 23) She sees her as “a vengeful ghost” and gives the dead so much power over herself.
The third important incident that Saru recalls repeatedly is her brother Dhruva’s drowning in a pond. Saru’s love for power can be identified in her relationship with the brother too. It is said that being older than him by three years gave her advantages of dictatorship. Because of the mother’s favouritism, Saru hates Dhruva too. The struggle for importance is seen when she thinks, “I must show Baba something, anything, to take attention away from Dhruva sitting on his lap. I must make him listen to me, not to Dhruva. I must make him ignore Dhruva”. (TDH, 27, 28) Saru wants to blot him out of the family picture and when it happens, there is a definite “After Dhruva.” (A.D.) atmosphere at home.

Saru’s feeling of homelessness is an affirmation of her sense of isolation. Saru leaves “home” twice in the novel to seek release-once to establish her independence from mother’s suppression and the second time to establish her indispensability to her husband and children. When victimized by Manu, she starts on a quest for home and reaches the home she had earlier rejected. Saru is taken in but finds herself still “a homeless refugee,” “a fleeting interruption” “It [Manu’s house] was not home. Nor was this [father’s house] home. How odd, to live for so long and discover you have no home at all!” (TDH, 195). The home-hunt is in essence a peace hunt. Home is what one makes of any house. Saru could once make a happy
home of just a room with Manu. It was a time when the external world did not matter at all to them and it was not healthy to live in isolation. How they can relate to the external world and yet be an organic unit is what home is all about. One has to be at peace with oneself to be at peace with others.

The feeling of homelessness drives Saru occasionally to the longing to be released from existence itself. Saru wonders:

To be alone? Never a stretching hand? Never a comforting touch? Is it all a fraud then, the external cry of ...my husband, my wife, my children, my parents? Are all human relationships doomed to be a failure? (*TDH*, 176).

Would it always be a failure, any attempt to reach out to another human being? Had she been chasing a chimera all her life, hoping for someone? Perhaps the only truth is that man is born to be cold and lonely and alone. (*TDH*, 200).

But Saru will not let herself be bogged down by this. The novel surely has positive suggestions to offer. Saru places her trust in self-confidence: “All right, so I’m alone. But so’s everyone else. Human beings... they’re going to fail you. But because there’s just us, because there’s no one else, we
have to go on trying. If we can’t believe in ourselves, we’re sunk” (*TDH*, 200), (Ellipses Deshpande’s) Despite aloneness, man can seek a meaningful life in human interdependence too. Saru’s need for a confidant and her finding some relief in unburdening her heart to her father reiterates the idea of inter-dependence.

But now her marital life becomes a nightmare for Saru. She can no longer stand during the nightly assault, a savage Manu at night, and a normal-looking Manu during the day. She wants to discuss her problem with someone, to tell that her husband is a sadist (*TDH*, 58), to find if she can divorce him. At this critical juncture of her life she learns about the death of her mother and goes home to see her father. But deep in her heart she knows it is to escape Manu and his nightly assaults that she is going to her father’s place. There, left alone in peace, she might be able to find an answer to her problem.

Saru quickly adjusts to the rhythm of the house. She reminisces, gathers details of the lingering illness of her mother and secretly envies the inner strength of the woman who suffered and suffered all alone. The moment comes when she is able to talk about her problem to her father, to lay bare before him her scarred psyche. “My brother died because I turned
my back on him. My mother died... because I deserted her. My husband is a failure because I destroyed his manhood” (TDH, 198). She now realizes she has several separate selves, each meant to fit a particular role. Which ‘I’ is the real me?-this is a question she has never asked; or is the ‘real me’ unrelated to the various roles, the different identities she has adopted at different times? The cost of individualism, individualism beyond all relations, can indeed be heavy in terms of psychological integration. Saru must accept her different selves--the guilty sister, the undutiful daughter, the unloving wife -- to become whole again.

Panic once again strikes her when she receives a letter announcing Manu’s arrival. She cannot still comprehend that each has to fight his battle all alone and that one is one’s final refuge. She prepares to leave the house before Manu arrives. But her father stops her and tries to make her see the truth:

“Saru,” and there was angry despair in his voice.

“Don’t do it again.”

“What have I done?”

“Don’t turn your back on things again. Turn round and look at them. Meet him.
The novel ends with the hope that Saru might be able to achieve the wholeness and overcome her identity crisis. That would be true freedom for her. A knock at the door, but it is not Manu, a neighbour asking for the doctor. Saru, who had earlier tried to run away from this self because of the pain it had caused her, leaves the house to attend to the ill child, calling to her father to receive Manu if he comes and tell him to wait.

Though she remains unchanged till the end, she has a better understanding of herself and others. This gives her the courage to confront reality. The dark no longer holds any terror.

Rather than escaping from the dark or cursing the darkness, all that Saru needs to do is to light a candle and declare that the dark holds no terrors. It will also light up the fact that she is as much responsible as Manu is for the complex situation created. Despite all such awareness and the father’s plea - “don’t do it again.... Don’t turn your back on things again. Turn round and look at them. Meet him” (TDH, 137) —she packs up to take an escape route unsure of where to go. Escape has always been her mode of resolving the tangled knots, exchanging old horrors for new ones. When Manu writes about his coming to take her, she pleads that the father should not open the door for him.
Saru’s mother’s strong preference for her brother drives her to a sense of restlessness and alienation. The partisan attitude of her parents has a devastating effect on Saru. She becomes rebellious in nature. When her brother dies by drowning in the pond accidentally, she mutely watches the whole scene without rushing to his help. Since then, she is haunted by the thought that she is responsible for his death. Even her mother blames her. She points out, “You killed your brother” (TDH, 146). Premila Paul attempts to lay bare Saru’s mind when she says (Paul, 1991 : 67) : “Dhruva’s demise had always been her subconscious desire and there is very thin demarcation between her wish and its fulfilment”.

Life becomes more desperate for Saru after Dhruva’s death. There are no celebrations at home, her own much- awaited birthday passes off in silence both at school and at home. Saru’s mind is filled with deep and indelible scars as her mother constantly pines for her dead son and rejects even the presence of her daughter. At every given opportunity Saru’s mother snubs her. This sense of rejection by her mother fills the adolescent Saru’s mind with feelings of hatred towards her mother as Adesh Pal (1995 : 74-75) observes:
For Saru the very word ‘mother’ stands for old traditions and rituals, for her mother sets up a bad model, which distorts her growth as a woman, as a being... thus the strange childhood experiences false up her inflated ego and her thirst for power over others.

Saru yearns for security and emotional attachment. She wants her father to support her and her feeling raised against Manu’s brutality. She even rehearses these thoughts and recites them as if she was reading out a clinical history of an unknown patient. But when the real moment comes she blurts loudly and crudely, “My husband is a sadist”. (TDH, 199) Her father fails to understand her vocabulary like sadism, love and cruelty. Painstakingly Saru makes every possible effort to explain to him about her problems and when she speaks to him, it is not as a daughter but as a woman to a man. Saru’s father expects that they should talk like matured persons because he feels that this kind of relationship of intimacy or sharing has never occurred even between him and his wife. He says “Silence had become a habit for us” (TDH, 199). He enquires about the events that have happened and gradually his unnatural composure and indifference disappear. Saru eagerly tells him everything about Manu’s brutality and expresses her helplessness. She says: “I couldn’t fight back. I couldn’t shout or cry,...
could do nothing. I can never do anything. I just endure”. (TDH, 201) She expects moral support from her father and she becomes more frantic and requests him. “But you’ve got to help me, you’ve got to. You did it once. And because you did I went to Bombay, met him and married him” (TDH, 204).

Although Saru’s social and financial status grows, there is no peace for her at her home. Her feelings on being an economically independent individual are worse. In fact, her economic independence, though asserted by feminists, brings no fulfilment to her. Another extra-marital relationship of Saru is with Padmakar, often called as Padma. He was her classmate in medical college, whom she meets years later as a medical practitioner. Padmakar forces her to have a deeper relationship with him, but after a few incidents, she dissuades him from doing so as she wants to bring an end to their relationship. This relationship is neither soothing nor comforting to her. She becomes clear-eyed with no illusions left about love or romance. She says:

And I? Now, I knew it was not just the consequences I feared and hated, but the thing itself. What had I imagined? Love? Romance? Both, I knew too well were illusions, and not
relevant to my life anyway. And the code word of our age is neither love nor romance, but sex. Fulfillment and happiness came, not through love alone, but sex. And for me sex was now a dirty word. (TDH, 133)

Commenting on Saru’s relationship with the two men, Kamini Dinesh (1995 : 200) says:

In The Dark Holds No Terrors also there are other men but the relationship gives no solace. On the other hand, the homosexual Boozie and the frustrated Padma bring to Saru the disillusioning realisation that there can be no happiness or fulfillment in these relationships. There cannot be an escape route from the tension of married life. The woman seeking a crutch has, finally to fall back on herself.

Urmila of The Binding Vine is one who is ahead of her predecessors by her endeavours to help other women. Often referred to as Urmi, she is an upper middle class career woman. She is also a grieving mother who has recently lost her one year-old baby daughter, Anu, and consequently has become highly sensitive to the suffering and despair of others. It is this sensitivity which leads her to befriend the helpless Shakutai, whose daughter
Kalpana lies in a comatose state in hospital after being brutally raped. The mutual support and sympathy between Urmila and Shakutai in coming to terms with each other’s grief is remarkable. Normally Urmila’s meeting with Shakutai would not have happened as Shakutai belongs to a different strata of society. It is the same sensitivity which also makes her delve into the poems of Mira, her long-dead mother-in-law and understand the mind of the young Mira who is subjected to rape in her marriage. In spite of the best efforts made by her friend cum sister-in-law Vanaa, Amrut and Inni, her own mother to bring grieving Urmila back to normal life, Urmila seems to be taking her own time to cope with the untimely loss of her daughter. Commenting on Urmila’s attitude, S. Indira (1995 : 22) writes:

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

Urmila is aware that women at different levels irrespective of their social backgrounds are given raw deal. It could be so in the case of low class
illiterate women from chawls like Shakutai and Sulu or the urban-bred, educated women like Urmila's mother, Inni, her friend Vanaa, and her mother-in-law, Akka. Urmila is furious at the way even educated urban women submit themselves to safeguard their marriage. While Urmila is a modern woman, Vanaa is traditional, even though educated, and is a social worker by profession. She is submissive and obedient to her husband. Vanaa's constant repetition of "Harish says" irritates Urmila and she reprimands Vanaa "Assert yourself, you don't have to crawl before him, do you"? (The Binding Vine, 30). Later, Urmila becomes much more irritated with Vanaa who is unable to assert herself before her husband even in matters where she should be making the choice. She secretly longs to have a son. Soon after the birth of their second child, who happens to be a daughter again, Vanaa tells Harish about her desire to have a son. Harish decides to have no more children and quotes population figures and wonders at her wish which silences her. She even begins to think, "He is right". Urmila, on listening to this, becomes furious and bursts out "You let him bulldoze you, you crawl before him..." (BV, 81). She also admonishes Vanaa for trying to cope with her domestic duties single-handedly and argues with her when she tries to speak on behalf of her husband.
Why can’t Harish help?

“He comes home so tired...”

“You know, Vanaa, what you’re going to become, coping with everything the way you are”?

“What”?

“A super-woman”

“Good! And doesn’t that make Harish a Superman?... (BV, 81)

As Urmila observes, the common idea of holding the mother to be solely responsible for taking care of the children has remained the same without any new signs of change. From the days of Inni to the days of her grand daughter Mandira, confining women to the subjugated roles of mothers and wives has not changed at all. The little Mandira, who strongly believes that a woman’s primary duty is to take care of her family, resents her mother going to work leaving her and her sister in the care of an ayah. She tells Urmila scornfully “When I grow up, I’m never going to leave my children to go to work” (BV, 72).

Urmila understands self-confidence of a vivacious girl can be shattered by the Indian institution of marriage system which transforms her into a fearful and nervous woman. But, Shanthi Sivaraman (1998:136)
observes, “Urmila is different,… she wants to assert herself and not crawl before man”.

No other character in Shashi Deshpande’s earlier novels is so rebellious as Urmila. Till now all her characters may be independent to some extent but are firmly bound by the shackles of tradition. Moreover, the protagonists in the earlier novels are aware of the inequalities in society but they do not attempt to set them right. Indira Nityanandham (1995 : 287) observes: “It is love which makes women vulnerable”.

Most of the female protagonists of Deshpande reject their mother as a role model because the latter represents to them limited options and a narrow outlook on life. As Mira in one of her poems had stated:

To make myself in your image

Was never the goal I sought (BV, 124).

Life is a process which demands change and not the status quo. The rejection of the mother in a way is necessary for the assertion and development of a daughter’s personality.

However, when it is the daughter’s turn to become a mother, she discovers, in her turn that she cannot escape the binding vine of love and the
fears and vulnerability that come in the wake of love. Urmì, who has rejected her mother’s dreams for herself, cannot help succumbing to the same weakness as mother’s:

I wanted so much for Anu; now, it’s all gone, there’s nothing left of all my hopes for her. We dream so much more for our daughters than we do for our sons, we want to give them the world we dreamt of for ourselves. “I wanted Kalpana to have all that I didn’t,” Shakutai told me. But Kalpana wanted none of her mother’s dreams. She had her own. (BV, 124)

The degree to which Indian women are subjected to domination by their husbands is also evident from what Inni reveals to Urmì in reply to her unvoiced accusation against her parents for having left her to be brought up by her grandparents at Ranidurg. Inni pathetically confesses to Urmì that it was Urmì’s father who had sent her away to Ranidurg as he did not trust his wife with looking after the child well as she had left the child in the lurch. Years later when she tries to explain to Urmì the reason why she was sent away, Inni pours out all the anguish of a woman who was helpless before the dictates of her husband. She says:
Then he decided he would take you to his mother. He didn’t say anything to me, he just took you away. I never imagined he wouldn’t bring you back, I thought this was just to teach me a lesson, to punish me, but—I begged him, Urmi, I cried, I promised him I’d never leave you alone, but he wouldn’t listen. Nothing could make him change his mind. You know your papa—I didn’t want you to be sent away to Ranidurg, believe me Urmi, I didn’t want that, I wanted you with us. I never got used to the idea of your being in Ranidurg, I wanted you with me. (BV, 200)

Urmila is aggressive, economically independent, takes her own decisions and her feminism borders on militancy, and prompts harshness in her equations with others. A lecturer in a Bombay College, she lives with her mother, Yamin (Inni, for short) and her six year old son Kartik. Hers is a love match with Kishore, a former neighbour now working with the Merchant Navy and away from home for long spells. Although she lives with her mother, her representation suggests the strong-willed single woman. In that respect, she is unlike any other of Deshpande’s protagonists. Deshpande who is dismissive of militancy in women has possibly created a radical feminist only to subvert such a character. The novelist reveals
through the representation that expressing one’s needs, accepting one’s vulnerability are not weaknesses but liberation, and that assertiveness and not aggressiveness is the desired ideal.

Urmila has many strengths. Her fiercely independent nature is first seen when at the age of fifteen, she chooses to stay alone with her grandfather Aju’s dead body (Aju had hanged himself to death) while Kishore goes to fetch some other members of the family. Her rationale is, how could she leave until her father came?

Kishore, her husband later, is a very supportive and understanding partner. So, the crisis in her life is not caused by a domestic wrangle but by the sudden death of their one-year old baby girl, Anu. The novel is ostensibly about Urmila’s coming to terms with her child’s death. It is, in reality, about Urmila’s re-definition of her identity, values and choices with greater apprehension of her relationship with others, especially her husband.

The death of Anu is one event that reveals her at her most vulnerable. It is an event that causes her intense grief. Traumatised, she repeatedly asks, ‘Why me?’ Her distress sometimes manifests itself in psychosomatic attacks of asthma so that she is left gasping for breath. At other times she is driven into hurting herself masochistically to experience pain, as she explains.
It intrigues Urmila that Vanaa is so contented in her marriage, playing second fiddle to Harish. She recalls having shocked Vanaa when she had walked out on Kishore on the wedding night both to challenge convention and to exhibit control over her own body. She is surprised - that Harish and Vanaa share a subtly tender relationship as in the intimate scene where Urmila sights Vanaa’s head on Harish’s shoulder in their car. Urmila, on the other hand, with all her militancy, feels insecure in her relationship with Kishore:

Now there is the fear of Kishore never returning home, the fear of his not wanting to come back to me. Yes, that’s the thing, that’s what I am most afraid of. (BV, 82)

Although his equal, Urmila is unable to tell Kishore to change his job (as many Merchant Navy employees do) not because he won’t do it but because she lacks the courage to tell him that she needs his physical presence in her life. Playing the strong, independent woman while being vulnerable within, is the cause of Urmila’s pain and disappointment. “Each time you leave me, the parting is like death”, the words come to Urmila but she can never utter them to him (BV, 138).

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The sexual relationship between Urmila and Kishore is passionate and satisfying. Yet, after every intercourse, Urmila experiences an aching disappointment as Kishore withdraws into a world of his own, “there is something in him I will never reach” (BV, 141). That impermeable armour around him generates the fear of abandonment in her. It is the same primeval fear that the uneducated Sulu expresses when her husband threatens to remarry since she can’t bear him a child. This places the sophisticated, well-educated Urmila on the same plane as other oppressed Indian women in a patriarchal society.

Urmila loves her husband so dearly that when Dr.Bhasker asks her whether she loves him, Urmila confesses “I love my husband and therefore, I am an inviolate”. (BV, 165) In another context also she reiterates : “Yes, I was honest when I told Vanaa I am safe’. (BV, 165). Commenting on Urmila’s relationship with her husband, J.P. Tripathi says:

“Urmila, the sailor’s wife and college teacher, is more self reliant and has an identity different from that of her husband; she is self-respecting and does not want to live on Kishore’s rnoney. She is, however, a sensitive vine and needs Kishore as an oak to entwine herself around” (J.P. Tripathi:152)
Indira Nityatandham observes:

_The Binding Vine_ is a refreshing change from the first three novels of Deshpande. Protest comes easily to her protagonists here and there is less agony in attempting to change societal roles and attitudes. The hope for Indian women lies in the happy fact that though there are Miras and Kalpanas and Shakutais, we also have our Urmilas. (Nityanandham, 1995 : 66).

But if the novel tells us of women’s liberation, it also tells us of their bondage “of (their) human bondage”. As Urmi once observes,

The most important need is to love. From the moment of our births, we struggle to find something with which we can anchor ourselves to this strange world we find ourselves in. Only when we love do we find this anchor. But love makes you vulnerable. Mira realized this; and she was afraid. (_BV_, 137).

The middle-class woman today is not merely educated; she is a co-bread winner and supplements her husband’s income to maintain the standard of living they aspire to provide for their children: She has thus
assumed a new role for herself in the wake of changing circumstances. This has, however, not exonerated her from her traditional role and responsibility in the family which, in addition to her career consciousness, has led to severe problems of adjustment and is the main cause of her agony today. Children feel neglected in the absence of the mother from home.

Urmila thinks that “it is women who take parenthood seriously, men don’t, not to the same extent anyway” (BV, 76). This is true of at least Urmila’s, Shakutai’s and Sulu’s husbands. Urmila’s was a love marriage. There was a time when her life was full of ecstasy and she was fearless and confident as her love gave her immense strength. But now she realises that she has married a man “who flirts into her life a few months in a year and flirts out again leaving nothing of himself” (BV, 164). Instead of being confident she is now under a constant fear of losing him. Shakutai’s husband, although a father of three children, has actually abandoned her and is living with another woman. Had he lived with Shakutai, her sister Sulu’s husband would have never dared to touch Shakutai’s daughter, Kalpana, or cherished the dream of marrying her. Being protectionless Kalpana is raped by him and fatally injured. Sulu, his wife, commits suicide.
Deshpande also gives us a glimpse of women living at another level of society, women like Shakutai and Sulu. Shakutai’s husband leaves her in her father’s home soon after their marriage so that he can search for livelihood in Bombay. When he does not return, six months later, however, Shakutai joins him in Bombay, unable to stay any longer in her father’s house. She realises that her husband is a lazy and good for nothing fellow who does not stick on to any job. They live in a relation’s house where she is put through much humiliation. After the birth of three children one after the other, Shakutai takes it upon herself to work and support her family. In spite of doing all kinds of work to support her family, her husband deserts her for another woman. Shakutai does not hesitate to describe her husband as a useless fellow. Talking to Urmiof her unfulfilled desire to have a mangalasutra made in gold she says: “Then one day I thought—the man himself is so worthless, why should I bother to have this thing made in precious gold? That’s been the greatest misfortune of my life, Urmila, marrying that man.” (BV, 110) It is, indeed, tragic that in spite of putting up with such a worthless husband and in spite of struggling alone to fend for her children, fingers are pointed at her when anything goes wrong in the family as is the case when Kalpana is raped. As she tells Urmiof, bitterly, in one of her conversations: “What can you expect, they say, of a girl whose
mother has left her husband? Imagine! He left me for another woman, left me with these children to bring up.” (BV, 147)

Kalpana is brought to the hospital in an unconscious state. The casualty man puts it down as an accident case and when Dr. Bhaskar Jain comes up with the stunning finding that she was raped before being knocked down by a car, the police officer argues, “why make it a case of rape ... we don’t like rape cases ... They’re messy and troublesome, never straightforward ...” (BV, 88). Kalpana’s mother, Shakutai has her own reasons to insist that it be registered only as an accident case. She is convinced the police will not bother about finding out who did it, they will only harass her. And she is frightened of people coming to know of it. The police officer only abets that fear. Kalpana is unmarried, people are bound to talk, her name would be smeared, what good will it do her or her family to have it known she was raped, he asks Dr. Jain. And then, of course, he comes up with the usual high-brow bias- “for all you know, she may be a professional, may have gone out with a boyfriend, may have been hit by a car only after they had a bit of fun. And even if she was raped, publicising it isn’t going to do anyone any good. It only means trouble for everyone.”
Shakutai says she would never be able to hold up her head again if it gets known that her daughter was raped. She fears that public knowledge of Kalpana’s tragedy would disgrace her and her family, so that no one would want to marry her younger daughter Sandhya or befriend her son Prakash or even talk to any of them.

The rapist is discovered to be Shakutai’s sister Sulu’s husband, who it is later revealed, had always lusted after Kalpana. This revelation shatters Sulu who immolates herself in guilty despair, leaving behind her grief-stricken sister Shakutai, who had adored her.

Mira, perhaps, symbolizes the plight of countless women who face the same situation but are unable to voice their suffering. The invasion of one’s body even though sanctified by marriage, can be as traumatic as rape.

Utterly lonely, Mira lives in that alien house whose inmates treat her as a mad woman. The anguish in Mira thus gushes forth:

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. (BV, 99-100).
Mira has aversion to physical intimacy with her husband and still she has to put up with his obsession for her. She gives voice to her inner self in her poems “in the solitude of an unhappy marriage, who died giving birth to her son at twenty-two” (BV, 48). It so happens that many years after her marriage, Urmī receives an old trunk full of books and a few other things from Mira’s husband’s stepmother, referred to as Akka. Among these books Urmī finds Mira’s diary which is “not a daily account of her routine life but a communion with herself” (BV, 51). When Akka hands over Mira’s jewellery to Urmī, she says, “They are Kishore’s mother’s,” but while giving books and diaries to her, she says, “Take this, it’s Mira’s” (BV, 48).

Also in her poems we don’t find any mention of her other relations. She does not share this loneliness with others. After marriage to this man she was rechristened Nirmala. Though overtly she does not react, she puts down her reaction in these lines:

Nirmala, they call, I stand statue still,

Do you build without erasing the old?

A tablet of rice, a pencil of gold

Can they make me Nirmala? I am Mira. (BV, 101)
With the loss of such selfhood and identity women have to undergo yet another kind of brutalisation. Mira’s diary reveals how Venu, a poet, who later rises to become a great figure in Indian literature, subtly snubs her for attempting to write poetry. When Mira gives him some of her poems to read, he says, “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” (BV, 127). It is reflective of the handicaps that women writers often face in a male-dominated society.

Thus Mira symbolizes the miserable and hopeless lot of innumerable Indian women who suffer silently and their voice remains smothered. From her diary it becomes clear that she intensely disliked the sexual act with her husband. She felt a physical repulsion for the man she married (BV, 65). She hated the very word ‘love’. She writes in her diary:

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 be me? Why can’t he leave me alone? (BV, 65).

The marriage of Akka also proves how terribly unfair our society is towards women. She is made to marry a widower and the father of a child.
Even before her marriage, she is warned that her prospective husband had been obsessed with his wife and after her death is now interested only in his son. In fact, he marries her so that his son can have a mother. Listening to Akka narrating the story to her and Vanaa, Urmì thinks: “The cruelty, the enormous cruelty of that silenced us.” (BV, 47) This example, in a way, describes the fate of many women who stoically accept marriage under any condition, because marriage is the only goal in life for a girl in our society, and finding a groom is the most difficult thing on earth. And so Akka willingly agrees to marry Kishore’s father in spite of the risk of living under the shadow of a dead woman.