The Problem of Marriage and Affirmation of Self
CHAPTER – IV

THE PROBLEM OF MARRIAGE AND AFFIRMATION OF SELF

The novels of Shashi Deshpande have remarkably etched her out as an unrelenting champion of the urban educated middle-class Indian woman who is caught between modernity and tradition. She is safe “neither with the old-values that are antiquated and exhibit flagrant gender discrimination nor with the modern neurotic norms” (Mitra : 38) Indian Women, even today, despite their good education, are not bold enough to defy the rigid norms laid down by society.

In the rigidity – formed and tradition bound societies like India the repression one has to put up with is usually very severe and the resultant suffering often assumes pathetic proportions for sensitive individuals. Among the Indians, the women happen to be the worst sufferers as the social norms and moral codes have been so framed as to be particularly disadvantageous to them. So the Indian English women novelists, encouraged to a certain extent by their historical and cultural context, have consistently treated the neurotic phenomenon in their fictional works.

‘Freedom is one’s birthright’, so it has been said. The individual is born to be free and to live freely. But once he enters the world of society, he is curbed by innumerable factors victimizing and subjugating him in many ways. This causes a
constriction within his essentially free spirit and this, in turn, leads to a desire for rebellion. The rebellion is a natural outcome but he stands condemned by society. The feminist struggle for liberation can also be looked upon within this framework of the freedom crisis. Woman, born to be as free as man, finds herself constrained and curbed by the community, not only in India but in most parts of the world.

Deshpande’s woman does not resort to suffering stoically or paradoxically. She chooses and rejects both ways – staunch rebellion and meek acceptance. She represents a set of the modern women who are educated and are very much in contact with the society, dealing with the critical problems like love, sex, marriage, settlement and individuality.

Women as John Stuart Mill calls them “are the disqualified half of the human race” (John Stuart Mill, 2000 : 99). So, naturally they are the focus of attention in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. Though not an avowed feminist, her fictional world has at its centre, women longing and struggling for recognition in a male dominated society. Her basic concern is the physical and emotional relationship between men and women. Her novels have universal value as they movingly study the acute struggle of the Indian woman to survive and create a meaningful life in a man’s world.

Throughout the 20th century there has been a study of a ubiquitous male control over every aspect of a woman’s existence. Man has subjugated woman to
his will, by using her as a means of selfish gratification. But he has never desired to elevate her to the rank she is created to fill. Shashi Desphande’s novels deal graphically with problems that confront middle-class educated women in the patriarchal Hindu Society. In *Roots and Shadows* she focuses on female experience and female world. But she is not against the male and has stressed a harmonious relationship between man and woman. The novel *Roots and Shadows* presents a revolutionary woman who is seen to be acting against dominance of any kind right from her childhood. Indu, the heroine of the novel refuses to be cowed down by Akka, the rich family tyrant who dominated the family. Again as an act of revolt she boldly breaks the tradition by marrying Jayant who belongs to some other caste. For Indu it is a great astonishment when Akka, who is hated by her, leaves all her wealth to her.

Besides being an educated young woman, Indu is very sensitive to the situations. She aspires to become independent and complete in herself, but finds so many hurdles coming in her way. While studying in the college, Akka does not allow her to meet boys and cultivate friendship with them. Similarly when she gets married to Jayant, who is her own choice, she hopes for freedom. But ironically enough she very soon realises the foolishness of her decision: “Jayant and I ......... I wish I could say we have achieved complete happiness. But I cannot fantasize.” (*Roots and Shadows*, 14) She speaks about her own incompleteness thus:
This is my real sorrow that I can never be complete in myself. Until I had met Jayant, I had not known it ..... that was somewhat outside me, a part of one without which I remained incomplete. Then I met Jayant and lost the ability to be alone.

*(Roots and Shadows, 34)*

Marriage does not give Indu the expected freedom. After getting married she does everything that her husband would like. She frankly says:

When I look in the mirror, I think of Jayant, when I dress I think of Jayant, when I undress I think of him. Always what he wants what he would like, what would please him. And I can’t blame him. It is not he who has pressurized me into this. It is the way I want it to be.... Have I become fluid, with no shape, no form of my own? *(Roots and Shadows, 54)*

The paradox of the situation for Indu is that though she is not happy with Jayant, she cannot live without him. When Naren tries to make love with her, she declares.

I’m essentially monogamous, for me,
It’s one man and one man alone *(Roots and Shadows, 89)*

But later she offers herself twice to Naren. She does not take love making as a great crime. But at the same time she thinks of the enormity of what she has done.
Her mind starts thinking over the reasons for giving her body to Naren. To her love is nothing but a big fraud. The concept of love is false. She thinks that love is not the only thing in life. Thus the writer places her heroine sandwiched between tradition and modernity.

Indu struggles hard to understand life in reality. She is ashamed of her not being a pure woman, and at the same time, she hates her womanhood. Her mind is torn between two extremes. She is attached to her parental house but at the same time the house turns out to be a prison for her. She is thus always seen in a confused state of mind, struggling with situations to reach a final solution. Thus Shashi Deshpande has ably presented the complex modern women who are deeply rooted in modernity through the character of Indu. As hers is a love marriage, she does not want to give any chance to her parents to blame her. She wants to prove herself to be a success. Shashi Deshpande movingly describes her pathetic condition:

The hideous ghost of my own cowardice confronted me as I thought of this.... that I had clung tenaciously to Jayant, to my marriage, not for love alone, but because I was afraid of failure, I had to show them that my marriage ...that I, was a success... And so I went on lying, even to myself (Roots and Shadows, 115).
According to Indu, one should listen to the dictates of one's own conscience and be true to oneself in speech and action. As P.Bhatnagar says, "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" (1991: 150). But unfortunately she has failed to do so either because of fear of failure or because of timidity. She feels she is a sinner and deceiver and becomes a cause of her sufferings. For Indu it is the time of questioning, of rethinking her life, her journalistic career and her illusion of hard-won independence. She gets attracted to her cousin Naren for the simple reason that he understands her mind and heart more than Jayant does. The fact that Naren shares her problems makes Indu feel that Naren is a better choice than Jayant. Ultimately, Indu decides to return to Jayant, but returns with a complete new self.

Indu experiences disillusionment in sex which makes her suffer silently. That is why she does not feel guilty in her extra-marital relationship with Naren and decides not to tell Jayant about it. It reveals Indu's assertive nature, her autonomy and her awareness that she exists as a person and not as a dependent on Jayant. She takes firm decisions: "That I would at last do the kind of writing I had always dreamt of doing. That I would not, could not enrich myself with Akka's money, that I would, on the other hand, pay for Mini's wedding" (Roots and Shadows, 205). She asserts her individuality in order to realise her freedom. Indu's
life shows that she is in confrontation not only with the family but also with the male world and the society, in general. She broke away from her family because of resentment and desire for freedom. Right from her childhood Indu had seen the secondary place given to women. Even a simple thing like sending a cup of tea for her to the room was considered against discipline. Her English education which had exposed her to modern times had set her apart from the family. She started fighting against her womanhood because the knowledge of her womanhood had been brutally and mercilessly thrust on her. She hated to work on a women’s magazine when she was asked to write on men glorifying manhood and giving a secondary role to womanhood. It was at this time she came across Jayant and set eyes on him. She somehow felt that he was the only man for her and willingly surrendered herself to him. It was not only her marriage which made her feel uneasy but also her writing. In her personal life as well as in her professional role she fought for the rights of women. She had to commit adultery in order to come to terms with her married life. Though marriage is important for men and women, the same amount of freedom and importance is not given to women. The novel thus throws light on the problems of marriage for women and how educated women like Indu struggle for the affirmation of self.

Our society attaches much importance to marriage but, at the same time, it has imposed many restrictions which curtail women’s freedom and individuality. The novel *Roots and Shadows* traces not only the problem of marriage but also the
affirmation of self through the protagonist Indu. To start with, Indu is a meek and
docile woman. But she finally emerges as a bold, challenging and rebellious
woman. It is her strong assertive nature that helps her discover the meaning of life
in her journey towards the affirmation of her self. This novel received the
Thirumathy Rangammal Award for the best English Novel published in India in
1982-83. The novel proclaims that both man and woman are equally important for
a successful married life.

The novel *Roots and Shadows* is about a woman’s self quest. Indu the
protagonist of this novel learns the truth about herself, dismissing all the shadows
that she had thought to be her real self. When she says that she would at last do the
kind of writing she had always wanted to do, she asserts her will and self. She can
no longer cheat herself saying that she will do things for the sake of Jayant, her
husband. She will not remain a doll or a puppet but take decisions for herself and
affirm her being. As Simone de Beauvoir observes, “the more women assert
themselves as human beings, the more the marvelous quality of the ‘other’ will die
in them” (Simone de Beauvoir,1952:150). Indu, a middle class young girl, brought
up in an orthodox Brahmin family, headed by Akka (the mother surrogate in the
novel) “left home full of hatred for the family, for Akka specially” and she had
sworn, “I would never go back”. (*Roots and Shadows*, 20). Indu who had lost her
mother at birth, identifies, throughout the novel, Akka as the mother figure. She
rebels against Akka, her world, her values and marries Jayant against the wishes of
Akka. Akka said at her marriage, “such marriages never work. Different castes, different languages... it’s all right for a while” (Roots and Shadows, 74). Indu comes back to her parental home after eleven years when Akka is on her death-bed and on Akka’s death, becomes the sole inheritor of her property.

There are recurrent images of enclosure in Roots and Shadows. Indu very often speaks of the dark room where so many women had given birth. One of her recurring dreams is the subterranean passage through which she escapes and boards a bus in order to reach a deserted barren place. Similarly, Saru in The Dark Holds No Terrors feels herself enclosed. The image of the enclosed walls suggests the kind of suffocation undergone by women not only in their homes but also the homes they have chosen as a refuge.

A woman looks forward to her marriage to become truly free. In their desire for freedom, women almost resemble the heroines like Indu and Saru to have a room of their own. The heroines have taken a momentous decision which only proves to be an anticlimax, like Caliban becoming the slave of Stepheno and Trinquilo. Both Saru and Indu marry out of their castes and their second homes become the very prisons they had escaped from. Saru, for example, realises that her husband is a sadist. In the same way Indu learns the gift of silence from her marriage. Both these heroines experience not only disillusionment in sex but also suffer a silent sexual humiliation. Saru’s extra-marital affair with Boozie does not lead to sexual fulfilment. But Indu’s relationship with Naren has a totally different
significance. What is significant about such relationship is that they suffer no guilt and they begin to evolve a new code of sexual morality. Thus they experience a sense of sexual autonomy freeing themselves from sexual politics. Marriage like the parental home does not give both Indu and Saru the expected individuality and happiness. They have to be carefully walking on them – one step this side or that will ruin their lives.

Nostors, the Greek word means return home. This aptly describes the situation of Indu who comes at the call of Akka and stays there till the house is disposed of. In fact the novels Roots and Shadows and The Dark Hold No Terrors begin with the heroine’s returning to the homes of their parents. This beginning helps the novelist use the cinematic technique of flash back. Saru comes quite unexpectedly and her father is quite surprised at her visit. Now the home they have discarded becomes the very place of shelter. Another interesting feature is that once again their parental homes provide real independence and maturity to them. Indu learns more about Akka, her past, her concern and her suffering. It is here that Indu gets ample opportunities to know herself, her secret passion and the volcanic sexual explosions that she is capable of. It is here that she realises her roots-an independent woman and a writer, and what the shadows are. Akka’s traumatic married life comes to a close when she exercises her will in disallowing her husband’s concubine to see him at his death bed. This enables Indu to learn not
to judge others by her own standards. She takes a firm decision regarding her job and life and thus she is able to see life in a fresh light.

The most remarkable revelation about Indu is that she learns to see her life independent of Jayant. The novel gains its feminist outlook in Indu’s exploration into herself. It also moves beyond the boundaries of feminism into a perception of the very predicament of the human existence. Indu moves on her road of self realisation and the destination seems to be the point of comprehension of the mystery of human life. The novel ends with affirmation of the individuality of Indu. Through the image of the tree Shashi Deshpande suggests that Indu has learnt to view not only her life but also the very meaning of life itself. It is with this total understanding that Indu decides to return to Jayant. She has to decide about the nature of her job. As a result of her confrontation with her real self, she comes to know her roots and life does not come to an end for her. Indu’s movement from her parental home to the outside world through education and marriage does not really lead her to knowledge of the self. Her return home in the absence of her mother or mother figure only helps her realize her own self. She wrongly imagined that her mother stifled her freedom and so defiled her. But when her husband begins to kill the very roots of her existence, she defies her husband and finds a way of her own. Thus at the end, the heroines of Shashi Deshpande get the necessary awakening and take a positive view of their lives.
Shashi Deshpande’s novels depict the agony and conflict of the modern educated Indian women who try to make the quest for self-realisation. In this regard, Shashi Deshpande and Margaret Laurance share certain common concerns in spite of socio-cultural differences. According to Laurance freedom means, “the individual coming to terms with his own past and with himself, accepting his limitations and going on from there, however terrified he may be. This kind of inner freedom has been a continuing theme.” (McClelland & Stewart, 1974). In the fiction of both these writers, women seem to work within social restrictions. Once the protagonists of these writers achieve the inner freedom, they accept their roles with a new awakening. These two writers assert that freedom does not merely mean a kind of escape from assigned roles but a kind of inner freedom which is spiritual and psychological. The quest for the individual identity and affirmation of the self is marked by the conflict between the inner and outer selves of the protagonists. This conflict arises due to the educated Indian woman’s dilemma between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand and self expression, individuality and independence on the other. Margaret Laurance’s novel A Jest of God (1974) portrays Rachel’s journey towards her inner freedom through coming to terms with the past and with her own self. This is what happens to Sumi in Shashi Deshpandé’s novel A Matter of Time. The main concern is the urge to find one self, to create a space for one self to grow on one’s own. Shashi Deshpande’s women characters possess a strength of their own which enables them to remain uncrushed in spite of challenges and hostilities.
A Matter of Time is a novel woven around human predicament. This is a memorable story of three strong women who represent three different generations in a family. The novel contains all kinds of sufferings and good qualities. It is a story of pain, endurance, suffering, love and understanding and support extended to one another. Sumi and Gopal are tied by a love marriage which results in three young daughters-Aru, Charu and Seema. Sumi’s husband, Gopal tells Sumi that he is leaving the house. She tells her daughters about it. Gopal’s action gives immense pain to Sumi but she is able to endure the pain within herself. This is nothing but a loving mother’s genuine affection and care for her three daughters. Sumi feels a sense of alienation when her daughters blame her for their father’s action. She asks herself, “Do my daughters blame me for what Gopal has done? Do they think it is my fault? Why can’t I talk to them, tell them what I feel, how it was? Why can’t I open my heart to them?” Sumi tries to come to terms with the hard, painful reality and wants her daughters to do the same. She does not have any fear of his death, while her daughters are deeply worried about his being dead or alive. Sumi knows that Gopal is sure of being alive. But at the same time she wants to know how he had taken the decision to leave the house. In fact Gopal’s desertion has affected Sumi’s body and soul, despite her great efforts to bear the suffering. The novelist says:

With Gopal’s going, it was as if the swift-flowing stream of her being had grown thick and viscous-her movements, her
thoughts, her very pulse and heart beats seemed to have slowed down. It had worried her family, but it has been a necessary physical reaction to her emotional state, as if this slowing down was essential for her survival. (28)

Besides Sumi, Aru, her eldest daughter is so upset and angry with her father that she wants Sumi to file a case against Gopal. But Sumi assures her with a woman of common sense—she says, “I just want to get on with my life.” (A Matter of Time, 61).

By allowing Gopal to have his own way, she wants him to free himself from the bondage of love. At the same time she understands her daughter’s desperate need of the warmth and togetherness of family. Her setting Gopal free without any complaint speaks about her courage and understanding. This understanding between Gopal and Sumi has a unique relationship in the fictional world of Shashi Deshpande.

When Sumi and Gopal meet for the first time after their separation there prevails a calm atmosphere. There are no tears, no questions or explanations. Sumi enters his room but Gopal is busy with his lunch. Sumi is asked to wait. They do not speak with each other. Sumi looks out of the window into the courtyard. She finds Gopal laughing with some children. She realizes the reality of his life apart
from her and their children. It occurs to her that they can never be together again.
She understands and accepts her fate. This reality dawns upon her without even
any exchange of words. She is more concerned about getting on with her life. She
does not want pity. She distances even her husband. Therefore it is clear that both
Gopal and Sumi are unusual. Shashi Deshpande movingly describes the situation
that exists between Gopal and Sumi thus:

All these days, I have been thinking of him as if he has been
suspended in space in nothingness since he left us. But he has
gone on living, his life has moved on, it will go on without
me. So has mine. Our lives have diverged; they now move
separately, two different streams (A Matter of Time, 85).

The whole novel subtly debates the problem of individual freedom. The
novel has three parts-The House, The Family, The River and each title carries
within it a meaning. The House is the body and it is also memory and linkage, the
coming together of all different elements. The Family consists of three
generations. The third part ‘The River’ is about immersion in the river waters
which clean and purify. Thus the novel is not only about women but also about
marriage and the nature of freedom. Gopal knows that Sumi will not bring in any
legal action against him. He also knows that she is giving him his freedom and
thereby feel a sense of freedom for herself. Sumi after a lot of suffering and self-
introspection comes to terms with her present with an understanding and
acceptance of their past. She is ready to march ahead with the new acceptance of life. She is all set to begin her life in a new way as a teacher and a writer with a lot of creativity, and a new confidence. The remarkable feature of her character is that without even a trace of bitterness, she can forgive her male counterpart, who is the main cause of her suffering. With an understanding she looks upon men as human beings with their own limitations. As Jasbir Jain rightly observes, “Love need not destroy, possess or absorb or annihilate. It can stand aside and let the other be free.” (41)

The protagonists of Shashi Deshpande protest against the patriarchal system due to their rebellious nature. They question the time-old, established concepts of love, marriage and sex. They are basically career-minded and begin their quest for freedom. The remarkable feature about them is that in spite of all the mental agony, they have an optimistic mind. A quest for identity and self-affirmation forms the major theme of all the novels of Shashi Deshpande. A Matter of Time is no exception to this. Sumi, the protagonist of this novel is an outstanding example of an educated woman who does not want any one’s pity. The fact that life must go on is movingly pictured throughout the novel. Even Aru at first thought that her mother was indifferent to Gopal’s desertion. But she changes her mind after the death of Sumi.
I thought she didn’t care about what papa did, I thought she was uncaring, indifferent, I said angry words to her, but I know now that was not true. (*A Matter of Time*, 240)

The novel *A Matter of Time* is also about the parents of Sumi-Kalyani and Sripati. They live in a strangely oppressive silence. They have not spoken to each other for thirty five years. There is a clear parallel between Sripathi’s desertion of Kalyani and Gopal’s desertion of Sumi. But what is significant is that women come to their own without men. Though others think that Sumi takes her husband’s desertion as a matter of fact, she undergoes her own kind of suffering:

It takes time to get used to sharing your life with another person, now I have to get used to being alone. (*A Matter of Time*, 23)

Sumi is a woman who wants to have her own way in everything. This is the typical attitude of the modern educated woman who wants to establish her identity. Sumi’s decision to learn to ride the scooter reveals her desire for a more independent life. When she wants Aru to ignore the peculiar relationship between her father and mother, she tries to make herself forget what her husband has done to her. With all the trauma of being a deserted wife, Sumi is more interested in moving forward in life in order to find a meaningful existence. She allows Gopal to go his own way just as she must find her own path. When Sumi is going for
house hunting she happens to meet Gopal. It is here that suddenly she realizes that
Gopal and she must now move on alone and prepares herself for the separation.

In the novel it is Kalyani who emerges as the most powerful character. Her
story is one of deep endurance and strength. Kalyani carries within her a sense of
history. When she gave birth to a son, her mother’s contempt for her was
assuaged. But the child was retarded. Kalyani lost the child on her way to her
parents’ house in Bangalore. Sripati, her husband looked for the lost boy
throughout the city like a mad man for the whole day. He returned home after two
months but never spoke to Kalyani thereafter. Sumi’s three daughters often talk of
Kalyani’s marriage to Sripati and about their great grandmother, Manorama.
Living with a husband without any communication in the same house for such a
long time is something horrible. The children do not know anything of the history
of the relationship between Kalyani and Sripati. Kalyani is a fatalist with great
belief in destiny. Sumi after entering a world of creative writing courageously
discusses daring themes like female sexuality. She decides to write a story with
Surpanaka, the demon sister of King Ravana at the centre. The novelist makes
Sumi die when she is about to begin a new life. But Sumi has established her
identity and found meaningful existence before her death.

The novel comes to a full circle with Aru. When the novel begins, just after
Gopal deserts Sumi, Aru is in a state of confusion. It is very difficult for her to
understand her mother’s indifference or even her father’s behaviour. Here she
behaves like a child and wants to go back to the same happy, carefree existence which they had enjoyed in the past as a family. She particularly resents Kalyani’s oppressive love and the way she likes to look after her and her sisters. But gradually Aru comes to realise that a good relationship with her grandmother can be forged. Thus it is Aru who articulates the feminist voice in the novel. It is she who questions the injustices done to women. At the same time she does not want to lose Gopal. She tries to get legal help to make Gopal pay, at least financially, for what he has done to her mother Sumi. She is also sensitive enough to sympathise with her grand father. When she thinks of him:

She can’t think of the cruel husband Sripati, only of her grandfather alone in his room of the way he looks up when she enters, of his pleasure in her company. She thinks of all his little arrangements in his room, which seem so pathetic to her, of how his fingers tremble when he folds his clothes… And anger ebbs away, leaving her flooded by pity instead.

\textit{(A Matter of Time, 144)}.

Sumi however does not want Aru to view every man-woman relationship with suspicion. She does not want Aru to see in every woman, a victim and in every man a betrayer. With Kalyani, Aru’s relationship gets a distinct change when she brings a basin of hot water to immerse her grandma’s swollen feet in and gets her a cup of coffee. Aru joins a computer class after her exams and becomes
part of a women’s activist group. It is through this group that she comes across Surekha, a lawyer. Through Surekha, Aru will understand something of the separation between her parents and will go on to become a lawyer herself. When Sumi dies Aru rushes to Kalyani and kneels by her huddled body and says,” Amma, I’m here. I’m your daughter, Amma I’m your son, I’m here with you. Amma I’m here (A Matter of Time, 233). It is because of Aru and Kalyani and the partnership that they have forged, the strength with which they face suffering that the novel ends on a note of hope. The lost image on which the novelist closes her story is not of Sumi’s death but of Aru and Kalyani standing together at the door and a smile of encouragement which they have for Gopal.

A Matter of Time is a novel which moves beyond feminist concerns. It tries to penetrate and analyse the very predicament of human existence and solve the riddle, that is life. A desperate situation can be altered to that of hope through affirmation of one’s self. It is this process of self examination through courage and resilience that makes Gopal realise in the end:

If it is indeed true that we are bound to our destinies that there is no point struggling against them, even then this remains that we do not submit passively or cravenly, but with dignity and strength. (A Matter of Time, 246)
Thus Shashi Deshpande offers an affirmative vision which is essential for upholding goodness, duty and truth of life. Shashi Deshpande has used various narrative techniques to convey the state of a woman’s mind and her true feelings. The use of interior monologue or stream-of-consciousness technique helps to convey the inner life of character’s feelings. In this novel she uses interior monologue to reveal the character’s inner perceptions. An examination of the text clearly reveals the writer’s capacity to use unique methods like the double narrative in order to heighten the effect of her subject matter.

Aru is upset over the break up of the family and regrets the fact that their family appears so pathetic and vulnerable before the eyes of the neighbours. An interesting interior monologue follows Sumi’s break up with Gopal. Sumi is anguished but cannot speak of her agony since it would trouble her mother Kalyani. This technique is also a vehicle to deliver her memories. Shashi Deshpande uses this technique to provide the readers first person details of the past. People recreate their past through their dreams and meditations. For example Sumi recalls Gopal’s words regarding Destiny just when her own future seems beyond her control and comprehension. She recalls photographs of her mother’s marriage, Kalyani’s reliance upon the concept of Fate and Gopal’s resignation from a university job. Sumi is irritated at Gopal’s explanation for his resignation because the reason is not clearly stated. She had thought, “Just like Gopal, I had thought, both irritated and annoyed, to give such an impossibly metaphysical
reason for resigning a job. If I’d asked him, ‘why are you leaving me? I’d have got just such an answer and what would I do with that?’ (A Matter of Time, 27).

Thus the memory of a past incident where Gopal had been irresponsible and evasive is given to the readers through Sumi’s inner monologue. Gopal himself attempts to find a valid explanation of his odd behaviour by returning to memories of his childhood. Gopal has been vexed about his father, his early unhappy childhood, leaving home and searching for his roots. The mystery of his past trauma is nothing but a screen blotting out, justifying his present behaviour. Gopal himself asks the question why he had married Sumi: “Why did I marry Sumi? Because I met her – it’s as simple as that”. His thoughts on marriage reveal a matter-of-fact relationship which got converted into marriage. Any glamour of romance in the Sumi-Gopal story has been removed. Gopal realises that his feelings of affection are simultaneous with a sense of alienation from his family. Is it an honest admission, is he being cruel? All these morally troubling questions haunt Gopal (A Matter of Time, 40-42). The same behaviour occurs in Sumi also. In her frequently tempestuous relationship with Aru, Sumi wonders if she is doing any justice to her daughter.

Kalyani and her husband Sripati have not spoken to each other for a long time. Aru is told the reason for this disrupted relationship by her aunt Premi. Kalyani had lost her retarded son Madhav in a crowd and Sripati had lapsed into an accusatory silence ever after. (A Matter of Time, 139-141) Aru and her sister
wonder if Kalyani had lost the son deliberately because he was too difficult to manage. Thus a number of stories are woven into the fabric of *A Matter of Time*. These stories may be narrated, embellished or given hidden shades of subtexts through the character’s interior monologue. Kalyani’s story provides a good illustration for this.

Interior monologues portray emotions and they, like emotions, do not move quietly. They are turbulent and disjointed. For example, Gopal recreates his father in his dreams. The father makes gestures of affection and care. The tempo is built up within the second level narrative thus: “This father of my dreams smiles at me, when I lag behind, he holds my hand when I’m tired, he looks at me affectionately—I know, of course, what it is I’m doing: I am recreating my father in my dreams as I had done in my waking hours, all those years ago, as a boy” (*A Matter of Time*, 42)

Later Gopal recalls and visualises Sumi getting ready for the party. He remembers how she had treasured his mother’s bangles. He is affected by Sumi’s gesture and his memory of the event. He therefore breaks off the rumination at a heightened moment: “Suddenly Gopal catches himself and controls his thoughts. I thought I’d left it all behind, but I haven’t, it is here with me still and at the sight of Sumi everything comes back”. (*A Matter of Time*, 106)
This is typical aposiopesis, and the reader understands that Gopal is deceiving himself when he cuts his reveries short.

The thoughts of the characters are sometimes in the form of retorts to others comments. A debate is suggested where part of the responses remain unvoiced. This device is known as stichomathic device. A very good illustration of this device can be seen in the Kalyani-Sumi discussion of the problem. The first section of the dialogue goes like this:

Perhaps that’s why Kalyani didn’t want me to move in here.
But she didn’t say that. Why do you want to be alone? She had asked. Not to lose sight of my loneliness... (A Matter of Time, 23).

Another example for interior monologue is cloaking of events in emotions. Non-descript, ordinary or unexplainable events suddenly become significant because a character’s feelings, which are expressed in an interior voice, envelop them. A beautiful passage in the novel may be cited as an example. Aru has told her younger sister Charu of Kalyani’s tragedy, the loss of her son Madhav. The two think over the possibility that Kalyani may have deliberately lost the difficult child. But Charu does not agree with this suggestion. Charu says:

He was her son. And more confidently you know how she loves children, babies specially. Yes, they’ve seen her with
babies, with Ratna’s sister’s baby, chirruping to it, lifting it high, bringing it down and putting her face gently against the baby’s delighted one.

‘Yes, she loves babies. But you know babies are different’.

Aru is unable to explain more clearly what she means: that babies are Nature’s trap, the fly-paper to catch women and pin them down to the nurturing role. Nature needs them to take on for her purposes.

(A Matter of Time, 142)

The overall effect of the tragedy is poignantly brought home to the reader. The loss of the son has suddenly changed two things: the event’s status as an accident and the trauma such a loss may have inflicted upon the mother. Thus Aru’s meditation brings out the full impact of the issue. The silence that exists between Sripati and Kalyani is not merely accusatory on the part of Sripati, but also threnodic since Kalyani only laments in silence. This silence is also eponymous since it carries the name Madhav throughout. Aru’s interior monologue quite aptly is never voiced but silently, inscribes the event within its tragic human face.

Shashi Deshpande’s characters occupy a vivid inner world which is at loggerheads with the outer. Sometimes the thoughts of the characters are expressed through non-referential images. This means the characters indulge in
abstractions which lend an element of unreality to their other world. A very good example is Gopal’s conjuring up various images of his father. He describes it as, “drawing various selves out of the protean being of the father I had imagined”. (A Matter of Time, 42) A crucial word here is ‘protean’ which represents the unreal, shapeless, featureless and therefore non-referential nature of Gopal’s ruminations. A similar eerie non-referential imaging is Sumi’s review of her marriage. Shashi Deshpande writes: “Sumi sometimes has a picture of her marriage moving slowly through this tunnel of whispers to the yawning silent darkness into which Kalyani’s own marriage has disappeared” (A Matter of Time, 102). This abstract dematerialisation of a crucial event by Sumi is Shashi Deshpande’s attempt to make her story anagogical. The metaphors of silent darkness or stillness are supposed to reveal the spiritual meaning behind the first level narrative.

Such a type of narrative helps the readers to recall the split between the characters’ lives, behaviour and feeling. A near schizophrenic duality is kept up when Shashi Deshpande reiterates the darker spiritual meaning behind their lives. The vision which Sumi has just before her death (A Matter of Time, 233) is the coming together, if violently, of these two versions of Sumi’s text self-world. Gopal himself regrets that he is not able to share this vision of duality (A Matter of Time, 238). As is appropriate, the split between characters’ relationship, their own worlds and narratives is kept at its anagogical and mysterious level by Shashi Deshpande. Gopal is doomed with Sumi’s death, not to
get the other-world picture, of the "duality that ends all fragmentation and gives up his struggle to understand" (A Matter of Time, 238). The split remains within Gopal just as the split between him and Sumi reaches irretrievable limits. The interior monologue continues, though there is no stichomythic. The text of an inner narrative, the self and the world run along-at times conflated into an amorphous mass, differentiated at other times.

The Dark Holds No Terrors tells the story of a marriage on the rocks. Sarita (called Saru) is a "two-in-one woman" who in the daytime is a successful doctor and at night "a terrified trapped animal" in the hands of her husband, Manohar (called Manu), who is an English teacher in a third rate college. The novel opens with Saru returning after fifteen years to her father's house - a place she had once sworn never to return to - remembrance of things past and a brief confession to the father with whom she had hardly communicated before. So the narrative meanders from present to past and vice versa. The stay in her father's house gives Sarita a chance to review her relationship with the husband, her dead mother, dead brother Dhruva and her children, Renu and Abhi. 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 to her.

The novel is remarkable for its exploration of the inner landscape. Shashi Deshpande does not betray any inclination or ulterior motive to sell India abroad
by liberal doses of oriental mysticism or sociological data. For her the psychological milieu of the individual is quite an empirical canvas to work on. The novel is a fascinating study of male psychology by a woman which in turn becomes an exposition of the female psyche too.

Saru is highly self-willed and her problems arise because of her outsized ego and innate love for power over others. She defies traditional codes at the slightest threat to her importance as that is what she missed and craved for in her mother’s house. As a child, Saru had seen the predicament of the grandmother separated from her husband and considered “an unwanted burden” by her own people. From now on every move in life is towards the realization of that goal of economic independence.

Though Saru had known and loved Manu she was quite unnerved at the thought of marriage. It was perhaps the fear of sex, the unknown, commitment, responsibilities or loss of freedom. But the reality proved different. Despite the unclean atmosphere of their small room, sex seemed a clean act. As an adolescent, sex was a shame, then an embarrassment, then a matter of pride, and after marriage a source of enjoyment:

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 arm I loved. All the clichés, I discovered, were true, kisses were soft and unbearably sweet, embraces hard and passionate, hand caressing and tender, and loving as well as being loved, was an intense joy. It was as if little nerve ends of pleasure had spring up all over my body (TDHNT, 34-5).

So Saru’s later withdrawal cannot be interpreted as frigidity as some critics do. She feels utterly humiliated at the thought of being used and reduced to “a dark, damp, smelly hole”. She sees sex as a dirty word and the experience a terror, an inhuman insult to her personality. Though sex is often said to be a unifying force, in Saru’s case it acts as the instrument of revenge and therefore of estrangement. With her responsibilities increasing outside of home, she recoils from Manu’s love – making and he takes her rejection of sex as rejection of himself.

Saru’s love for power can be identified with her relationship with every character in the novel. With the natural love for power (inherited from her mother perhaps), she views her mother as a rival in the game of power. The mother had always appeared as an authority figure and posed a threat to her individuality and self will. The power that the mother exudes repels her. The archetypal terrible mother sees Saru only as a burden to be eased, a problem to be solved, a
responsibility to be dispensed with and a person who has no right to any choice in life. The hatred is deep rooted. Referring to her puberty Saru says: “A kind of shame that engulfed me, making me want to rage, I scream against the fact that put me in the same class as my mother... If you're a woman, I don't want to be one” (TDHNT, 55) Saru’s self-esteem is pretty low and is induced by her mother and Saru’s over interpretation of that. In her mother’s presence Saru feels that she was being observed, analyzed, weighed up for ultimate criticism and possibly for ultimate rejection. So Saru feels an excessive need to prove her worth into adulthood. Saru marrying Manu and her claim to have thereby severed the umbilical cord is an act of defiance proving her strength, power and self reliance. The mother’s Parthian shot- “I know all these ‘love marriages’. It’s love for a few days, the quarrels all the time. Don’t come crying to us then” (TDHNT, 62) is a sure prediction of Saru’s future and failure. Later Saru’s hurt ego would not admit her miscalculations and defeat. Though she tries to learn from the mother what not to be, she ends up as an educated version of the mother herself.

The mother established that Saru has killed Dhruva and Saru put her self in the dock. Saru never boldly refutes or denies the charge of murder except in the confession to her father. This is because she had in a way passively watched him die and therefore has passively contributed to his death. When the mother accuses her of murder she speaks out Saru’s intentions and not the deed. Dhruva’s demise had always been her subconscious desire and there is very thin demarcation
between her wish and its fulfilment. The truth lies some where in-between. She has always felt an inner drive to make him the mythological Dhruva (pushed off the father’s lap by the step brother) and Dhruva in death becomes a tantalizing “North Star” controlling her happiness from afar. The guilt has come to stay and she is destined to be in the dock perennially. Her husband, dead mother, dead brother and even her children are the accusers and she, the accused. Saru has always been a problem child and the mother, a problem parent; the feeling leaves Saru frightened of the possibility of the repetition of the cycle in her family too. She views the layout with its grunts, cries and pain which made “an animal out of her” to be “a prelude to motherhood”. She is least mother-like in her reluctance to be on the giving side. But though it is out of character with Saru, it is the thought of children that prevents her from seeking a divorce.

Saru’s attitude towards her children is invariably conditioned by her past and even love for importance. When Saru goes away to her father’s house she does remember the little needs of her children like seeing Renu off to school every morning and covering Abhi with a blanket every night. But such a thought does not send her rushing home. She takes the opportunity to test, establish and reinforce her indispensability. She would subordinate all emotional ties to please her ego.

Renu’s verbal non-communication and eloquent, mystifying expressions in her drawings leave Saru nervous. She refers to Renu as “a woman despite her
age,” “a critical, cold, shrewd, objective observer” reminiscent of her own mother. It speaks of Saru’s projection and the unconscious fear of getting rejected by her daughter. She also entertains fear of the repetition of the cycle in her own family as she finds in Renu’s jealousy and rejection of Abhi a parallel of her attitude to Dhruva. She questions: “...do we travel, not in straight lines, but in circles? Do we come to the same point again and again, Dhruva and I, Renu and Abhi... Is life an endless repetition of the same pattern?” (TDHNT, 158).

The Dark Holds No Terrors is a feminist novel not on the lone basis of the female centrality in it. The novel focuses on woman’s awareness of the predicament, her wanting to be recognized as a person than as a woman and her wanting to have an independent social image. In a society where these are considered out-stepping the limits, The Dark Holds No Terrors would be considered a protest novel too. Saru’s feminist reactions date back to her childhood when she had to contend with sexist discrimination at home. The framework of the novel provides good acoustics for woman’s voice and establishes that woman, too, has choices in life. But Shashi Deshpande does not glorify woman’s sufferings. Though she enlists a sufficient amount of sympathy for her protagonist, it is not on the grounds of her being a female sufferer or a martyr in patriarchy. Throughout the novel Shashi Deshpande maintains commendable objectivity and avoids generalizations and partial views. In fact, the novel explores questions like who is the victim and who is the predator? Are the
roles so distinct, so separate? Or are we, each of us both?” (TDHNT, 144). Saru analyses further.

...there is something in the male... that is whittled down and ultimately destroyed by female domination. It is not so with a female. She can be dominated, she can submit, and yet hold something of herself in reserve. As if there is something in her that prevents erosion and self destruction... Does the sword of domination become lethal only when a woman holds it over a man? (TDHNT, 77).

Though it is a feminist affirmation of woman’s strength, it is also suggestive of the destructive nature of woman. Shashi Deshpande is certainly aware of the woman’s predicament in a male dominated society, especially when the woman is not economically independent. There is a reference in the novel to a woman who, ill treated by her in-laws, drowns herself in a well. There is a reference to yet another woman victim who is tied to a peg by the in-laws and fed in the cattle shed. Saru detests the merciless judgment of her mother who dismisses the topic saying, “she perhaps deserved it”. The thrust here is not on man’s cruelty to woman but woman’s cruelty to woman, the internalization of the patriarchal cruelty by woman.
Saru has absolutely no respect for the abject acceptance religiously practised by the wives. The wife of Manu’s friend accepts total effacement of her very presence and position. She remains a silent, unobtrusive nameless waiter at the dining table, not even introduced. Vidyasa, who posed to be a liberated woman, pales into a shadow after her marriage. Saru has utter contempt for Smita who changes her name to Gitanjali, annihilates her personality and puts on the romantic mask of being a contented wife. Saru condemns them as stupid martyrs and idiotic heroines. She remembers the Sanskrit story from her school text of the woman who would not disturb her husband’s sleep even to save her child from the fire. “A woman so blessed, it was said that Agni himself came and saved the child” (TDHNT,188). Any number of such mythical figures are created by men for woman folk to emulate, thereby ensuring the unquestionably superior male position.

The society presented in The Dark Holds No Terrors is certainly one going through transitions where at least economically independent women could have choices in life. Saru has tremendous respect for the dignified, self reliant teacher friend Nalu, who despises all compromises and remains single to lead a meaningful life of convictions. Even among men there is a pad maker Rao who complains that his wife does not relate to him on equal terms but waits on him, and could talk of only middle class concerns like economizing the family budget though she does not need to. Saru’s vehement advocacy of woman’s college, and
her inability to render the same speech there, bring out her strong reaction against such a traditional stand and her inability to adhere to that way of life:

Listen, girls... whatever you do, you won’t be happy, not really, until you get married and have children. That’s what they tell us. And we have to believe them because no one has proved it wrong till now. But if you want to be happily married, there’s one thing you have to remember. Have you girls seen an old fashioned couple walking together? Have you noticed that the wife always walks a few steps behind her husband? That’s important, very important, because it’s symbolic of the truth. A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he’s an M.A., you should be a B.A. if he’s 5’ 4’ tall, you shouldn’t be more than 4’9”. 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. It can be traumatic, disastrous. And, I assure you, it is not worth it. He’ll suffer, you’ll suffer and so will the children. Woman’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. It will always be unequal, but take care that it’s
unequal in favour of your husband. If the scales tilt in your favour, god help you, both of you, and so you must pretend that you are not as smart as you really are, not as competent as you are, not as rational as you are, and not as strong either. You can nag, complain, henpeck, whine, moan but you can never be strong. That’s wrong which will never be forgiven (*TDHNT*, 124).

She acknowledges this as the way of the world perhaps leading to domestic bliss in the traditional sense of the term, but she would take the road less travelled by. Despite the agony it causes and the difficulties she has to steer through, there could be no turning back.

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* reacts against the traditional concept that “everything in a girl’s life, (is) shaped to that single purpose of pleasing a male” (*TDHNT*, 148). There are references to the Women’s Liberation Ideologue, Betty Freidan and Virginia Wolf’s idea of a woman’s right to “a room of her own”. But the strength of Shashi Deshpande’s novel is that she has not let it get trapped in the framework of clinchers borrowed from the Women’s Liberation Movement in the West.

The novel does not limit itself to woman’s problems. With a woman as the central figure, Shashi Deshapnde probes the universally relevant issues of human
relationships, man’s tragic aloneness, and so on. Even Saru the realist who sees the ultimate human reality in the human body and its process of decay, sees aloneness as a painful but inescapable human condition. She realizes that the suffering of multitudes does not mitigate one’s own suffering in any way and that she is doomed to sit and watch happiness recede from her, all by herself. It is this realization that helps her understand the mother’s last words: “... that’s what all of us have to face at the end. That we are alone. We have to be alone’ (TDHNT, 176)

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 her 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. “Home is the place”, writes Frost in his poem entitled. “The Death of a Hired Man”, “where, when you have to go there. They have to take you in”. Saru is taken in, but thinks herself still “a homeless refugee”, “A fleeting interruption”.

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

To be alone? Never a stretching hand?... Is it all a fraud then, the eternal cry of... my husband, my wife, my children, my parents? Are all human relationships doomed to be a
failure?... 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 is born to be cold and lonely and alone (*TDHNT*, 176).

But Saru will not let herself be bogged down by this for long. The novel surely has positive suggestions to offer. Saru places her trust in self confidence and her finding some relief in unburdening her heart to her father reiterates the idea of interdependence. The perfect partnership between Madhav and the father is a demonstration of the meaningful interdependence. It is a perfect pattern where they make no demand on each other – “the father cooks and he cleans. It’s a partnership, wordless, uncomplaining and perfect. A tacit understanding. As all good partnerships should be” (*TDHNT*, 30).

The feeling of homelessness is indicative of inner disintegration. Tension between the different parts within one’s self takes away the harmony within and without. At times Saru sees herself as two separate halves, “a two- in – one woman, “a confident professional in the white coat by day and “a trapped animal” by night. At other times it is more than mere dichotomy; it is total disintegration. Shashi Deshpande uses effective images like the woman possessed by the devil and the ventriloquist’s dummy to show the rift and distance between the activities in her and the actions carried out by her. There is a constant fear in her that even as a doctor she was just “a well trained animal... capable of making the right
noises, the right gestures automatically” (TDHNT, 19) and that some day the activities would fail and people would perceive “the white coat containing nothing”. The profession, however, is a “vital crutch” without which she could not hold herself up together.

Saru doodling both at the doctor’s desk and at the dining table – “one circle entwined in another... ending up sometimes with a complex intricate pattern of a strange mystifying beauty” (TDHNT, 18) – externalizes the intricacy in her problematic mind, woven by herself with varied thoughts of guilt. We can sense a subtle romanticizing and a desire to wallow in such a confrontation at bay. By avoiding open discussion she attempts a black out of an experience. Her reluctance to switch on the light in the early morning signifies her lingering in the dubious state awaiting solution to dawn on its own.

It is ironic that the father whom Saru had always considered “a negative man, incapable of strong feeling” and who had “always avoided things, The truth, Facts, Life, Confrontation” (TDHNT, 180), is the one who ultimately urges her to confront facts. Even the courage to admit to herself that her orbit comprises her children, her home, her practice, her patients and that very definitely Manu is out of it brings enormous relief. Her confession about her part in Dhruva’s death to the father brings relief too. She admits: “I have been clinging to the tenuous shadow of a marriage whose substance has long since disintegrated, because I have been afraid of proving my mother right” (TDHNT, 20). She is also aware that “there
was only the relief that comes from surrender. Not to pretend any more, not to struggle – it brought nothing but solace” (TDHNT, 179).

Rather than escaping from the dark or cursing the darkness all that Saru needs to do is to break the self imposed exile, 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 urging her to confront facts, she packs up to take an escape route unsure of where to go. Escape has been her mode of resolving the tangled knots, exchanging old horrors for new one. When Manu sends a telegram about his coming to take her she pleads that her father should not open the door for him.

Saru says that she has come to her father’s place to escape “the professional role”. But it is actually to escape the role being a wife that she is there. At the moment of utter despair it is the call of her profession that steadies her and gives her the courage to confront reality. Saru setting out to attend Sunita’s illness is significantly placed at the very end of the novel. In the very first part of the novel Saru says, “...as long as there is a patient before me, I feel real” (TDHNT, 18). She refers to the profession as a crutch, which speaks for its indispensability. The novel’s ending with Saru setting out to attend to a patient indicates the assertion of her career. There can be no compromise about it.
The proposition that Saru puts forward at the beginning of the novel to test whether she is carrying the hell within is proved right, and it is time for confrontation of the hellish terrors within. The dead mother, the dead brother, Manu and even Renu to an extent are externalized aspects of those terrors within. The mother and the brother have been sealed beyond confrontation or reconciliation. Saru has to deal with the living at least. She knows that she has been carrying the light, the solution within, and has to light up the situation and let the terrors flee. All along she had placed the problems outside of her, in Manu. She realizes that the problem lies as much within as outside. Earlier it was only Manu’s inadequacy that she saw. Now she sees her own inadequacy too — her inability to combine roles and be a source of love as a daughter, sister, wife and a mother. The brief stay away from Manu and the children and at a place that she had run away from has given her a good perspective and a chance to review her past, her own psychology, her own place in relation to others in the family and the society around. With the self realization comes the decision to confront the problems. She will not allow herself to be the object Manu can take his frustration on. Confrontation is not a one way process. Manu, too, has to face the reality of his own failure and his wife’s success. The doctor in Saru is much more important than the wife or mother in her.

But the strength of the novel is that in spite of the close involvement of the author with the subject, she is able to maintain considerable objectivity. She gifts
In relation to her brother, Dhruva, Saru’s status is belittled in the family. When he is alive, he is the mother’s favourite and Saru is neglected. What is worse Saru is later held responsible for Dhruva’s death. So indelibly is the guilt stamped on her mind that even after years of the episode she is guilt – ridden: “But there can never be any forgiveness. Never any atonement. My brother died because I heedlessly turned my back on him. My mother died alone because I deserted her. My husband is a failure because I destroyed his manhood” (TDHNT, 198).

If Saru is attacked on the plane of filial relationships, she is also offended by the mother again – for her body. The mother once again torments her by projecting the values of a male dominated society:

‘You’re growing up’ she would say. And there was something unpleasant in the way she looked at me…”

“And it became something shameful, this growing up so that you had to be ashamed of yourself…” (TDHNT, 55).

This is not generation gap. It is a power struggle where the mother, as said above, is the spokesperson of a male point of view. Saru breaks the umbilical chord – leaves home. This is her first public defiance of the patriarchal power system. Saru’s defiance is further expressed when she becomes economically independent and marries of her own choice. The institution of home, which is supposed to foster the growth of a child, robs the woman of her right of
respectability and individuality. The rejection of home and family at this juncture in the novel is Saru’s first foot forward towards independence. She leaves the ‘inner space’, the home. The novel may be viewed as Saru’s journey into inner space(s) one after the other.

From the first ‘inner space’ Saru moves to another by marrying Manohar, raising a family and having a home. Although Saru goes out a number of times, she comes back home the equal number of times. This turning to the inner space is conditioned by her female biology as there is an inner bodily space with productive potential. It is felt keenly accepting as well as rejecting it, as puberty and pregnancy are reacted against but they are also accepted when children come. Saru reacts against puberty: “And it became something shameful, this growing up.” It was “… like death you knew it was there, you knew it happened to others, but surely it couldn’t happen to you…. It was torture” (TDHNT, 55). But later Saru accepts this fact of life and is “released from a prison of fears and shame” (TDHNT, 56). The body and mind work in unison to result in the polarity of male female reactions. The female experience of differentiation, to which the initial response is negative, is later accepted under the ethos of enlightenment.

From this ‘inner space’ Saru moves to another ‘inner space’, i.e. her father’s home. If the ‘inner space’ with her husband was marked by his sexual sadism, then this one is marked by a psychological trauma. Her emotional upsurge breaks all barriers and she bares her sexual life to her father. All barriers and
pretences are broken here but to no avail. "It has been a fiasco, an exercise in futility, her coming here at all" (TDHNT, 194). Her quest for 'Home', the inner space has been disappointing. "No she couldn't call it home. How odd to live for so long and discover that you have no home at all!" (TDHNT, 195). Her father discourages her resentment towards Manohar and wishes her to go back to her home in Bombay. Saru travels from one inner space to another but defies one after another. At the end of the novel, however, by implications she goes back to her home in Bombay.

On the surface, If I Die Today (1982) appears to be a campus fiction, which was practised by the British novelists like Kingey Amis, Tom Sharpe, Malcolm Bhadbury and David Lodge in the 1970’s and 1980’s. The centre of action in the novels is the S.D.M College and Hospital established by the present Sethji and his father with a dream to make it "the best in the country" by snaring "the best he could" (If I Die Today, 2) Ironically, of late the campus has been the site of murders. It is in this background that Guruji, a cousin of Doctor Ashok’s suffering from cancer, is admitted there for treatment. His illness, his attitude to life, his admission in the lives of the medical doctors and their families and his death add to the name of his Guru from Ashok’s village “has risen above all human weaknesses and crossed that dreadful barrier... the eternal human fear of death” (If I Die Today, 9). He has come to accept his impending death, which others around him have not, in such a way that they find it impossible “to think of him as
a patient” (If I Die Today, 6). His character is a potent text. Brimming with multiple meanings it is read differently by different characters on different occasions. He is to Mira, Ashok’s wife, a rather peculiar man… a sadhu… or sanyasi or something … not really, but like that” (If I Die Today, 5). “Unusual, horribly fraud” (If I Die Today, 8). A brave man. “A saint ready to give himself capable of breaking all barriers, ignoring all formalities and approaching you directly, the narrator, and uninterfering fool” (If I Die Today, 83) to Cynthia, “a saint.. a blackmailer” (If I Die Today, 68). “A sick guy” (If I Die Today, 16) and “either a malicious man or a silly fool” (IIDT, 101). Since he is different from all around him and has begun to see himself as a spectator” (IIDT, 9) of the drama on the campus, he becomes a disturbing and dangerous presence on the campus haunted by the death of Prabhakar Tambe, a leader of the workers, in the Sethji’s mills’ (IIDT, 103), having genuine feeling for the workers, “A man in a million” (103). Due to wrong diagnosis of his case, since his death is shrouded in mystery, the campus is raucous with whispers, conjectures and confabulations. At the party hosted by Rani, the Dean’s wife who lives in a flat in Bombay away from her husband and joins her husband when her children come to visit their parents from the boarding schools, Garu and Manju discuss the case of a convict who has confessed the murders of more than forty people. A few days later Guru is found dead in his sleep, and involvement of some medical staff member is suspected. His doubts are further aggravated by the behaviour of Mariga, Dr.Kulkarni’s hyper sensitive daughter, whose insinuations suggest that her father is involved in Guru’s
murder. The death of Sumanta’s wife adds to the ongoing dance of death and an erstwhile nurse Vimala is implicated in it. When Mariga finds Tony “floating in the tank near the temple” (IIDT, 88), the fear ridden psyche of the campus gets worsened. Its impact on the sensitive soul of Mariga becomes hysteric and dreams of an imaginary accident and her subsequent death in a hospital leaving her hard-hearted father heartbroken. It is only after murderous attack on Vijay, the narrator’s husband, in the dark of the night that the true identity of the murderer is revealed, who is none other than Dr. Vidya, the sister of the Dean, whose psychic derangements caused by her secluded life and brother – fixation, compile her to behave, unlike others in her profession, in a way no better than that of “the insane animal of the night” (IIDT, 133).

Deshpande’s preoccupation with death, murder and nightmarish suspense in the novel (Dwivedi 1996: 46 – 53) is betrayed as it is in the novels like Come Up and Be Dead (1983) and The Binding Vine (1983). It attains the dimension of existential dilemma in The Dark Holds No Terrors (1980) through Sarita, in Roots and Shadows (1983) through Indu, and in That Long Silence through Jaya. The novel seems to be a script of a popular movie combining thrill, mystery, suspense and horror in it in the manner of Agatha Christie. It is due to the anxiety of Christie’s influence that the novelist differentiates her characters in the novel from Christie’s. Deshpande remarks in The Dark Holds No Terrors:
These were not characters created by Agatha Christie. These are real people. People (the narrator) knew. I could not just associate them with murder (*TDHNT*, 116).

Without disrespecting the authorial or narratorial intentions it has to be conceded, however, that Deshpande was in good measure influenced by Christie, and that she strives to exploit with considerable success, techniques of popular fiction with a tight plot and plausible character. The twists in the plot are brilliant. She builds the suspense regarding the identity of the murderer, and multiplies it by withholding its disclosure. She is a step ahead of her readers' imagination. But what makes her different is perceptible in her marginal voices which contain her central concerns in them. But for these voices, be they regarding life and death or womanhood or motherhood the novel would have been a cheap popularity of death. The Death was inevitable in case of Tambe, Guru and Tony as it is in the case of those whom they have left behind. But the realization of the way they prematurely reach their destination is tragic and utterly inhuman, for it is not only denial of their potentialities but of their right to live. The saving grace of the whole situation is that almost all rejection of life and that life... goes on as before which is another truth, and the people strain, if unsuccessfully, towards "becoming better persons", as they strive to "come through the ordeal purified and cleansed" having learnt.. (their) lessons" (*IIDT*, 137). Yet another realization pertaining to fuller understanding of human predicament dawns on these people.... "Life is never so
definite as all that. We can never change overnight. We are chained to our old selves, and can do no more than muddle, on coping with each day as it comes” (IIDT, 137). Definite it may not be, but life as Deshpande presents it in the novel, goes on. After a string of tragic deaths life sprouts again through the narrator who gives birth to a baby girl the day after that terrible night (IIDT, 138). It is this assertion and celebration of life that make Deshpande’s work different from a popular writer – be it Agatha Christie or someone else, for novel as such is the exploration of human situation and life in fictional terms with a rich imaginative fullness where the sole interest does not lie in the surprising turns of the plot and in the mystery of ‘whodunit’ but in the life which it generates and in the active participation that it depicts.

A good story teller that Shashi Deshpande is, presents the predicament of women in such a way as would voice her concerns for problems and perils of those of her sex. But she is not self conscious, as for instance Anita Desai often is, or writing for effect. In If I Die Today, as in her other novels, one of the concerns of the novelist is to depict what happens to women after marriage. What they have been, what they have become, and what is in store for them. On the surface, all is well with her middle class women. They have a relatively happy married life with their not so badly placed husbands and are blessed with children in most cases. Yet there is something rotten in the state of their domestic and married life, for which to a considerable extent their spouses are somehow responsible: Education,
economic independence, and motherhood to disturb the existing equation. The story of Manju and Vijay is a telling instance of it. In this kind of relationship neither the husband (Vijay) is of an out and out bad sort, nor is the wife (Manju) a clingy woman who sets out to be a victim. She has been a loving, affectionate and understanding wife before she turned into an emotional pretzel. Now she is neither content nor confident. She is in a rather miserable state and unable to see that her feelings of misery are not due to her faults. She seems to have become a victim of what psychologists call a passive aggressive husband who neither hits the wife nor says even a single angry word to her, but by his actions, words and sly comments makes her feel guilt ridden and censured. It is through this tender trap that Manju and others like her are controlled by their male counterparts. Manju finds her married life fraught with silences and barriers. It seems that the motherhood is the cause of Manju’s misery, and it makes her “Feel like a breeding wifehood or motherhood but in the attitude of the middle class male which deprivileges the woman against the man the moment she becomes a wife. Manju avers:

“A marriage. You start off expecting so many things. And bit by bit, like dead leaves, the expectations fall off. But... two people who have shut themselves off in two separate glass jars? Who can see each other but can’t communicate? Is this a marriage?” (IJD, 24).
The marriage is almost on the verge of wreckage and “it is the Indian male” (IIDT, 27) who emerges as the villain and the burden on the Indian Woman. Incidentally, the pattern of relationship remains more or less the same in various sets of relationships in the novel – be it the case of Manju and Vijay, Smita and Shyam, Suman and Vimala, Shanta and Kulkarni, Mira and Ashok or Cynthia and Tony. Even the ‘oh-so-foreign’ Dr. Kulkarni after all is “just a traditional Hindu male” longing for a son and heir, and has reduced his wife Shanta to a dull colourless “shadow of her husband” (IIDT, 36). The narrator finds the “given” motherhood as a burden. Womanhood without motherhood remains inadequate but it inveigles a woman into dependence, and reduces her to a shadow of her husband. In such a state she has no other place but her husband’s to go, which ironically falls short of becoming home, for an invisible wall stands between their hearts. Faced with the question “Are you going back home?” the narrator ruminates.

Was I? Yes, where else could I go? But I was going home because there was no other place? And yet, what could I do? There was Sonu. And this child to come. For a moment, I resented them bitterly. Motherhood, I thought. It’s a trap. Keeping you in cage until you lost the desire for freedom; until you forget what the word ‘freedom’ means (IIDT, 47).

Even the issueless wives suffer in the novel. The novelist examines the plight of women from a different perspective by presenting the case of an
economically independent non–Hindu family and thereby suggesting that the fate of a woman remains the same irrespective of caste, culture, religion or economic status. All was more than well with Tony and Cynthia before marriage. But with the cold touch of marriage new problems crop up. The question ‘who earns more of the two?’ matters more than anything else in marriage, for Cynthia is a medico and her husband Tony just a Games master. At least Tony feels so (*IIDT*, 84). Cynthia also understands the malaise that has crept in their marriage and the reasons behind “his going down hill”. According to her, Tony “had an odd complex too about my being a doctor. If I’d given up my job and become the pathetically clinging female, may be things could have gone right between us” (*IIDT*, 95).

In most of these cases marriage seems to have failed or reached the point of wreckage, in spite of education, economic independence and material well-being. For Guru nevertheless marriage is a “relationship in which one dispenses with masks” (*IIDT*, 41). Ironically, women are at the receiving end. Although majority of them have learnt to live with their fate like Shyam has, and most of them like Mira have to suffer “Despair” (*IIDT*, 4), their newly acquired consciousness prompts them to voice their agony and anger. It is their middle – class mentality that dissuades them from revolting against the tyranny. Even this is no mean achievement on their part because the mentality of the class they come from leaves
little scope for its rebels. The “articulation of one’s feelings and reactions is in itself heralding of a revolt and must be taken as such” (Chandra 1996: 61).

Shashi Deshpande explores in *If I Die Today* her favourite themes, of which woman’s condition remains her principal preoccupation. She continues with it in her works like *That Long Silence*, in which Jaya examines the state of her existence, and resists from being defined with reference to her husband – as a footnote to him, that complements but has no independent existence. The doctor invites her to visit him but only with Mohan, her husband; ‘why your husband, of course’ – what did he mean by that? Was it impossible for me to relate to the world without Mohan? A husband is like a sheltering tree…. Vanitamami, did you, without knowing it, speak the most profound truth I’m destined to hear in my life” (*That Long Silence*, 1989: 167). But as elsewhere, the novelist does not show the courage with which to explore the woman’s situation as would endear her to the feminist school. In *If I Die Today* also towards the end a baby girl is born to the narrator and is named Gauri, the name being her husband’s choice. And she too ‘let it be’ (*IIDT*, 138). This is symbolic of reconciliation between the husband and the wife not only in the narrator’s family but in all other families; the novelist intends to end the novel on an optimistic and conciliatory note.

Deshpande’s fictional achievement should not be seen in terms of her subscription or non – subscription to feminism, for a writer of some substance is committed to human situation and not necessarily to some ideology. She, for
herself chooses the path of conciliation without yielding either to absolute acquiescence or to the temptations of embracing the feminist mould would have with slight manipulation of her creative endeavour. Her work mediates between the existing state of women and the female feminist consciousness. However, her insights and depth of perception ensure that her fictional creations rise above the staple 'whodunit' sort of work or mere ideological subscription, and go on to become serious reflections on the human condition with particular focus on the perils and predicament of her sex in their world.

The movement of Shashi Deshpande's heroines from her parental home to the outside world, through education and marriage, does not really initiate them into a knowledge of the self. Their defiance of the mother does not ensure them the freedom they desire. Their return home, in the absence of the mother-figure only helps them realize their own selves. They had imagined that their mothers stifled their growth and so defied them. But when husbands began to kill the very roots of their existence, they defied their husbands and found a way of their own, rejecting all over-riding influences. Their fear of losing themselves in the dark mysterious universe is dispelled when they come to understand that life can be better if one can believe in one's self and if one accepts the responsibility for his own life.