A close study of Shashi Deshpande’s novels reveals her deep insight into the plight of Indian women, who feel smothered and fettered, in a tradition-bound, male-dominated society. She delineates her women characters in the light of their hopes, fears, aspirations and frustrations, who are aware of their strengths and limitations, but find themselves thwarted by the opposition and pressure from a society conditioned overwhelmingly by the patriarchal mind-set. She highlights their inferior position and the subsequent degradation in a male dominated society. Deshpande’s women protagonists are victims of the prevalent gross gender discrimination, first as daughters and later as wives. They are conscious of the great social inequality and injustice towards them; and struggle against the oppressive and unequal nature of the social norms and rules that limit their capability and existence as wife. Fettered to their roles in the family, they question the subordinate status ordained to them by society. Her works have drawn great critical attention and acclaim for her sensitive and realistic representation of the Indian middle class women. Her sincere concern for women and their oppressive lot is reflected strongly in all her novels.

If all her novels are taken together, we find that Shashi Deshpande is obviously concerned with feminist issues. Not only are all her protagonists women but also the story is narrated from their point of view. It is only in one of the nine novels, *A Matter of Time*, that she has shifted to the omniscient narration, but there too it is the women’s point of view that prevails. Indu (*Roots and Shadows*) is a journalist, Jaya (*That Long Silence*) a housewife and a creative writer, Saru (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*) a doctor, Urmic (*The Binding Vine*) a college teacher,
Sumi (*A Matter of Time*) though educated, takes up a job only later, while Savitribai and Leela (*Small Remedies*) are a singer and a social worker respectively. Madhu, the narrator (*Small Remedies*), is also a journalist and a writer. Deshpande thus seems to believe that it is the educated and the creative woman who will liberate herself first and contribute to women’s liberation both actively as well as through her behaviour. While the lower class-working woman is handicapped for want of education and economic opportunities, the upper-class woman is a slave to material comforts for which she makes compromises. Besides, Deshpande’s stress is on creativity rather than on any thing else.

In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu undergoes great mental trauma in her childhood and in marriage due to her husband Jayant’s double standards. Ostensibly educated and liberal, he is intolerant about any deviation on her part from the traditional role of a wife. He is no different from the other less educated and conservative Indian men when it comes to playing the role of a husband. The miserable plight of Indu’s Kakies and atyas is revealed through Indu’s eyes. The heart-rending account of Akka’s child marriage reveals the miserable condition Indian women of the older generation had to live in. Shashi Deshpande has remarkably presented the inferior status of women by giving us an insight into the married lives of Indu’s aunts and other relations. Although Indu is educated and has a liberal outlook, she realizes bitterly that her lot is no different from her numerous illiterate and village-bred aunts, and she too a victim like them of the patriarchal social set-up.

The *Dark Holds No Terrors* is a telling example of men who are intolerant about playing a second-fiddle role in marriage, and how their manhood gets hurt when their wives gain a superior status in society. Manu feels embarrassed and insecure with the rising status of his wife Saru.

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya’s troubles in marriage stem from her husband’s tolerance towards any deviation from her role of a subservient
wife. When threatened with charges of corruption, he expects her to go into hiding with him; when she refuses to comply, he is greatly enraged and walks out of the house. Jaya is miserable as she followed her Vanitamami’s advice that a husband is like a ‘sheltering tree’, which must be kept alive at any cost, for without it the family becomes unsheltered and vulnerable. She does so but finds herself and the children the more unsheltered and insecure.

In The Binding Vine, Shashi Deshpande raises the issue of marital rape. Women like Mira, Urmī’s mother-in-law, have to bear the nightly sexual assault by their husband silently. Other women like Shakutai, her sister Sule, Kalpana and her sister have their own sorry tales. Shakutai’s husband is a drunkard and a good-for-nothing fellow, who leaves his wife and children for another woman. Kalpana is brutally raped by Prabhakar, Sulu’s husband. Urmī takes up cudgels on Kalpana’s behalf and the culprit is caught. Urmī’s husband is in navy and during his long absence she craves for some physical gratification. Her friendship with Dr. Bhaskar provides her ample opportunity, but she never oversteps the boundaries chalked out in marriage. This virtue of hers remains unacknowledged by her husband.

A Matter of Time is yet another novel wherein the husband walks out on his family comprising the wife and three daughters. Sumī, is so shocked that she lapses into complete silence but, apparently tries hard to keep things normal for her daughters. Her desertion is a cause for great humiliation and mental trauma for her as it’s not only a matter of great shame and disgrace but a bitter realization of being unwanted. Words of sympathy from relations fail to console her. She is self-respecting and takes up a job for herself and her daughters. Though, Gopal, her husband, returns but she is a new Sumi now. She has coped with the tragedy with remarkable stoicism.
In *Small Remedies*, is narrated the tragic tale of Savitribai Indoreker, doyen of the Gwalior Gharana. She leads the most unconventional of lives, but undergoes great mental trauma because of the double standards practiced in society. Right from her childhood she had sensed the gross gender discrimination in the society that had one set of laws for men and another for women. Madhu, too, is a victim of double standards of society. She gets totally estranged by her husband Som after she naively discloses to him about her single act of physical intercourse before marriage, though Som has himself had a full-fledged physical relation with another married woman before marriage.

*If I Die Today* contains elements of detective fiction. The narrator, a young college lecturer, is married to a doctor, and they live on the Campus of a big medical college and hospital. The arrival of Guru, a terminal cancer patient disturbs the lives of the doctors and their families old secrets are revealed, two people murdered, but the tensions in the family resolved after the culprit is unmasked. One of memorable character is Mriga, a 14 year old girl. Her father, Dr. Kulkarni, appears modern and westernized, yet he is seized by the Hindu desire for a son and heir, and never forgives Mriga for not being a son, her mother too, is a sad suppressed creature, too weak to give Mriga the support and love, a child needs to grow up into a well balanced adult.

*Come Up and Be Dead* is a psychological thriller. In this novel Deshpande demonstrates the versatality of her award winning literary skills. The suicide of a school girl is an exclusive school is something, even the efficient Head Mistress cannot deal with specially when it is followed by rumours pointing at her brother. Two more deaths follow, making the school a hotbed of fear and suspicion. After an attempted murder, Devyani, the Head Mistress’s cousin and housekeeper, glimpsing a conspiracy behind it at all and knowing it has to be stopped, accepts an invitation to come up and be dead then.
Moving On is a story that begins, conventionally enough, with a woman’s discovery of her father’s diary. As Manjiri, Unlocks the past through its pages rescuing old memories and recasting events and responses, the present makes its own demands: a rebellious daughter, devious property sharks and a lover who threatens to throw her life out of fear again. The ensuing struggle to reconcile nostalgia with reality and the fire of the body with the desire for companionship races to an unexpected resolution, twisting and turning through complex emotional landscapes with her uncanny insight into the nature of human relationship and an equally unerring eye for detail. Deshpande ventures further than she ever has the terrain of the mind, teasing out the nuances and exploding the stereotypes of familial bonds.

It has been repeatedly pointed out by Shashi Deshpande’s critics that she is a feminist writer, she herself says that she writes about human beings only. In an interview given to Sue Dickman, she says,

...People seem to think you are writing about women. writing about Jaya. I am writing about Jaya. I am writing about Saru. I wrote about Saru, and then Saru is over; and I am writing about Jaya, and then Jaya is over; and then I am writing about Mira. Not women. And my books particularly, I feel, get slotted as women’s books, more than anyone else’s. I don’t know why.¹

In the same interview she was asked whether this happened because the main characters in her novels are all strong women. She replied that women should not be judged merely as women and that she is happy that readers are able to relate themselves to her characters. But she also says that there is nothing wrong in being called a feminist writer. She says,

Because by saying so you’re saying there’s something wrong with being a woman writer, something inferior or subordinate
in being called a woman writer. So I don’t want to do that either. I am a woman, and I write about women, and I am going to say it loudly. I don’t want to disassociate myself which is like saying,” Look, that’s an interior kind of a club, and I don’t want to be a part of it.²

Thus in choosing a protagonist who is somewhat feeble at the beginning but emerges in the end as a stronger woman with a transformed consciousness, Shashi Deshpande follows a liberal ‘feminist’ ideal where growth in consciousness is the objective. Chandra Holm interviewed Deshpande for *Indian Review of Books*. Holm told her that her protagonists change a lot when they marry and lose part of their identity and self confidence. In other words, her main characters have an incredible inner strength. On this Shashi commented,

Yes, I do believe that women have a great strength. All humans do. Actually we have reserves we are often unaware of. But for women the situation is made more complex by the fact that they have been told they are weak, they are made to believe in their weakness. And often they learn to hide their own strength, because a woman’s strength seems to weaken a man.³

In all these novels the protagonists are not only educated, creative and liberated but also mature and compassionate enough to reach out to others who are at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. Indu (*Roots and Shadows*) helps Padmini to settle down and Vithal to have his education even though the latter is not related to the family. In *The Binding Vine* Shakutai finds her own voice through Urmī’s sympathy and guidance. Jaya (*That Long Silence*) helps the crazy Kusum against everyone’s wishes, later helps Jeeja when her son has an accident. Saru (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*) takes great interest in her patients.
In almost all Deshpande’s novels, we find that the protagonist is exposed to some shock at the beginning. When That Long Silence opens, Jaya’s husband is accused of corruption and has been advised by his accomplice to remain in hiding for a few days. That’s what makes them shift temporarily to their Dadar flat. All this sets Jaya thinking. In Roots and Shadows, Akka dies, in A Matter of Time, Gopal walks out on Sumi. Saru is repeatedly attacked by Manohar, her husband. In Small Remedies, Madhu’s son is killed in a communal riot. Chandra Holm raised this question in her interview: “It is as if all of these characters needed a strong kick to be shaken out of their placid existences to discover the stuff they were actually made of. Why is this? In reply to this question, Shashi Deshpande said,

My novels always begin in a moment of crisis. Most of us go on unquestioningly until we are shaken out of the rut by something catastrophic or disastrous. Suddenly all that you have taken for granted becomes doubtful, everything falls apart. You begin then to question everything. And it is through this questioning, through this thinking that you move on, pick up your life once again. But you are never the same after this. This is true of all human beings, not just women....In this thinking process, humans do discover their own potential. So do the women I have written about.⁴

Another aspect to Deshpande’s novels is the lack of cordial relation between a mother and a daughter: In Roots and Shadows, Indu’s mother dies in childbirth, hence a delineation of the mother-daughter relationship is not there. In The Dark Holds No Terrors, the mother-daughter relationship occupies the centrestage. Saru’s mother’s cold and indifferent attitude towards her develops a sense of antagonism in Saru towards her mother. She develops aversion to all the traditional values represented by her mother. Saru’s experiences in her crucial years of puberty make her hate womanhood itself. The entire novel revolves
round Saru’s uncordial relationship with her mother. It is to cause displeasure to her mother that she takes up medicine as a career and later marries a man from outside her caste.

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya also does not have any cordial relationship with her mother, and in turn her mother also does not have any strong maternal feelings towards her daughter. It is her mother’s disapproval that makes her agree to marry Mohan. Jaya, in her turn, has great attachment to her son, but does not have equal warmth towards her daughter. She hates her mother for not living up to the ideal role of the perfect mother. Like Saru, she tries to be as dissimilar as possible, rejecting her as a role model.

In *The Binding Vine*, we find Urmii’s relation with her mother as direct and frontal. Her hostility towards her mother is evident from her angry tone and language. She uses when speaking with her or about her to others. She hates her for having sent her to Ranidurg as a child to be brought up by her grandparents. Shakutai also has a love-late relationship with her daughter, Kalpana.

In *Small Remedies*, we find Savitribai Indorekar’s relationship with her daughter Munni is not so warm. Munni feels unwanted, unloved and rejected by her mother and she develops a feeling of aversion towards her or her identity. Her mother dissociates herself from her daughter and in turn, she too dissociates herself from her mother. Munni even goes to the extent of taking a new name, “Shaila Joshi.” Thus, in Shashi Deshpande’s novels, “There is no mother who could serve as a model for the daughter.”

One of the recurring themes in her novels is rape in marriage—man imposing himself on a woman. The causes of this vary from case to case. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, it happens because Saru begins to earns more money than Monohar and society recognizes her as the breadwinner. In *The Binding Vine*, it is Mira’s husband’s obsession for
her and his idea that love can be expressed only through the sexual act. In *Roots and Shadows*, Akka is too young and frail for her hefty husband, so he is drawn to other women. Even in *That Long Silence*, there are occasions when Mohan has sex with Jaya quite against her will. However, the extent of cruelty differs in each case. Akka (*Roots and Shadows*) finds the sexual act so painful that she prefers to be locked up in a room and starved rather than go to her husband’s room. Mira trembles at the arrival of the night. In Jaya’s case, the cruelty does not go that far. In fact, after the sexual act, Mohan inevitably asks her whether he has hurt her! But in her later novels, especially in *A Matter of Time* and *Small Remedies*, we find that the couples almost transcend sex. In the interview given to Chandra Holm, Shashi Deshpande says that,

> “the small remedies are the small good moments in life. If we consider *A Matter of Time* in this light, we find such moments when Sumi and Gopal visit a friend and spend an evening on a river bank. Even when they get united for the first time, Gopal is in no hurry to give vent to his lust. He waits for Sumi to be ready for it—both physically as well as mentally.”

We can say the same about Madhu and her husband, Leela and Joe and Savitribai and Ghulam Saab in *Small Remedies*. For all these couples, sex is not important for its own sake. It is some other bond such as music, or social work, that ties them and is a stronger link than sex.

Thus we can draw a tentative conclusion: to the older generation of men, love means lust. To the women, however, Sex is tortuous. In Jaya’s case, there is no cruelty but there is nothing except physicality that connects her to Mohan. Jaya’s is a representative case of an average Indian housewife. Love between Sumi-Gopal, Leela-Joe, Savitribai-Ghulam Saab transcends the body and its limitations too. This love creates the small good moments of life which are the small remedies of
which Shashi Deshpande speaks in the interview. She states that she does not “believe in a simple opposition of bad bad man and good good women. I don’t believe the world is like that at all.” Thus, she has constructed motifs of patriarchy and oppression by employing the method of negation and affirmation. Her protagonists are victims of the Indian patriarchy and after initial submission resist the oppressive situation, thereby reflecting the author’s view that a women must assert herself within marriage to preserve her individuality.

In all the novels, patriarchy and the values it implies are criticized explicitly as well as implicitly. Patriarchy works in two different ways. Some of the external and obvious ways that patriarchy uses for domination are sexual and physical violence, mental torture etc. This form is comparatively easier to deal with. The other subtler forms which have been imbibed by generations and have taken the form of well-established traditions are not so easy to retaliate against because the victims themselves have internalized these values. These include gender defined roles. In That Long Silence, when Jaya suggests that the boys clean up after lunch, it is the women who are more amused. Similarly, when Jaya wants Mohan to cook, he not only goes wild with anger but remains offended for a long time. These subtle forms reinforce the impression that patriarchal values are both natural and universal. Anything, therefore, that deviates from them appears abnormal.

Deshpande here portrays the modern, educated woman’s predicament in that although she has become aware of egalitarian values, her emotional conditioning in childhood has been in a patriarchal environment. So, like her uneducated counterpart, she can neither accept it as natural nor can she fight against it very easily. Deshpande also suggests that it is women themselves who perpetuate patriarchy through their own actions. Jaya (That Long Silence) of her own accord decides to model herself on the women of Mohan’s family. She also tries to please Mohan as a woman. Even the educated Vanna (The Binding
Vine) allows Harish to dominate her. Sunanda (Roots and Shadows), instead of fighting against patriarchal domination becomes cunning and devious. In Roots and Shadows, Shankarappa remarks that women are obstinate like donkeys and refuge to change. Thus Deshpande blames women too for perpetuating patriarchy in the following ways: By refuting to change themselves; by not rebelling against patriarchy; by dominating those who are weaker. Patriarchy is also criticized by questioning the importance given to a male child. We see this in The Dark Holds No Terrors and A Matter of Time also through views casually expected by men. For instance, Mohan sees toughness in his mother’s silence. However, although patriarchy as a way of life is criticized, the male characters emerge neither as villains nor as objects of ridicule. It is true they are not conscientious enough to change the patriarchal order by themselves but they are not full-fledged villains either. Brought up in patriarchal environment, they continue the tradition. The writer criticizes the social structure, not individuals. Although most men are self centered and callous, there are a few who help the protagonists to evolve their own identity. Kamat (That Long Silence) is one such man who wants Jaya to work hard on her writing and use it as a means of liberation. Another such man is Naren (Roots and Shadows). Liberated himself, he wants Indu not to make any compromises as a person or a writer.

Shashi Deshpande’s view on marriage is different from what most of the western feminists like Simone Behavior, Germaine Greer and Kate Millet held. In The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir writes, “It has been said that marriage diminishes man, which is often true, but almost always it annihilates woman.” Germaine Greer even goes to the extent of saying that woman should not marry. Kate Millet is of the opinion that marriage reduces the status of woman to a mere object for decoration and a total of man’s sexual gratification. But Deshpande never subscribes to the views of any feminist. Her ideology may not be of the type radical feminists hold but she has her own brand of feminism which, as
Jaidev says, “has to be authentic, rooted and context bound.” And Deshpande is not against the institution of marriage, as her women protagonists strive to make their marriages work in their endeavor to lead a meaningful existence. Shashi Deshpande keeps her narratives female-centered as she gives and intimate insight into the psyche of the middle-class Indian women who feel oppressed and hemmed in by their patriarchal socialization. She provides new ideals for a better man-woman relationship, thereby broadening the scope of woman’s existence. She not only presents a feminist insight into patriarchal values, but also prescribes a balance between tradition and modernity as a working philosophy for the contemporary woman. To her, tradition are the values of harmony and coexistence that symbolize the Indian way of life, and modernity is the assertion of the independent, individual identity. After having passively played out their socially ordained roles, her protagonists move out of their cloistered selves to assert their individuality as human beings. Deshpande feels that the woman must be true to her own self if she wants to realize herself. The straitjacketed role imposed on woman only bogs her down in mire of negation and suppression. She must venture out of the familial framework to give full expression to her individuality and identity.

An evolutionary and a very comprehensive picture of the Indian woman belonging to different educational and economic levels emerges on the large canvas that Deshpande chooses for her novels. In The Binding Vine Akka, Mira and Inni represent the older generation while Urmi and Vanaa represent the younger one. Akka’s husband is different to her. Mira’s husband is a pervert and Inni is separated from her child. Urmi is even more liberated than Vanaa. In A Matter of Time, Kalyani, who represents the older generation, is never forgiven for being responsible for the loss of her male child. She is so scared of Shripati that she trembles at his sight. Her daughter Sumi takes Gopal’s walking out on her with resignation and tries to evolve her own independent identity.
Sumi’s daughter Aru seeks legal aid to punish her irresponsible father. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya’s mother, Mohan’s mother and both the Ajjis represent the older generation. But among these, Jaya’s mother and the Saptagiri Aji are selfish and dominating. Mohan’s mother is completely crushed by mental torture and repeated childbirths. In *Roots and Shadows* too, the women of the older generation have to suffer because of sexual violence, widowhood, drudgery etc. Sunanda, who belongs to the next generations, becomes devious while adapting herself to the circumstances. Sumitra becomes a social snob. Padmini belongs to the younger generation and is aware of her mismatched marriage but is helpless due to the circumstances. The same range of characters is seen at the level of class. The problems of Shakutai, Sulu, Kalpana (*The Binding Vine*), Jeeja, Nayana, Tara (*That Long Silence*) are different from those of the middle class women. Lack of educational and economic opportunities, especially for women, has made patriarchy even stronger among the working class. Men have mistresses and neglect the family. Women have to look after the children and be breadwinners too. Physical violence, sexual, above, and mental torture are a part of daily life. In spite of poverty, childlessness and not having a male child are treated as calamities; women have to suffer for it. Women, having internalized patriarchal values, blame themselves for their barrenness. Unable to retaliate, their aggressiveness turns inward or is directed at children. Shakutai becomes a dominating figure as soon as she enters the home. Sulu sets herself afire and dies. Kusum too becomes loony and commits suicide. But here, they younger generation is bolder. Tara does not suffer as resignedly as her mother-in-law jeeja. She openly prays for the death of her drunkard husband. However, the writer and her protagonists seem to believe that both in the middle class and the working class, the necessary changes will come only through education. The younger girls, even from the working class go school and develop the strength to fight against injustice. The protagonists of Shashi Despande’s novels too evolve.
Jaya (*That Long Silence*), Indu (*Roots and Shadows*) and Saru (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*) make resolutions to change themselves through self-realization. But Savitribai and Leela (*Small Remedies*), Shakutai and Sumi (*A Matter of Time*) change themselves. In short, the protagonists of the novels in the first group think much and act little, while those in the second group think as well as act. Their thoughts shape their actions, and actions influence their thoughts.

An important attribute that almost all Shashi Deshpande’s protagonists have is their passion for writing. To them, writing is not just a hobby or a pastime, but means of self-expressions and liberation. Jaya (*That Long Silence*) is a writer and she takes her role seriously. However, two things upset her. In one of her stories, there is a man who cannot reach out to his wife except through sex. Her husband Mohan, who is too insensitive to understand literature, feels that Jaya has written about him. He fears public ignominy. He gets so upset that he scold Jaya, and she decides not to write anything that will even remotely resemble her life. Secondly, her story about a child widow is rejected by a magazine. It is Kamat who tells her what is wrong with the story. He tells her that she is holding herself in. Jaya’s predicament is the predicament of all those writers who have been suppressed. But under Mohan’s influence, Jaya turns to popular writing and writes a column called ‘Seeta’. In Indian mythology, Seeta of course stands for total self-surrender. Deshpande makes us aware that a woman writer can misuse her gift of writing in order to perpetuate patriarchy. Thus Jaya closes the doors of her mind on all those women who suffer, and about whom she wants to write. Mira is also a writer and expresses her agony through her poems and diaries. She is so committed that she wakes up at an odd time of the night and writes without any one’s knowledge. We have already seen why she chooses two different languages for her poems and diaries. Deshpande portrays patriarchal domination in the field of writing too. When she meets her favourite poet Venu, he passes a
remark that a beautiful woman like her need not write poetry. It is ironic that a man who is himself a well-known poet sees a fellow-poet as just a woman. Venu achieves fame, wealth and glory as a poet while Mira has to write stealthily. Indu (*Roots and Shadows*) is also a journalist and a writer. She particularly writes about women and she is unhappy when she has to write untruth about a certain woman. However, she is conscientious and decides not to repeat her mistake, this makes us hopeful that in the future she will use her writing for positive purposes. Sumi (*A Matter of Time*) writes a play based on a story. It is notable that she turns to writing after Gopal has walked out on her. Shashi Deshpande wants women writers to take their role seriously. In the interview with Sue Dickman, she says that women writers can show the world and say things that no one has until now said. About commitment to writing she says, “Even when I was sick I had a lot of health problems—even in bed I used to sit and work and write and somehow I know that was it. This kind of a commitment, I find, not many women have. A lot of people want to say that they are writers, but they are not willing to commit themselves to that extent.” She adds: “In one of Patrick White’s novels there is a painter, and somebody asks him. ‘Are you still painting’? And he says. ‘still breathing’? I mean ‘Are you still eating, are you still shifting…?’” It is only since I got the Acadami Award that people recognize that I am a writer. And people how, when they ring me up, do say, ‘Am I disturbing you?’

In the interview given to *Indian Review of Books*, Chandra Holm asked her with reference to *Small Remedies*, whether there was any specific reason for her to use music as a symbol of rebellion, as a symbol of the breaking up of shackles that chain women in our society. In answer to this, she said, “I have always been interested in the woman artist, the woman creator. From Indu, the journalist-writer, to Jaya, the writer who tried to silence herself and Mira, the poet who was silenced by society, I have now reached Savitribai. Any act of creation outside
the family was considered wrong for women therefore, any such act was an act of rebellion. And it is amazing how, in spite of all these taboos, there have been women writers, painters, musicians etc."

We have seen that women and their problems have a central place in Shashi Deshpande’s novels. And so women characters, their interaction with men and other women, their attitudes and values are more important in the over all design of the novels than the plot. In short, her earlier novels are what may be called ‘the novels of self realization’ and so the area of action is the mind and not the material world. After their moment of crisis, the protagonists isolate themselves and go into temporary exile. This is because they need to take a quiet and objective survey of themselves and their relationship with others. This is not possible in day-to-day life, that gives us neither the time nor the space required you such self-realization. Besides, they must also go away from those persons about whom they have to think. So, Jaya (That Long Silence) comes to the Dadar flat and keeps moving between past and present. In The Dark Holds No Terrors, Saru, in spite of her estrangement from the family, returns to her father. In Roots and Shadows, Indu returns home after a gap of several years and takes a fresh survey of her relationship with her family, as well as with Jayant. In her later novels The Binding Vine, A Matter of Time and Small Remedies self-realization is not an isolated act but is interwoven with action. In the Indian Review of Books interview, Shashi Deshpande says,

People/characters first come to me. They development in my mind. In that sense, I know the person I am going to write about. The plot then develops. The plot actually works out through the development of the person, his/her reaction to other people in the society. Other than that when I start writing I do not have a ready plot. In fact, the end is a surprise to me also, many times.
This also explains as to why in all the novels the plot is quite thin and can be summarized in just a few lines. No sub plot is to be found, although the same person may move about in two different worlds. In the *Binding Vine*, Urmì moves in her own world as well as that of Shakutai.

Shashi Deshpande’s views on the novel as a form of literature and her concepts of a good Indian novel also deserve some consideration. Shashi Deshpande wrote an article in *The Sunday Times of India* under the title ‘Who’s the heaviest of them all?’ At the beginning of this article, she refers to Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy*, Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor is Last Sigh* and Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*. She further says that these novels are packed with people and events from all walks of life. No detail is left out here. Pico lyre reviewed *A Fine Balance in Time* and called it an epic which is worthy of the 19th century masters of tragic realism, from Hardy to Balzac and strong contender, as he puts it, ‘for, the title of the ‘great Indian novelist.’ What interests Deshpande in all this is the reference to the ‘Great Indian Novelist.’ What worries her is the underlying assumption that the English novel without linguistic boundaries is an ‘Indian’ novel, while the rest are merely regional. She says that ‘Indian’ and ‘regional’ are not mutually exclusive. We are, all of us, both. “But there it is: to write in English is to be ‘Indian’; to blank out for the world the rest of our writing.”

The reference to the other two novels *A Suitable Boy* and *The Moor’s Last Sigh* suggests that a certain kind of novel alone deserves the title ‘The great Indian novel.’ It is true that they focus on ‘the political, the national experience and a national consciousness,’ and that they have a ‘large cavas—both in space and time.’ History is very much present in these novels. Shashi Deshpande refers to Aristotle who said that poetry is more philosophical and weightier than history because poetry speaks of the universal and history of the particular. Shashi Deshpande combines these two ideas and ironically comments that writers
are now using history to make literature weightier. Even if Rushdie’s view that literature is self-validating is accepted, the question does arise, “Does the migrant writer create not entirely out of memory, but as becomes obvious through newspaper clippings as well? Does distance make the national experience more visible than the personal?” She feels that the piling on of detail adds nothing to the novel. It only creates extra weight under which it sags. Hemmingway had said that writing should be like iceberg with ‘seveneights of it under water.’ She then refers to Rushdie who speaks of the ability to see at once from the inside and outside, but Amitav Shosh’s The Shadow Lines disproves this Deshpande says. “The Shadow Lines narrates a poignant story of partition, boundaries and connections between peoples. The riots in East Pakistan in which the narrator’s cousin Tridib dies, comes to us not through a mass of detail, but through the sparsely related, long-silenced memories of two people. So in truth does history reach us through memories and silence.” She tells the writers that here in India our visions are different: “Let’s not be so overcome by the Empire strikes back phenomenon that we forget the context in which most of us here write.” She also refers to the view that because of the weight given to big themes and national experience, there has been the marginalization of women’s writing. But Shashi Deshpande does not agree with this view. She says, “To me as a reader there are no margins Anita Deshi’s Clear Light of Day and Attia Hossian’s Sunlight on a Broken Column, which give a glimpse of the period through private lives, are excellent books.”

I think that this also answers the question whether Shashi Deshpande, who has not written about the so-called national experience and national consciousness, should be considered a postcolonial writer. If we apply Shashi Deshpande’s own criterion that a book should give a glimpse of the period through private lives, we can say that Shashi Deshpande has certainly written about the national experience. In all her novels, she portrays the empowerment of the suppressed sections in
India. In *Roots and Shadows*, Anant, the upper-caste Brahmin, loses his hold over the newly empowered castes and classes. He loses much of his land to those who tilled it until now. His income is greatly reduced and a lower caste person, who is now politically and economically more powerful than him, buys his house for which he cannot afford to pay even the taxes. In *In Binding Vine*, a working class women learns to use the press to fight injustice. The children of working class woman not only go to school but even to English medium schools. In *A Matter of Time*, a young girl like Aru approaches a feminist and an advocate to reclaim her father. The women, who were suppressed until now, become journalists, doctors teachers and social workers. Thus women also get empowered through education. This depiction of the empowerment of the suppressed sections makes Shashi Deshpande a novelist who deals with a national experience and national consciousness.

Shashi Deshpande’s protagonists’ quest for identity gets largely accentuated due to their frustrating experiences born of the prohibitive nature of the Indian patriarchal society. In her novels, the host of male characters—husbands, lovers, fathers and other relations—display different aspects of patriarchy and oppression. While the majority of the husbands are patriarchal in their approach, the older men, particularly the fathers, are broad-minded. Surprisingly, the male friends are ‘feminist” in their approach and sympathise with the protagonists’ lot. Deshpande’s male characters only serve to enable the protagonists to define their identities more fully. All the protagonists of Shashi Deshpande are in search of their identity. But to evolve their own identity they must first fight patriarchy. So in *That Long Silence*, Deshpande tells us how women attracts more sufferings through her silence. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, we see how man becomes aggressive when his wife becomes the breadwinner and also enjoys more social prestige. In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu first liberates herself through education, then exposes her family to modern values and finally decides to continue her struggle. In
The Binding Vine, Urmi helps Mira and Shakutai to have their own voice. In A Matter of Time, Sumi is not reduced to a weeping child after Gopal has walked out on her but makes her life meaningful. In Small Remedies, all the three women have a very high and noble aim before them and work very hard to realize it. However, from The Binding Vine onward, Shashi Deshpande seems to be taking a different route because now action and thought go hand-in-hand and influence each other. In this content, Vrinda Nabar, a well known Indian critic, in her review of Small Remedies says, “Deshpande goes back in this novel to the first-person narration, something she had tried to move away from in A Matter of Time. This departure had to do with trying to get a wider perspective more outwardness and less introspection. Deshpande says that, ‘in spite of the first-person narration in Small Remedies, the perspective which I have wanted remains and comes through the minor characters who have a bigger role to play in this novel’, Madhu’s narration does not impose a tunnel vision, but through the other voices obtains a broader perspective.”

In The Binding Vine, Urmi does not merely think but acts out her role and brings about a concrete change in a working class woman’s life. Sumi (A Matter of Time) also acts to change her life; and so do Savitribai, Leela and Madhu in Small Remedies. Thus, in these three novels, there is greater emphasis on action. However, this common quest for identity creates the problem or repetition But I would argue that is there is any repetition, it is the repetition of form and not of content. In almost all her novels we locate a recurring pattern. In almost all her novels was locate a recurring pattern: the protagonists are exposed to some crisis, isolate themselves from the usual surrounding and routine life, think about themselves and others, keep moving between the past and the present, and at the end they return as transformed persons. Because this pattern is repeated over and over again, it is possible to argue that Deshpande’s novels are the same stories told in different words. But I think the opposite is true. They are different stories in the same way.
The conflict between the tradition and modernity, the various painful experiences that the woman undergoes from innocence to maturity; the effect of social and political events on a woman’s life, a man made moral code and a male dominated society; the bounding and the power structure among women themselves lack of educational and economic opportunities; woman’s hypersensitivity; her potential to overcome her tragic situation through conscious efforts. These are some of the major themes in women’s writing it is these woman who have shaped the woman’s image or in Shashi Deshpande’s mind; and from that mélange, she has evolved her own independent image of the Indian woman. It is this image that emerges from her novels. Although she is not an avowed feminist, Shashi Deshpande occupies a place of pre-eminence among the contemporary woman novelists concerned with woman’s issues. Deshapande’s creative talent and ideology have established her as a great feminist writer genuinely concerned with women’s issues and anxieties. Her protagonists are modern, educated, middle-class woman who, fettered, to their stereotypical roles of a wife and mother, feel smothered and helpless in a traditional- bound male dominated society.

Shashi Deshpande’s novels are a realistic depiction of the anguish and conflict of the modern educated middle-class women. Caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand, and self–expression, individuality and independence on the other, her protagonists feel themselves lost and confused and explore ways to fulfil themselves as a human being. Deshpanday’s concern and sympathy are essentially for the woman. She has given an honest portrayal of her fears, sufferings, disappointment and frustrations. Besides revealing the women’s struggle to secure self—respect and self—identity the author lays bare the multiple levels of oppression, including sexual oppression. Deshpande’s primary concern for the women makes her a feminist writer.

Undoubtedly Shashi Deshpande is a writer but with a broad humanistic outlook. Her novels are essentially reflective of the unenviable
situation of the beleaguered contemporary Indian women, which she has depicted with great artistic finesse and outstanding originality. Her commendably realistic depiction of the contemporary Indian women’s situation and the pragmatic she puts forward, accord her novels an imperishable importance for their affirmative eloquent message for women and the whole humanity as well. In all her novels, the protagonists undergo the transformation of consciousness by the end. Thus, Deshpande follows the liberal–feminist ideal which treats growth in consciousness as the end. Her novels reflect changing times through private lives. Breaking up of the joint families, the empowerment of the suppressed, communal violence, corruption and more and more liberation are some of the major changes. There is no despair in the minds of novelist- She gives us hope to confront reality, to live life with *A Matter of Time* optimistic point of view, every time which nw energy and courage. The enter works of Shashi Deshpande reveal the essential truth proclaimed by Tennyson.

Old order change, yielding place to new and God fulfils Himself in many ways. Lest one good custom should currpt the world.
REFERENCES


SUMMING UP

(i) A Versatile Novelist.

(ii) A Keen Observer of Human Life and Affairs.