CHAPTER 5

Conclusion: Self Abnegation to Self-Assertion

A life plan must be open to change, as new possibilities open, in society and oneself.

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It is seen in the preceding chapters that people respond variously to the institution of marriage and are engaged in conflicts, which form an indispensable element of human relationships. The wife’s narrative is the narrative of complaint, based on passivity and it conflicts against the master narrative of marriage as held by society; by their husbands and by the older generations of women. Through these conflicts, truths emerge and identities are established. The conflict, in the novels between the existential problem of the heroines and their desire to cling to their marriages, finally ushers in a workable solution. The heroines have to bear the burden of balancing tradition and modernity and this is done through reconciliation — in a mutual give and take. This chapter makes an attempt to analyze, assess and evaluate the solutions which the heroines arrive at. The heroines seek solutions through introspection and self-realization and they conform to the sanctity of marriage with a strong resolution to be assertive about their own needs, desires and aspirations.

The preceding chapters have attempted to study whether the wife can live as an individual within the parameters of the rigid codes of the Indian society; how successful she has been in endorsing her individuality and the problems and dilemmas she faces in trying to break free from the traditional values. This chapter studies the solutions
adopted by the heroines – whether they are viable enough to establish the individuality and liberation of the heroines or whether it is a stoic resignation to their fate. This chapter strives to probe whether the solutions are mere compromises and negotiations made in order to create a habitable world in the margins of patriarchy or whether the heroines have been successful in empowering themselves to live life in a positive harmonious way.

Society is constituted by various positions of power and powerlessness and wherever there is power there is resistance. The heroines of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande are situated in the periphery of the powerful. They are inflicted with feelings of hopelessness and despair and they are oppressed with the rigid norms and codes of their family and society which dictate their lives. Equality amongst races, class and gender, with all its implications at various levels of society is a major issue of the modern world. One of the fundamental areas where this equality matters and is desired is in the area of marriage. In the Indian context however, inequality between husband and wife is sanctioned by tradition and is termed as culture. This view poses a problem for the Indian wife. The heroines who are educated, thinking, writing women struggle and strive for emancipation and equality within their marriage – in other words, clashes and conflicts regarding narratives of marriage become essential to establish emancipation. Some of the heroines seek escape through death and some accept their marital situation by compromising after an ordeal of suffering and self-realisation.

Discord in conjugal life which can be interpreted as conflicts of narratives, has assumed alarming proportions in the of post –industrial era. Spouses cannot escape disharmony in their marital alliances because husbands and wives share each others’
diverse cultural values, social situations and opposing natures while their own needs, desires and aspirations struggle for expression and recognition. Moreover, they have to live with each others' attitudinal, ideological and gender differences. They share each others' cultural values, mutual commitment, trust and faith and at the same time they have also become acutely aware of the need to make adjustments for a harmonious co-existence and understand each other's feelings and emotions. For this they have to shed their egos, identities, desires and ideologies, so that they can fulfill their mutual interests, commitments as well as their elementary and complementary needs. In the novels of Desai and Deshpande, there appears to be an imbalance of spousal adjustment. The wives execute their roles as prescribed by patriarchy and subjugate their own needs and desires in order to fulfill the expectations of others and also for the peace and harmony of their families. Such role execution however, provides them with no liberating experience. The husbands on the other hand, either fail to notice the sacrifices and suppressed needs and desires of their wives or consider it their privileged lot to be served and waited upon or they mistake the silence of their wives to be a sign of contentment.

Liberal education, one of the results of the colonial era, has not always made a difference in the world of women. The patriarchal system has forced even educated women to live in a kind of zenana – even where there is no continuation of purdah – because basically they have lived a cloistered life being dependent on their male counterparts emotionally. Most women see themselves as connected to others and depend on others for their identity, rather than as autonomous and separate, as men tend to see themselves. In the novels, the only form of expression of the women's sufferings
and suppression is silence – the silence of fear – whether it is the forced silence of a rape victim like that of Saru’s and Akka’s or the subjugated silence of a housewife like that of Monisha and Nanda. Silence is also a form of protest for some of the heroines like Jaya and Indu. In the novels taken up for study in my thesis, what is repeatedly revealed is the inability of the women to speak and the positive movement is always a movement towards speech, towards the breaking of ‘that long silence’. Most of Shashi Deshpande’s protagonists can articulate well and can write. But they are forbidden by their husbands to write as crusaders for woman’s cause. The writing-thinking-enabled middle-class women are trapped in their marriages. There are no clear cut solutions offered in the novels. All the heroines are sensitive and thoughtful, ruminating over their fate and position in a conservative society. Their quest is to understand who they are, how their male counterparts relate to them, why they slump into inanity and desperation and why they feel alienated. A phase of introspection has a purging effect on the heroines and fills them with an urgency to break the ‘silence’ and become self-assertive. Voicing their needs and aspirations and demanding a separate space of their own – is the first step towards empowerment and individual development. They also learn that turning their backs on their problems or staying withdrawn would be mere escapism and no liberation.

The sufferings and subjugation of the heroines lead to intense analysis and introspection which usher in self-realization. Self realization implies the multiple practices of knowing and governing oneself, through the inherited historical traditions and also through a defiance of those very traditions. Tradition does not always refer to the past, but it also refers to the contemporary world. In other words, tradition is:
an aspect of contemporary social and cultural organization, in the interest of the dominance of a specific class. It is a version of the past which is intended to connect with and ratify the present. What it offers in practice is a sense of predisposed continuity. (Williams 116).

The concerned novels end with a note that suggests such continuity, rather than a change. The change is simply in the attitude and in the degree of courage of the heroines. The solution to the heroines’ predicaments is a compromise with traditional values without sacrificing individual desires. This compromise is the result of self-realisation.

The patterned conclusion in Shashi Deshpande’s novels is that the protagonist has achieved self-realization; has resolved to break the ‘long silence’ and become assertive. The readers however are left with the feeling that there has been no major change in the life of the protagonist, in the end. The progression of the novels can be described as a process of self-evaluation which provides relief to the pressures of social norms and attempts to come to terms with societal expectations. There is an attempt on Deshpande’s part to connect the old traditional beliefs with the new ideas of women’s empowerment. She inevitably brings in the sanctity of marriage, when all the heroines go back to their husbands. Similar attitudes can also be traced in Anita Desai’s Sita. However, there is no air of defeatism or submission when the heroines go back to hearth and husband – rather they begin a new journey as enriched and empowered souls. As critic Usha Bande says:

Authors like Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande evolve a balance between traditional demands and modern compulsions and re-negotiate the power relations in an attempt to resolve the crisis. Not that this method always works but at least the novelists probe the individual consciousness and help deconstruct the hegemonic notions (Bande 191).
The concept of woman’s personal freedom has not yet fully developed in India and it is against this backdrop that the concerned novels are written. Both Indian men and women have hitherto functioned within rigid hierarchies. The Indian ethos advocates deference to superiors, a series of behavioural codes, a philosophy of self-abnegation and a cultural emphasis on sublimating the ego. Indian women have been especially taught to curb their freedom; condition themselves to suppress their needs; silence their senses and sublimate their selves in a philosophy of self-denial, self-effacement and service. In India, it is religion that shapes, moulds and establishes the social set-up since the Vedic age to the present. Hence there are no systematic theories and phrases, nor any schools of feminism like the West – which advocates gender equality. The concept of individual freedom was first introduced into Indian culture through Western education and through the exposure of Western educated Indians to liberalism, at the beginning of the 19th century. But it did not become an operational principle of Indian life until the country achieved Independence and adopted a democratic system of government. As Western educated Indians came to be acquainted with European liberalism, they were inspired to reflect upon their own value system and to examine the inequalities, the injustices and oppressions of their own culture. This awareness stimulated a movement for social reform which was reflected in literature.

Social reforms against gender inequality in India however are not supported by ideas like the search for space or an assertion of woman’s identity in life as well as in literature. Modern Indian literature portrays not so much the establishment of gender equality, as a search for the female self – which is biologically different from man. The Indian value system is a huge stumbling block in the path of woman’s emancipation and
equality with man. For the Indian woman, *pativrata* (one who is vowed to her husband) norm which is to serve and to be devoted to her husband and his family – is the ultimate religion and duty. With these conditions as premises, the concept of equality as a correlate of the concept of individual freedom is alien to the Indian society, though feminism throughout the world propagates the same struggle between male ego and female desire for freedom.

In most countries the feminist struggle was directed towards obtaining legal and political rights for women. Whereas in India, though legal and constitutional rights were available, they have not been adequately utilized, due to lack of awareness, education etc. Indian women therefore, have continued to be prey to the ruthlessness of custom, the burden of tradition and the unrelenting demands of rituals. Women's lives are culturally constructed and the processes of socialization are rooted in their social reality. Writings of Desai and Deshpande are determined by this social reality and they project their characters as pawns of a social authority, or more specifically of the master narrative. The struggles for emancipation for the heroines therefore, need to be considered on the lines of Indian reality and not that of Western feminism.

Indian women writers portray the struggle between the male ego and the female desire for freedom. The freedom cannot be worked out only through education or economic independence, it has to be achieved through the body, because it is on the basis of the body's attractiveness, docility and productivity that the traditional role models have been constructed and societal norms and codes laid down. Female sexuality has been traditionally viewed as a threat to social institutions. The body is thus controlled by patriarchal morality and by the roles of wifehood and motherhood and
marriage is believed to be a sacrament in which procreation confers upon the woman a status, especially if it is the birth of a male child. Women have been worshipped for these virtues and discarded when they failed in them. Thus any need for personal space, for working out new definitions of freedom, for loosening the hold of tradition without destroying it, has to begin with the body and by re-defining the values placed on womanhood. When women attempt to seek selfhood or project subjectivity or work towards self expression and freedom, they have to transcend the body, in other words go beyond their gender roles. The conflict between social and personal claims has to be resolved through the roles thrust upon women by the patriarchal society. Selfhood is not imagined as an abstract concept, but the struggle for space which begins with the physical existence and the right to ownership. Desai and Deshpande remind us that women do have a right to live, a life which is not under the shadow of essentialism and biologism. The traditional past was determined by sanctity, respect and allegiance whereas the present holds a questioning and protesting attitude for humanitarian concerns.

Despite the social changes that have taken place, the concept of difference between men and women still prevails in society. A problem that feminists identify in this continuing perception of difference is that it is almost impossible to escape the formation of social hierarchies based on perceptions and representations of difference. Women are seen as being ‘closer to nature’ in their physiology, their social role and their psyche and men have been perceived as ‘closer to culture’ – more suited for public roles and political associations. For this reason women have been relegated to a secondary social status. This social construction of woman is the reason for their
continual oppression. The social roles and modes of behaviour that civilization has assigned to women have kept them in an inferior position to that of men. This has made feminists raise questions on how to challenge this assumption of difference. Should women deny sexual difference and claim equal rights on the basis that they are the same as men? Or should they, on the other hand, argue that they are equal but different, and that their specific ‘feminine’ qualities are as valuable and as important as ‘masculine’ attributes? Feminists have therefore to develop different strategies to cope with the norms and codes prescribed for women. The question of difference – either denying it or emphasizing it or giving it a positive value is a tension between needing to act as a woman and needing an identity which is not determined by gender.

There is an irreducible biological difference between men and women. Woman is a biological and not a socio-historical category, even though all the behaviour associated with femininity is clearly a social construction. The liberation of women thus depends on freeing women from this social construct of the ‘eternal feminine’, which has reduced them to a position of social and economic inferiority, but it does not depend on the denial of ‘men’ and ‘women’ as biologically distinct categories. Feminism recognizes the inadequacies of male created ideologies and struggles for the spiritual, economic, social and racial equality of women, sexually colonized and biologically subjugated. Through the centuries –

Man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort; but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. He has done all he could to debase and enslave her mind  (Grimke 10).
Indian feminism uses tradition for reinterpreting space and redefining relationships. Indian feminism had no Freud to contend with, instead their battle has been with Manu and the religious constructs which both segregate and stultify women. In India, it is religion that shapes, moulds and establishes the social set-up since the time of the Vedas to the present day. Women have been the custodian of human values for centuries. In India therefore, feminism is not a movement for gender equality but an establishment of female self which is biologically different from men. Desai and Deshpande have projected this particular struggle for the selfhood of their protagonists in the concerned novels. The heroines strive for space and individuality and for the fulfillment of their needs, desires and aspirations. Surrender of the self, to fulfill patriarchal expectations appears to the heroines to be a subtraction from their individual freedom and wholeness. Identity is built up as a composite of images and effects – i.e., mental representations taken in from the outside world from the start of life, which are developed in relation to the desire for recognition and the later social requirements for submission to an arbitrary law (Horney 109). The modern age however is characterized by a questioning mode which challenges all established ways of thought and behaviour and emphasizes on the individual’s interactive association with the world. The heroines too perceive themselves as separate entities though they are inextricably linked with the members of their family.

Society proceeds from change to change. Changes occur continuously though it may not be in the desired direction. Woman and womanhood have been vastly affected by these changes – from the Vedic period to the present. This has been studied in chapter I of this thesis. The institution of marriage too has traveled a long way from the
precincts of sacrament to contract. The basic idea of women being custodians of tradition and entrusted with the prime roles of procreation and preservation has remained the same. The ideologies of women as carriers of tradition often hamper actual changes taking place. Besides, the long duration and strong domination of patriarchal practices prevent actual changes from taking place—both within societal norms and in the psyche of the women themselves.

The processes of woman’s liberation are culture specific and are rooted in social reality, since woman’s mind-set is culturally constricted. The Indian ethos and the Indian conviction determine feminist activism together with the struggles and solutions of the Indian women. Desai and Deshpande try to project this particular situation in which the heroines find themselves—the battle between the need for emancipation and their inability to break free from their traditional mind-set. Therefore after a long tedious phase of sufferings and subjugation; traditional upbringing and conditioning with iconic examples from mythology; together with an exposure to Western liberalism, modern education, rationalistic thinking and rebellion—the only solution of the novelists for the heroines is compromise. What the novelists try to convey is that victory is not in the subjugation and destruction of the male identity; rather in bring him to see the indispensability of spousal space.

To feminists however, the term ‘compromise’ present in the Indian ethos implies a denial of autonomy and freedom. Feminist anger in the West may be seen as women’s cry against the hypocrisy of a culture that accords centrality to the values of equality and individual freedom but nevertheless denied equality to women. Feminist agenda is based on the principle of similarity and difference—similarity because “women are
human beings like men and therefore ought to be granted equal rights” and difference because “women are different from men and therefore ought to be granted the right to represent themselves” (Bullock 313). It is seen that the perceptions and sentiments, about gender equality and freedom of a large section of the Indian women seem to diverge from those of the Western influenced feminists because there is difficulty to break free from the Indian value system which has a strong hold on their psyche. There is also an innate inability to tune into the demands for equality and personal freedom (Chitnis 82). Yet in the novels, there is a strong challenge to the set pattern of society, evolving through centuries – of the man to rule and the woman to obey and serve; man the god and woman the devout; man for field and woman for hearth. All the heroines disown the ritualistic and tradition-bound life in order to explore their true selves. They are on a quest for selfhood and an understanding of the existential problems of life. They raise questions and seek solutions and thereby embark on the growth process – growth of the individual and the growth of society. Questioning is intrinsic to growth and it is also the first step to combat a dominant ideology. The politics of control and the socio-cultural determinants against women are condemned through such questioning.

The novelists seem to suggest that there is no easy solution to life’s existential problems and the options before women are limited. Struggles supported by hope appear to be the best option. Solution for the heroines’ predicaments lies in making ‘life possible’ as Jaya (TLS) observes at the end of the novel that it is not easy for a person to change. “We don’t change overnight. It’s possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope.... And if there is anything I know now, it
is this: life has always to be made possible" (193). Dignity in suffering elevates an individual and redeems the novels from becoming grim sagas of suffering. The inevitable is accepted with dignity and strength. It is the will to resist, endure and survive which is glorified in the novels. In other novels, heroines who have expressed resentment at an oppressive marriage like Ibsen's Nora, Kate Chopin's Edna, Arundhati Roy's Ammu have not been able to either emerge victorious through their resistance nor have they been able to endure and survive – they are either vanquished or condemned to languish in loneliness, while Anita Desai's Monisha and Nanda simply suffered and plunged into neurosis. They were not strong enough to protest. In the absence of any escape routes, the married women often seek consolation in obsession, masochism or mental slavery leading to physical decay, disease and death.

The novels of Desai and Deshpande are narratives of complaints against the limitations of women's lives. These novels also emphasize a resistance. But it is passive resistance blending with self-realisation. Knowledge of the self together with self-assertion and urgency to fulfill one's own needs, desires and aspirations make way for reconciliation and an acceptance of the sanctity of marriage. The heroines who had walked away from their husbands, go back to them to an uncertain future, but as enlightened women equipped with self-assertion and understanding. Shashi Deshpande makes her heroines experience the stifling silence within them, as they play out their roles in a mechanical manner, repeating tradition. They empower themselves through self-knowledge to go back to their husbands to confront power politics, negotiate their needs and resolve the crises. They seek solutions by making an effort to establish a contact with the master narrative of marriage and at the same time assert their real
selves. The heroines — Sara, Indu, Jaya, Madhu and Sita are able to comprehend and surmount their personal difficulties and gain an optimistic vision of life. Their hope is akin to the hope of Sisyphus, which propels him to roll the stone uphill again and again.

The heroines’ emancipation is not in repudiating the claims of their families but in drawing upon untapped inner reserves of strength. The wife in the end therefore is not a rebel but a redeemed wife — one who has broken the ‘long silence’, one who is no longer afraid of ‘the dark’. She is a wife reconceptualized as a woman and an individual — a marked contrast to the older generation of women around them with their uncomplaining, unresisting fatalistic attitude. Hers is the dilemma of the new woman that could be resolved when the claims of selfhood are reconciled with the claims made upon her by the family and the society.

The growth and survival strategies of the heroines are linked to the recognition of their true selves and to finding their personal bearings in a chaotic world where hostile conditions threaten their selfhood. The heroines’ movement from rebellion to compromise; their discarding of self-deluding reasoning to adopt new approaches to living; their acceptance of disillusionment and disenchantment have become necessary concomitants to living. In an experiment conducted by psychologist Martin Seligman (1972) dogs were trapped in a cage and were given electric shocks. Initially the dogs reacted violently and tried to break free. But when they realized that there was no way out, no matter what their response, they ceased voluntary movement. They became submissive, listless and passive. Even when the shocks became more intense there was no reaction. Eventually, when the cage door was opened the dogs refused to leave and did not avoid the shocks. They had to be repeatedly dragged to the exit to teach them
again the process of voluntary response. The dogs had learnt to be helpless and passive (Flavia 157). In the case of the heroines, they are gripped by an anxiety which is the result of the conflict between the securities offered by a routine existence and the risky opportunities offered through transgression. Full of despair and anxiety, they desperately seek a harmonizing vision that would enable them to achieve a measure of inner peace and calm.

A sense of equilibrium is essential to help individuals cope with the multiple internal and external pressures that make conflicting demands on their lives. The unalterable and uncontrollable aspects of life clash against the value of individual assertion and thereby the heroines emerge stronger and empowered to establish their individual needs, desires and aspirations. Shashi Deshpande’s heroines are concerned with the question of living rather than escaping from it or from one’s responsibilities and participation. For Anita Desai alienation and loneliness have been the recurrent themes. The heroines who are not courageous to discard alienation and seek active involvement in life have been vanquished like Maya, Monisha and Nanda. Deshpande’s heroines like Saru, Indu, Madhu and Desai’s Sita too have sought escape from the turmoil of marriage, but finally go back to their conjugal life, resolving not to exist in the periphery but to establish their identity and weave their individual needs, desires and aspirations into the matrimonial fabric. The search for identity becomes essential for the heroines to establish their relationship with themselves and with the world. It is through free and responsible choices and decisions that man authentically defines his own existence. All the heroines of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande have
been able to define their existence – whether it is through the choice of death or through compromise.

Third Force Psychology is a branch of psychology that stresses on the social dimensions of psychological traumas. It gives special emphasis on integrating the fragmented personality of the individual and involving him meaningfully with the world around him. It is an approach concerned with the growth of the human potential beyond preconceived ‘norms’. It emphasizes on the assertion of a person’s capability to gain control over his life. This psychology is in line with Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande’s view of the individual as a multidimensional being who must connect with the world in multiple ways and can attempt to make the right choices in pursuit of his goal of self-fulfillment. The heroines’ gesture of compromise and reconciliation is such an attempt to be part of the matrimonial fabric as well as to seek self-fulfillment.

Self-fulfillment as the achievement of a serene acceptance of life in all its hues is not possible for these protagonists, who though portrayed as distinct individuals, assume a representative role in manifesting the desires, expectations and limitations of all men. Their intellectual and emotional biases fix them into certain attitudes and perceptions. The heroines strive for self-fulfillment but its attainment has a relative significance. The cycle of desire and achievement is an unending one because a relative value is attached to achievement. For instance, initially the heroines believed self-fulfillment could be attained through their emancipation but gradually perspectives changed. They become matured individuals who understood that the multi-dimensional life cannot be narrowed down into a singular perspective. Therefore, they modify their perceptions of self-fulfillment and began to seek it by relating with the society and its
open to change, which is actually a step towards positive growth and maturity. Towards the end of the novels, the heroines incorporate new insights into their interpretations of the world and accept compromise as a basic condition of existence. The heroines’ compromise is inevitably a reflection of the ambivalent position occupied by women in the newly emerging social scenario, where despite their individualistic yearnings they lack any definite direction or goal. This compromise also points to the novelists’ interest in the heroines’ assertion of the self in such a way that can allow their integration with life, rather than turning ones back to the complex, demanding phenomenon of life. The novelists advocate “neither attachment nor detachment but a positive detachment that understands the need for appropriate action according to the circumstances” (Chakraborty 70).

Real freedom implies cessation of all conflicts and liberation from all fear. Conflicts cease to be a problem when they are confronted and solutions are sought. Escapism is a sign of weakness which further makes the solutions elusive. Saru (DHNT) decides to confront her husband and not to run off from his assaults; Jaya (TLS) decides to voice her needs and not to suffer in silence; Indu (R&S) decides to start the writing career she had always wanted and not give in to her husband’s dictates; Madhu (SR) decides to start life anew with her husband and make him realize his limitations and Sita (WSWGTS) decides to go back to her husband and get involved with life. Self-fulfillment is possible only when individuals are receptive to the diverse aspects of the world they live in. Desai’s Monisha (VITC) and Nanda (FOTM) seek exile from their miserable lives; they become withdrawn, passive beings engaged in serving others, because it was expected of them. The Bhagavat Gita too advocates
action, not running away from the field of action — rather it emphasizes forgetting the self in action. Flexibility and willingness to compromise are the basic requirements for survival. Conflicts however do not cease totally. Since they are an integral part of human existence, one has to make choices, time and again. Though a certain degree of individuality is surrendered — their compromise appears to be the only sane path towards survival. Compromise implies not mere capitulation but making better choices out of the options available.

For novelists like Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande — social reality is psychic in its origins and manifestations. The socio-economic problems are to a great extent the concretized manifestations of the intangible conflicts and instincts of man whose behaviour is controlled by unconscious and irrational forces. The final solution therefore lies in the re-adjustment of the components of the psyche. This is possible when self-knowledge is attained. The heroines’ ‘going back’ is not a helpless re-adjustment to the unavoidable, harsh realities of life, but a comprehension of life resulting from a heightened awareness. The novelists hold the view that knowledge of oneself, including ones awareness, strength and knowledge of the world is a pre-requisite to having a comprehensive view of the life processes. Introspection and self-evaluation help one achieve self-knowledge which leads to an objective involvement and acceptance of ones situations. The acceptance and compromises are neither defeat nor triumph but the transcendence of both and not the stoic resignation to unalterable fate. The knowledge of the self is therefore a spiritual endeavour where the ultimate goal of life is peace, harmony and compassion. This is akin to the quest for identity and autonomy; growth and the importance of human relationships and existence. The
transformed heroines are not disappointed and submissive women but enlightened souls who learn to take a detached view of their problems. Their problems are resolved not by finding solutions but by developing the awareness that their marital problems do not harass them anymore.

"In the grand cosmic design anything that exists must have functional significance, ultimately contributing to the cosmic harmony" (Ramalu 129). Discovery of such a functional significance enables the heroines to go back to their roles of wives. The heroines thus proceed from psychic chaos to cosmic awareness. They have undergone a deep and complicated psychological process leading to a spiritual awareness. Their sufferings appear to have a therapeutic and educative value which adds a deep dimension to their individuality – because all their narrow dreams dissolve into the enlarged perception of the reality. Their spiritual awareness is not a ritualistic mastery, but an expansion of awareness and the development of a steadfast wisdom. It is an ability to look at the world as it is and not as one thinks it is. The heroines’ approach to their predicaments is “neither struggle nor submission but transcendence” (Ibid 133). It is an acceptance of a peaceful harmony by transcending their predicaments. The individuality which they have been striving for has been attained in the stage of transcendence. Spiritual thinkers believe this stage to be at the top of all human needs. Through their intense introspection the heroines get psychically resurrected and proceed towards a new perspective and serenity.

Solutions come through changes. It is the modern Indian woman who is represented by the heroines of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande who take the initiative of change – a change of their mind-sets and their narratives of marriage. They
resolve to change themselves when no other change is possible. The greatest obstacle to change in India, especially regarding gender equality is the value system to which women abide. The struggle for gender equality has been difficult because of myths, legends, religious sacraments and culture which has always glorified the pativrata code or devotion towards husband and his family. Besides, a strong sense of deference to superiors, a series of behavioural codes, a philosophy of self-denial and an emphasis on sublimating the ego build up the value system of the Indian society. The Indian tradition has always applauded devotion, faithfulness and sacrifices which in turn has promoted her subjugation. Mythical heroines like Sita and Savitri are glorified for their loyalty, fidelity and devotion, whereas, their wit, intelligence, resourcefulness, tenacity or affection is never held up for emulation.

The concept of gender equality as a correlate of the concept of individual freedom is alien to the Indian society. It slowly began to creep in at the beginning of the 19th century into Indian culture through Western education and through the exposure of Western educated Indians to liberalism. The articulation of liberalism in the Indian context is distinctive and diverges from Western liberalism. There are at least three specific points on which the perceptions and sentiments of a noticeably large number of women seem to diverge from those of Western influenced feminists. As pointed out by Suma Chitnis, the most conspicuous difference is “the average Indian woman’s disapproval of feminist anger. The second is their somewhat mixed and confused reaction to the feminist emphasis on patriarchy and particularly on men as the principal oppressors. The third is their relative inability to tune in to the demands of equality and personal freedom” (Chitins 82).
Changes regarding gender equality or militant protests against patriarchy are a far cry in the Indian social scenario. The beleaguered wives who are trapped between tradition and modernity, therefore resolve to change themselves, in order to live meaningful lives. The heroines learn that they should be open and receptive to life and accept their situations if they cannot be changed and participate in life's struggles instead of being escapists. The doctrine of change is fundamental for one's maturity and spiritual awareness since everything is evanescent – enjoyment, misery, wealth, poverty, power as well as physical existence. Thus their withdrawals, fears, anxieties and the feelings of suppression and worthlessness change towards courage, assertiveness and compassion. They begin to participate positively in life's activities, accepting its pleasures and pains. They learn that unhappiness results from "wanting to change that which cannot be changed, or from wanting to keep the same that which cannot be kept the same" (Bahm 101).

Distorted egoistic perspectives of people lead to miseries. The Buddha's Middle Path proclaims "Accomplish your liberation through careful perseverance" (Bahm 101) – which is to adjust ones identity with the lives of others in order to overcome conflicts, injustices and oppressions. Throughout the novels the heroines are plagued by conflicts because they were compelled to merge their identities with those of their husbands. Finally when they become assertive they make an attempt to merge their husbands' identities with theirs. This is done when their husbands understand the needs, desires and aspirations of their wives and respond to their miseries in a positive way. The heroines too dissolve their pessimism, by inculcating the strength to survive with dignity and by analyzing their problems rationally. They learn that in order to attain
selfhood they must transcend silence, negation and self-alienation. They realize that since there is no easy solution to life’s existential problems and the choices before them are limited, the best course is to undergo the trials and make life possible.

Introspection, logic, reason and experience release the heroines from the stifling traditional constraints and their own inhibitions, to cherish a spontaneous surge towards life. They attain their solutions through analytical rationalism and through a change in their outlook and perceptions. Just as the Buddha had said, “O Bhikus, my words should be accepted by the wise, not out of regard for me, but after due investigation, just as gold is accepted as true only after heating, cutting and rubbing” (Bahm104). Thus it is seen that the concern of the novelists is to make the heroines attain their selfhood within the contours of tradition though the prevailing conflict of narratives in their novels is between individual and the society where the individual appears to be more important than the society. The novelists however point out that the individuals are not free from their own limitations, inhibitions, faults and foibles. Therefore a balance is maintained between the needs of the individual and the unalterable social conditions, through the heroines’ compromise. They realize that victory is achieved not through subjugation or achieving power over their husbands, rather in bringing them to see the indispensability of each others space. Thus, there is a harmonious reconciliation of contradictory elements in their lives. They attain a sublime outlook on life by maintaining an all important balance between the ego and the spiritual self. They realize that anger and protest, which are the consequents of the ego, are not sound weapons for fighting battles or achieving peace in life. The novels end in orderliness and settlement in the apparent marital chaos. Turmoil prevails when ones view of reality, ones understanding of the
world, is challenged by a new idea or concept. But gradually the realisation comes that what one was told and made to believe and have been struggling with has little truth in it. This realisation transforms fears and limitations into empowerment and joy – because the concepts one is made to believe interfered with one’s growth and power and capacity for joy. Defiance of contradictory beliefs leads to growth, peace and truth – a truth which is absolute and constant. With this acceptance of truth life’s possibilities seem to expand. All the heroines except Maya, Monisha and Nanda develop inner harmony and proceed towards development of their personalities and reach a state of redemption and spiritual re-birth.

Thus it is seen that in the novels, the writers pose a problem, question it, fight it and then work towards acceptance and reconciliation. The reconciliation is an acceptance of their situations with dignity and strength. The heroines discover this strength within themselves, through their struggles and introspection. It is this strength which sustains them, makes them find their own way and also makes them vocal. As Shashi Deshpande says, “The weak have their weapons as the strong. They’re different” (Pathak 236). The novelists do not encourage the female protagonists to rise in rebellion against their male counterparts – instead they work towards building a harmonious relationship between men and women in a spirit of give and take, through reconciliation and compromise, because they believe that women should live within relationships. At the same time there is a strong indictment against the rigid rules and norms of patriarchy. This indictment finds expression through the silent, passive and bitter struggles of the women protagonists. They are tormented by an inability to question the power relationships within their marriage. It is the ‘long silence’ of the wives which
emphasize their predicaments. Their situation is akin to the subaltern who cannot speak, as stated by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak (66). But it is found that the positive movement of the heroines is always a movement towards speech, towards breaking of the 'long silence' and becoming assertive. “The wife in the end is therefore not a rebel but a redeemed wife ...the dilemma of the new woman could be resolved when the claims of selfhood are reconciled with the claims made upon her by the family and society” (Dinesh 204).

For the heroines, the novelists as well as the interpreter, the solution lies in reconciliation. The Chakrayuvha or the circular trap theory where there is no possibility of a solution is so ingrained in the novels that compromise becomes the only possible way out. In the end the heroines discard the uncomplaining, unresisting, fatalistic attitude taught by their elders, and they surge ahead courageously to tackle the same predicaments, which had plagued several generations of women. Critics, like Mrinalini Sebastian point out about Shashi Deshpande’s novels “There are really no solutions being offered.” (Sebastian 169).The feminist trends depicted in Shashi Deshpande’s novels are of little worth, because most invariably her novels seem to end where they began – with only a changed protagonist who has followed the torturous route of self-examination and self-realisation. The open-ended closure with apparently no change in the source of the women’s sufferings leaves the novels with an unconvincing air. Walking off from their marriages, to seek their selfhood or engaging themselves in power battles within their marriages are not viable solutions in the Indian context. Rather, the struggle is for a better and meaningful relationship between men and women, instead of a relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. The sanctity
of marriage still reigns as an ideal amongst middle-class Indians. Kate Millet and Simone De Beauvoir have influenced the educated Indian women only to the extent of making them refuse to be sufferers. The heroines are still controlled by the social stigma of divorce and by family and marital values. Though they are thinking, educated and skilled women, they have not yet attained the consumer mentality of the independent woman who views marriage as just another service, which needs to be discarded when not working properly. The novelists convey the message that mistakes cannot be corrected by mistakes. Seeking freedom through escapades and abandonment are mistakes.

Therefore, Desai and Deshpande’s heroines strike the right balance between their individual needs and the needs of a marital relationship. Individuals express themselves and communicate through relationships and they learn and evolve through relationships. The heroines realize that human beings are inter-related and are dependent upon one another. The heroines’ frustration and helplessness are the consequences of this inter-relation and the options or solutions before them are limited. The best option they hit upon is compromise which is made through a conscious assertion to re-orient their lives. By defining themselves beyond the role of sufferers, they take a positive step towards development – for themselves as well as for the society. The novelists “advocate neither attachment nor detachment from the marital relationships, but a positive detachment that understands the need for appropriate action according to the circumstances” (Chakraborty 70).

It is seen that the progression of the novels is cyclic with the only change being the self-realisation of the heroines. There are no changes visible in the private domestic
spheres — the changes are only in the outlook of the heroines. Though they are armed with self-assertion after a phase of introspection and they become strong enough to confront all odds against them, their marital situation holds an uncertain future where emancipation continues to be elusive.

When expectations are fulfilled or questions are answered in a narrative, closure is brought about. Narrative closure coincides with the end of a quest. All the novels of Shashi Deshpande, taken up for study, together with Anita Desai’s Where Shall We Go This Summer? have an open-ended closure. The expectations of the heroines are not fulfilled but the question of solution to their problems is answered in the form of compromise. Yet answers that appear to emerge with closure always contain traces of the narrative conflicts, because the answer or the solution is arrived at not in some absolute contact with reality but out of myriad differences. Authors of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century see authorial imposed closure as a threat to the kind of thinking that narratives can bring about. Truths cannot be arrived at if conflicts are resolved at closure by imposing morality or societal norms. “Tradition is constitutively contested terrain even if traditionalists try to depict it as unchanging and beyond questioning: ‘traditions’ are, in practice, rarely agreed upon or deployed smoothly” (Gopal 142). Desai and Deshpande attempt to convey a truth which transcends scriptures, rituals, norms and traditions. The narratives of marriage held by society, which conflict against the narratives of marriage of the wives, embody a language which holds no absolute meaning or truth. Therefore there is no absolute answer or solution to the wives’ problems. As Shashi Deshpande herself states about marriage “One does not pose a problem and present a solution. It is not Math” (Deshpande 251). Even Anita Desai’s heroines like Maya, Monisha and
Nanda who choose death as the final resort to control their lives, find no answers for the existential problems. All the novels end in a vague and unconvincing closure with no absolute solutions or answers. The answer simply lies in continuing the struggle, in the resolution to assert and adjust. The novels raise many existential questions – which is the avowed aim of the novelists and finally they tentatively expound a philosophical resolution for these problems. Thus, a balance is maintained in the structure of the novels between the problem and the solution and this balance is essential to help the protagonists chart a course through their marital lives.

The novels therefore proceed chronologically from acute pessimism to restrained optimism; from a dismal appraisal of the human predicament to a more positive interaction with the world. Desai and Deshpande do not simply portray rebellion and failure or rebellion and compromise. The purpose of the novelists is to bridge the chasms between the inner and outer worlds of the heroines. This is done by accepting their marital situation without sacrificing their individuality and involving themselves in their marital roles through the all-important tool of self-assertion. The key to self-fulfillment is self-assertion. An individual has to assert himself decisively to affirm his control over life. Identity is asserted not only in individual community, social or national terms but is viewed as something to be attained to overcome the sense of loss and fragmentation. And marriage becomes a relationship of sharing and oneness, rather than one of subjugation and control. What men and women share as human beings is far greater than what divides them as men and women – they share the same urges, needs and aspirations as well as the same potential. This has been the most liberating discovery for the heroines.
Works Cited


