Chapter III

Writing the Body

Women have been guarded away from writing for the reasons that it serves as an effective strategy to perpetuate patriarchy, and also for the power that it inheres to defend and subvert. Hence, women perceive writing as a ‘golden apple’ to be retrieved, as the key to their liberation from the imposed silenced subordination. Writing, thus, becomes a site of struggle; it is an arena where women fight to regain their subjectivity. Women, always slotted second in the binary division, have to erase their distorted images depicted by male supremacists, revive their fallen spirit, and set right the misconceptions about their sexuality as menace to society, the ostracism of their ‘unclean’ bodies, etc. The patriarchal system reduces women to mere bodily beings without soul or mind. The selfhood and self-actualisation that women writers seek through their writing can be attained only by reclaiming the female body from which they have been alienated because the fundamental unique experience of the female is her experience of her sexuality, her body, and the functions and capacities of that body. Writing the body, accordingly, becomes inevitable to women writers who seek to break off from the phallocentric bondage. Jasbir Jain points out that the way to selfhood for women is through their body. She
explicates that selfhood is not imagined as an abstract concept but as a struggle for space, which begins with physical existence and the right to ownership of the body ("Gender" 119).

It is irrefutable that there exists a tension between women’s lived bodily experiences and the cultural meanings inscribed on women’s bodies. Historically women have been determined by their bodies: their individual awakenings and actions, their pleasure and their pain contend with representations of the female body in larger social structures. A re-vision of the female body is not possible until the cultural messages inscribed upon it are read. Female experiences are either structured through institutions, languages, terms, images, metaphors, stereotypes, etc., which are of masculine nature or they are represented relatively little.

Therefore it is through the expression of female bodily experiences that the phallogocentrism can be opposed. Jouissance is the primary mode of resistance to masculine symbolic and verbal mastery, claim postmodern feminists like Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray. They valorise motherhood at a metaphorical level – everything that constitutes for female existence, that phallocentric thought represses and what is lost in patriarchal structures (see Weeda-Zuidersma 16, 17). Since the start of the modern feminist movement many women writers and scholars have examined how ideas about the female body affect women’s lives, how ideas about the female bodies are socially constructed, and how these social constructions are used to control women’s lives, and how women can resist these forces. Thus, it becomes apparent that the social construction of women’s bodies is a political process, which reflects, reinforces or challenges men and women’s differential access to power and resources.
Shashi Deshpande and Margaret Laurence, in different ways, seek to establish a woman’s right to her body. Through their representational characters they reclaim female subjecthood, and register their resistance by ‘writing the female body’ from which women are refrained. Their heroines redefine the patriarchal notions of female sexuality and the phallocentric dichotomic divisions of good / bad woman. This chapter examines how Deshpande and Laurence’s writer-characters (re)write the body in their attempts to reassert the values of women, and restore human dignity and worth to women.

In a patriarchal social set-up man not only relegates woman to a subordinate position, but also regulates her very ‘being’ as well. Man claims that woman is his property. That he has had legal backing is evident from the earliest written legal records to nearly the present days’. Consequently, possessing inalienable rights over her, he rapes her, he batters her, and he restricts her thought and creative processes. Women resist their oppressor through writing, and break the yoke of subordination borne down the ages. Writing, per se, is a mode of resistance for women, since it is a male preserve, and a tool propagating patriarchy. The patriarchal society bridles women by putting reins on their sexuality. It becomes inevitable that women strike back by writing on tabooed themes like sexuality, rape, etc., and gain a breakthrough. A woman writer, hence, writes of the atrocities inflicted on female body, how the female body is made a detestable object, how a woman’s spirit is debilitated, etc. Women’s writing, thus, reveals that female body is a site of power as well as resistance.

The history of women’s oppression by men and male-designed institutions comes to light through women’s writing. Only through an analysis of the power
relationships between men and women, we discover what women are or can be. Women have been clamped down by their physiological status, and stamped inferior by religion and culture. Judith Lorber cites Judith Butler to reaffirm that it is not biology but culture that makes destiny. She says there is no core or bedrock human nature below the social production of sex and gender, self and other, identity and psyche, etc. for these are always manifestations of cultural meanings, social relations, and power politics (21).

In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault politicizes sexuality and its role within the processes of self-formation. He traces the origins of our restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality (3) in which silence about sexuality became the norm. He demonstrates that sexuality, knowledge and power are socially constructed through ‘discourse’ and objectified in books, artefacts, languages, institutions, etc. (106) He finds that discourse “transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it ...” (101), and “it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together” (100). He sees power as directly connected to the most intimate areas of the human body. The stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the strengthening of controls and resistances, etc., are linked to one another, in accordance with a few strategies of knowledge and power. He observes: “Where there is power, there is resistance . . .” (94). He looks at the relations of power in terms of struggle and resistance; struggles are concerned with resisting the effects of power on bodies, and, or with the politics of self-definition and self-formation. He is concerned with what it means to be a self and how we as individuals are pressurised into creating our selves in a given fashion.
As part of their resistance to the oppressive forces of patriarchy when women write on their repressed sexuality they are severely criticised and their writing is linked to their personal life. The notoriety this sort of writing raises compels women to be silent on such issues or even withdraw from the scene of writing. Thus, for many centuries silence and censorship have been the primary regulatory forces on female body.

Mira, the poet, in *The Binding Vine*, is bitten by cankerous, misogynistic forces to withdraw from active public scene. The remarks of the male chauvinist poet Venu (cited in chapter II, p. 3, 4) reveal the patriarchal views on woman: he reminds her of her primary duty in Freudian (as well as Atwoodian terms); in other words, he re-emphasises that woman’s status in an androcentric society is merely that of a gendered body, and man has authority over her sexuality and fertility. Snubbed by Venu, Mira writes stealthily thereafter, and she represses her desire to publish her poems. Mira writes on marital rape. Jaya in *That Long Silence* also faces similar constraints, when her husband dreads the sexual lives depicted in her fiction may scandalise their private lives. Sacrificing her rights as a writer, she switches over to other topics to avoid discord and save family honour. Like Mira, Jaya also writes secretly; nevertheless, internal censorship works on what she writes.

Mary Ellman in her article “Thinking about Women” says that the alienation a writer usually suffers is habitually identified and related to sexuality. Sexual conflicts have clearly become the specific focus, literal as well as metaphoric, of a general and amorphous sense of intellectual conflict (86-87). When the writer-characters of Deshpande like Jaya, Mira and others, with the traditional upbringing to be an ideal wife and mother, generally hesitate to embark on sex and sexuality in
their writings, we have an exception in Madhu Saptarishi in *Small Remedies*. She has an unconventional childhood; hence she is not being subject to rigorous social conditioning. Perhaps for this reason, Madhu shows the pluck to pull down the barrier between the ‘dignified’ and the ‘disreputable’, by including both the elements in the biography of Savitribai Indorekar. On learning that the right pitch to start is ‘honesty’, if she wants to be a writer with integrity, Madhu includes the shady episodes of Bai’s past – breaking out of the Brahminical household to study music, her elopement with her Muslim lover and accompanist Ghulam Saab, and later deserting him and disowning their daughter, all on her way up on the ladder to success. Bai makes no mention of these ‘discreditable’ events while dictating the details of her life along with her brilliant career chart to become a doyen of Hindustani music.

Apparently, the construction of female identity in the fictional world becomes problematic because most of the women writers are careful not to wound the feelings of the reading public, which have internalised all the taboos put forward by patriarchy. Women writers with self-professed preference towards feminism have tried to create a space from where women characters can create an identity for themselves, and analyse their position in an androcentric society. Adrienne Rich stresses the importance of a truthful portrayal of women’s lives:

> Women have been driven mad, “gas-lighted” for centuries by the repudiation of our experiences and our instincts in a culture which validates only male experience. The truth of our bodies and minds has been mystified to us. We therefore have a primary obligation to each other not to undermine each other’s sense of reality for
expediency; not to gaslight each other. (qtd. in Donovan’s *Feminist Theory*, 140)

Deshpande through Indu (*Roots*) points out that the patriarchal society has fetishized modesty in woman. Though Indu, hailing from a traditional familial set up, boldly moves out to marry from another caste she remains a victim of self-internalisation. The patriarchal injunctions she has internalised structures her consciousness of herself as a woman, as a bodily being. Jayant, her husband also cannot divest himself of the deep-seated patriarchal ideas about women’s modesty. It is unthinkable to him to picture his wife as a ‘passionate’ woman. So, despite being in deep love with her lover-husband Indu restrains herself, lest her sexual urge puts him off. This is what Cixous points out: “We have turned away from our bodies. Shamefully we have been taught to be unaware of them, to lash them with stupid modesty . . .” (“Sorties” 100).

Male control of women's bodies has always been the cornerstone of patriarchy. Women often play out their resistance to this authority in sexual terms. Indu compromises to be an ideal wife by pretending to be “passive”, “unresponsive”, “still” and “dead”. She hides her “responses and emotions as if they are bits of garbage” (*Roots* 38). The journey from girlhood to womanhood involves a lot of self-silencing whereby a woman becomes preoccupied with how she is perceived by others, says Janet Lee (88). Indu feels unhappy playing second fiddle to Jayant. She confesses it to Naren: “‘We’re on different planes. He chooses his level. And I . . . I choose the one he would like me to be on. It humiliates me. . .’” (*Roots*82). Repression of the natural urges in her conjugal relationship with Jayant chokes the erotic, the deepest and non-rational knowledge in Indu, and makes her
vulnerable. Indu is portrayed as “an anachronism” – “[a] woman who loves her husband too much. Too passionately. And is ashamed of it” (Roots 83). Indu wonders what “ancient guilts” still lay in women that make them, even today, “associate bodily desires with guilt and shame?” She thinks of the ascetics who resort to scourging themselves. But she doubts if one can make “peace” with one’s body by “self-flagellaton?” (Roots 148) She believes that the sexual instinct, the maternal instinct, self-interest, self-love are the basic truths and hence cannot be ignored or repressed (Roots 158).

Indu who is engaged in writing her autobiographical fiction does not hesitate to disclose her bodily desires. Uninhibitedly she confesses that when she slowly wakes up early morning she becomes aware of the desire that consumes her and the pain and coldness on realising that she is all alone. She knows it is mere wishful thinking:

> Early morning . . . you wake up, aware of the shape, the feel, the taste of your own body. The whole of you becomes one aching emptiness. You want to touch and feel, to be touched and felt; finally, inhabited. You turn round to meet the warmth, the hardness, the intimate contact of another body. Then you realise there’s only you. And you feel cold and alone and bereft. (Roots 148)

Despite that Indu loves Jayant immensely she deceives him and her own self. Consequently, she seeks sexual gratification in Naren. On the psychological plane Indu claims to be loyal to her husband: “. . . I’m essentially monogamous. For me, it’s one man and one man only'” (Roots 81). Whereas on the physical plane she yearns for to be caressed by Naren, and at his touch she feels as if little nerve ends
have sprung up all over her body, and she responds to him with ardour and warmth (Roots 80). She introspects: “Why was I feeling so vulnerable? What had Naren done to my shell?” (Roots 81) She frees herself from all inhibitions and restraints in her lovemaking with Naren, and discovers a sense of internal satisfaction. Having experienced the erotic, and recognizing its power, Indu regains her self-respect and reclaims in language and history what women have been prohibited. She reflects on the nuances of the sin she has committed – adultery:

An ecstasy filled my body and I could not be still any more. There was a joyous sense of release, of passion I could experience and show and participate in. I clung to him convulsively, marvelling that I did not have to hold myself back. . . . I don’t need to erase anything I have done, I told myself in a fit of bravado. (Roots 152)

Surprisingly, Indu feels no remorse. She analyses it with a “detached objectivity” and realises she has committed no crime, and why then should she make such “a monstrous thing” out of this (Roots 158). Regarding the matter of wronging Jayant, she thinks she has cheated him earlier also, that is, by pretending to be a modest submissive wife, and hiding her true self from him. She self-examines: “But had I not wronged Jayant even before this? By pretending, by giving him a spurious coin instead of the genuine kind? I had cheated him of my true self. That, I thought, is dishonourable, dishonest, much more than this, what I have done with Naren” (Roots 171). Indu does not believe in the mind-body dichotomy. Hence she considers the adulterous act she commits no more serious than the pretences she makes to Jayant. Besides, she finds that this act of adultery has a cathartic effect on her, though from the physical point of view her sins cannot be washed away, she is able to drive out her
“private devils” (*Roots* 172). She is able to release the repressed desires tormenting her, and her body cannot trap her anymore.

Female writing is bound up with female biology, maintains Cixous, because women have been taught to feel guilty about both, and the courage to claim and proclaim both language and biology is the first step toward transformation – women’s emancipation. She maintains that women have been driven away from language just as they have been forced to deny their bodies, and she encourages the full expression of female experience as a powerful subversive force. Writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement for a transformation of social and cultural structures (Cixous qtd. in Walker 41).

All the novels under scrutiny highlight that the ideals of modesty and chastity are imposed on women to pinion them down to subservient role of wifehood. But these heroines through their transgressions, their sexuality and their independence declare that they are ‘impossible wives’. They cannot repress their urges to live out their lives, seek meaningful relationships, and to attain self-actualisation. Indu (*Roots*) enters into an intimate physical affair with Naren to attenuate her repressed sexual urges. Jaya (*Silence*) makes clandestine visits to Kamat’s flat but their relationship stops short of sexual intimacy. In *The Binding Vine* Urmila’s family raise their eyebrows at her going out with Dr. Bhaskar Jain. And Jiji (*Moving*) has no qualms about seeking self-gratification.

The erotic that these women experience is an assertion of their life-force. It offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear
its revelation. Realising the potential power of the erotic, it has been used against
women all their lives by the male world. Hence, voicing their bodies has never been
easy for women due to the self-internalisation of the patriarchal injunctions. But
their sparing speech / reticence suggests their awareness that in speaking about
desire itself, they are breaking away with culture, resisting a cultural taboo that
renders the body, particularly a female body, and its sexual parts unspeakable. All
these women voice their conflict in speaking about their responses to sexual desire,
conflict between the voices of their bodies and the realities of their lives. Whether
they speak of the reality of physical risk and vulnerability, or the reality of getting a
bad reputation, the pressure that they feel to silence the voices of their bodies, to
disconnect from the bodies in which they inescapably live is more or less explicit.
They challenge the cultural story about their sexuality – which frames sexual
feelings as male – by describing the conflict they experience between the feelings in
their bodies and the cultural taboos on their desires.

Indu looks at female desire positively and disapproves of the word
‘deflowered’ to describe her first experience of lovemaking with Jayant, instead she
prefers to describe that her body had “burgeoned into a flower of exquisite felicity”
(\textit{Roots}83). In her essay “Daring to Desire: Culture and the Bodies of Adolescent
Girls,” Deborah L. Tolman cites AudreLorde on the “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as
Power.” Lorde describes the power of the erotic as ‘the yes within ourselves, our
deepest cravings.’ She writes that in this culture women have been systematically kept
from this power in themselves because, she surmises, the power of the erotic makes
women dangerous. Lorde encourages women to reclaim and reconnect with this
affirmative force that resides in them to enable them to glean pleasure in their work and their existence (Tolman 103).

Germaine Greer in *Female Eunuch* agrees with de Beauvoir that women in a patriarchal society distort and suppress their human qualities which are not very different from men in most respects, to fit the fantasy framework created by men. The stereotypical female of male fantasy is a female who is desexed in body, mind and feelings. So the ideal woman entrapped in a patriarchal culture is the nearest thing to a castrated creature – a female eunuch. The suppression of the real ‘self’ mars the felicity of Indu’s marital life. She is indignant at the lopsided system that drums into woman her duties, suppresses her rights, erases her identity, and reduces her to a mere ‘role’ player and an agent in the propagation of the human race. She reflects that “[b]ehind the facade of romanticism, sentiment and tradition, what was marriage after all, but two people brought together after cold-blooded bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce so that the generations might continue?” (*Roots* 3)

Marriage is a metaphorical trap that smothers the womanly self of the female hero and by extension, adultery too becomes a metaphor for the escape of the woman from the cage of patriarchal mind-set. Adultery is seen as a sort of metaphor for the woman breaking free from the shackles of duty-bound fidelity. It is a metaphor for the woman’s endeavour to capture a female space, the woman’s struggle to be true to her inner self and to her womanhood. Perhaps, this is well established in Deshpande’s novel *In the Country of Deceit*. The novel pivots on the adulterous relationship of Devayani, a young unmarried woman, with Ashok Chinappa, a much older and married police officer. She has no remorse in crossing the threshold but only happiness and contentment in re-defining her identity.
Modesty is a desirable quality in women, and the husbands Deshpande portrays, especially Jayant and Mohan, have an ambivalent attitude towards their wives: they prefer modern and educated women yet they should be passive and submissive like traditional women. As R. Mala observes, Deshpande’s heroines are victims of “sexual paralysis” (53). This forces them to extra-marital relationships. What is significant about such relationships is that they suffer no guilt and they begin to evolve a new code of sexual ethics. These writer-characters do not hesitate to pour out their discontented sexual life in their autobiographical writing. Indu writes that the suppression of sexual urges, lack of communication between Indu and Jayant on such topics, and the self-internalisation of patriarchal norms of modesty have paralysed her writing also. The ‘good girl syndrome’ holds her back from portraying the reality of womanhood. She hopes she may have the confidence and courage to speak out the truth, break the silence about female body – “menstrual pains and pangs of childbirth, the ecstasy of orgasm …” (*Roots* 78).

Deshpande makes it clear that imbalanced marital relationship is a huge obstacle to free and frank communication between a husband and his wife. This is evident from the contrastive picture she gives of the unconventional character Naren with whom Indu becomes outspoken and vehement on the repressive nature of women’s writing. Greer exhorts woman to retrieve her suppressed sexuality by taking possession of her body and feel glorified in its power. She urges woman to assert her own rights to sexual expressions. Irigaray and Cixous emphasize that women, historically limited to being sexual objects for men (virgins or prostitutes, wives or mothers), have been prevented from expressing their sexuality in itself or for themselves. If they can do this, and if they can speak about it they will establish a
point of view from which phallogocentric concepts and controls can be seen through and can be taken apart. Hence the exhortation of Cixous to women to put their bodies into their writing as there is an intimate link between female sexuality and female writing. Woman’s body has been confiscated by the male. She tells women “Write yourself, your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth” (338). Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous state if women are to discover and express who they are, to bring to the surface what masculine history has repressed in them, they must begin with their sexuality. And their sexuality begins with their bodies, with their genital and libidinal difference from men (see Jones).

An analysis of Deshpande’s women characters from *Roots and Shadows* to *Moving On* demonstrates an increasing audacity in asserting their individuality. Of course, the temporal factor cannot be ignored. The educated middle class female characters she portrays belong to different periods that are progressive in time. Per se, their response to sexuality varies. Between Indu in *Roots and Shadows* and Jiji in *Moving On* the contrast is striking. Indu puts on frigidity to avoid putting off Jayant with her sensuality; whereas we find in Jiji an unrestrained expression of sexuality. The fact that the male characters are also increasingly progressive in thinking has to be taken into account.

Jiji is perhaps, the most sensual of Deshpande’s characters. While writing in her father’s diary (after his death) she does not restrain in confessing her sexual life. Diary writing is considered the most private and the most confessional of all forms of writing. It is an imaginary mirror where the writer’s growth is reflected. It brings to light the secrets hidden in the dark recesses of the mind – guilt, repressed desires,
etc. Writing about the body becomes writing-the-body. Jiji gives free vent to her corporeal desires in the linguistic body she creates. Sexual writing helps her to create a physical existence for herself through its connections to écriture féminine. A woman’s most private writing can come to have political implications. Jiji is open in writing about her body, and its desires. She flouts the norms of modesty set for women. Caught by the tempestuous desires of her young burgeoning body, she defies all relationships cherished so far – father, mother and sister – and discontinues her medical studies to marry at the age of nineteen a photographer much older than her, with no worthy occupation, and whom her South Indian parents brand penny-pinching and money-minded (being a Sindhi).

Distinct from other husbands of Deshpande, Shyam leads Jiji to the ecstatic experience of conjugal bliss. She is ushered into a blissful new world where the beauty and the pleasures of the human body – male as well as female – are explored, and she revels in raw sexuality. Sex has its free and full expression in their life. Shyam teaches her “to glory” (Moving 187) in her body, although she, being conditioned by the patriarchal norms, is at first reluctant to gaze it. He leads her on an exploratory tour of the male – female bodies, tracing tantalizing paths, setting free to explore the forbidden terrain of human body.

But Jiji, whose desires of the body are unleashed by Shyam, fails to rein them. After Shyam’s death she dreams of having sexual intercourse with a stranger. The dream evokes the memories of her physical intimacy with Shyam, and arouses her dormant desires. She feels the lovemaking in the dream is real, for the feel of the skin to skin contact still lingers. As she attempts to interpret the location of the palatial building where the lovemaking (in her dream) happens she is amazed that a
building she saw in childhood, an innocent period when her body is unripe and unaware of sexual pleasures, gets intertwined with an adult experience of lovemaking. It is apparent that Jiji’s repressed and unfulfilled sexual urges surface in her dream.

The carnal desires drive Jiji crazy, and she sees her body as a stranger, someone unfamiliar to her. The young body with the vigorously active hormones will not yield to rationality or morality. The way her body responds – leaping out at the warm touch of Raman Kumar, the tenant’s body – startles her. She feels guilty for not checking her sexual urges. She wants to punish her body. After the lovemaking with the tenant she feels having a cold bath, she wants to “pummel [her] body, to punish it with savage blows until it turns black and blue. [She] hate[s] it. [S]he wants to disown it” (Moving 232). The love making years after Shyam’s death is painful. She thinks the physical pain also helps alleviate the mental pain and her guilt of losing self-control. Jiji’s sexual intimacy with Raman Kumar shows that it is satisfying only physically, just meeting the demands of the hungry body. It is not mentally satisfying, for the awareness that the man is not Shyam torments her. She has implanted Shyam as her lover; it is he who has first introduced to her the idyllic state of sexual love. She struggles to erase the memory of the sexual relationship with the tenant. She wants to wipe out the woman with the body – the one who is brazenly bold with her sexual desires, and install Anand’s mother instead. She wants to regain her self, and tame the wild impulses of her body. She finds her mind in a tumult but the body, having its desires fulfilled, is “strangely at peace, strangely light” (Moving 257). She has loving memories of the body: its softness, its curves. She realises the body cannot cheat or pretend; it is honest, whereas the face can
pretend what is not, and she can lie with words as well. When the body has desires it seeks out fulfilment. That is why Indu in *Roots and Shadows* does not resist Naren’s advances. Her body fails to pretend it is a ‘one-man body’; nonetheless, her mind is loyal to Jayant. Indu and Jiji try to overcome their ‘guilt’ thinking that they have only given the body what is its due. Apart from the basic bodily needs of safety, protection and survival, Jiji opines that the body needs something more. The desires of the body have also to be fulfilled.

An analysis of the attitudes of Badri and Vasu (Jiji’s parents) and Jiji towards body may be relevant here. The expression of sexuality exclusive to male writing is challenged, as women writers of modern times deterritorialize and create bold women who dare defy the traditional norms. Jiji is placed on a par with Badri. We understand that both Jiji and her father are “votaries of the body” (*Moving* 313) whereas Vasu has only contempt for bodily matters. Badri is fascinated by anatomy and physiology, subjects which most students find “dry, tedious and fearfully voluminous to remember, a nightmare in fact when preparing for an examination” (*Moving* 106). The structure and functioning of human body fill him with awe. He is much influenced by his anatomy teacher who says that “the human body can give us glimpses of the mystery of existence itself” (*Moving* 106).

Badri’s is a love-at-first-sight marriage. After marriage he learns of their incompatible response to passion. Vasu does not reciprocate his passionate love; she considers it sheer bodily lust, something indecent and undignified. Badri understands Vasu is not simulating indifference, for he believes that “[e]motions can be faked, lips can speak untruths, but the body never lies” (*Moving* 108). He believes like the Buddha that the human body itself is a privilege. He is totally baffled and
finds her quite enigmatic. Badri cannot see the body and mind as two separate entities. He attempts to educate her thinking she is too young and ignorant regarding conjugal bliss, though he knows that body is the best teacher and one need only listen to the urges of one’s body. He regards the human body “as a supreme assertion of creation, as the acme of creation” (Moving 112).

By juxtaposing Badri and Vasu’s attitude towards sexuality Deshpande underscores the impact of social conditioning which is reflected in Vasu’s response to sexuality. Tolman writes that the recent research in women’s psychological development reveals that at adolescence girls come into a different and more problematic relation with themselves, with others, and with the culture(s) in which they are growing. In essence, many girls appear to face a relational impasse or crisis. She cites Carol Gilligan who characterises this crisis as division between what girls know through experience and what is socially constructed as ‘reality.’ It is also at adolescence that girls come into relationship with their social contexts as social beings (100). What should be deduced here is that Vasu has gone too far accepting the patriarchal injunction that body is evil. She looks upon Badri as an intruder into her life, one who tries to possess her body (an idea mooted in Deshpande’s short story “Intrusion” also).

Badri, on the other hand, holds a very different opinion about body. He believes “Mr. Bones [the body] is the most important person” (Moving 155) for it has the power to dictate the course of one’s life, be it the health of the body or its sexual desires. For instance, he points out that the asthmatic bouts of Malu have affected the lives of the members of the family. As Baba and Mai spend more time caring Malu, meeting her needs they rather neglect Jiji. This neglect or lesser
attention has driven Jiji to seek love and happiness elsewhere, to fall headlong in love with Shyam, throwing off all familial ties. Badri also deems that the ties tied up with the body are permanent. For example, a mother cannot disown her child or the child its mother. The umbilical cord remains as “phantom link” (Moving 114). He wonders how Jiji can sever her relationship with her parents to marry Shyam, and how Vasu can disown Jiji on the ground that she has disregarded her mother’s pleas.

The body once again becomes a major preoccupation for Badri when he realises his days are numbered. He recalls his professor’s words which he noted down and reused in his own lectures later: “A man’s possesses nothing certainly save a brief loan of his body. Yet the body of man is capable of much curious pleasure.” Badri thinks of the curious pleasures he has experienced: “the sight of a woman’s body, her hips, her breasts” used to arouse him. He has “brief flares, sudden flashes” (Moving 304). But Badri’s body, now battered by cancer, does not experience those curious pleasures. He only longs to have a restful life, pain-free death.

Deshpande and Laurence’s writer-characters disclose their sexual urges and affairs which would condemn them and slot them as deviant since patriarchal morality prevails over female body. The patriarchal society has set specific slots for a wife and a whore. Female sexuality has traditionally been viewed as a threat to social institutions and has been projected in terms of passivity. In the attempt to carve out a chaste, docile wife the desires of the female body are suppressed. In her study on the Patterns of Feminist Consciousness in Indian Women Writers, Anuradha Roy says that in Indian society centuries of indoctrination regarding the expression of female sexuality continue to hold ground, and the most restrictive taboos and the most stifling codes of behaviour
exist in the sphere of female sexuality. She explains why a woman is forced to practise modesty so:

    Trapped between age-old arbitrary stereotyping of woman as disembodied goddess or seductive siren, a woman is conditioned to believe that a ‘good’ woman has sublimated her sexuality. Indoctrinated with the idea that any aggressive gesture of sexual attraction towards a male, even her husband, is somehow lacking in feminine modesty, a woman schools herself to repress her sexual desires. (46)

    Passivity is part of a systematic training given to women, says the feminist author, Dale Spender citing Florence Nightingale, the founder of the modern nursing profession, who protests the over-feminization of women into near helplessness. Nightingale states that learning to put up a happy, contented and cheerful disposition to her master is a lesson mothers unwaveringly teach their daughters. The only way such a lesson can be taught successfully is by the systematic denial and removal of passion from women. And the daughters, taught to deny the existence of any passion, will or force in themselves, cultivate a smiling, serene veneer, which reinforces men’s images of themselves (qtd. in Spender 400-401). The manifesto of sex workers by Durbar MahilaSamanwaya Committee underlines the fact that a virtuous woman must be devoid of desires.

    Within the oppressive family ideology, it is women’s sexuality that is identified as the main threat to the conjugal relationship of a couple. Women are pitted against each other as wife against the prostitute, against the chaste and the immoral…. A chaste wife is granted no
sexuality, only a de-sexed motherhood and domesticity. At the other end of the spectrum is the ‘fallen’ woman – a sex machine, unfettered by any domestic inclination or ‘feminine’ emotion. A woman’s goodness is judged on the basis of her desire and ability to control and disguise her sexuality….Women’s sexual needs are not only considered to be not important enough, in most cases its autonomy is denied or even its existence is erased. (557)

Deshpande illustrates that sexuality is made a taboo to keep women under reins, and this has been effected through the propagation of distorted images of women. Single women are considered an embarrassment and an obstacle to progress, because their unbridled sexuality represents a threat to order and discipline; hence the attempt to contain and institutionalize it. Writers with feminist consciousness attempt to re-read / re-write the prevalent distorted images of women and free them from the accursed status.

In Deshpande’s novel, A Matter of Time, Sumi, the middle-aged protagonist who stumbles on her talent to write rather late, remarks that women are ashamed of owning their sexuality even to themselves, as she recalls the confession her friend once made rather unwittingly that she missed her husband especially at night. This prompts Sumi to think of another version, a very possible one of Surpanakha’s story. Surpanakha is a character portrayed by the patriarchal society as contemptible because she is the one who makes advances on men, when a woman is expected to practise modesty. Sumi deems that Rama and Lakshmana, unused to outrageous sexuality on the part of women, must have felt threatened by Surpanakha’s sexual libido. To release sexual libido is to subvert social and political order. So, frightened
of losing their hold as indomitable patriarchs on women, the princes, Rama and Lakshman humiliate and mutilate Surpanakha. In the male-oriented society a sexually aggressive woman becomes an object of contempt; hence Surpanakha is depicted as an evil, a siren. This is an instance to show how an image of a fallen woman and the stigma she bears can stop other women from ‘overreaching’. Deshpande resorts to revisionist mythmaking (a major strategy in women’s writing) to overcome the denial of authoritative expression, challenge stereotypes and discover new possibilities and redefine woman and culture. She makes a bold move, portraying Surpanakha from a feminist perspective and valorising female libido. In this context a citation from Maya Angelou’s poem “Still I Rise”, which depicts an enlightened race defying the oppressors with courage and self-confidence seems apt (though the issue here is gender), for Surpanakha too would like to have asked Rama and Lakshman, the ideal men as per Indian society, these questions:

Does my sexiness upset you?

Does it come as a surprise

That I dance like I’ve got diamonds

At the meeting of my thighs? (25-28)

Early women writers also have had no choice but to follow the track set by male writers, punishing women for their sensuous lives and defiance of societal norms. The way George Eliot concludes The Mill on the Floss and Kate Chopin The Awakening may also be cited as examples for punishing women for their sexual longings. Eliot inconclusively brings about the end where we may interpret the drowning of Maggie Tulliver in her attempt to save her brother as a social chastisement for her overnight boat ride with Stephen Guest. The intelligent but
impulsive Maggie is already socially dead, having denied space by the cultural norms of her community. Eliot carefully avoids the lapses of her own disreputable personal life in the lives of her fictional characters. Chopin herself has been driven to obscurity for writing on the subject of marital infidelity and physical lust for another. Her portrayal of Edna Pontellier, fluttering with unbridled passion breaking off from the stifled, miserable marriage to a spirited and lusty freedom had caused a great furore. The novel ends with Edna walking into the deep sea, going back to the elements. Thus, it is quite evident that women’s sexuality is governed by male norms.

Women’s bodies had till recently been defined by law as men’s property. Hence it is deemed that in the case of marital rape the husband is only exercising his authorial power, received through the transfer of the rights of possession: women belong to their fathers before marriage and to their husbands thereafter. Rape outside the fold of marriage is treated as a sort of property damage. For this reason, as per the ancient Babylonian law, a rapist required to pay a fine to the husband or to the father of the raped woman, but nothing to the woman herself.

Rape is unquestionably a gendered crime, perhaps, the most atrocious cruelty inflicted on woman. Andrea Dworkin rightly observes in *Our Blood: Prophecies and Discourses on Sexual Politics*:

> Under patriarchy, no woman is safe to live her life, or to love or to mother children. Under patriarchy, every woman is a victim, past, present and future. Under patriarchy, every woman’s daughter is a victim, past, present and future. Under patriarchy, every woman’s son
is her potential betrayer and also the inevitable rapist or exploiter of another woman. (qtd. in Weisberg 149)

Men are usually more powerful – physically, politically, and economically – than women. Nevertheless, they resort to rape as a means to intimidate women and to keep them in their ‘place’. Therefore rape is an expression of male power and dominance over women. The spirit and the body of the woman are annihilated in the fire of the man’s / men’s lust. Deshpande’s novel *The Binding Vine* deals with rape inside and outside the fold of marriage. Mira’s writings mirror the anguish of forced sexual activity that she is subjected to in the name of marriage. About this horrible indignity heaped on women by men merely on the strength of brutal force Adrienne Rich categorically states: “it is not only rape of the body alone, but, rape of the mind as well” (61). The invasion of a woman’s body even in marriage can sometimes be as traumatic as rape. A parallel can be drawn between this novel of Deshpande and her short story “Intrusion” which tells about a honeymooning couple wherein the husband forces his yet unprepared wife into the sexual act, which is tantamount to rape. Thus, Mira symbolises many an unfortunate woman whose silent suffering is smothered.

Women are considered guardians of family honour, which is presumed to reside in female body. Virtuous women are either unmarried virgins or chaste wives. The honour of a mother is linked to the chastity of her daughter, and if the daughter goes astray the society points the finger not only at the daughter but also at the mother. It becomes, therefore, a mother’s prime duty to bring her daughter up with an unsullied name. The fallen social status and the mental turmoil of a mother whose daughter is subject to rape are dealt with lengthily in *The Binding Vine*. Shakutai and
Kalpana are from the lower stratum of the society. Shakutai is a typical, protective and affectionate mother, who nurtures fear in her heart as her daughter grows up physically; she disapproves of her daughter dressing fashionably. She fears that it will unnecessarily draw attention of those leering men, “Here boys are like . . . they’re like dogs panting after bitches. And if you paint and flaunt yourself, do you think they’ll leave you alone?” (Vine 146) Owing to her youthful fascination for cosmetics and a new sense of freedom upon earning her own income, Kalpana pays no heed to her mother’s words. Her mother’s fears come true when Kalpana becomes the victim of her uncle’s lust, brutally beaten and raped by him. In spite of all her motherly love and sympathy for her daughter, Shakutai sees Kalpana’s gutsy attitude and desire to flaunt as the reasons behind this tragedy. Very often the blame of rape is exclusively on women and their sensuous nature. African-American women are considered generally as animalistically hypersexual, and thus responsible for their own rapes. Shakutai blames Kalpana for bringing upon her the ill-fate.

The partisan attitude prevalent in the patriarchal society is apparent in the outburst of Shakutai. The only conclusion that people like Shakutai can arrive at is, “we have to keep to our places, we can never step out. There are always people waiting to throw stones at us, our own people first of all. . . . [A] woman must know fear” (Vine 148). In a rape case the male accomplice is often not booked. The fear of being branded often prompts the girl / woman (her family) to hush it up, and in the process the rapist gets away scot-free. Shakutai dreads the aftermath of the rape as the entire family will have to bear the stigma and no one will marry her or even her sister. “'If a girl’s honour is lost, what’s left? The girl doesn’t have to do anything wrong, people will always point a finger at her. . . . I have another daughter, what
will become of her ...?"’ She pleads not to register the case and give it publicity. “[E]ven if it is true, keep it to yourself, don’t let anyone know of it” (Vine 59). Her refusal to admit the truth that her daughter is raped, and is physically and mentally injured in that process, brings out a woman’s fear of being stigmatized and ostracized in society. So Shakutai assumes that her daughter has been injured in a car accident. She overhears the conversation between Vanaa and Dr.Bhasker, the doctor-in-charge. She recoils in fear the moment she hears the words like ‘report’, ‘rape’. She hysterically cries:

‘It’s not true, tell me it’s not true, what you – what this doctor says. . . . Tell him my daughter is not that kind of a girl. . . . It’s not true, you people are trying to blacken my daughter’s name. . . . No, no, no. . . . it’s not true, don’t tell anyone, I’ll will never be able to hold up my head again, who’ll marry the girl, we’re decent people. Doctor . . . don’t tell the police.’ (Vine 58)

Deshpande cites another instance of marital rape in Moving On. Vasu, the short story writer is a traditionalist; she dares not to rip the walls of conventions. Only in her last story (“Blackout”) we find her bold to surmount the patriarchal restraints and write about the stark reality of the woman’s world. She retaliates against the androcentric world where the female body is but a male possession. In this story the woman, sexually assaulted and battered by her husband for years, avails of the opportunity to liberate herself from servitude. Deviating from her previous stories which bear the heroine’s name as the title, Vasu here uses the English word ‘blackout’ for her Marathi story. And the heroine here does not have a name since she represents all the incarcerated women in the male-centred world. The story takes place in a
Muslim mohalla in Bombay in the year of the Bangladesh war. The protagonist, a Muslim woman dares to switch on the light in her home (the act symbolises the dawn of freedom in her life) when a blackout is enforced throughout the city. Within moments a group of men knock at the door of the ‘traitor’ to inquire of it; the veiled woman gives the standard answer of all illiterate and innocent women, ‘Ask my husband’ upon which they drag the struggling, protesting man out and beat him to death. The woman bolts the door and in her bedroom, in the dark she undresses, slowly, painfully pulling off the clothes from her battered, bruised body. She gently touches her multi-coloured bruises (old and fresh) with her fingers lingering over them. And, then with a sigh, she gets into her bed, thinking ‘I can sleep tonight.’ She feels relieved of her husband who sexually abused her every night. This story of Vasu that comes out in a Sunday supplement draws much attention and raises harsh criticism, and Vasu who dislikes publicity withdraws from the world of letters. Jiji, as she evaluates her mother as a writer, thinks that her mother, if born a little later, would not have much inhibition to unveil the brutality towards women. But by the time attitudinal changes took place she had withdrawn from her career.

Ironically, the patriarchal culture reserves blame for the woman, whether she is an active or passive participant in the sexual act. Kalpana, the rape victim in _The Binding Vine_, Madhu who had pre-marital sex in her girlhood in the novel, _Small Remedies_ and the mythical figure Surpanakha – all bear this stigma. We know that women who ‘rebel’ against the male establishment are humiliated; they are often by being pictured as bogeyman to little girls.

Another manifestation of the loss of rights over her body is when woman is forced to raise a large family. Continuing the lineage by giving birth to sons is a
requisite for retaining the status of wifehood. Though the writer-characters studied here have a nuclear familial set up they write about the woes of women whose bodies are controlled and exploited by their men. This juxtaposition of educated and financially secure women helps to highlight the oppression of the low class women in a male-dominated society. Gender solidarity appears to cut across class division. Patriarchy is seen here as the common enemy, without class / caste specificity. That Long Silence, Roots and Shadows, The Binding Vine and MovingOn all bear instances of the hapless state of woman whose body is someone else’s possession. Through the writer-protagonist Jaya (Silence) Deshpande fulfils an implicitly feminist function of ‘consciousness-raising’. Jaya cannot close her eyes to the miseries of the womenfolk, especially of the lower class who are doubly oppressed. Besides toiling hard to fend for their family (most of the husbands are drones and drunkards living on the pittances the wives earn), these women have to bear the brunt of patriarchal power in the form of wife battering, threat of divorce, etc. In her ‘Diaries of a Sane Housewife’ Jaya commiserates with the oppressed lives of Nayana, the sweeper and garbage collector, and Jeeja, her maid at her Dadar flat. Nayana is threatened of divorce if her fifth pregnancy turns out a female child. She has given birth to four children, of which two girls are alive and two boys are dead.

Rich writes that the awareness that both childbearing and childlessness have been manipulated to make women into negative quantities will enable us to close the gulf between “mothers” and “non-mothers” (Woman 249). She focuses on the patriarchal imperative that views all women as reproductive beings. If motherhood is perceived, as Rich views it, as a social institution, rather than a natural ‘given’ it
becomes a metaphor for all types of ways that women are disempowered and can be, conversely, empowered.

In *Moving On*, we come across Jiji’s domestic maid, Ratna, who is bold to fight against the injustices towards her body and life. She occasionally requests for overnight stay with Jiji. From her talk Jiji deduces it is part of the continuing battle with her husband, a battle that will never be resolved: “[t]he eternal conflict between man and woman, the man asserting his rights, claiming his rights to her body, the female denying him.” Ratna, although a low class illiterate woman, is not ready to surrender herself to her husband. She thinks his demands are too ridiculous, for she has already done her due as a wife by giving him four children “two living, two dead” (*Moving* 276). She has given him a son as well. She believes it high time he stopped having sex because their daughter has reached marriageable age.

In *That Long Silence*, soon after her marriage, on seeing the well-defined roles of women in her husband’s home, Jaya makes an attempt to be an ‘ideal wife.’ But she finds the surrendering of her selfhood, which is indispensable to becoming an ideal wife, quite stifling. Jaya demystifies wifehood and regains the right over her body by asserting her will to abort her third child and that too, without informing her husband.

Double standard morality is yet another means of the androcentric society to keep women under the thumb. In a heterosexual adulterous act or in a rape case it is the woman who has to bear the brunt of condemnation. It is moral indignation (besides her spontaneous and uninhibited self-expression due to her unrestrained upbringing) that prompts Madhu (*Remedies*) to vent her views on sex and sexuality,
and bring to light what women in a patriarchal society would keep in the dark. It shocks Madhu that her husband Som who himself had premarital affairs cannot come to terms with the fact that his wife is not a virgin. The knowledge that she had a pre-marital affair as a teenager shakes the foundation of his trust in her. “But it’s the single act of sex that Som holds on to, it’s this fact that he can’t let go of, as if it’s been welded into his palm. Purity, chastity and an intact hymen – these are the things Som is thinking of, these are the truths that matter” (Remedies 262). What is more appalling and indigestible to Som is that his wife has been a willing partner. Madhu thinks that “he could, perhaps, have borne: that I had been raped, forced into the act, that I was a victim, not a participant” (Remedies 260). Madhu is vociferous at this illogical gender discrimination; she finds two different yardsticks are being used for the same wrong done, one for men and another for women.

In The Diviners also there are instances where the double standard of morality operates. The purity of the body remains a fetish to Brooke Skelton (Diviners) as well. Hence neither does Morag nor Skelton share their pre-marital sexual affairs, though Laurence portrays the uninhibited and gratifying sexual relationship of Morag with Skelton, her husband. But in course of time, the suppression of Morag’s creative powers rocks her marriage. And after the breaking up of the marital ties with Skelton, she seeks gratification in Jules (Skinner) Tonnerre, her first lover from her home town, Manawaka, the man who later fathers her child, Pique (215-230). Morag has a casual affair with Chas (265-270), and later a seriously emotional relationship with Dan McRaith, though she hesitates to marry him and be entangled in wifely duties, for she decides to set her priority for mothering and writing. Morag, thus, deconstructs the notions of good-bad girl,
portraying herself as a creature of flesh and blood brimming with sexuality and yet seeking the truth of life.

In *Moving On* also we find how the patriarchal society censures women for loose morals while the role of men in such acts is played down. Jiji tells Raja how difficult it is to live as a widowed woman. She has fought with many men who thought she can easily be seduced. She says men generally think widowed / single women are easy preys to satisfy their lust. To ward off the lecherous men Jiji tries to put on the most forbidden expression, discards sarees, cuts her hair short, etc., so that she will not look voluptuous. But her attempts are unsuccessful. She says: “No matter how you dress, whether you shave your head or hide behind a burkha, they come at you, wanting your body, touching you, drooling over you, sniffing at you. Like dogs. Like dogs in heat” (*Moving* 284). All the same, the patriarchal world will stamp her a filthy woman, says Jiji.

Naresh K. Jain in his work *Women in Indo-Anglian Fiction: Tradition and Modernity* says that the question of a woman’s sexuality is central to any consideration of tradition and modernity. The idea of purity and chastity is still the norm, and any deviation is generally deeply disturbing to the male psyche. Male promiscuity is, however, tolerated and dismissed as a sign of masculinity (19-20). Chandramathi also brings out the double standard morality practised in Indian society in her short story “The Story of a Poem”. Reghuraman, the hero of the story, desires his wife to be pure and untainted, docile and submissive, a good cook and efficient home keeper. At the same time he carries a flirtatious relationship with his colleague and passes innuendoes at her. He enjoys her companionship and, discusses with her the current and sensational issues in art and literature. Nevertheless, she is
not desirable as a wife for she is a feminist, one who doesn’t conform to the traditional mould.

Sandra Lee Bartky sounds a note of warning when she states that “[t]o overlook the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed” (“Femininity” 27). Mary Jacobus also holds the same view and proposes that women’s writing need work within ‘male’ discourse but ceaselessly deconstruct it to write what cannot be written. Deshpande deconstructs the phallologos to write on the most hushed subject, rape, within and without marriage. According to Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan: “For women to ‘speak’ rape is itself a measure of liberation, a shift from serving as the object of voyeuristic discourse to the occupation of a subject-position, a ‘master’ of narrative” (qtd. in Sitesh 202). Any attempt to seek selfhood or self-expression and freedom has to work through the body, deconstructing received notions regarding a ‘good’ woman. In order to go beyond gender, to transcend the body, the conflict between social and personal claims has to be worked through the roles thrust upon women and the manner in which adultery and rape affect them.

In The Binding Vine, Urmi musters courage to atone for the literary and social mistreatment of women. She does not seek the consent of Kishore to publish Mira’s (his mother) poems on marital rape. She also decides to publish the report of violence on Kalpana, and thereby break the restrictions of the male-dominated society that silences women’s issues like rape, and challenge the notion of woman’s complicity in the atrocious act. Matilda Josyln Gage believes that “to refrain from condemning patriarchal crimes” is “playing precisely into the hands of the
‘patriarchate’” (qtd. in Spender 339). So Urmi takes it up her responsibility to publish Mira’s poems as well as to bring the culprit to book in Kalpana’s case. Besides, Mira and Kalpana, Sarita, the protagonist in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is also a victim of sexual abuse by her husband. To be assaulted, abused and raped by someone as intimate as a husband or lover is quite a degrading and humiliating experience for a woman. Though not recognized as ‘real’ violence, abuse of this nature is experienced daily by countless women in every culture. Behind closed doors of family, custom, values, traditions that are taken for granted and never questioned – are muffled voices of terror and trauma, which do not reach beyond the threshold nor attract the attention of lawmakers or redress agents.

The restrictive taboos regarding female sexuality and a sense of inferiority of the female body intensify as a girl child comes of age. Janet Lee in her article “Menarche and the (Hetero)sexualisation of Female Body” explains how menstruation is “a biological act fraught with cultural implications, helping to produce the body and women as cultural entities” (82). “The body of woman is the site where culture manufactures the blockade of woman” says Valerie Export (qtd. in Conboy 111). The body, thus, appears as a ‘text’ of culture; it is a symbolic form upon which the norms and practices of society are inscribed. The cultural significance of menarche in the lives of women is emphasised by Lee in the following words:

[Menarche is] an important time when young women become inserted and insert themselves into the dominant patterns of sexuality. As a crucial signifier of reproductive potential and thus embodied womanhood, menarche becomes intertwined with sexuality….
Menarche marks a simultaneous entry into adult womanhood and adult female sexualization. (“Menarche” 84)

Since women are over-represented through the practices and ideas of sexuality, menarche becomes loaded with meanings. It bears significant consequences in the lives of women, as power equations are scripted into the discourses and practices that surround women’s bodies. Their early experiences with menstruation socialize women to think of their bodies and sexuality in ways demanded by patriarchal culture. Through these experiences, women learn to think of their bodies as contaminating and embarrassing. They become alienated from their own bodies. Thus, menarche represents the entrance into womanhood in a society that devalues and trivializes women through cultural scripts associated with the body.

Leela Dubey in her study, “On the Construction of Gender: Hindu Girls in Patrilineal India” observes that the onset of puberty introduces dramatic changes in the life of a girl, as the focus is on woman’s fertile body. She adds that in many Indian languages menstruation is likened to the process of flowering or blossoming – the necessary stage before fruit can appear – and expressions such as “her body is full”, “it is ripe”, and “it is ready” highlight the reduction of woman to a womb negating her intellectual and artistic abilities (qtd. in Atrey “Girl Child” 249).

Many Indian communities ceremoniously announce the girl’s initiation into womanhood. However, Deshpande focuses not on the rites and rituals and its cultural significance but rather upon the traumatic nature of this experience and its effects upon the young girl. Her novels throw light on the widespread taboos
segregating menstruating women in some cultures due to an interpretation of menstrual blood as signifying the power of fertility / a polluting substance. All the heroines of Deshpande share the disgusting experience of the onslaught of womanhood. The women of the selected novels remember menarche as an experience that provokes anxiety: it reminds them of their contaminating, sexualized body and changing relationship with others. They have internalised the stigma and shame associated with having bodies that bleed. This entails restrictions on the body, mind, and soul. Though they have responded as active agents, they have also resisted these discourses through a variety of means. They continue to resist them as they reminisce about their first menses, viewing their experiences retrospectively, framing and reframing them, hoping to neutralize the pain and shame, perhaps taking back their power.

In *Roots and Shadow*, Indu shares with Naren the reason why she had quit her job with a women’s magazine; she had a feeling of being hemmed by her womanhood, as if being locked up in a cage. Naren senses her repressed anger against her womanhood. When he asks her why she fights against her womanhood so fiercely she becomes vociferous. Her hatred stems from the brutal, graceless way the knowledge of womanhood was thrust on her:

‘You’re a woman now,’ Kaki [aunt] had told me. ‘You can have babies yourself.’

I, a woman? My mind had flung off the thought with an amazing swiftness. I was only a child. And then, she had gone to tell me, baldly, crudely, how I could have a baby. And I, who had all the
child’s unselfconsciousness about my own body, had for the first time, felt an immense hatred for it.

‘And don’t forget,’ she ended, ‘for four days now you are unclean. You can’t touch anyone or anything.’

And that had been my introduction to the beautiful world of being a woman. I was unclean. (Roots 79)

The degree of intensity of Indu’s resent of her womanhood can be gauged from the fact that she adopts a male pseudonym and writes from the male perspective, and she feels proud when her friend remarks that her writing bears an unmistakable signia of a male author. She shares her feelings of worthlessness, lack of control and fragmentation with Naren, illustrating how menarche is intimately connected to the feelings of sexual alienation and objectification. She develops a disgust of her body and distaste for feminine functions, and she decides not to have children.

The framing of womanhood at menarche occurs often within the context of the complex dynamic mother and daughter relationship. Mothers/mother-surrogates socialize their daughters into the same restrictions associated with femininity that they have endured, ensuring that their daughters also will fit into society and maintain a submissive femininity and gendered sexual identity. Matrophobia develops in the girls: they resent their mothers for the subservient ‘roles’ they play, and fear they too would follow the mothers’ footsteps. Sarita in The Dark Holds No Terrors, Mira in The Binding Vine as well as other women characters in Deshpande’s novels resent to follow their mothers’ footsteps. However, there is much evidence to suggest that these patterns are being disrupted. Many of the women who had negative experiences with
their mothers at menarche tell stories of positive experiences of menarche with their adolescent children.

Deshpande calls attention to the fact that a natural phenomenon like menstruation is distorted and pejorated. Women are stamped dirty, unclean creatures because of the bodily discharge. A sense of inferiority gets deeply ingrained in them as they are forced to look upon themselves as despicable figures. Seeing the corner room [in Mira’s house] Urmī (Vine) tries to fathom the ostracism Mira suffered. It is the room where women sat three long days, sequestered from the rest of the family, the room with a window which looks out on to the street (‘My companion for three days’, as Mira calls the window in the corner room’). Urmī reads Mira’s poem and she visualizes:

[Mira was] sitting on the floor with dishevelled hair, wearing an old sari, her plate and glass by her side . . . drawing herself into a huddle each time someone entered, tucking her sari under her feet, drawing it tightly round her shoulders when the children ran in, afraid of polluting them with her touch. And then, when she was alone, looking out of the window listening to the cries of the hawkers . . . .

(98)

Often the passive, indirect, fragmented language of menarche and menstruation is about sexual objectification and alienation. The sense of bodily alienation is entwined with women’s ‘object’ status. Nonetheless, the patriarchal societies allow men subjectivity, and construct femininity as a mirror through which men see themselves as human. On analysing the plausible reason for the sense of superiority that men have over women, Woolf infers that women are accountable for
it: “Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (Room 44).

Citing various writers like Thomas Buckley, Alma Gottlieb, and Sharon Golub, Lee states that historically and cross-culturally, menstrual blood has been considered both magical and poisonous, and menstrual taboos have structured and restricted women’s lives. The disdain associated with menstrual blood encourages many women to hide such evidence of their contamination from the potentially disapproving gaze of others (84, 85). “[T]he words that women used to describe menarche are those that symbolise the relationship of women to their bodies in a misogynist society: fear, shame, embarrassment, humiliation, preoccupation, mess, hassle, and so; however, running through these stories are also tales of consciousness, agency, and resistance” (92), writes Lee. She also cites from Emily Martin’s *The Woman in the Body: a Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* to show that while these discourses do frame the body, the woman in the body does resist, she is not always a powerless pawn to be acted upon (qtd. in Lee 92).

Women show their resistance to the destructive and alienating discourses associated with menarche and menstruation through telling the stories, and through the many ways that women have learned to cope. For many, the telling of their stories took the form of ongoing analysis and commentary on those experiences, speaking or writing on the effects of body politics on their everyday lives. Some speak of increasing solidarity with girls, of using menstruation as a way to manipulate and get their way; of having a desire to do things differently when their own daughters start to
menstruate. This kind of traumatic introduction to womanhood is absent in Laurence’s *The Diviners*.

Jaya in *That Long Silence* writes about the ‘unfeminine’ manners of Nilima, her neighbour’s teenage daughter who is “not ashamed of her monthly curse”. For her, “it was only a hated enemy”. She expresses her exasperation: “‘It’s so horrible, auntie, . . . I don’t want it, why can’t I stop having it? Isn’t there any drug I can take to stop it?’” (63) She pays no heed to the way a girl should sit or dress, thinks Jaya, as she glimpses her stained underwear because of her graceless sitting posture. The lack of control of her own body, its clumsy, cumbersome processes only infuriate her. Jaya’s daughter Rati has a carefree attitude regarding this. About her Jaya writes so:

Rati had sailed easily and confidently into her womanhood. It was I who had been flustered, unaccountably choky and emotional, remembering how momentous, how agonising and terrible it had been, that time when the drama of my womanhood had begun. But Rati, when I tried to explain these things to her, had only said, ‘Oh, I know everything.’ Casually, airily. She was neat and tidy, never messy. I found her astonishing, remembering the awkwardness and burden of my adolescence”. (*Silence* 64)

In her Preface to *The Politics of Women’s Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance and Behavior* Rose Weitz underscores that women learn to discipline their bodies and police themselves so that they conform to ideas based on man’s desires about proper female appearance (Weitz 1). In her book *Femininity and Domination* Bartky points out that women also partake in their objectification. She remarks that the
objectifier and objectified can be one and the same person. Thus the woman takes toward her own person the attitude of the man and becomes infatuated with her bodily being (narcissism), considers her body as a beautiful object to be gazed at, and finds erotic satisfaction in decorating it. She notes: “In the regime of institutionalised heterosexuality woman must make herself ‘object and prey’ for the man. . . . Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other” (qtd. in Papadaki 55). Iris Marion Young opines that women’s preoccupation with their appearance suppresses the body potential of women: “Developing a sense of our bodies as beautiful objects to be gazed at and decorated requires suppressing a sense of our bodies as strong, active subjects…” (qtd. in Papadaki 56).

An analysis of Indu’s (Roots) character would only emphasise this socially constructed and objectified personality of women. Indu is apprehensive about the change that has come over her: she is a woman who has lost her identity in her husband’s; now she thinks of her ‘self’ only in terms of Jayant: “When I look into the mirror, I think of Jayant. When I dress, I think of Jayant. When I undress I think of him. Always what he wants. What he would like. What would please him” (Roots49). The idea that it is the masculine image that is reflected in a woman’s mirror recurs in many feminist writing. Kamini Dinesh supports this idea when she says: “Women have not learned to see themselves for the mirrors they look into do not reflect them. They reflect the male idea of woman, whether married or single. The mirrors reflect the men in their lives (Spaces 33). Indu apparently, to use Laura Mulvey’s expression, is an object of ‘male gaze’, the defining mode of operation of masculist discourse that constructs the ‘woman’ as a textual object. It prevents woman from being ‘herself,’ from having a ‘self’ separate from or prior to the socio-
visual construct imposed by the male gaze. Bartky attributes the workings of male gaze to the Foucauldian notion of ‘disciplinary power’ and surveillance – compelling women to inscribe their bodies with the need for male approval of their physical looks and, thereby, reinforcing the rules of patriarchal discourse (*Femininity* 87). She also endorses R.W. Connell’s statement that women are encouraged to accommodate male needs, understand themselves as others see them, and feel pleasure through their bodily objectification, especially being looked and identified as objects of male desire (qtd. in Lee 88). From Indu’s instance it becomes apparent how male desire and policy have been scripted onto the female body.

The vulnerability of the female body is often emphasised to rein women. In *Moving On* Jiji, who has been managing her affairs after her husband’s, and later her parents’ death, gets threatening calls to sell her house to some real estate agent who works for an underworld don. She is reminded the fact that she is a woman, stressing the defencelessness of her femaleness and the intimidating power of the male opponent. Women are reminded now and then that their frail body can easily be overpowered; therefore they pose no challenge to men. The social construction of women’s bodies as weak compared to male bodies often serves as a powerful tool for controlling women’s lives.

Foucault argues that the human body evolves through historically and socially specific practices which are based on relations of power. According to him, there is no blank, neutral body. There are only signified bodies. He gives an account of how the signified body relates to power, sexual difference, repression and domination, and how the body, in turn, is instructed by these factors. Butler postulates that our bodies are governed by what Foucault calls ‘regulatory ideals’
(such as sex, size, race, colour and sexual orientation), and are not static and stable physical materialisations. We are not passive inhabitants of our bodies – our knowledges [sic] impact on our bodies. Foucault sees the body as problematic in that it is imposed upon by culture while at the same time imposing itself on culture (see Weeda-Zuidersma 53-56).

How the body becomes problematic is plainly illustrated in Laurence’s *The Diviners* where Morag Gunn’s foster parents, the Logans are described. It is apparent that the lives of the marginalised, inclusive of women, are controlled by the dominant upper (patriarchal) class. Christie Logan, being the town garbage collector, is the most despicable character of Manawaka. Laurence portrays the Logans as ‘physically grotesque’: Prin, short for Princess, is enormously fat, white and lethargic, sitting in an armchair all day, looking “like a great huge pear.” (*Diviners* 28) eating jelly doughnuts, and Christie with sparse sandy hair, bobbing Adam’s apple, missing front tooth, and outsized blue overalls looks silly, and the worst part is, he smells, of “[h]orseshit, and garbage, putrid stuff, vegetables and that, rotten eggs and mouldy old clothes” (*Diviners* 30). He is a clown-figure to the townsfolk, and the kids jeer at him, calling him ‘The Scavenger’, and he replies making foolish faces. The social stigma imposed on the Logans by the Manawaka society forces Morag to dissociate with everything that stands for it. Morag later realises this ‘muck’ is all the construct of society. Morag erases the stigma attached to the Logans and herself by relating all these in ‘The Diviners’, her spiritual autobiography.

Female body is a pawn in the hands of the patriarch. Hence the procreative rights of women appertain to the male domain, and their fecundity is exploited to
meet male desire and design for descendents. An examination of motherhood, a crucial human experience, throws light on the politics of the body. Some of the novels selected for study here explore the space for motherhood. They also reveal the disadvantaged status of motherhood. The plight of Nayana and Jeeja is already referred to in this chapter. Orthodoxies of motherhood are challenged in *Roots and Shadows, That Long Silence, The Binding Vine, Small Remedies*, and *The Diviners*, and the more traditional representations are refigured. Indu’s (*Roots*) decision to forgo motherhood, the ultimate state of woman’s fulfilment, is formed from the devalued notions of her female body. Jaya’s (*Silence*) decision to abort her third child (already stated) also demystifies motherhood. Mira (*Vine*) loathes being like her mother who effaces her ‘self’ for the family. The ideal of a self-sacrificing, glorified motherhood is dismantled. Thus these women characters learn to break free of the stereotypical ‘mother’ and ‘wife’ who sacrifice their personal needs to silence their selves.

Laurence deals with the undervaluation of women’s capacity to reproduce, and the aspects of the mother / daughter genealogical relationship that are silenced. In *The Diviners*, contrary to what was customary of old times when women are forced to give too many births and raise a large family, Morag is denied the right to conceive and give birth to a child. Pregnancy and childrearing challenge many of the assumptions of patriarchy and, therefore, are subject to control. Initially Morag does not resent the condescending attitude of Brooke because, perhaps, she seeks in him the father who she feels has been denied to her, but eventually she rails against his positioning of her as “child”: “I am not your child. I am your wife” (243), she tells him. Marsha Stanfield Bordner writes, “Brooke regards Morag more as his offspring
or pet than a person in her own right’ (qtd. in Lundberg 28). Thus, it is understandable that he does not want Morag to have his child: Brooke already has a child, and that child is Morag herself. In Karen Horney’s terms Brooke reins in Morag’s pregnancy because of his ‘womb envy’. Horney says it is the unexpressed anxiety felt by men, naturally envying pregnancy, nursing, and motherhood – of woman’s primary role in creating and sustaining life – that leads them to dominate women. By giving birth to and nurturing a child, she would be asserting her own sexual maturity and capacity to take care of another human being, rather than being taken care of herself, and this is something that Brooke cannot abide. Susan Maushart echoes this belief in *The Mask of Motherhood* when she writes:

> Motherhood is fearsome because it is so intensely powerful, entailing acts of creation before which all other human endeavour withers into shadow. In the creation stakes, motherhood is the big league, and everything else – art, science, technology – is a farm team. Is it really any wonder . . . at some subconscious level all men are terrified, awestruck and deeply envious of the gender-specific miracle of creation? (44)

Also, as Bordner notes, “Brooke’s tendency to regard Morag as a child is reflected in his attitude towards her writing” (qtd. in Lundberg 28).

Moreover, the grim fact that Brooke will never allow her to conceive dawns on Morag. She no longer cherishes the desire to conceive Brooke’s child as now it is clear to her that she wants to give birth to something that is a part of herself, not necessarily, as she first believed, a part of Brooke. Thus having a child, like her writing, is an act that Morag must undertake on her own, without Brooke’s help or
his approval. The confidence she obtains from the initial success with her writing, provides her the courage to leave Brooke and pursue having a child on her own.

Morag’s writing and her motherhood are again woven together. Cixous views a deep connectedness between writing and the body. Motherhood is a uniquely feminine experience and, therefore, the primary trait of women. Morag fulfils her desire with Jules (Skinner) Tonnerre’s help by deliberately not using birth control in her sexual encounters with him. Jules asks her (in contrast to Brooke’s characteristic command), “[Y]ou don’t want to get pregnant, do you?” (228), and she replies, “Would you mind very much if I didn’t do anything to try not to” (228). Ironically, because Morag’s choice to have a child has so long been denied to her, Jules responds by asking rhetorically: “Do you have to ask my permission?” (228). Morag’s lovemaking with Jules, in addition to being sexually and emotionally satisfying, and resulting in a much-desired pregnancy, is an act of empowerment from the outset: “this joining is being done for other reasons, some debt or answer to the past, some severing of inner chains which have kept her bound and separated from herself” (222).

In her essay “Sorties” Cixous refers to “the delights of a pregnancy,” and identifies as one of the main delights of a pregnant woman the fact that she can “valorise herself as a woman in her own eyes” (qtd. in Weeda-Zuidersma 94). Morag yearns for the experience of mothering. She will not brook the denial of her womanly rights even at the risk of surrendering the new haven of being a professor’s wife. Here the distinction between the role of mothering and the experience of mothering, as Rich has pointed out, is quite significant. Jean BethkeElshstain also attests the uniqueness of mothering in her work Public Man, Public Woman:
Mothering is not a ‘role’ on par with being a file clerk, a scientist, or a member of the Air Force. Mothering is a complicated, rich, ambivalent, vexing, joyous activity which is biological, natural, social, symbolical and emotional. It carries profoundly resonant emotional and sexual imperatives. (243)

Morag retrieves her womanly rights from the man (her husband) who has been dominating her. By conceiving a child against his wish, and that too of another man, over and above, a ‘half-breed’ (Métis), she raises a challenge to Brooke’s peremptoriness. Morag asserts: “I know that whatever I’m going to do next, or wherever I go, it’ll have to be on my own” (223). It is significant that single-motherhood and a career in writing are both seen as unconventional and difficult undertaking. This new independence of Morag’s carries with it a heavy burden of responsibility that has to be borne singly as well. Though fear and panic send tremors at the thought of looking after and supporting a kid on her own, and of building up a career as a writer, Morag manages to uphold the rights and freedom she attains.

Laurence makes it clear that Morag is not one of those women who are compelled, by various external forces, to become mothers: she wants and needs to have a child. This active desire to be a mother is in itself a re-appropriation, for traditionally motherhood has been seen as a duty or an imposition by the patriarchy, not for a woman’s own pleasure but for the propagation of the species. Unlike many feminist writers who choose to react against tradition by having their female protagonists choose not to have children, Laurence reacts against the patriarchy by putting this decision into the hands of the woman and by having her choose, actively and without outside compulsion and, indeed, in the face of staunch opposition from
her husband Brooke, and the possibility of great difficulty in the future to become a single parent. Thus, we have Laurence’s first point of comparison between the female artist and the mother: the moment of choice, the revelation (a word and an experience that Laurence is fond of using in her writing and which she personally believes in) that one wants and needs to become a mother may be usefully and appropriately compared with the decision to become a writer.

It has become quite apparent that ‘female body’ is a social construction. The various false and pejorative ideas about female body and femininity are socially constructed to keep women under subordination, and they, in fact, centrally affect the strictures within which women live. Only by looking at the embodied experiences of women, as well as how those experiences are socially constructed, can women’s lives, their position in society, and the possibilities for resistance against that position be fully understood. Human body is a textless text into which outside meanings are read but it always has the potential to be read from the inside, in that the body-bearer may at any point choose to wrest control over the text to interpret it as his or her own, making unique meanings and giving them primacy of place, opine Kenneth Dutton and Lawrence Schehr (see Culbertson).

This makes the female body a direct source of female writing, which means, to write from the body is to re-create the world of women. Women, Cixous contends, can write themselves out of the position of the objectified ‘Other to Man’ and be their own subject. Cixous promotes the idea of écriture feminine – a feminine practice of writing – aimed at critiquing phallocentrism and encouraging, in response, a female practice of writing (Morris 118). She says there is good reason to turn away from the narrow specifications that patriarchy has given to female biology. She invites women to see
their bodies as a resource, a source of pleasure and power, even while they are conscious of the social construction of the body. Rather perpetuating the long standing view of the female body as representing a lack, an absence, she exhorts women to move towards a celebration of the female body (Weeda-Zuidersma 99).

Hence Deshpande and Laurence, with a deep sense of female consciousness and social commitment, deconstruct the process by which the ideas of the female body have come to be socially accepted. Through women writer-characters they attempt at obliterating the distorted inscriptions on women’s bodies, and venture out to etch fresh engravings of liberty, uninhibited sexuality, and all that women have been deprived of. They rewrite patriarchal narratives with the possibilities for woman to have an identity outside the patriarchal framework. The authors through their female writer-characters, who through their narratives, prove that women’s writing is the means by which they survive, that is, through literary representation, historically, and through a reconfiguration of their selves, bodily, they reclaim the body that has been illegally confiscated by the patriarch. They unfetter themselves from an imposed destiny by the process of writing, and authenticate that they can re-create their identity through word, which includes the acceptance and validation of their body, their sexuality, and their passions. Thus Deshpande and Laurence substantiate what Rich posits in her essay “Notes towards a Politics of Location,” that the body is the closest geographical location from which women derive their identity, and, accordingly, they should reclaim it as their own by reconnecting with it (qtd. in Araújo-Gröchenig 52). Women should rethink themselves and speak about themselves, starting from what is unique to them: their body.