Chapter IV

Writing the Self

Women writers struggle to create a distinctive ‘space’ in the male-dominated world of letters. They deviate from traditional subject matter (which constitutes experience). They also adopt techniques appropriate to their subject, which in Mark Schorer’s opinion is an indispensable factor. In his hallmark essay *Technique as Discovery* (1948), he observes:

…[T]echnique is the means by which the writer’s experience, which is his subject matter, compels him to attend to it; technique is the only means he has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning, and finally, of evaluating it. And surely it follows that certain techniques are sharper tools than others, and will discover more, that the writer capable of the most exacting technical scrutiny of his matter will produce works with the most satisfying content, works with thickness and resonance, works which reverberate, works with maximum meaning. (387)

This underlines Schorer’s view that the process of literary production (artistic methods) assumes no less importance than the social structure which forms the
foundation of artistic work. In a letter to Clara Thomas, Margaret Laurence once commented on the indivisible nature of form and matter:

The problem of form, it seems to me, is always the problem of selection . . . . I don’t think of form as something imposed upon a novel, but as its bone, the skeleton which makes it possible for the flesh to move and be revealed as itself . . . . I am sometimes occupied with thoughts of the sort of form which will be certain to get across what I want to get across. (qtd. in Thomas10)

The present chapter is an attempt to examine how Shashi Deshpande and Margaret Laurence write their selves into the fiction under scrutiny, and how they artistically fuse theme, form and technique to create aesthetic works of literature. In other words, this chapter essays to examine how the personal experiences of the authors get transmuted in their fiction, how the writer-characters serve as looking-glass for the authors to discover themselves, and what appropriate techniques are used for this purpose. The undercurrents that have shaped Deshpande and Laurence’s literary products, which lent them a distinctly feminine voice, are quite significant.

Encoding of the problematized career into fiction indicates that autobiographical elements are strewn about in the novels. It should be borne in mind that the novels taken for study do not come under the category of autobiographical novels as of D. H. Lawrence or Sylvia Plath’s where a lot of their personal lives have been loaded into. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that a few nuggets of the writer’s personality, thought or experience, wittingly or unwittingly get integrated into one’s writing adequate to unfold before us the making of the writer. This is
especially pertinent in the case of women’s writing. In an interview with GeetaGangadharan Deshpande cites Dom Moraes who endorses this fact: “Most of what a creative writer writes is his autobiography, if not of his life, of his thoughts. All one’s life doesn’t go into one’s writing and all one’s writing doesn’t consist of just one’s life” (qtd. in “Denying” 253).

The indisputable link between the personal life of a woman writer and her career confirms that her gendered roles, based on the principle of self-denial, (en)gender her writing. Thus it is evident that as a writer she can neither flutter nor fly because as a woman she is caged and her wings are clipped. This implies that the hindrances to the ‘being’ of a woman in a patriarchal society are the hindrances to her ‘becoming’ as well. In “Literarity and Words” Maureen Devine cites Hélène Cixous’s theoretical stance of écriture feminine as follows: “The conflicts a woman-as-artist faces which hinder her relationship to her art, whether ‘high art’ (like writing, painting) or ‘crafts’ (like quilting, gardening, cooking, etc.), can be seen as the conflicts the woman faces in becoming herself wading through the sea of cultural restrictions that deny her creativity” (182). This explicates that the problematization of woman-as-writer is not only related to the society, but also to her art. The woman writer is denied self-identity; this in turn denies her self-expression / self-actualisation. The impediment to her being (self-identity) is the cultural construct ‘woman’, which is also the impediment to her becoming (self-actualisation). That is, becoming a writer is restricted by the cultural construct ‘woman.’ Thus, to free her art from the clutches of gender (cultural construct) she has to free herself from the gendered role of ‘woman’ (cultural construct). This means the deconstruction of the cultural construct ‘woman’ is a pre-requisite to deconstruction of the culturally
constructed art. In other words, the woman writer who seeks self-identity and self-actualisation has to demystify and demythify the culturally imposed roles.

To render writing an emancipatory act Deshpande and Laurence, besides using unconventional themes and characters, avail of various techniques that provide space for self-reflexivity (self-referentiality) like metafiction, *künstlerroman*, *mise en abyme*, etc. Their identity as women writers get transformed: from the state of incarcerated women they become free and unrestrained writers. Through writing, Deshpande and Laurence rewrite their female destiny. Writing thus serves as a medium to explore, discover, assert and realise their selves. Coral Ann Howells explains that for a woman writer “writing is the means through which she achieves not only her imaginative freedom but also her freedom in the real world” (47).

Writing may mean many a different thing to women. Despite curbs and constraints their stealthy act at writing highlights its therapeutic aspect. Women jot down their thoughts to ease their aggrieved minds. Moral indignation at the injustices meted out to women prompt some to recount the tales of misery of their oppressed sisters. They strike solidarity, raise their consciousness, and instil hope and courage by deconstructing stereotypes and portraying deterritorialized characters. Writing is an emancipatory act for women. Irrational customs and conventions that fetter women are exposed. Women have been marked by gaps and omissions. Writing bestows upon them visibility and validity. It provides them a livelihood. Writing is a guiding star as well; they gain a clearer vision, and steer their life accordingly. Fakrul Alam observes:

> Once literature begins to serve as a forum illuminating female experience, it can assist in humanizing and equilibrating the culture’s
value system, which has historically served predominantly male interests. A literary work is capable of providing role models, instil a positive sense of feminine identity by portraying women who are self-actualising, whose identities are not dependent on men (45).

The benefits of writing are various and the writer-characters do not experience them alike due to their different specific contexts. Deshpande and Laurence champion the cause of women. They portray a women’s world, revitalise the writer-characters to write in their own terms.

In this study on Deshpande and Laurence the woman-as-writer becomes one: the authors encode their own problematized relationship to the texts through the creation of women writer-characters. The writer-characters are to a certain extent the fictionalised self of the authors. They are the alter-egos of the authors. The life of the writer-character bears some resemblance or connection – metaphorical, biological, or autobiographical – to the life of the writer of each novel. The plot of each novel revolves round the writer-character in conflict with her self and society. Thus the fiction charts the intertwined course of the writer’s life and art. Writing resolves their crisis; it also strengthens the connection between the individual self and the community (especially the bonding among women).

The quest for authentic female self-development is a process that entails coming to terms with multiple social and cultural forces, external as well as internal, that infringe upon the path toward female individuation and understanding of the individual self. The protagonists under scrutiny being middle-aged women, the rites of passage are depicted as the mature woman’s awakening to the reality of her social and cultural role as a woman, and her subsequent attempts to re-examine her life and re-
shape it in accordance with her newly acquired feminist consciousness. It is significant that it is not solely a search for identity per se but rather an exploration and articulation of the process leading to the awakening of the female protagonist. The mature protagonist re-examines her past through the recollection of past experiences. She arrives at an understanding of her female self, the social and psychological influences on her as a child and adolescent. Thus the self emerges from the interaction between the self and the world. The female protagonist looks into the process of self-negation that she has been schooled in and learns to reinstate her ‘self’. The novels taken for study here delineate this process of becoming, the process of self-development of a woman who becomes—or is on the threshold of becoming—a writer. In the novels the path toward self-development or self-definition is portrayed as intimately connected to the process of creation; thus the act of writing becomes essential to the discovery of the self.

It has to be noted that the particular perspective of the female protagonist and her inner development are often vastly different from the male’s experiences or that of the patriarchal norm. Hence the process leading to selfhood and creative self-assertion also varies from that of the male counterpart and his quest toward actualisation. The protagonist’s experience of the social and cultural environment depends on several interrelated factors such as gender, class, race, and ethnicity, all of which determine the individual’s position with reference to the social context. The women writers will have to confront all that complicates the female protagonist’s quest for actualisation and authenticity.

The writer-characters of the novels examined discover that the crisis in their career is inevitably linked to the crisis in their personal life. A similar phase
of crisis, self-discovery, and self-actualisation can be traced in the life and career of the author as well. Despite the intense longing to soar up the woman writer finds her wings clipped by patriarchal ideology. She wriggles out of the patriarchal tangles to realise her social obligation, which she learns is an integral feature of a writer. The quest for self-identity uncovers the causes that precipitate the crisis. Self-discovery is a process of confrontation and internal growth. The woman writer emerges successful only when she learns to self-assert and create her own space. The social constraints on a woman necessitate her symbolic or literal transcendence in the self-discovery narrative. The author seems to be the prototype for the writer-character. It is through the writer-characters Deshpande and Laurence discover their ‘self’, their true ‘voice. In the process of discovering her voice the writer-character maps the lives of other women and despised classes relegated to the dark dungeons of history.

Deshpande and Laurence problematize their marginalised status as women writers in their novels by narrating stories of women writer-characters who write on margin from the margins. For instance, Laurence shows all the prejudice (gender, racial, social) and the injustices that she saw in Canada at that time (late 1970s). She creates the writer-character Morag Gunn, an orphan adopted by the most despicable couple of the town, the refuse collector and his illiterate, obese wife. Morag encounters various challenges in her life. Her failed marriage and unforgettable past leads to her self-discovery which she achieves through art. Art enables her to gain perspective, and she asserts herself as a writer. Laurence also faced the challenges of marital life in seeking her identity as mother and writer.
Deshpande relates the story of the writer-cum-columnist Jaya in *That Long Silence* who reviews her life as a daughter, wife and mother, and writer when she finds herself in a blind alley. Jaya recounts not only her story, but that of Mohan’s mother, his sister Vimala, her relative the insane Kusum, the servant folk – Jeeja, Tara, Nayana, etc., that is, all the silenced and subordinated women. In *Roots and Shadows*, Deshpande makes Indu introspect the crisis in her life, and evaluate the factors that moulded her maiden and marital life. She surveys the oppressive atmosphere of her ancestral home which has left a deep impact on her career. In *The Binding Vine* Deshpande unveils Mira, the unsung and unhonoured poet, who comes to life through her daughter-in-law, Urmi’s reading of her poems and diary notes. The novel sheds light on the portrait of Mira as a poet, daughter, wife and mother. *Small Remedies* tells the predicament of the journalist-cum-biographer Madhu who sets apart her entire life to dote on her son. Her autobiography gets inscribed in the biography that she writes of the musical maestro, Savitri Bai Indorekar. This provides Madhu an opportunity to reflect on the career-oriented women, Bai and her aunt Leela, and replenish herself. In *Moving On*, Vasu, a short story writer is portrayed in the diary writings of her husband Badri and their daughter, Jiji. Jiji adds to the jottings of her father after his death. We get the portraits of Vasu from her husband’s and her daughter’s perspectives, as they evaluate her roles as wife, mother and writer. Jiji also obtains an opportunity to chart her prospective course through this introspective act of writing which helps her to gain confidence and assert an independent life.

The progressive movement of Deshpande discovering her self-identity and asserting her feminine voice can be traced in these novels and the writer-characters
therein. With each novel she sets her foot firm freeing herself from the
countenonality that confines women. With *Moving On* Deshpande seems to move
towards an androgynous stand by making Badri Narayan one of the narrators of the
novel, and giving him a substantial role, unlike the sketchy male characters of her
earlier novels. The unconventionality of Madhu, a motherless girl child being
brought up by the father and a male servant, and not experiencing the lack of
maakapyaar, highlighting the inessentiality of ‘mothering’ is depicted in *Small
Remedies* in contrast to Indu (*Roots*), also motherless, being taken care of by her
aunts in the ancestral home, and Urmi (*Vine*) being sent away with her grandparents
as a punishment to her mother for leaving the girl child for a while with a male
servant. A similar graph of literary growth becomes conspicuous in the case of
Laurence establishing herself as a woman of substance and principle with the
publication of her Manawaka works. From Hagar Shipley, Rachel, Stacey, to Morag
we see Laurence engaged in a pilgrimage, as suggestive of the title ‘diviners’,
affirming her faith in the power of women.

The writer-characters scrutinised here narrate their own stories, but
emotionally disentangle themselves so that they can view their own lives and art
objectively. Jaya in *That Long Silence* reflects on the art of writing: “you can never
be the heroine of your own story. . . . Perhaps it is wrong to write from inside.
Perhaps what I have to do is see myself, us, from a distance. This has happened to
me before; there have been times when I’ve had this queer sensation of being
detached and distant from my own self. Times when I’ve been able to separate two
distinct strands – my experience, and my awareness of that experience (*Silence* 1-2).
She learns that if a writer wants “[t]o achieve anything, to become anything,” s/he
has to be “hard and ruthless” (1). Techniques of defamiliarization or the distancing effect help Deshpande and Laurence create these novels as metafiction. Laurence makes Morag comment on the way she selects her life experiences to write her novel. The “Memorybank Movies” and “Snapshots” give us a glimpse of the sorting of the raw material and the blending of imagination to create fiction. Reflecting on the experience of writing a novel, Morag states, “They’d been real to her, the people in the books. Breathing inside her head” (58). Deshpande conveys through Jaya that the real life characters and incidents get transmuted in the crucible of imagination.

The women writer-characters analysed here demonstrate the power of word that helps them break the bars of the patriarchal birdcage that they are shut up in. As they struggle to find their authentic voice they expose the gendered literary tradition that marginalises women’s writing. They forge a new literary tradition with a vision of a new world where women are not slotted by androcentric criteria, where the true feminine voice ultimately alters the hierarchies of dominance of gender and class. Deshpande and Laurence’s texts focus predominantly on the writer-characters’ inner struggles in the path of self-awareness and self-actualisation.

The novels under scrutiny may be considered metafiction as they narrate a story about a writer creating a story. That is, the narrator intentionally exposes herself as the author of the story. The novel, in a sense, becomes multi-layered: it is not only the story of the writer-character but the author’s as well. Thus, the texts become a medium for Deshpande and Laurence to problematize their own relationship to art in and through the process of writing. Apparently, this provides room for the blending of personal details into the metafictive novels. The author
avails of the opportunity to vent her views and opinions on morality, social commitment, marginalization, ghettoisation of women’s writing, etc.

Deshpande and Laurence move away from the trodden path; they portray women writers, who are bold to deconstruct the cult of womanhood. They create new images of women, who no more sacrifice their inner urges, surrender their selfhood and play secondary roles in the androcentric society. The authors selected for study reflect on the frontiers of fact and fiction as their writer-characters sift between the facts of their life, their childhood memories and the power of imagination to build up a fictional world of their choice. The novels under consideration may be regarded as juryüntlerromane as they record the growth of the writer-characters: caught in crises, awakened to self-awareness, and reaching the state of self-actualisation. The female juryüntlerroman implies an optimistic genre, the growth of the female artist: the emergence of woman from cultural conditioning into full personhood.

The concept of creativity as a catalyst for self-discovery is the basic theme of many female juryüntlerroman. However, “to be a creative woman in a gender polarized culture is to be a divided self” (Ostriker 60). The female artist has to contend with not only confining social and cultural definitions of her role as woman, but also with the very concept of herself as an artist. Carol Pearson and Linda Huf both underline the problem layered on the juryüntlerroman when the artist is a female. They argue that if “the artist hero is a divided self ... the artist heroine is that and more. She is torn not only between life and art but, more specifically, between her role as a woman demanding selfless devotion to others, and her aspirations as an artist, requiring exclusive commitment to work” (Huf 5). The life / art division for her is more
complex, as life is tied up with both her own and societal or cultural expectations. As we have seen, the female *künstlerroman* explores its protagonist’s self-realisation, not just as an artist’s but as a female artist’s. Her roles and obligations as woman appear to jeopardize the autonomy of her art. Each and every writer-character analysed here endorses this fact that their artistic expression is subject to cultural dimensions that bind their lives too.

Down the ages creativity has been defined exclusively in male terms, and Gerard Manley Hopkin’s assertion that “the male quality is the creative gift … [which] especially marks off men from women” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 3) is not an anomaly, but rather underscores the heretofore general assumption. The male primacy in the creative realm has been reinforced in religion and myths, where the creator is always male. But Gubar points out the irony: “the creation itself is the female, who, like Pygmalion’s ivory girl, has no name or identity or voice of her own”; the very fact that until recently “women have been barred from art schools as students yet have always been accepted as models” (293) emphasizes the exclusion of women from the creative sphere. The depiction of the male as the creator and the female as the object for creation is a recurrent pattern in myths.

Consequently the quest for self through creative act has been projected as male artists identifying with mythic male figures. The female *künstlerroman* written by and about women thus operates “under the psychological and sociological burdens of a patriarchal society and its myths,” as Grace Stewart points out in her study *A New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine 1877-1977* (9). Myths generally reflect crucial periods in human life, and because the quest for self carries mythic undertones, Stewart has taken an archetypal approach to the question of
female struggle for artistic self-fulfilment. She concludes that the female artist has to struggle with “patriarchal heritage of myths, a reason why a new mythos is needed to guide the female artist toward personal and artistic fulfilment; each female künstlerroman, she believes, “will foster the growth of a new Mythos, a new base for the female artist” (180).

Since the conditions for development for the female artist are so vastly different from her male counterpart, female künstlerromane build on their own traditions and developments. Linda Huf in her study, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: The Writer as Heroine in American Literature (1983) argues that female artist novels are rare, yet the female künstlerroman differs quite significantly from its male counterpart. Certain recurring themes characterize the female künstlerroman, such as the conflict between female conditioning and woman’s role as an artist, a conflict growing out of “the practical impossibility of being both the selfless helpmate and committed craftsman” (6). Men play an important role in these novels, not as male muses, however, but rather as impediments in their [the females’] artistic strivings. While the male artist contends with bourgeois conventionalism, the opposition to the female artist is all encompassing:

[T]he artist heroine who fights for the rights of woman against the wrongs of man invariably discovers that The Enemy has outposts in her own head. She learns that she has inner foes as formidable as outer ones. Because she has internalized society’s devaluation of herself and her abilities, she must slay enemies within her own ranks: fear, self-doubt, guilt. (11)
However, Huf finds that women of the last two decades have begun to overcome the guilt for creating; artist heroines have become more self-assertive in their stance against confining traditions, and are increasingly “daring to be selfish” (157) in their strivings toward artistic fulfilment.

Thus before creative self-assertion is possible, woman has to come to terms with not only cultural and social constraints, but also a heritage of patriarchal myths and assumptions about herself as a woman and an artist. The writer-characters portrayed in the novels under study are engaged in the process of resolving the crisis that they face as women and as writers. Adrienne Rich sees the re-visioning of this cultural history as an act of survival for women writers: “Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves” (Rich, 35); understanding the discrepancies between what woman is and what she is expected to be is thus essential to the process of self-development. The woman that has been represented with no authentic self, void of creative powers is in the process of un-learning the art of silence. Women writers re-inscribe the Eternal Feminine – a model of selflessness and purity of heart, one who leads a life without external events, a life whose story cannot be told as there is no story. They are authenticating the self, filling the void with creative powers; they are in the process of un-learning the art of silence.

The writer-characters in the novels analysed are bound by masculine norms despite their liberal thinking and dislike of traditional roles. As they slowly stir up to the stifling atmosphere they turn their pen to the world around them. They become aware of the complexities inherent in the role-vocation conflict, the social powerlessness that women writers are hedged in. The writer-characters are examples
of women’s oppression within patriarchal culture and proof of the necessity of female autonomy and independence. While literature is a way to express and examine the woman writer’s struggles, it is also the root of other struggles. It is her life as a female that interrupts and inspires her art, and it is her art that interrupts and inspires her life.

The struggle and growth of the vocation-minded Morag Gunn from her childhood when she starts fantasizing the Spruce-family till she winds up her life story in her final novel, *The Diviners*, and how she copes with single parenting is related in Laurence’s *The Diviners*. Instead of being erased or written by others, Morag Gunn, the mother-protagonist writes herself back into existence and identity. This act of self-inscription allows Laurence to validate the possibility of a successful mother-writer as against the general conception of its incompatibility. Morag often resents the demands of the people in her life: “how could anyone be expected to work in such a madhouse, and here she was feeding them all, more or less, and no goddamn money would be coming in if she didn’t get back to the typewriter” (5). The demands of motherhood, however, are clearly the ones that Morag finds most difficult to handle. Throughout *The Diviners*, Morag presents herself as torn between her work and her child.

Deshpande’s novels, namely *Roots and Shadows*, *That Long Silence*, *The Binding Vine*, *AMatter of Time*, *Small Remedies*, and *Moving On* deal with the conflictual roles of wife /mother and writer, an outcome of self-internalisation. Deshpande and Laurence place emphasis on the struggle between female obligations and the passion for creating literature. The life-art tension that is so integral to the *künstlerroman* is foregrounded in these novels. Deshpande and Laurence unravel and resolve the wife-writer / mother-writer conflict in their novels.
The success of a female *künstlerroman* relies upon a plot and characterisation that balances the female artist’s gender and her vocation. This continual weaving together and pulling apart of the female artist, both externally and internally, calls for alterations of the *künstlerroman* structure as well as its content. The female *künstlerroman* frequently relies upon circularity unlike the linear pattern of the canonical *künstlerroman*. Deshpande and Laurence portray the middle-aged women writers as not only looking back on their growth into artistry but also allow their characters the opportunity to look forward, to explore their on-going narrative. This enables the writer-character to take power over her own construction as woman and artist.

The techniques of flashbacks, interior monologues, old photographs etc., serve as starting points to look back to the past. Deshpande and Laurence also use *mise en abyme* (a circle inside a circle inside a circle, ad infinitum) which provides infinite possibilities for women. This enables them to re-frame the portrait-of the-wife/mother within the portrait-of-the-writer. Beginning the novels *in medias res* and creating the novel within a novel technique (the *mise en abyme*), the writer-characters write themselves out of bounds and limits, and are able to free themselves from patriarchal confines. By availing these techniques Deshpande and Laurence try to present the development of the female artist as an ongoing process.

Deshpande’s novels begin with the writer-character (except Mira in *The Binding Vine* and Vasu in *Moving On* who come alive only through narration within narration) in a state of crisis, reviewing the stalemate in her life and art. Laurence’s Morag has attained maturity as an artist and has resolved the crisis in her career. She retrospects on the hurdle-lain path she trod towards attainment of her rights. In
order to counter the sense of stasis that comes with the circularity of the artist’s development, Deshpande and Laurence begin their stories in _medias res_. They engage the writer-character in writing a novel, the very novel in which she is the protagonist. That is, within _The Diviners_ Morag is writing _The Diviners_; Jaya is engaged in writing an autobiographical fiction in _That Long Silence_; _Roots and Shadows_, the novel is the outcome of Indu’s desire for creative writing; in _Small Remedies_ the narrator, Madhu’s autobiography is embedded in the biography of Savitribai Indorekar, and so on.

Deshpande and Laurence provide some insight into their own creative process by dramatizing the reality of the writer-characters (Indu, Jaya, Mira, Sumi, Madhu, Vasu, Jiji, and Morag). They achieve self-assertion and self-realisation through portrayal of these characters. There may be strong autobiographical links; yet the primary focus is on their inner evolution. The interviews and the articles Deshpande and Laurence themselves have authored authenticate the autobiographical elements woven into the texture of the novels. According to Charles Ruas, interviews are of immense value because they serve as a looking-glass – or window …. The body of the finished work becomes a bridge for the interviewer to reach out to the author (xii). Deshpande and Laurence make an introspective as well as a retrospective view of their own selves – into the making of themselves as writers. As their writer-characters get a sense of direction after self-examination, we, on gathering the various bits of Deshpande and Laurence’s lives, get a deeper insight of their growth as artists. Ruas says: ‘The fiction writer unfolds a self-portrait . . . which is composed of many layers of images – the public persona, the individual in
front of his work, the archetypal writer. These overlapping shades may be contradictory, but are a fundamentally unified aspect of the writer’s psyche . . . (xii).

Deshpande’s writings “Of Concerns, Of Anxieties”, “Writing from the Margin”, “The Dilemma of the Woman Writer”, “Seeking a Moral Base”, and Meenakshi Mukherjee’s “On Her Own Terms”, Ammu Joseph’s “The Censor Within”, and KaveryNambisan’s “No Sound of Bangles” help us to see how Deshpande peeps in and out from the lives of her protagonists. These interviews and writings, in the guise of recalling the process of creation, compel the writer to observe herself in her novels. They provide us a valid biographical document, and we get a clear sense of the development of the writer’s thoughts from work to work, and the artistic aspiration the work embodies. Author and editor, Gita Hariharan on being interviewed by Dickman says:

[T]here are certain things in any written work, any work of art, little things which connect to your own life like hooks . . . . [T]hat’s the link between the writing and your lived experience. . . . [A] lot of stories heard, overheard, in childhood, surface, and you twist and turn them further, but there is some link there . . . . You’re completing certain stories you might have found for yourself. I think that ultimately the hard work of fiction is in completing the picture. So you might get one piece of your jigsaw puzzle from your own life or from a person you’ve seen or you’ve met, but the rest has got to be yours. (31)

The fact that the writer’s own piece is essential for the completion of the picture is brought out in Small Remedies, where Madhu notices the distinction
between the two biographies she has written: Hamid Merchant and SavitribaiIndorekar’s. Hamidbhai’s biography is a straight chronological narrative; it lacks lustre and life. She reflects on the shortcomings of her insipid work:

I knew it was flawed, I had no doubts that I’d botched it up. I’d written all the facts about Hamidbhai—his nationalist father, his saintly mother, his business acumen, his philanthropy, his patriotism, his simple life, etc., etc. Yes, all this was there. But Hamidbhai himself was nowhere in the book, he had eluded me. The truth was that I hadn’t really known him at all, except as Joe’s friend. . . . But Hamidbhai’s absence was not the only thing that was wrong about the book; I was not in the book either. I’d kept myself carefully, scrupulously out of it, making myself the invisible narrator.

(Medecies 160)

Madhu critically analyses Bai’s biography to find what makes it outstanding. As a writer she upholds truth and integrity though it entails the inclusion of the ‘subdued’ parts of Bai’s life. Madhu’s own childhood is inextricably linked with the childhood of Bai’s daughter (who was disowned later). She realises that a work sans the author’s personality is dry and lifeless, and a biography is not just arraying biographical data, the author’s selfhood has to be impressed. Nobel Laureates V.S. Naipaul and Xingjian also underscore the link between the writer and her / his writing. Deshpande quotes Naipaul: “The thought that you have to begin, do it all, out of what is in you, your own internal resource is frightening” (“Concerns” 109). Xingjian is of the view that the personal element is an indispensable ingredient of writing. He believes that a work withstands the ravages of time only when the
feelings of the writer as an individual are dispersed in it (1). Deshpande opines that the observations and experiences registered in the mind will surface in the writing:

[W]hatever you go through, ultimately strengthens your writing . . . .

[E]verytime you’re going through something, some part of your mind is clicking away, at least registering it very consciously, which is something one is ashamed of. Even waiting to write, or going through this process of writing, it comes into writing. Nothing is lost. No part of your life is ever lost. I think that’s one of the most precious things I’ve learned about being a writer. (Dickman 31)

When Ranjana Harish comments that readers may trace an “identical journey” in our “heroines”, Deshpande says it is inevitable that “they had to grow with the creator and finally culminate as self-fulfilled women” (224). Thus, the author’s handling of the troubled phase in the protagonist’s life is an important index of her own feminist awareness. Along with the writer-character she is engaged in a search for identity. Thus, the writer-protagonist becomes a mirror for the author, to examine, understand and revalidate herself. Altogether, the author and the writer-protagonist share the experiences of oppression and subsequent resistance. Considered along with devices like images, narrative tones and the handling of minor characters Deshpande encodes her feminist consciousness with authenticity and great profundity.

Deshpande began writing in her thirties. Until then she had never written anything: not a short story, not even a poem. So she had no inkling that she will ever become a writer, yet she felt dissatisfied playing the conventional role. In response to a query made by Atrey and Kirpal about her sudden initiation as a
writer, Deshpande states: “Until then I was looking around to see what I could do. I was unhappy not doing anything, just looking after the home and children” (1). From her answer, Deshpande could well be one of her own writer-characters who learn how to break the ‘silence’ and find her ‘voice’ and ‘identity’. She reveals to Geetha Gangadharan: “It was just an accidental beginning.” She comments that the late entry into the world of letters was in a way advantageous; it helped her skip “a lot of juvenile writing, the adolescent mawkish kind” (“Denying” 251). On discovering the oasis within her, she liberates herself from the ennui and claustrophobic existence of looking after her home and children, and from the discontent of living a ‘worthless’ life.

Thus, writing helps Deshpande come out of the state of immanence. She becomes the prototype for Sumi in A Matter of Time who in her middle age just stumbles upon her resources to write. She attempts at rewriting a childhood story: “The Rice and Curds Tree” into a play, “The Gardener’s Son”. Sumi is amazed at the wonderful shaping of the ideas that are forming in her. She ventures to write a play on Surpanakha, making her a positive symbol of courage and female sexuality. Both the ‘creator’ (Deshpande) and the ‘creator-character’ (Sumi) feel at home in the newly discovered domain. Deshpande comments on this experience of hers: “It was as if something lying dormant in me through the years was suddenly awakened” (“Concerns” 106). Deshpande and Sumi share a sense of freedom, confidence, joy and self-worth that writing imparts.

A parallel can be drawn between Deshpande’s development into an unfettered, full-fledged artist and that of her artist-protagonists. The early phase of Deshpande’s literary career is derivative. The influence of Guy de Maupassant, O’
Henry and Somerset Maugham can be traced in her early short stories. Her heroines like their ‘creator’ hail from an educated middle class family. The discovery of her latent talent does not assure Deshpande a ‘smooth ride’. She has to tread along a thorny path to discover her ‘voice’, her own identity as a writer. She is no better than her heroines, who despite the trappings of being educated, free and independent, are caught in the trap of wifehood or motherhood.

Deshpande observes women’s problems, women’s concerns, women’s experiences, etc., are of interest only to women. They are never ‘human’ problems. Only male ideas, male problems and male experiences are considered ‘human’. In this world dominated by male values gender struggle becomes too tough for women, and Deshpande develops an ‘inferiority’ complex. She gets the misconception that serious writing is about men and can be done by men alone; women’s writing is insubstantial. Even today the word ‘woman’ carries a ‘pejorative’ connotation. It is still loaded with the weight of ‘insignificance’. The derogatory terms coined for women’s writing – ‘domestic literature’, ‘kitchen sink literature’ make it clear how women’s writing is looked at. Deshpande was for long under the conviction women, and all that concerns them, is second class. She suffers from a George Eliot complex, and slips into a male narrator, a sort of male ‘I’.

Deshpande recalls how pleased she was when a friend once made such a remark about one of her stories. “I hadn’t known that you’ve written that story, I’d imagined the writer to be a man” (“Dilemma” 230). These words find a ready echo in Indu who assumes a male pseudonym to hide her female identity. Jaya also attempts to conceal her femininity by writing stories in Kamat’s name. The crisis of female identity that the author faces comes up in That Long Silence and Roots and
Shadows. In the presence of Holmstrom Deshpande reminiscences those days when she was uncertain of herself:

The male narrator was actually very much a conscious effort on my part. I used to be afraid that my stories would be considered much too ‘womanish’. Remember that this was before the time when one could speak out with a woman’s voice and be certain that one had every right to do so. I was almost apologetic about always wanting to use a woman’s voice. In those days too, I was ‘trying out’ voices. And it took me quite a while to find my own. (242)

The author is prompted to self-probe her ‘male’ stand. Why does she need to use a ‘male’ narrator? Is it to distance herself from the subject? Is it because of the trivialising trend towards women’s concerns? Is it because of the ‘narrowness’ of women’s interest and experiences? Is she being brainwashed to regard women’s experiences second-rate? Does she regard women’s writing mushy, and so having a ‘male’ narrator would help intellectualise it? Deshpande realises that what she has been doing is similar to having a male pseudonym adopted by many women to conceal their female identities.

Deshpande gets to the core: she is trying to get to reject her femininity, which was what Indu did using a male narrative voice and Jaya by writing in Kamat’s voice. She was under the notion that in order to be accepted as a writer she has to come out of her woman’s skin. Deshpande’s early stories were published in *Femina* and *Eve’s Weekly* but later she felt publishing in women’s magazines deprived her of recognition as a serious writer. Her protagonists: Indu staying in a women’s hostel, and Sumi in the Big House with her mother and three daughters,
and visited by female relatives eagerly desire to come out of the ‘zenana.’ Indu (Roots) and Jaya (Silence) fear that by restricting their work to women’s magazines, their growth as writers may be hampered, and they would be ghettoised.

The turning point in her writing career comes with the story “The Intrusion”. Deshpande experiences for herself what, memorising his writing career, Naipaul says in his Enigma of Arrival: all at once material, tone of voice and writing skill had locked together and began to develop together (qtd. in “Concerns” 106). Deshpande believes that this was exactly what happened to her when she wrote the story “The Intrusion”. Writing that rather difficult story she, like her heroines, discerns the inadequacy of the sexist language to deal with the theme of marital rape. But she succeeds in breaking through the language barrier. For the first time she experiences a sense of power within. Mira (Vine), when she inscribes in verse her unhappy experience of her insensitive husband forcing himself on her, undergoes a similar liberating experience. It seems that with the story “The Intrusion” Deshpande has found her anchorage. She sheds her inhibition and consciousness associated with her ‘gender.’ “The consciousness of one’s voice is a very important development for a writer, until then most writers are groping, feeling their way imitating other writers” (Deshpande, “Margin” 9). Thus, with this story Deshpande crosses another barrier to self-knowledge and self-identity. After writing the story “The Intrusion” she feels confident to speak in her own ‘voice’. The stories and novels she wrote thereafter mark her out as a ‘woman writer,’ a woman who writes about women. The stages of self-crisis, self-exploration, self-discovery, and self-actualisation that Deshpande passes through in her career as a writer can be traced in the lives of Indu,
Writing about women and their concerns, Deshpande finds herself catalogued as a woman writer and feminist. In the article “Writing from the Margin” she says: “And then the word ‘margin’ came back into my life, no longer belonging to the paper I wrote on, but to me as a writer” (9). She realises that her name seldom appears in the list of Indians writing in English, and her name, “if it figures in the list at all, goes as, ‘among the women writers’, invariably a kind of footnote” (10). She felt her self-worth as a writer being challenged. “[A]fter nearly three decades of writing, seven novels, nearly 100 short stories, three national awards and students all over the world working on me, it is possible to be so dismissive of my work” (9). The neglect she bore was because of the label ‘women’s writing’ attached to her works. Deshpande’s is not a singular instance. All the sixty-two women writers, from eleven languages of our country who gathered at the National Colloquium held at Hyderabad in 2000 are in league with her (Nambisan IX).

She gets a foretaste of the marginalised status of women writers when she is rebuffed by an editor whom she approaches with a story of hers. His suggestion to publish it in women’s magazine disheartens and disappoints her. Deshpande recalls that this incident must have infuriated her so much that it surfaces later in That Long Silence. Jaya to whom this happens in the novel is seething with anger. As the anger dies down, Deshpande ruminates on the editor’s advice. She is pretty confident it is a good story, not the romantic or sentimental type seen in women’s magazines. It surprises her why it took so long for the truth to sink in: women’s experiences are of interest only to women; that only women want to read about other women; her own
marginalisation as a writer only reflected the marginalisation of the women at large and that the two are tangled together in a kind of vicious circle (“Margin 10”). Very often women writers find it difficult to clear the first hurdle: publishing their works, reports Joseph. “While some spaces have opened up for women’s writing, especially in magazines and journals, they said accessing them is not easy and often involves compromise of one kind or another” (IV).

In the article “The Dilemma of the Woman Writer” Deshpande tells of her isolation as a writer: on one plane, she feels out of the mainstream Indian literature for choosing English as the medium; on another, a deeper plane, the lack of a female tradition, the absence of a role-model and ‘gendered-space’ ‘wipe’ her out. She feels like writing in a vacuum. The plight of Mira (Vine) comes close to that of her ‘creator’. They have to confront the misogyny in literary practice. Deshpande finds the use of the phrase ‘woman writer’ both “intriguing” as well as “irritating” (“Dilemma” 229). When phrases like ‘woman singer’ and ‘woman dancer’ are not used she cannot understand why there is a ‘woman writer’. It is but to ‘categorise’ her, to judge her using a special yardstick. “Women writers from across the world who belong to WW (a spin-off from International PEN – Poets, Essayists and Novelists) believe that gender-based censorship is major threat to free expression by women”(Joseph IV).

Deshpande notes that some women’s writing is propagandist, for example, Marilyn French’s Women’s Room, where the author has let anger carry her away. Woolf points out this as the woman novelist’s dilemma: she is caught between these two extremes – “the unreal world of romance” and the exaggerated world of “shit and beans.” According to Deshpande the phase of anger is an inevitable one that a
woman has to go through. After so many long ages of silence and suppression it is not strange that there is “exaggeration” and “extravagance” in women’s writing. “It is like letting a youngster loose in the world after years of strict discipline” (“Dilemma” 230).

Women have every right to express themselves in any way they want to. What matters in their writing as in the writing of men, is sincerity, integrity and professionalism. She confesses to Dickman that she was literally screaming in That Long Silence that she wanted to have some thing of herself, some time to herself. She used to see her father work uninterrupted, for her mother would take care of all the household chores. She realises writing demands total commitment; she has to put aside a lot of herself, which is very hard for an Indian woman because the family claims her. To be a professional, she learns one has to make a “whole mental leap” (Dickman 31).

Deshpande admits That Long Silence is the most autobiographical of all writing; a life-time of introspection went into this novel, not in the personal details but in the thinking and ideas (“Concerns” 108). She moves along with her characters in their trying and testing phase. Like Jaya, Deshpande realises that to bring oneself to writing, to voice the long suppressed sounds of women is an ordeal. She reveals to Riti how confused and confounded she was when she wrote That Long Silence:

There are many times when I have felt like giving it up, and have wondered what the hell I was doing it after all for. One does have moments of frustrations too. There was even a time when I almost threw this Silence into the waste-paper basket because I was convinced that it was bad, and I did not know whether I would find a
publisher. I have gone to bed on some days feeling so despondent. Then my mind would suddenly start working and I would think of a new character or some dialogues. I would rush to write it down and realise that I had to keep on going. Motivation is entirely internal. (‘No Looking’ 241)

With this novel, *That Long Silence*, Deshpande crosses yet another barrier to the knowledge of her ‘self.’ As she writes in it, self-revelation is a “cruel process” (1). But ultimately she realises what is her destination and how she can reach there. The great truth dawns on her:

To achieve anything, to become anything, you’ve got to be hard and ruthless. Yes, even if you want to be hard and ruthless. Yes, even if you want to be a saint, if you want to love the whole world, you’ve got to stop loving individual human beings first. . . . There’s just no other way of being a saint. Or a painter. (Silence 1)

By articulating the pent up feelings of all these years Deshpande acknowledges the ‘feminist’ consciousness within her. Earlier she used to reject that tag, as much ‘negativism’ was attached to the term ‘feminism’. After this novel she reads a good deal of Simone de Beauvoir, Germaine Greer, Betty Freidan, Kate Millet and Virginia Woolf. But she develops her own idea of feminism out of her own life, her own experiences and thinking. Self-knowledge is a great feeling which empowers one. “It is like drinking Asterix magic potion” (Deshpande, “Concerns” 108). With this Deshpande gets rid of the complex of inferiority associated with her gender and work. Along with her writer-characters she experiences the marvellous power of words. “The power of the writer is the power of the creator” (Remedies
It is not only her silence that Deshpande is highlighting but the silence of each and every character in the novel from the different strata of society. Through the erasure of her silence she gives voice to all the other silenced women. The authorial power she acquires thus helps her to break the male hegemony, and subvert the patriarchal monopoly of creation. The once subjugated woman becomes autonomous. The concept of womanhood is no longer on the periphery but on the centre-stage. Thus by portraying Jaya as breaking the yoke of silence Deshpande becomes a pathbreaker.

The literary establishment often comes under fire from virtually the entire spectrum of women writers for its role in muffling women’s voices. Indu, Jaya, Mira, Vasu and Jiji struggle out of the ‘voiceless’, ‘faceless’ slot of non-existence with their author, as Deshpande brings to light the undying authentic ‘self’ repressed by the patriarchal power. Perhaps, Sumi (Time) does not encounter a trying situation due to the late introduction into and the abrupt exit from the world of letters. But freed from the shackles of wifehood she emerges a powerful revisionist and undermines patriarchal authority.

Deshpande along with her characters learn that ‘honesty’ is the right pitch to begin with. The period of uncertainty that they go through is like the strumming, tuning up of the orchestra and setting the *tanpura* before the concert begins (Holmstrom 248). Deshpande believes that writing is a calling and that the writer’s integrity should be to herself / himself. In spite of the underlying flaw that it diminishes the artistic worth, all good writing is socially committed writing because it comes out of a concern for the human predicament (“Concerns” 109). The creator as well as her creator-creatures learns the essence of creation at the end of a phase of
torment and turmoil. Though Deshpande suffers from the claustrophobic world of women, and desires to come out of the zenana she knows that her rootedness lies there. She explains to Harish her preoccupation with women’s world: “A writer, in my view, writes about what he / she experiences acutely. Being a woman it was very natural for me to write about the special awareness with which I look at the world around in which women suffered and struggled as they did. Being a woman I could appreciate their predicament better. . .” (“Two Halves” 223).

The integral part of the self-knowledge of the women writers is that they cannot compromise with lacerated womanhood. Deshpande and her writer-protagonists regain their autonomy only when they take the challenges of the phallocratic world. By making Indu, Jaya and Mira desilence the wail of wounded womanhood, and Sumi, Madhu, Vasu and Jiji deterritorialize and portray women who overstep, the writer and her writer-characters establish their existence and female identity. Deshpande speaks of Woolf’s theory in which she postulates two preconditions for a woman writer, that is, to kill ‘the Angel of the House’ within her and to muster courage to write about her experiences as a body. Deshpande dislikes theorising and defining; nevertheless, she admits that hers are texts created by a woman writer.

Though Deshpande’s father was born in a very orthodox family he moved away from it. His hatred of blind faith in dogmatic ideas and superstitions, his love of western liberal thinking, his indiscrimination between boys and girls, his granting of intellectual freedom to his children, his seriousness towards his vocation of writing – all left a deep mark on Deshpande. Perhaps, the unconventional characters like Kamat, Naren, Jaya’s father and the like may be modelled on him. As a part of
breaking taboos of man-woman relationship Deshpande creates characters like Kamat, Naren, and Dr.Bhaskar who see women on equal terms. These men lend a patient ear to women’s grievances and even help them come out of their delusion. Deshpande points out that companionship can be developed with the other sex also. These constructive relationships help them to realise their inner worth and take up responsibilities, as well as not view an oppressor in every male.

Deshpande, like her father regards writing as a serious vocation, and not a hobby. She tells Harish that very often women’s writing is looked upon as a pastime occupation. Her own experience is not much different; nobody hesitates to interrupt her during her writing hours. Unfortunately even her mother, who has no lack of reverence for a writer’s profession, cannot take her daughter seriously. This is a good manifestation of the internalisation of the patriarchal laws, the laws that restrict the freedom of women. Viewing women’s writing as a pastime is manifest in Mohan’s attitude; he regards his writer-wife a good showpiece. He does not want Jaya to write on serious themes like man-woman relationship but to stick on to the middles like ‘Seeta’. His attitude reflects that women’s writing is equivalent to flower arrangement or embroidery or things like that, and not anything serious.

This is because the role and goal set for women are different. Familial relationship form the core of the Indian society, and Deshpande does not rule out the necessity of living within relationship. But she is against rigid rules that confine a woman to the roles of wife or mother. That she cannot agree with the idealisation of wifehood or motherhood is evident in every novel of hers. She makes her heroines aware of the false and sentimental notes that accompany womanhood (Deshpande, “Woman’s World” 236), for it only cripples their individuality and creative
potential. Be she a wife or mother, Deshpande’s heroine is a frustrated one. The patriarchal canons have hampered the burgeoning of the artist in her. Her protest against society that looks upon women as mere breeding animals is registered in all the novels. Deshpande shares her painful observation with GeetaGangadharan: “Women have been so dispensable in my mother’s family that one could see women dying and immediately and the men getting married again. I could see that the female life had no value at all. The whole chronology of their life centres around childbirth” (“Denying” 253). The excessive stress on feminine functions at the cost of one’s potential as an individual enrages her. What Deshpande tries to convey through her writer-characters is that these ‘feminine’ duties assigned to women only fetter them, and through them she portrays the world of women – the hapless victims trapped by womanhood.

Intelligence, she observes, is always regarded as a handicap for a woman. In the novel *Roots and Shadows*, Old Uncle tells Indu that they do not like their women to think. An intelligent woman with the spirit of inquiry causes a threat to the patriarchal society. Deshpande and her heroines, though proud of their education and intellect, always feel uncomfortable in the phallocratic world; but they express a sort of dislike for the purely physical aspect of feminine life. They realise that these stumbling blocks raised by the patriarchy only lead to the marginalisation of women writers.

Deshpande projects the onslaught of womanhood as a very disgusting experience. She strikes hard at the unscientific notion of ‘uncleanliness’ and ostracising the menstruating women. Indu in *Roots and Shadows* observes the subjugated role women play in her ancestral home, decides not to have children,
and get into the trap of motherhood. Kamala Suraiya Das warns that the trappings of womanhood can only be the trap for the woman writer. She exhorts a writer, a serious writer not to get married and start a family. She considers it suicidal as one has to sacrifice the creative strength for it (Dickman 31). “One way or another, marriage, motherhood and the family encompass women and affect their writing,” says Nambisan in her report on the forces which work to silence women, “The Guarded Tongue.” SudhaArora, who stopped writing for twelve years after marriage, complains that she cannot write as she wishes, though she does a lot of writing now (IX). Deshpande has been able to verbalise the various problems of women writers through her writer-characters as how they are hemmed by patriarchal boundaries.

Dealing with the problematization of woman-as-writer, Deshpande takes up the issue of a writer’s integrity. We understand that Deshpande does not compromise to make her writing a saleable product. She does not write with an eye on the Western readership and explain Indian customs and rituals and relationships. She writes for Indians, but there is no conscious effort to use Indianisms and make India look exotic (Deshpande, “No Looking” 240). Often women writers are pressurised by circumstances to compromise with the quality of their writing. Though Deshpande herself has been firm and determined, she presents her characters as undergoing this test, as this is an inevitable phase in a woman writer’s career. In *Roots and Shadows* Indu is asked to write articles that are palatable to readers. Later when she realises that the canker of untruth is her root cause of her discontent, Indu regrets having made compromises for popularity. In *That Long Silence* Jaya suppresses her real emotions in her stories.
On the other hand, Urmi in *The Binding Vine* is prudent and wary not to allow Preetha to exploit Mira’s poems and Kalpana’s rape report as a cause of feminism.

Deshpande stresses the loneliness of the soul. Self-love is of prime importance. When one gains self-awareness and self-respect one is capable of reaching out to others. Thus, human relationships, the pivot of her novels, gain more importance than social relationships. As a creative writer Deshpande is more interested in the relationship between person and person, than person and society. The writings of her writer-characters revolve round interpersonal relationships. In other words, the highlight is on the writer’s intra- and inter-relationships. Jaya, Indu, Mira and Madhu write when they learn to love themselves; when they want to reaffirm their existence; when they want to protest against the injustices meted out to them. Deshpande desilences through her writer-characters who after the initial hesitation take a bold step to depict truthfully the world of women.

Deshpande dislikes giving messages yet we do hear a note of exhortation in *That Long Silence*: “To achieve anything, to become anything, you’ve got to be hard and ruthless” (1). She believes that the lack of women achievers is because of our incapacity to be ruthless. She cites her own writing as an example. If she starts doubting whether her writing would hurt anyone she will never be able to write; one has to learn to get over these sensitive aspects. She says: “We all have a certain inherent potential within us, may be for different things, but we have a right to put it to use” (Deshpande, “Denying” 254). She infuses her own writer’s credo into her heroines.
Deshpande says: To start on any writing, novel specially is like embarking on an adventure. You don’t know what lies ahead. There are surprises, you suddenly make discoveries (“Concerns” 109). Her writer-characters experience the same thrill of their creator as they discover themselves. Indu, Jaya, Mira, Sumi, Madhu, Vasu and Jiji discover themselves through their writing. The conflicts of the writer-protagonist are none other than what the author herself faces as a woman and writer. The personal experiences, observations all go into her, moulding her thinking and writing. The path toward self-development or self-definition is portrayed as intimately connected to the process of creation; thus the act of writing or creating becomes essential to discovery of self. The tensions built up by playing the societal role and the aspirations of the writer / artist tear her apart. She speaks out in the article “Of Concerns, Of Anxieties”:

Most of my writing comes out of my own intense and long suppressed feelings about what it is to be a woman in our society, it comes out of the experience of the difficulty of playing the different roles enjoined on me by society, it comes out of the knowledge that I am something more and something different from the sum total of these roles. My writing comes out of my consciousness of the conflict between my idea of myself as a human being, and the idea that society has of me as a woman. (107)

Laurence identifies so closely with her protagonists that she calls herself a “Method writer” (qtd. in Stovel 101). In *The Diviners* such identification is understandable, because Morag Gunn so closely reflects Laurence. To examine how much of her real life surfaces in the novel we must turn to Laurence’s memoir
Dance on the Earth which provides glimpses of her life: about herself as a mother and writer. Here in her memoir Laurence incorporates the facts of her own life as well as the lives of her three mothers, as she calls them – her biological mother, her stepmother (who is her aunt as well) and her mother-in-law. The novel, The Diviners turns out to be the writer-protagonist, Morag’s autobiography, and is narrated from the point of view of Morag as a child, mother and writer; likewise Dance on the Earth is about Laurence as a child, mother and writer. Nora Foster Stovel in her essay “(W)rites of Passage: The Typescript of The Diviners as Shadow Text” says that The Diviners might be titled ‘A Portrait of the Artist as a Middle-Aged Mother’, for mothering babies and her books, her two types of offspring, is as important to Morag in The Diviners as it is to Laurence in Dance on the Earth (101).

In Dance on the Earth Laurence admits that The Diviners is not precisely an autobiography, but certainly a spiritual autobiography (8). “Morag may be a spiritual sister or shadow of self, a mirror image reflecting her creator. The Scot moniker Morag suggests Margaret, and Morag even resembles Margaret in appearance, with her straight black hair and heavy glasses, suggesting a “wise owl” points out Stovel (101). The Diviners chronicles the development of the writer – Morag / Laurence. Dance on the Earth becomes an authentic record of the autobiographical details that Laurence blends into the novel. A lot of Laurence’s life – some superficial and some quite profound details – has gone into the making of this character, Morag. Laurence denies that all the particulars in The Diviners are autobiographical. For instance, she has a daughter and a son; whereas Morag has a daughter from an illegitimate relationship with a Manitoban Métis. The Manawaka of Laurence’s stories is not Neepawa, her hometown. But its geography, the details of its situation, its landmarks
– the houses, the cemetery on the hill, and its people are all based on her memory of the town that was her world.

Laurence is a writer by destiny. “Her life and work are inseparable and they are as much the fulfilling of the early prophesy as Morag Gunn’s, though there is nothing as strange in Morag’s development as the role played by chance in the consolidating of Margaret Laurence’s talent” (Thomas 188). Morag, the same as Laurence herself, is depicted as having a very strong urge to write from childhood. Laurence frames *The Diviners* with images of Morag, the writer, seated at the kitchen table in front of the window overlooking the river, trying to write. Such images are self-reflexive, reflecting Laurence writing *The Diviners* in “The Shack”, her cabin on the Otonabee River (Stovel 103).

Writing is a psychic gift, considers Laurence, and mysticizes it like Morag’s friend and neighbour, the old diviner Royland. Morag refers to Royland as a shaman, accepts the unexplainable like the water that “kept its life from sight”. She sees divining as “the gift, or portion of grace, or whatever it was” (369) but writing for her is even more mystical. Laurence says divining is a mystical experience, trying to reconcile to water divining and writing. She believes that a writer has to be inspired to write. At the same time s/he has to seek it as well. The prototype for Royland is her neighbour at McConnell’s Landing, an old man called Jack Villerup, who is a well-driller.

Laurence makes Morag hail from a Scottish-Irish ancestry which is actually her own. Morag hears the tales of her ancestry from Logan. During her stay in England Laurence twice visited the Highlands of Scotland from where actually the
Laurences hail. Morag also stays with her daughter in England for a few years and also pays visit to her ancestral land in the Scottish Highlands. Thus, the novel, *The Diviners* testifies to the description of that place to some degree. Laurence through Morag encodes some of her socio-historical background into the various tales she writes, especially, *Shadow of Eden*, where she modifies critically, and supersedes the limitations of both Scottish and Métis tales by incorporating them into the structure of a historical novel. *The Diviners*, thus, becomes the anvil where the Scottish-Canadian Laurence hammers out the Scottish-Irish-Métis-Canadian-writer-character and her daughter to overcome her marginalised status. The novel, *The Diviners* is apparently the child which Laurence has been carrying for years and years in the womb of her imagination.

Laurence re-evokes the memories of her mother lying on her deathbed and the fantasies of being with her through Morag who does the same of her mother suffering from infantile paralysis, a deadly disease of those days. The pain of losing her beloved parents, the misery of becoming orphaned, all these personal experiences of Laurence are rendered poignantly in Morag’s life. In *Memorybank Movies* and the *Snapshots* narrated in ‘River of Now and Then’, the first section of *The Diviners*, Laurence’s and Morag’s experiences blend together.

Creativity is a remedy for loneliness for both Laurence and Morag. Right from their tender age they exhibit signs of their imaginative prowess. They resort to fantasy to cope with the bereavement of their parents. Morag recalls herself as a child creating characters even before she is able to read and write. She creates a “spruce-house family”: Peony, Rosa Picardy, Cowboy Joke, Blue-Sky Mother, Barnstable Father, Old Forty-Nine, characters taken from songs like “‘Cowboy Jack’
and ‘The Wreck of the Old Forty-Nine’” (*Diviners* 10). She creates shadow-selves in the *persona* of Peony and Rosa, *alter ego* prefiguring her novel heroines – Lilac, Mira, and Fiona. Margaret also created a fictional family; imagined a “‘funny’ house” with a character named “Blue Sky” after her mother’s death (*Dance* 40).

Laurence published a story in the school newspaper *The Black and Gold*. Her teachers Mildred Musgrove and Connie Offen were her guiding spirits. Morag’s mentor and high school teacher Miss Melrose is modelled on Musgrove. Morag also contributes to the school journal and is encouraged and appreciated by her teacher. The experiences of Morag on joining the University of Winnipeg are based on Laurence’s when she was in the United College (later University of Winnipeg). The feelings of Morag being away from her hometown and from familiar faces are none but Laurence’s experiences.

In the novel, *The Diviners* Laurence dramatizes Morag’s creative growth which in fact marks her own growth. Morag’s fictions are embedded in the narrative of the novel to illustrate her literary development. Laurence includes Morag’s mentors – Christie Logan, Miss Melrose, and Brooke Skelton – who teach her to read and write. Laurence reflects her own literary training by including Morag’s journalist experience: Morag reporting for the Manawaka Banner, recalls the Neepawa Banner, where Laurence worked before she ultimately graduated to the Winnipeg Citizen. Although fiction, not fact, is Morag’s métier, reporting influenced her writing, as it had Laurence’s.

Many relationships Laurence had in her life form the source for the relationships she weaves in her novels. She has created Hagar, Rachel, Stacey,
Morag, and all other people of her Manawaka world out of a gigantic complexity, reaching back from her own place and time through four generations of men and women in a Canadian western town, notes Clara Thomas in *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*. “All the strands of her ancestral past have interwoven with her own life and the power of her own gift impelling her to write her people down, to liberate them from her imagination to the pages of her fiction” (5). Laurence quotes Al Purdy from “Roblin Mills Circa 1842”, acknowledging this indebtedness of imagination (creation) to life, in the epigraph to *The Diviners*: “but they had their being once /and left a place to stand on.”

A reflection of Laurence’s stepmother and mother-in-law, who were a perpetual source of strength, inspiring her to deal with life and go on writing, is seen in *The Diviners* where Ella Gerson and her mother love and support Morag in her endeavours. Morag’s bonding with Ella Gerson and her family is also moulded on the amiable relationship Laurence had with Adele Wiseman and her family (*Dance* 105).

The profession of a writer raises several challenges. Laurence observes women often fail to combine their vocation and domestic roles. Laurence had to fight for her ‘womanly’ rights, struggle to keep her vocation of writing and be a mother as well. When writing demands her time she is often compelled to stop it and attend other duties like cooking meals, looking after the kids and be a loving wife, thus causing role-conflict. Many a time she felt she was attempting an impossible juggling act. Morag Gunn also embodies these conflicts between sustaining her vocation and the duties of motherhood. She recognizes and discusses the mother-writer problem in her autobiography, *Dance on the Earth*: “Faced with the daily
demands of their own work, the daily needs of their children and their husbands, and
the ever-present household ... a woman writer often feels what I believe is termed a
role conflict” (136). However, Laurence also clearly feels these many roles are not
insupportable. She makes clear that one can be both mother and writer not only
through her character Morag Gunn but her own life as well.

Laurence believes that it is extremely difficult for women to have a marriage,
a family as well as a profession. She resents this unreasonable attitude of the society
of having to choose between the talent which a woman is born with and her marriage
and family. (This idea is discussed in length in the chapter “The Politics of
Creativity”.) The talents of women are undervalued or unrecognised by the society.
Laurence says many women of her generation, including herself, were single and
breadwinning parents. Many could attend to their calling only at an enormous cost.
In her case she had to sacrifice her marriage. Laurence knew it would be a tough ride
for her shouldering the responsibilities alone. She will have to look after her kids, do
her writing and earn for her family. She feels she has acquired adequate strength
from her mothers to surmount the obstacles. She realises there is an undeniable and
unbreakable link between mothers and daughters. Her mother experienced
jouissance in playing with her baby daughter. She would become so engrossed in
playing and sharing happy moments with her daughter that she even forgot to make
dinner for her husband. In Morag’s case she gets too absorbed in writing that she
forgets Brooke and his dinner. Laurence’s life and experiences have gone into the
moulding of Morag.

Laurence owes a debt of gratitude to her mother-in-law, Elsie Fry Laurence
(she calls her Mother), for passing great determination on to her through all her
writing and childbearing life. Fry came from a generation where a woman’s primary role was a homemaker. Nonetheless, she was a woman with a vocation. Through their correspondence, and whenever Laurence and her Mother met they would talk interminably about two things that mattered most to both of them, children and writing. This is why Morag is portrayed with such strong conviction of vocation and of having children. Laurence knew that her mother-in-law could well understand her stand in giving up her marriage for her vocation and children. Morag also gives up the much cherished marriage with Brooke Skelton, the university professor that stood in her way of vocation and motherhood.

The role-conflict that Laurence suffered is highlighted in Morag’s life. The difficulty of splitting her time for her daughter and for her writing has been an insoluble problem for Morag. Even when her daughter, Pique grows up Morag’s attempt to stop worrying about her is not successful. The eighteen-year-old Pique goes on a lone quest leaving a note at her mother’s typewriter. Morag, though anxious, is relieved at the thought that she has ample diversions to keep her mind away from the worries of her daughter. “I’ve got too damn much work in hand to fret over Pique. Lucky me. I’ve got my work to take my mind off my life. . . . If I hadn’t been a writer, I might’ve been a first rate mess at this point. Don’t knock the trade” (Diviners 4). The therapeutic power of writing helps Morag maintain her composure, but when it comes to a question of choice she sets priority for her daughter over her vocation. She knows life is more important than Art.

How much taxing motherhood, especially single parenthood, and vocation are to woman is quite obvious in her Morag’s words. However, the disadvantage of one is negated by the other. For both Laurence and Morag writing is not only their
passion but their livelihood as well. Laurence does not endorse that motherhood is an impediment to one’s vocation, and she believes that she would not have written better had she been free from playing the role of mother.

It is noted that in the past few women writers were mothers, perhaps for the reason that those days motherhood was a full-time occupation. This meant that motherhood excluded authorhood. Later this mutually exclusive status changed. By the very process of writing (about their lives), women writers pay a debt of gratitude and acknowledge publicly their appreciation of maternal love. Laurence has been influenced by her maternal past. She writes from a woman’s perspective, recreating her ancestral past in her novels and her memoir. Morag Gunn is thus prototyped on Laurence. The Diviners is a tribute to woman’s creativity – as writer and mother, the two roles both Laurence and Morag hold close to their hearts.

As a writer Laurence had to overcome several unconducive factors. For instance, to earn one’s bread through writing was too bleak at the initial stage. She was urged to pursue nursing. Moreover, writing calls for long apprenticeship before one will be approved of as a successful writer. Besides, Canadian writers did not earn much esteem in their own country. Despite the uncongenial conditions Laurence realised that she has a commitment that could be fulfilled only through writing. Morag also thinks it her duty righting the wrong she saw around.

Margaret and Jack Laurence had strong sense of their vocations but their views on many matters differ. Jack had been patient with Laurence’s writing but he looked upon it not as her vocation but as something that interested her. Jack’s levity regarding Margaret’s writing is replicated in Brook’s approach towards Morag’s
writing. We are reminded of Mohan in That Long Silence who also regards Jaya’s writing as a pastime. Initially Margaret could not protest as she had no clout. She lacked supportive claims to be regarded as a professional writer for she had no publications to her credit. With two of her works in print she felt reassured and confirmed her vocation. However, Jack cannot reconcile to the fact that his wife is a writer. When she wrote the novel The Stone Angel he wanted to read the first draft but she did not want anyone except the publisher to read it. She sensed that his negative remarks would dampen her spirits and career, and so she did not show him. The book was very important to Laurence as she had to stake the rest of her life on it. When she showed him the final draft he was not impressed. Thus the incident pivoted their lives, severing their marital ties. Laurence reflects that it is rather a strange reason for the breaking of a marriage. Finally with this novel Laurence launched herself as a substantial writer. It showed her direction, her destination, but to attain that she had to sacrifice her married life and take up the responsibility of her kids single-handed. In this new phase of life she felt uprooted and was haunted by guilt and fear.

Certain traits of Jack Laurence are used in the portrait of Brooke Skelton. Brooke shows his eagerness in reading Morag’s stories, but reading the first story he remarks that the conclusion is too sentimental and some of her expressions are weird. Morag realises that Brooke’s conceitedness. He feels being an Englishman and a professor in the language English he is superior to the creative writer, Morag. Moreover, when she tells him that she is engaged in writing a novel he expresses his doubt of her capability in dealing with the larger canvass of a novel.
So she does not show him the draft and disclose the fact that she is going to publish it in her maiden name.

Laurence strongly believes that a writer possesses a sense of mission – to explore and illuminate the past of her/his people, and bring a sense of dignity and continuity to the lives of men and women in the present. That is, s/he must be involved in, what Gerald Moore says of Achebe’s work, an “act of restitution” which is necessary, both as “a piece of social history” and as “a ground for some sort of cultural continuity” (qtd. in Thomas 189). Laurence imparts this sense of mission into Morag also. Christie Logan feeds Morag with the tales of the heroic struggle of their clan for survival, migrating from one land of oppression, Scotland, to another hostile country, Canada. These stories of the chieftains and their clans – provide the orphaned Morag a sense of belonging: an entire clan is there for her, instilling her with the tenacity to survive.

Concerned how women writers tap their autobiographical self in their fiction, Rajni Walia in *Women and Self: Fictions of Jean Rhys, Barbara Pym, Anita Brookner* says a woman’s universe is not only different from a man’s, but it is also intertwined in a much more obvious way than in a male writer’s. For women, it is the daily trivia of everyday life that provides an intricate literary tapestry, an unlimited source where nothing is happening and so much is happening. Walia argues that women’s fiction constitutes exercises in self-analysis, that it is autobiographical, not in offering a minute reprisal of their lives, but in portraying their own aspirations, longings and emotions. In this, it evinces an ‘implicit feminist quest.’ This is very true of Deshpande and Laurence’s novels.
Thus, women’s personal lives blend into their ‘private and fictional words.’ Deshpande and Laurence self-consciously and systematically draw our attention to fictional writing as an artefact. They adopt various technical modes such as metafiction, *künstlerroman*, *mise en abyme*, *in medias res*, etc., to explore the relationship between the world of fiction and the world outside fiction, and situate the resistance within the form of the novel. Since women occupy ‘roles’ rather than ‘selves’ the study of the writer-characters provides a useful model for understanding the construction of subjectivity in the world outside novels. Through these seemingly autobiographical novels Deshpande and Laurence discuss the various aspects of marginalisation and exclusion women writers face. Deshpande and Laurence encode their problematized relationship to art through the creation of writer-characters, and warn women writers it is high time they shed the ‘feminine’ slough.