Kristy Murray, a known children’s fiction writer remarks in a blog:

When I was a young mother, I used to resent how invisible mothers were in children's fiction. Think about it: Both Mary and Colin in *The Secret Garden* were motherless along with Sarah from *The Little Princess*, Pippi Longstocking, Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, Bastian from *Never Ending Story*, and Ann of *Green Gables*, The Bastables in E. Nesbits books—to name but a few. The roll call of children in classic fiction whose mothers have died on them is long and venerable. Some of the afore-named characters had also carelessly lost their fathers too but absent mothers probably outnumber absent fathers by two to one.

In the latest phenomenon in children’s fiction, J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter Series* (1997-2007) too we find the very old tradition of matricide in children's fiction. Why are mothers so often dead, disabled or totally absent from so much children's fiction? The answer clearly lies in the fact that mothers risk their lives to keep their children safe, making heroism implausible. Lily Potter stood between Harry and Voldemort. If she had survived, Harry would have had to put up with her protecting him for the rest of his life and there would have only been one short book, not seven. The heroism of mothers completely undermines the possibility of a child
protagonist having a truly big adventure. Mothers stand between the child and the wider world to make sure that their offspring reaches adulthood safely, and in the process wreck millions of exciting stories. In removing mothers from stories for children, authors allow young readers to safely explore the world through fiction, to take risks in their imagination, to understand courage and fortitude without personally experiencing suffering. The absent mother in fiction is a reflection of how mothers are towering figures in reality.

In the adult world of women however the adventures in such cases take on a darker note. Often we find the absence of mothers resulting in tragic endings for the protagonists. The lack of the primary bond especially in the case of a girl-child can have far-reaching consequences. This is especially true in the Indian context where children especially daughters are considered solely as the mother’s responsibility. In a joint family system the absence of the mother might find others pooling in to take care of the child but in post-Independence India where joint families too are slowly dying out motherless girls often find themselves powerless to locate their place in the world, or the meaning of their lives. Friday writes:

Freud, Horney, Bowlby, Erikson, Sullivan, Winnicott, Mahler —the great interpreters of human behaviour—may disagree profoundly in some ways but are as one about beginnings: you cannot leave home, cannot grow up whole, separate, and self-reliant, unless someone loved you enough to give you a self first, and then
let you go. It begins with our mother’s touch, our mother’s smile and
eye . . .

In the depths of that first closeness to our mothers is built the
bedrock of self-esteem on which we will erect our good feelings
about ourselves for the rest of our lives. An infant needs an almost
suffocating kind of closeness to the body whose womb it so recently
and reluctantly left. The technical word for this closeness is
symbiosis

. . . Very early on, the young boy is trained to make it on his
own. To be independent. As young girls, we are trained to see our
value in the partnerships we form. To symbiose. (63)

The first meaning of symbiosis is found in botany, where it means two
organisms, a host and parasite, which cannot live without each other. In the
animal world, it often means a slightly different relationship, one of mutual
help; the bird that wins its food by obligingly picking the hippopotamus’s
teeth clean is a partner in symbiosis. So is the foetus in the womb. The
foetus is in physical symbiosis with the mother; literally, it cannot live
without her. The mother (most of the time) is in psychological symbiosis
with the unborn baby. She can live without it, but pregnancy gives her the
feeling of more abundant life. In this way, the foetus nourishes her. In our
earliest symbiosis with mother, both partners win. But when the mother is
absent the daughter is left to fend for herself. Anita Desai’s *Cry the
Peacock*, presents the case of such a daughter.
Its protagonist Maya came crashing into the world of Indian English writing raising the parameters of characterization to greater heights. It is the story of a young girl, obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster, whose heart-rending loneliness leads to the prophecy coming true. Critics have always read the work in terms of a girl’s increasing neurosis, considering Maya’s unique temperament, her father-obsession, her unfulfilling matrimonial ties, Toto, the pet-dog’s death, the astrologer’s prophecy, and her childlessness as the factors which lead to a fatal end for the character. This chapter however looks at the work from the point of view of absent mothers and resultant weak female bonding as the major factor which leads to the catastrophe.

Raka Varshney considers the novel as “the presentation of the psychological problems of neurotic women” (25). If the work had limited itself to this facet alone it would have definitely estranged the ordinary readers. But instead, as The Times Literary Supplement points out, “Maya’s extreme sensitivity never alienates the reader because it is rendered in terms of measurable human loneliness” (CTP blurb). It is this loneliness which strikes at the core of every reader. The word “alone” is definitely the most poignant in any language. Man has always been defined as a social animal and it is in his/her nature to bond with people and when someone fails to strike this bond the whole contour of life changes. In CTP, absence of a nourishing mother-love leading to the inability to develop bonds with others forms the core of the novel.
However, Maya does not seem to be averse to all kinds of bonds. As has been rightly identified by many critics Maya has a father-obsession. Moreover, during her childhood she used to eagerly wait up to meet and spend time with her footloose brother. After marriage, she is seen longing for Gautama’s presence at all times. Her world seems to be occupied by male figures and she seems to look up to the men alone as means to a meaningful life. Yet each one of them fails her, in her attempt to bond with them and she finds herself all alone. She seems to relegate the women in her life to secondary importance failing to strike a strong bond with a single one of them. Herein seems to lie the cause of the tragedy of her life. To illustrate; out of the one hundred and eighty four page long novel only around twenty pages mention other female characters.

Starting with the woman who gives her birth, Maya declares that only a vacuum exists as far as her memories of her mother are concerned. It is noteworthy that though she once mentions the presence of a photograph of her mother on the study table of her father, even as a child she does not seem to have any curiosity to know more about her mother. Not even once is she seen thinking about her or asking anyone about her. This is definitely indifference of the highest level. Though Maya herself seems to be unaware of it Desai uses an apt metaphor to subtly indicate the significance of the fact to the readers. Maya is said to live in “an old house full of rooms” (CTP 179) with her father. The emptiness of her life in terms of the absent mother seems to be embodied in the form of the many
empty rooms within the house, which looms large throughout the novel. For women writers houses have always held a deep significance. It is the bedrock, the haven which gives them a sense of security. As J. G. Frazer has pronounced, the home is an archetypal symbol for motherhood and when Desai draws our attention to its emptiness it clearly is a metaphor of great magnitude.

The first woman in Maya’s life is her ayah, as close to a mother-figure as possible. She however strangely does not form a strong bond with her caretaker. Unlike the strong bonds picturised between Scarlette O’Hara and the Mammy in Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind (1936) or that between Antoinette and Christophine in Rhys’ Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) Maya hardly gives much thought to her ayah. India’s strong caste-class system and her brother’s constant ridicule for having an ayah at this age are perhaps the factors which dampen the bond.

It is however, to be noted that the beginning of nightmares, terrors and fits of fever all begin with the moving out of the ayah from her life. The ayah once takes Maya to an albino astrologer to get her horoscope made and the man scares Maya into a fever predicting an early marriage and death for either one of the couple, under abnormal circumstances, at the end of the fourth year of marriage. The incident rouses the anger of her father and leads to the sudden dismissal of the ayah. Outwardly, Maya does not reveal any pain at the loss of the second woman in her life leading one to think that she had little space for the ayah in her mind. However the
day of the departure of the ayah is also the one which marks the beginning of her frequent headaches and nightmares, indicating that a deep scar has been inflicted in her psyche. *Wikipedia* defines the term nightmare as a “waking dream.” The same website identifies the original definition codified by Dr. Johnson in his dictionary as “a morbid oppression in the night, resembling the pressure of weight upon the breast.” Studies of dreams have found that fearfulness in waking life is correlated with the incidence of nightmares. It is pertinent to note that Maya the child regularly begins to have nightmares immediately after her ayah leaves her bedside. Henceforth she is far removed from the world of women and life becomes a waking dream, steadily increasing in its intensity into a nightmarish state. No more female characters are seen in the novel for a long time.

The incident with the albino astrologer makes her father all the more protective of his child, creating for her a fairy tale world to live in untouched by the realities of the outside world and converting her into “Father’s pet spoilt and cosseted” (*CTP* 120). In Gautama her husband’s words she accepted, “an order that you so naturally gathered to your bosom as the only way of life for the Brahmin daughter of a Brahmin” (*CTP* 121). Maya develops a father-fixation to which Gautama attributes even her choice of him as her husband, “If you knew your Freud it would all be very straightforward, and then appear as merely inevitable to you—taking your childhood and upbringing into consideration. You have a very obvious
father-obsession—which is also the reason why you married me, a man so much older than yourself” (*CTP* 122). Maya and Gautama are far removed in age and temperament, but Maya had upon the suggestion of her father fallen in love with this friend of his who used to often come to their house on his bicycle. Gautama rightly identifies the reason as her father fixation. But her only brother is a rebel, “If I was a partridge, plump, content, he was a wild bird, a young, hawk that could not be tamed, that fought for its liberty” (*CTP* 113). Though she loved and yearned for her brother’s company he was a drifter, getting involved with the freedom struggle and rebelling against their father’s world of clubs, art, poetry and serene parties. When she calls herself a partridge (a game-bird) she is in fact ominously prophesying her status as a bird of prey in a world of hunters. Her contentment is an indication of her ignorance of the plans that the hunters have for her. As a single bird with no other birds around to help her she is the indubitable victim figure.

The other children she came into contact with were the servants’ children and she knew that her father hated her brother’s closeness to these people of the lower castes and hence dutifully kept her distance from them, thus, failing to strike a lasting friendship anywhere. Interestingly, she does not mention any friends at school either.

The only other women she mentions are Leila who is totally involved in the twin worlds of her bed-ridden husband and her job as a lecturer and Pom who is immersed in the frivolities of the material world
and the daily squabbles of the joint family set up to spare Maya much time. Very clearly Maya seems to be unable to form lasting friendships or those worth any value with other women. Loneliness sets in as a concrete presence in her life. She bottles up within her the secret of the prophecy, and with no one to talk to, the bottled secret begins to ferment within her heart and her mind, mounting its pressure just as the increasing heat of the summer outside. The author builds up the atmosphere of tension with the help of a torrid and oppressively stifling Indian summer for the background.

The most striking feature of Maya’s world and the major cause for all her intense trauma thus appears to be the lack of women in her life. Her mother, she does not remember, her ayah she loses to her father’s anger, and she mentions no friends of consequence. In the beginning, Maya not only seems to be indifferent to women but also to her feminity. Among her many troubles her lack of children never seems to agitate her much. In fact she accepts her childlessness with equanimity mentioning it only once and that too very matter-of-factly as perhaps the reason for her deep attachment to her pet dog, Toto. Another reference to motherhood is the announcement of the pregnancy of Pom-Pom, which is also the last time that Maya sees her. Maya does not keep in touch with the pregnant Pom-Pom which clearly reveals her lack of interest in motherhood and its related pains and joys. Maya seems to associate only distress with motherhood as when she finds Mrs. Lal at whose house they had gone for a
party, pregnant for the sixth time. The knowledge makes her rate Mr. Lal a
tyrant and the whole evening horrible, while Gautama keeps trying to calm
her down stating that she is over-reacting and reading more than is clearly
visible. These two incidents when read together show Maya’s position on
pregnancy and motherhood as depressing, humiliating and stifling. But a
fact of greater significance is that she prefers to ignore these realities rather
than hate it. She also seems to have only contempt for the female world
symbolized by the condescension she shows towards the wives of her
husband’s friends at the party. Placing this incident against an earlier one
where she expresses her deep desire to be a part of an all-male party, to
listen to the conversations floating around gives the readers a better idea of
how deeply she is immersed in the notion of superiority of the male world.
In glaring contrast the company of women seem to leave her cold. Their
conversations and attitudes appear to either anger or bore her.

Her whole world seems to be regulated around the importance of the
men. Even in her moments of greatest despair, she calls out only to the
men in her life, “Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in
need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love, and I
am dying” (CTP 84). Throughout her life she seems to be indifferent to the
calming presence of women until she is shocked into it by the arrival of
Gautama’s mother and sister. Anita Desai manages to say a lot through the
events of the day of their arrival at the railway station. Maya and Gautama
had gone to the railway station to pick up his mother and sister when Maya
notices cage upon cage of monkeys waiting to be shipped to the laboratories in the U. S. In cages too small to even hold their upright bodies they had been stuffed together until the limbs and tails were suffused together into one vision of hell. Clearly the monkeys had not had anything to eat and Maya noticed that they did not even have water to relieve their thirst in the harsh summer. Deeply affected by the pathetic condition of the monkeys she begins to cry and begs Gautama to do something. But though he professes to understand her pain he opts to divert her attention by announcing how there had been a fuss in the parliament about the condition of these monkeys and how some members especially the female members of the parliament had created a hue and cry over it. He requests Maya to take his handkerchief and not let the people around see her tears. He tries to distract her by taking her to a bookstall. However his mother reacts very differently. Immediately upon her arrival, she sees the tears on Maya’s face, questions her, and goes about to get something done. She arranges water for the monkeys to drink. Maya however runs away without waiting to see it. In her dream that night she calls out to Gautama to help her call her father who she believes would be able to set the monkeys free. But her calls to her husband and her father in her nightmare go unanswered and she finds herself in a cage similar to the one in which the monkeys had been imprisoned. Maya is clearly the monkey put into a cage to be shipped out, and her pathetic condition continues to be ignored by the men around her whom she trusts absolutely.
The women who could have provided at least the water to quench her thirst are the ones she turns away from and hence her plight finds no relief. This brings about another fit of fever. The incident clearly reveals that Maya continues to trust only the men and never herself or any other women. If all tragic characters have a hamartia Maya’s is that she prefers to put her trust in men and never in women. It is this that leads her into the painfully lonely position that she clearly finds herself in. Desai through the metaphor hints at how other women could have provided the much longed-for succour that she badly needed but Maya fails to recognise this and hence suffers.

Like her father, Gautama only continues to pamper her, sympathizing with her tears, and treating her like a fragile doll. The men prove to be insensitive to the pain around them unlike the mother or the female parliament members. They never act to bring about any changes, however, it is upon these very men that Maya continues to set her hopes, and clearly this is where she goes wrong. Maya arrives at a faint realisation of the same during the next few days. When Gautama lets her remain in the closed, hot, stifling bedroom as the fever increases his mother comes in as a wave of freshness. She rubbishes her son’s protests and opens the windows letting the morning sun in along with a bough of brightly coloured bougainvillaea. Though at first Maya detests the intrusion, expressing her anger by shutting her eyes, along with the colour of the flowers comes a seeping change in Maya’s understanding of the world.
Desai is clearly indicating that with the arrival of the women Maya’s predominantly grey world has become more colourful, or in other words touched by the colours of life. Maya examines the mother eagerly with new eyes hoping against hope to be pulled out of the mire by her:

. . . she turned to me that patient face and her small, broad body that was so powerful with the richness and redness of the blood that flowed so abundantly in her. If she was a figure of old age she was as much a figure of fire and energy. The Gods might one day erect a monument to her, though human beings would not. She awed me, and attracted me at the same time. Were she to lift her hands into the sky, from those gnarled tips her blood would flow in generous streams towards those who needed it. I wondered if I was one of them. (CTP 132)

Maya realises that she as a human being caught in a patriarchal set up, had not given due acknowledgement to the love and energy flowing prolifically from the mother-figure, till date. Hoping to be rescued, Maya lets the women lead her to the city on a shopping spree. At the end of a tiring yet totally enjoyable day when the mother buys slices of cucumber for them Maya responds to the warmth of the mother in gratitude, “‘Only you would think of doing such a thing!’ I said to the old lady, filled with a longing to throw down my parcels and embrace her—a pillar of life and living, an anchor, much more so than her son, and the only one I had now. Oh to live in her world, to be of her kind! What safety, what peace” (CTP 134). For
the first time, Maya feels one with the women wishing passionately “to be of her kind.” During her earlier visits to her husband’s home she had always stayed aloof from the family. But at a point of time when she realizes that her sanity is deserting her she clings to these matronly figures. The value of female bonding seems to have come across to her fully just as she is about to lose it again. When the mother-in-law and sister-in-law announce that it is time for them to go, she feels miserable:

‘No,’ I cried miserable. What, the house empty again, and I alone with my horrors and nightmares? No! If they stayed a while, they might help me, as my own father could not, by teaching me some of that marvellous indifference to everything that was not vital, immediate and present, I did not know how they could do this, but somehow it had to be done. They were sane people, sane, sane, and yet so much more human than my own husband . . . ‘No,’ I begged, and flung myself at her knees, feeling her warmth radiate towards me. ‘Stay—stay another week.’ (CTP 136)

The metaphor of the house once again creeps into the lines. Devoid of female bonding she is sure her personal horrors will return to haunt her, as only empty houses can be haunted. Even her father’s presence looks pale when compared to the rich experience of life and companionship that the women have provided her. When they insist upon going her throat begins to swell with unbearable self-pity. She hangs upon every word, and every gesture, of theirs longing for the comfort of their presence and arms. For
the first time in Maya’s life she comes across the calm, peace and strength which women derive from the presence of other women. But Maya is unable to impress upon others her need for the same.

Maslow’s postulates of a hierarchy of basic human needs seem relevant here. In his Motivation and Personality, he talks about the different gradations of psychological needs. Following the level of the safety needs (security, dependency, freedom from fear), is the level of what Maslow terms “belongingness needs”—the longing for love and affection which, if unfulfilled, leaves the individual feeling sharply “the pangs of loneliness, of ostracism, of rejection, of friendlessness, of rootlessness” (43). Maslow rightly believed that in contemporary society, the thwarting of this group of needs “. . . is the most commonly found core in maladjustment and more severe pathological disorders” (44). Maya clearly is a victim of the lack of strong bonds in her life. She veers from an intense need to love and be loved to moods of detachment and withdrawal culminating in a total alienation. Maslow’s fellow psychologist Karen Horney’s companion theory of “basic anxiety” looks at the consequences of the obsessive feeling of being isolated and helpless. As explained in the second chapter human beings, according to her, respond to anxiety by adopting three distinct defence strategies. They move towards people, away from people or against people, moving alternately from one possible solution to the other in search of wholeness but further complicating the issue for themselves—resulting in increasing confusion, self-condemnation
and ultimately self-hate. In the process, the bonds with reality weaken, hurling the individual into the abyss of psychosis. Maya’s failure lies in the fact that she moves towards those who are unable to understand her and by the time she finds the right persons she has lost the ability to form any bonds at all leaving her desolate.

Unable to communicate her fears Maya lets herself be destroyed by her excessive introversion. She retreats into her private hell of horrifying visions and agonizing loneliness. Some time after the mother and the sister leave, another attack of frenzy comes upon Maya and this time Gautama tries to play the role of a mother unsuccessfully:

. . . you poor tired girl, this summer has been too much for you, hasn’t it? I’m sorry my mother could not stay on longer, she did you good. Let me try and make up for it a bit. Come, I’ll sit by you till you fall asleep. Should I tell you about the man who came to see me today—it’s an interesting case. But wait, first I’ll fetch you something to drink.’ (CTP 142)

Maya however does not wait to see him go. As soon as she hears his footsteps diminish in the distance, she leaps out of the bed and springing to the door, bolts it quickly. In a little while, she hears him knocking. Then banging. Then, in a fury of impatience, giving it one kick and leaving it, leaving her, in silence. Gautama is shown failing in his attempt to provide the same solace and tranquillity that the women (his mother and sister) with their mere presence had earlier conferred. Gautama’s attempt at
mothering is proved to be mere play-acting when he loses his patience and bangs and kicks upon the door in a fury of impatience, upon finding it shut to him. Her next thought runs thus, “Scratch and scuttle, scratch and scuttle. Slash, slash and scream” (CTP 142). Maya’s violent response, simulations of attacking another scratching, slashing and screaming show the intensity of her frustrations, which even she fails to understand completely. As R.D. Laing, an existentialist psychologist points out “when an acute isolation passes into a psychotic alienation, the person is particularly vulnerable to a flight into fantasy” (140). Anuradha Roy in her Patterns of Feminist Consciousness in Indian Women Writers shows how Desai cleverly handles the difficult subject of a disintegrating personality effectively:

Maya’s fantasy world is one of nightmarish fears filled with horrifying images and deafening noise. Rats and snakes, demonic dancers and albino astrologers infest her world while, all the while; reverberating through her blood is the ominous sound of drums. The feverish quality of the prose, the gush of images, powerfully conveys Maya’s mental disintegration. In her over-wrought imagination, everything is intenser, [sic] larger than life. The description of the dust-storm takes on a surrealist quality. (115)

The loneliness experienced by Maya seems to have reached the zenith of her tolerance. The emotional upheaval within her, externalized in the maddeningly increasing drum beats similar to the one in the famous
surrealistic play of Eugene O’Neil, *The Emperor Jones* takes Maya compulsively towards the climax of the text as related in the words of Maya:

> And then we turned again, walking toward the terraced end now, and I saw, behind the line of trees that marked the horizon, the pale hushed glow of the rising moon. I held him there, while I gazed at it watching the rim of it climb swiftly above the trees, and then walked towards it in a dream of love. At the parapet edge, I paused, made him pause, and his words were lost to me as I saw the moon’s vast, pure surface, touched only faintly with petals of shadow, as though brushed by a luna moth’s wings, so that it appeared a great multifoliate rose, waxen white, virginal, chaste and absolute white, casting a light that was holy in its purity, a soft, suffusing glow of its chastity, casting its reflection upon the night with a vast, *tender mother love*.

> And then Gautama made a mistake—his last decisive one. In talking, gesturing, he moved in front of me, thus coming between me and the worshipped moon, his figure an ugly, crooked grey shadow that transgressed its sorrowing chastity. ‘Gautama!’ I screamed in fury, and thrust out my arms towards him, out at him, into him, and past him, saw him fall then, pass through an immensity of air, down to the very bottom. (*CTP* 172-173. Emphasis added)
Gautama had been talking about the court and his client while Maya had eyes only for the beauty of nature around her. The murder is clearly unpremeditated though the reader gets the feeling that it had always been imminent. To the superficial view the murder seems to be the result of a suppressed fear and misplaced belief in the prophecy of death to either one of the couple by unnatural causes, during their fourth year of married life. However, Desai places many more suggestive elements in the climatic scene revealing much more to the keener observer. Maya’s sensitivity and her joy in the world around her had always gone unnoticed by Gautama, and he pays the price for the same in this scene. Also Maya herself unconsciously admits to her thirsting for mother’s love. It is this that she sees in the glow which the moon sheds upon earth and this that she eagerly strains for when Gautama accidentally comes in between. J. J. Bachofen in his *Myth, Religion and Mother Right* (1861) an extensive study on the evolution of social development collects evidence from legends, symbols and religious beliefs for the fact that human social organisation was initially a matriarchal clan. One among the major symbols he discusses is that of the moon. He postulates that the worship of lunar deities visible in ancient myths originate from the worship of woman’s power to procreate. According to him: “Ancient myths linked the moon and its cycles to women’s life. This led to the worship of lunar deities who protect and express fertility” (124). Thus the moon can be treated as a symbol of motherhood. Maya too unconsciously perceives the same as she thinks of
the moon in terms of a mother-figure shedding “her tender mother love” (CTP 173) towards her. The climax has to be hence read in terms of the protagonist having finally achieved a true understanding of the significance of mother-love. All throughout her life she had been kept away from the world of women by her secluded childhood and her misplaced belief in the supremacy of men but through her brief contact with a mother-figure she somehow senses the mistake, making her unwittingly react to the intrusion of Gautama into her view of the moon by violently pushing the trespasser to his death. Later she coolly relates the whole series of events to the mother and the sister when they arrive hoping for an understanding:

‘It had to be one of us, you see, and it was so clear that it was I who was meant to live. You see, to Gautama it didn’t really matter. He didn’t care, and I did.’ Her smiles, her caresses, her calm certainty of their complete understanding. When they tried to calm her and force her into her own room, to sleep, she had repeated, ‘You do understand? And then looked upon their horror with the blank gaze of those who no longer see reality. Then they had understood. (CTP 182)

In spite of the many times that Maya had been on the verge of insanity, Gautama the worldly-wise had never understood. Yet the women sense it from the eyes of Maya immediately. The motherliness in the women makes them seek to protect the waif, stifling the rumours told by the servants, with the announcement that “It was an accident,” overriding them
all with a fierceness that had silenced them effectively \((CTP\ 180)\). They shut down the house, move the girl to Lucknow, to her childhood home, call a doctor to diagnose her illness, arrange for an asylum to take her in, once her father returns from his tour, and opt to stay with her till his arrival. Though the two are shocked at the cruel death of Gautama each thinks only of “the harm to Maya” \((CTP\ 181)\) once the stories start getting around, and take immediate positive steps to stifle them. At the moment of catastrophe it is the women who stand by her, though she had been expecting and seeking the same from the men in her life, all along.

The last few pages show the women joining their forces together and the narrative is speckled by many epiphanic moments for each one of them. The mother and the daughter sit up through the night watching over Maya. Nila, the sister-in-law, realizes the depth of her mother’s pain and that; “some child-like faith she had had in her mother’s invulnerability” was after all false when she sees that “the old woman was on the verge of crying? Actually crying?” \((CTP\ 181)\). Though in shock, each one attempts to be brave for the other’s sake. The mother regains her composure on hearing the fear-struck voice of Maya and is the first to run to her:

\[\ldots\text{ they heard the patter of a child’s laughter cascading up and down the scales of some new delight—a brilliant peacock’s feather perhaps? Then it stopped, suddenly, and they heard a different voice calling, shrilly and desperately, from some unimaginable realm of horror, calling out in great dread.}\]
The old lady was up on her feet first. ‘Someone must go to her,’ she said, and her quick voice was so low and reassured that the tenseness in the younger woman relaxed immediately. ‘She is frightened,’ said the mother, and hurried out of the room. Nila heard her climbing the stairs, pounding them in urgency, she rose too, and went after her to the door, where she stopped and watched the heavy white figure go towards the bright, frantic one on the balcony, screaming. They met for an instance, there was silence, and then both disappeared into the dark quiet. All around was quiet then.

(CTP 184)

By linking the mother and the daughter through death Desai is clearly indicating the significance of the bond between mothers and daughters. The mother’s seems to be the sanest voice in the text, sensitive and realistic at the same time. Though Maya’s own biological mother is never deliberately thought of or even accidentally remembered throughout the novel, and the closest alternate mother-figure can be seen only in fifteen pages, the whole text can be read on the lines of the significance of this bond.

Even the names given to the characters by Desai are suggestive of this line of thought. Maya, as her name suggests fails in life because she lives in a world of illusions, created by her father, who protects and looks after the girl child so well that she becomes totally dependent on the male world. She is not allowed to grow into a real woman but remains the
chimera her name suggests her to be. By the act of deliberately not naming the father Desai seems to be proclaiming loudly that the father is the universal patriarchal figure. Gautama is the man who like his more famous namesake prefers the more philosophical world to that of the mundane and who in his path to greater glory forgets the wife who had done no crime greater than loving him whole-heartedly. As a lawyer he finds solutions to other people’s problems but is insensitive to the needs of his own wife. The mother-in-law, who too significantly remains unnamed, is the most sensitive to Maya’s needs in the novel, whereas Leila is the abstract, the one who can never be caught and Pom-pom the frivolous.

Another novel, also by Desai where we find the absence of mothers playing a similarly significant role is *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* It is the story of Sita who is curiously most unlike her more famous namesake. Pregnant for the fifth time, Sita at the beginning of the story is shown running away with two of her younger children to her childhood home on the island of Manori. In her words, “she had come on a pilgrimage to beg [with the memory of her father] for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn” (*WGS* 28). The text has always been read by critics in terms of marital incompatibility or sometimes even in terms of the discontent housewife presented by Betty Frieden in *The Feminine Mystique*.

However, as in the case of Maya a closer look will reveal that the strange absence of women especially mother-figures in Sita’s life has
played a significant role in the way the plot develops. A woman strangely different from all others, one peculiarly notes that Sita is certain about what she wants and all the more certain that her father will be able to work the miracle for her. From the very beginning the father, a leader of the freedom struggle who like Gandhi refuses to involve himself in the post-Independent Indian politics, is presented as a man of statuesque proportions. The whole island is replete with the stories of her father’s magical powers—he rid my house of snakes and scorpions . . . he made my wife bear . . . he treated me for my fits and boils . . . he dug the only well in Manori that gives sweet water . . .—and Sita too chooses to believe in it. Even though she has come across many examples of the ordinariness of her father, she prefers to shut an eye to these. As a child Sita had realized that the water in the well was not really sweet but refused to be the child who would call out that the emperor was not wearing clothes. Later even when her brother Jeevan tells her that their mother was not dead but had run away to Benares and the rumours of a mistress find mention in a biography of her father she continues to ignore the reality for the sake of the romantic. The fact that she, even in her middle ages prefers to strongly believe in the regional myth is definitely strange considering the fact that she herself had called him a “wizard” who “cast an illusion as a fisherman casts a net, with the faintest susurration of warning, upon a flock of fish in the sea. His chelas were the first to be caught and then the villagers, most inescapably the women. His wife had torn a hole in the net and escaped
into the dark depths of the ocean” (WGS 90). Sita seems to be caught in the web, even long after his death and Sita’s tragedy lies in the fact that her mother who knew the way out was not there to help her. Sita never had any memories of her mother and strangely admits that:

Life seemed complete, full, without her, there was no reason for her to exist. Sita had imagined she came into the world motherless—and the world was crowded enough so. She had always lived in the centre of a crowd, having been one of those flower children of independence . . . as she was not sent to school, she only came in contact with other families like her own and life seemed normal. She could not remember wanting or waiting for her mother. The rubies and pearls crushed in the mortar were all she had seen of her. (WGS 76)

The fact that her father plays such a large role in her life becomes more significant when we realize that he had filled her life so completely that there was no space left even for her mother. Desai presents the notion metaphorically in the act of the father grinding the rubies and the pearls of the absent mother to use in the medicines that he gives to the villagers. Sita is seen watching the act but awed by her father’s magical powers she never claims her inheritance from her mother.

In death too her father appears a larger figure than her mother. At the time of his death she realizes that she has to leave him behind on the island yet as she admits it was not as easy or simple as forgetting her
mother, “She succeeded ultimately, in discarding him, what was left of him, on the island, but he could not be forgotten. Unlike her mother, he had left traces and not merely traces but what could be called monuments” (WGS 79). This is in total contrast to her reaction on hearing that her mother could be alive and well in Benares. She tells Jeevan who announces the news that she prefers to believe that her mother is dead. However that does not stop her from wondering, “Who, what was she? . . . Women in Benares always wore white and had their heads shaven . . . What prayers did her mother pray—the ritual prayers to dawn, to the Sun, to the Ganges, or personal prayers of accusation, bitterness and reproach? Why had she left?” (WGS 78). This one single thought seems to be the only contribution that she makes to her mother’s possible existence. However, later after her marriage, her husband does try to locate this ghost in white, stripped of its jewels, lost in Benares. When all efforts, all enquiries draw a blank, and he returns home empty-handed, Sita shrugs in a very casual manner “. . . and let it go at that” (WGS 79). Indifference is clearly the characteristic feature of this bond.

Though Sita claims to have let go of her mother easily the absence of the primary bond seems to have turned Sita into a loner, for life. She appears to have a pessimistic view of all bonds, “Only connect, they say. So she had spent twenty years connecting, link by link, this chain. And what is one to do with a chain? It can only throttle, choke, and enslave” (WGS 79). Bonds appear to her as symbols of chains, stifling her
individuality. When she married Raman she admits to thinking that, she could live with him and at the same time “travel alone—mentally, emotionally” \( (WGS\ 135) \), an unnatural wish for any young bride. Sita’s seems to be a case of what Horney calls the second method of dealing with parental indifference by running away from people. Sita runs away from everyone, especially the other women she meets:

The women in his house . . . she never got used to anyone . . . and throbbed in revolt against their subhuman placidity, calmness, and sluggishness. The more stolid and calm they were, the more she thrummed as though frantic with fear that their subhumanity might swamp her. She behaved provocatively—it was there that she started smoking, a thing that had never been done in their household by any woman even by men only in secret—and began to speak in sudden rushes of emotion, as though flinging darts at their smooth, unscarred faces . . . she took to smoking instead of eating, to staring about her in silence, to speaking provocatively. They did not often answer her provocative questions, nor did they complain of her to her husband as women in another household might have done, for they had a quite exceptional capacity to expand the household and accept even such an outrageous outsider, and beyond that they did not stir themselves. They wished to be left in peace to eat, to digest. \( (WGS\ 43-44) \)
Sita’s attitude to all other women can be best seen in the tone of condescension and the impudent way in which she refuses to address them by their names and clubs them all together derisively under the common epithet “women.” As stated by Jane Gallop, “A daughter's relationship with her mother is her introduction to relationships with all women” \textit{(Feminism and Psychoanalysis 28).} In Sita’s mind “the women” merely exist to work in the kitchen, to serve, to eat, and to digest, not even stirring to complain against Sita’s audacious behaviour. This attitude to women is seen reflected in the fact that she does not have any female friends either. In fact she seems to look down upon everything feminine, even motherhood, in spite of having four children. Clearly the absence of a mother-figure in Sita’s life has contributed to the situation. “There may be a critical period for learning the art of mothering,” says anthropologist Lionel Tiger, “If you don’t learn it then, you are not likely to pick it up. For example, Benjamin Spock thought that girls learned to be mothers between three and six, when they played with dolls and watched mommy make chocolate-chip cookies. They put away all this information for a while and then at twenty, or when they marry, they retrieve the cookie utensils” (qtd. in Friday 129). Sita whose life lacked a role model fails at mothering when she herself becomes a mother. To her, “Children only mean anxiety, concern—pessimism. Not happiness. What other women call happiness is just—just sentimentality” \textit{(WGS 134).} She finds it hardest
to bond with her daughter, telling her once “You frighten me” \((WGS 42)\).

Sita admits that she:

\[\ldots\text{had been too incompetent a mother to know how to deal with her}\]

[Menaka] \ldots how to give her comfort—there was none, and it was not in her to concoct any \ldots she knew it was not fear that made her [Menaka] grimace and turn away from her mother: it was disapproval. Menaka—the calm, reasonable scientist to be—this Menaka loathed her mother’s proclivity for drama, for theatre, for emotion, with more bitterness than any other suffering relation of hers. Being her daughter, she felt most disgusted and hurt by it.

\(WGS 101\)

There seems to be an unbridgeable gap between the two, and Menaka constantly treats her mother with “scorn and contempt” \((WGS 18)\) often “watching her with hate and enmity” \((WGS 103)\).

And it is Menaka’s betrayal in the form of a letter to Raman asking him to take them back which brings an end to Sita’s self-declared exile. Sita at first adamantly sticks to her position saying that by coming to the island she was trying to positively say “No,” no more of the bored existence but it is to the very same situation that she opts to return to at the end. The ending raises many questions in the minds of the readers, as the plot appears to have completed a full circle. She does not seem to have bonded with her two younger children any more than at the beginning of the story as can be seen from the vigorous “No” that Karan screams out
when she asks him if he wanted to take some shells as souvenirs, and the way in which Menaka keeps avoiding her eyes. Just as she had once given up on her mother her children too seem to have given up on her expecting nothing but dramatics from her.

The marital bond too seems to have only worn thinner with the surfacing of certain realities. When she tells Raman about the boredom in her life, he reacts in shock:

Bored? He had exclaimed in genuine surprise. Why! How? With what? And looked so puzzled and pained—she could not believe that he had really believed that all was well, not known that she was bored, dull, unhappy, frantic. She could hardly believe that although they lived so close together, he did not even know this basic fact of her existence. (WGS 132)

The gulf seems to have become a deeper gorge. But even then Raman tries for one last time to connect with her asking her if she realized what she was doing to them all, only to be met with the statement, “All of you?’ she vaguely asked. ‘But you have nothing to do with it. Nothing” (136). It is this statement which reveals that she has always been and will always remain a loner. She seems to have struck the last nail into the coffin of human bonds. And when he lets go of her hand she realises that “he did it not in a passion, but out of pure weariness with her, weariness with her muddle, her dark muddled drama . . . He released her and at last she was free” (WGS 136). However after gaining the desired freedom she opts to go
back to the very same life that she had run away from. The image of Sita walking back to the house, searching for Raman’s footprints in the sand and placing her feet in them, “as a kind of game to make walking back easier” (*WGS* 136) seems to stress on the sense of compromise with a life that one finds meaningless. The journey of life is not being made happier but easier, by following the man.

D. A. Miller in his *Narrative and Its Discontents* (1981) theorises that “[there are] two basic requirements of a traditional novelistic form: a moment of suspense and instability and a moment of closure and resolved meaning. The first institutes the narratable disequilibrium, which the second converts back to a state of non-narratable quiescence” (109). Thus a novel is seen to deal with some insufficiencies, default or deferrals which enable narration. Then it reaches its climax, effecting a decisive closure with the application of forces of closure like a decision or choice made. Finally the narrative ends when nothing remains to be told. It is true that there are novels in which multiple endings are provided like *French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) by John Fowles. However, the basic principle behind such a work is that the whole narrative is constructed in such a way that no end jars with the reader’s notions. Sartre puts it in a nutshell in *La Nausee*, “Une Chose commence pour finir” meaning that, “everything in a narrative exists in view of the hidden necessity determined by its final configuration of event and meaning” (Goldthorpe 212). Sartre feels that it is the ending in the mind of the writer that gives all the preceding events a
meaning. In the case of the reader, it is only upon reaching the ending that he understands the significance of the foregone events. It is here that *WGS* fails. If the situation of the protagonist was so stifling in the beginning as to make her run away from it all, then why is she returning to the same situation now? What changes in the circumstances have occurred in between? She claims to have been attempting to “positively say No!” (*WGS* 135) but she herself admits to leaving things unsaid even when she comes across the final truth of life; an understanding that she reaches through the lines from Lawrence which had been haunting her throughout the stay, “asks to be hidden, and wishes nothing to tell” (*WGS* 137) What Sita seems to have understood seems to be her inherent loneliness. There is no greater truth at the end of this novel than that. If so, where did this come from? Clearly, as has been outlined in this chapter it stems from the absence of a mother-figure in her life. But all the more important is the indifference that she shows to the memories of her mother preferring to look upon men for succour.

Once again, the names that Desai selects are highly significant. Here is a modern-day Sita who is separated from her Rama and is on an island. But Desai’s Sita has gone away from Rama on her own. Like the mythical Sita she too is bold enough to take decisions but the boldness of her decisions look futile when we see the way the conclusion turns out. Unlike the original Sita who gains mythical status by her act of relinquishing the world which shakes the very foundations of Ayodhya, Desai’s Sita after
her revolutionary beginnings meekly follows her Rama home. The names thus appear ironical.

Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence* too presents a similar dilemma. Sarla Palkar calls Jaya, “an unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and a failed writer” (128). Just like Maya and Sita, Jaya the protagonist’s tragic flaw too lies in her male-centric notions of existence. However, one aspect sets this novel apart from the other two—here, the mother is not a memory which the daughter prefers to ignore but a living presence which the daughter opts to be indifferent to. Her father is the reigning deity in her life upon whose death her brother Dada, takes the position. When disillusioned by each, she looks for succour from her husband and later from Kamat only to be disillusioned even more quickly. Never once is she seen to extend her hand towards a woman. She herself admits, that she “had never gone to a woman for comfort” (*TLS* 139). However the way the protagonist ignores her mother and other women, has not been the focus of any study though there have been innumerable book-length studies on this Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel. The absolute indifference for her mother is revealed in the very first page:

‘Give us your bio-data,’ a magazine had asked me once. And I had found myself agonizing over what I could write, what there was in my life that meant something. Finally when I had sifted out what I had thought were irrelevant facts, only these remained: I was born.
My father died when I was fifteen. I got married to Mohan. I have
two children and I did not let a third live. (TLS 2)

Her mother finds no mention in the inventory of her life, being sifted out
along with the other irrelevant facts. All her love is saved for the men in
her life. Even when she talks of “physical touching” (TLS 15) she mentions
that there are only three people in the world who have touched her—her
father, her husband Mohan and later Kamat. It is hard to believe that a
mother would never have held or hugged her child as she grows up but
Jaya seems to give no importance to any of the times her mother touched
her. It is not anger or hatred that characterises this bond but absolute
indifference to the very existence of the mother. In the third chapter we
noticed a similar reference in The Thousand Faces of Night where Devi
says that her mother hardly ever touched her. But one must notice that
there is a huge difference between the comments by Devi and Jaya. Devi
yearns for a hug from her mother and when she refers to the lack of
physical contact it is with pain however Jaya refers to the father, husband
and Kamat alone as if her mother does not exist at all.

In fact, while she bestows on her father a superhuman status, her
mother is rarely mentioned and when she is talked of it is always in a tone
of disapproval. The mother is nonchalantly dismissed as prone to lying to
make her life easier. She continues to be a figure of ridicule in Jaya’s
mind, the few times she deigns to think of her. Her husband once
comments on how he found it astonishing that Jaya could laugh at her own
mother, “Yes, I know what you and Dinkar think of your mother, I’ve heard Dinkar and you laughing at her, making fun of her, your own mother” (TLS 118).

Seeing that whenever the mother is mentioned it is in a negative light one can state that the bond between this mother and her daughter is screwed up from the very beginning. But is the mother alone responsible for this situation? As has been discussed at length in the second chapter the bond between the mother and the child depends not only on the mother’s actions and attitudes but also on how the child reads or interprets these actions. It is through Kamat that we come across the possibility of Jaya’s reading of her mother having been inaccurate. Kamat once asks Jaya what her grievance against her mother was and she replies after some thought, that her mother had made her homeless by selling their home after the death of her father. Kamat tries to point out that as a widow with three children her mother might have needed the money but Jaya is not prepared to ponder over it. Adele King’s reading of Jaya as “an unreliable narrator” (166) thus appears accurate.

Once when as a new bride Mohan had found Jaya crying and asked her if it was because she was missing her mother Jaya comments, “I would have laughed if I had been able to stop crying” (TLS 117). Any notion of attachment to her mother is met with cruel laughter time and again. Even in her old age the mother continues to be neglected by Jaya. The extent of
her indifference and animosity to her mother is frankly admitted in the following words:

It frightened me the way Ai clung to me these days. When I was with her she behaved as if her world centred round me. She had become childishly possessive. She, who had never seemed to bother very much about my activities, was now prying, curious and resentful, about any part of my life that took me away from her.  

*(TLS 106)*

Any show of affection by the mother is detested by Jaya. Knowing that her mother who constantly fought with her sister-in-law is looking for a new place to stay in Jaya coldly cries out, “Why does it have to be me?” *(TLS 104)*. In fact, it is not just the mother, but even the other mother-figures like the two grandmothers and her mamis and kakis are dismissed derisively. She calls her maternal grandmother a ghoul, despised even the room in which her paternal grandmother used to sleep and announces to Nilima with candour that neither one of her grandmothers were either “soft” or for that matter “nice” *(TLS 183).*

Her friendships with other women are neither deep nor long-lasting. Her relationship with Rupa is termed “the charade of great friendship we played out so enthusiastically” *(TLS 47).* However it is these very women who pull her out of the mire each time she sinks in too deeply. After her father’s death when she continues to immerse herself in self-hatred it is Leena who befriends her and helps her regain her confidence. However she
drops Leena like a hot-potato on being told by someone that she is having an affair with a married man. She does show more concern for Kusum even to the extent of going against her husband’s wishes to settle the mad Kusum at the Dadar flat so as to give her proper medical attention. Yet readers get the impression that Kusum was more of an irritant in her life rather than a friend or loved one. In fact Jaya describes their bond thus, “As a child I had disliked Kusum, a dislike that was later tempered to an indifferent contempt. Even at the last, when she seemed so pitiful, with her mind disoriented, she had managed to irritate me” (TLS 19). The key phrase here is definitely “indifferent contempt” which characterises not just the bond with Kusum as admitted but almost all her bonds. Just as one begins to wonder if there is at least one woman with whom Jaya has a positive bond we get a clarification of Jaya’s instinctual need to help Kusum:

And so with Kusum’s madness I became aware of my own blessed sanity. Thank God, Kusum, you’re nuts, I had thought; because you’re that, I know I’m balanced, normal and sane.

Suddenly it occurs to me—as long as Kusum was there, I had known clearly who I was; it had been Kusum who had shown me out to be who I was. I was not-Kusum. (TLS 24)

Jaya takes Kusum’s ill-health as one more means to proclaim her difference from the community of women. Deep within, this is the reason why she needs Kusum to stay alive. To show to herself that she is unlike
other women preferring to isolate herself from them. Mukta, Nilima, Jeeja and Manda join forces to take care of her when she is on the brink of a mental breakdown yet never once does she acknowledge their help. Like in all her other novels Deshpande uses the Freudian medium of dreams to bring us into touch with the way Jaya’s mind works:

At first we are walking together. Then he goes on ahead and I am left behind. I am unperturbed and go on at my own pace, walking now between rows of houses, so close to one another that there is a slight sense of claustrophobia. For some reason, I have to pass through a house, but it is impossible for me to climb the flight of stairs that leads to the house. As I struggle, a girl comes to me. She is not surprised by my presence; on the contrary, she accepts it as if she had expected me. She helps me up, but suddenly when I am in the house it comes upon me with a sense of shock that I am alone, that I have been left behind, I will never be able to find him now. The realisation that I am lost overwhelms me. Worse—I do not know where I am, where I have to go and how I can find him. The disorientation is total.

The girl has helped me into a room and I find myself surrounded by a number of young girls. They are all smiling, and the thought comes to me . . . they are on my side. But none of them can help me. I am utterly helpless and really ill now. I lie down, stiff as a corpse, and the faces around me change from curiosity to sympathy.
The girls talk in low tones among themselves, discussing my predicament, while I continue to lie there, paralysed, aphasic. Suddenly he is there in the room. He comes straight to me through the girls. I am up in a moment, my illness, my helplessness quite gone. I run to him.

‘Come,’ he says, ‘we have to hurry. The taxi is waiting. If we don’t hurry, it will go away.’

‘Where is it?’

‘It’s waiting near the Portuguese Church. Hurry up.’

But as I run after him, I realize that it is too late anyway, we will never be able to make it, we will never be able to get away, it is all my fault . . . (TLS 86)

Though the dream ends on this tone of self-blame what is to be noted is how, though she realizes that the women are supportive and sympathetic her instinct is to ignore them and to seek a life with the man. She is unable to join them in light chitchat and instead lies down “stiff as a corpse” feeling “paralysed, aphasic.” She only feels ill and helpless in spite of their obvious show of concern. When Jaya walks out without a proper goodbye or even a second glance at the women she is in fact rejecting the comfort of female bonding. Yet even in the dream moving with the man does not lead to peace of mind but greater chaos. This attitude to female bonding is seen till the end of the novel. When Nilima, Manda and Mukta seek her permission to stay beside her after her illness she drives them all away as
courteously as possible, stating, “I was frantic for them to go away before I begin to cry and cling to them” (TLS 181). She seems to despise any form of bonding with other women though she does not hesitate before running after the men hoping, seeking, and crying plaintively for the strength of their shoulders. She even admits that she prefers the ghost of Kamat to the comforting presence of Mukta. And till the very end in spite of the support she has derived from the women around her she fails to realise the value of female bonding.

As for men she seems to hold each one on a high pedestal. At first it is her Appa, who always made her feel different and special. She thinks of her Appa and herself as a team against the rest of the world. His sudden death, when she is only fifteen comes as a shock to her. To Kamat she announces that the greatest cruelty that her father has done to her is dying. Everything about him is sacrosanct to her, his bicycle, his books, his stories, the home where they lived and her greatest ire against her mother is that she seemed to have adapted to the fact of his death. She even holds her grandmother and her mother responsible for the death of the father:

Appa cycling three miles into town to see ajji and three miles back home to Ai again, cycling between the two women, up and down the undulating roads, his heart pumping furiously. Yes, that’s right, they were responsible for his death, those two women, Ai and ajji. But ajji expiated by her death. She gave up even her single meal after Appa died and in six months she was dead. But Ai? (TLS 137)
Though she hated her grandmother too the fact that she gave up her single meal after Jaya’s father’s death leading to her own death within six months of his seems to expiate her in Jaya’s view whereas her mother’s cool adaptation to widowhood agitates her. It is very clear that the world of men holds Jaya in its thrall to such an extent that she finds no relevance in the life of women at all. The way she uses the phrase “those two women” when referring to her mother and grandmother shows clearly how remote she is from the world of women.

From her Appa, she shifts her loyalty to Dada, her brother. They nearly gang up against the rest of their family and she values all his suggestions. It is her marriage that opens her eyes to the fact that her Dada had been selfish enough to marry her off to the first man available so that he himself could escape abroad; away from the clinging extended family. She grudges him the fact that he escaped while she is left behind to take care of their every need. The next man in her life is Mohan with whom she fails to find any common ground other than their marriage. Her marriage to Mohan is compared to “A pair of bullocks yoked together” and later corrected to “We were two persons. A man. A woman” (TLS 8). The schism in the bond is evident. Kamat is the next with whom her bond is almost as strong as that of her father. Kamat’s death according to her leaves her with the same feeling of emptiness and blankness as her father’s had earlier done. Just as her father had always encouraged Jaya to talk to him, Kamat too encourages her to open up. She reveals many of her
frustrations to him. When Mohan makes her stop writing stories she requests him to let her use his address for corresponding with the editors. It is to him that she takes her angst when her works are rejected. It is to him that she narrates her past allowing him the privilege of even criticising her judgments. And even after his death she feels as if his ghost is still present in her flat and often talks to it with complete ease. But twice she had walked out on him—once when he had passionately touched her face and she had to her horror felt her body responding instinctually; and secondly when she had walked in to find him dead on the floor. Though Kamat plays an important role in breaking her silences the wife in her is conscious of the society which is why she never goes to him for a long time after the day he touches her face. And when she remarks that “it is only with the dead that you can have a perfect relationship” (TLS 157), one understands that it is because she realises that once dead he can no longer test her control over her body. He remains for her the man with whom she “had been just herself—Jaya” (TLS 153).

The difference in Jaya’s bonds with men and women having been made clear let us now analyse the closure of the novel. The first question that has to be answered is definitely whether the dilemma that Jaya finds herself in the beginning of the novel has been resolved. Mohan’s cryptic telegram of, “All well returning Friday morning” (TLS 189) seems to have enervated Jaya into action. But she herself wonders whether this time she will be able to give Mohan the answer he wants to listen to. She wishes to
speak out only the truth this time so as to “plug that hole in the heart” (TLS 192). She is by this statement claiming to have broken the silence. The “papers spread all over the table” (TLS 187) is symbolic of the release from bondage yet the final words spoken by Jaya are:

Why do I presume that understanding is mine alone? Isn’t it possible that Mohan too means something more by ‘all well’ than going back to where we were? People don’t change, Mukta said. It is true. We don’t change overnight. It’s possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know now it is this: life has always to be made possible. (TLS 193)

Jaya seems to be saying that her perception of life has changed, yet she knows that change based on her altered perspective of life is not going to be easy. She hopes for a change of attitude in Mohan too and if not she is preparing herself for a longer wait, holding hope close to her heart. Here the reader can sense that in spite of the claims to the contrary Jaya still prefers to depend on the decision-making power of men. To borrow from Beauvoir, “the heavy curse that weighs upon her consists in this: the very meaning of her life is not in her hands” (456) but in the man’s hands. The final line of the novel seems to echo Jaya’s earlier cry of pain at the monotony and ineffectuality of female existence “. . . but for women the waiting game starts early in childhood. Wait until you get married. Wait, until your husband comes. Wait until you go to your in-laws’ home. Wait
until you have kids” (*TLS* 30). And now she is going to wait hoping for a change in their marital relationship. The threat of desertion which had unnerved her to the extent of delirium still seems to hold her in its sway. So then, where does the difference lie? The ending of a novel Roland Barthes points out is, “a profound or final truth . . . after all the delays a presence, after all the lies and equivocations, the truth; at the end of a tentative process of naming and renaming, a peremptory final nomination: the discovery and proffering of an irreversible word” (117). If so, isn’t the nugget of truth contributed by Jaya one of stoic adaptation to the way life unfolds around one. The final words, “life has to be made possible” (*TLS* 193) keep reverberating in the ears of the readers. Some critics like Anuradha Roy believe that the silence has been broken with the writing that lies scattered around her towards the end of the novel. If so, it remains merely on the imaginative and verbal level as the protagonist is allowed to think and to claim her freedom but not to put her wish into action. The novel does not reveal to what extent she is prepared to go in order to make life possible. Nor does it reveal whether Jaya is finally able to erase “the long silence” or whether her intention to compromise leads to more silences. But one thing which is clear is that a lot depends upon Mohan.

One can argue that any compromise formula with men is what has lead to the silencing of Jaya. Deshpande appears to be validating this statement when we take a closer scrutiny of the ways in which silences crept into Jaya’s life. Her very first recollection is of how her taste in
music had differed from that of her father’s and how when she was caught furtively listening to the songs by Rafi and Lata her father had remarked, “What poor taste you have, Jaya?” (TLS 3). The shame she had felt then according to her survived for a very long time. After her marriage whenever she hurried around getting ready for a movie, Mohan would say calmly that there was no need to hurry as they would only miss the ads. Jaya who loved these ads never had the courage to tell him how much she adored them as she was afraid that like her father he would comment upon her poor taste. In each of these cases one can see Jaya moulding herself to suit the blueprint in the hands of a man, silently stifling her pleasures. Another such instance can be seen in the most curious issue of her temper tantrums. She used to have the wildest tantrums and her father and brother always used to encourage them but the first time Mohan had seen her flying into a rage he had looked so puzzled and hurt that she never lost control again. She opts to silence herself to fit Mohan’s definition of a wife as one “who never raised her voice against her husband however badly he behaved to her” (TLS 82). Similarly, it is Mohan’s hurt in the face of her candid stories which had put an end to her writing. Time and again we find that she silences herself for the sake of approval from the men in her life. Will life having “to be made possible” allow her to be indifferent to the approval of men just as she has always been to women?

Indifference clearly has much more far-reaching consequences than hatred. All the three protagonists, Maya, Sita and Jaya seem to be unable to
get out of the rut they are in. Drawing from the metaphor used by Deshpande in her *DHNT* life for these women seem to be “one circle entwined in another, one circle in another” until “they could never be disentangled” (81). The very reason and meaning of life seems to be left unlearnt. They seem to be caught in a vortex from which there is no escape.