“Man and woman-who knows what goes on between them, whoever knows the whole story?” (98) says Manjari, the narrator and protagonist in Shashi Deshpande’s *Moving On*, while reflecting on the unsolved mystery of her parents’ love for each other. Conjugal relationship which is a man-woman relationship inside marriage or sexual relationship between husband and wife is often shrouded in mystery. Sarbjit K Sandhu also refers to the strange and mystic elements in conjugal relationship when he says:

Marital life is nothing but a queer combination of several forces acting upon two human beings in different capacities to fulfil the marital ambition and play a vital role in society. The given roles of the two human beings do undergo a change both at the functional and psychological levels. (1991:22)

Man and woman who come together after marriage, make a strange combination because man being rational and woman being irrational react to situations differently. Women are simpler in the sense that they do not hide their emotion; they do not calculate but act on impulses; and they take the problem head on unlike men who can set small differences aside and be logical and calculative. Men burdened with so many responsibilities may feel stressed and be aggressive, angry and violent, but they are not expected to cry or scream which are simply associated with the female behaviour. Obviously, a heterosexual pair having fundamentally different patterns of behaviour cast a spell of mystery irrespective of time and place.

Conjugal relationship as such is one of the two most important relationships human beings are generally concerned with, the other being filial relationship which has been dealt with at length in the preceding chapter. Conjugal relationship, however, differs from filial relationship on the ground that it is not a blood relationship; it is a man-made relationship, not a God-made one. According to Shashi Deshpande,

Marriage is a more complicated relationship because it is not a blood tie. Also there is physicality of sex. And there are enormous demands
made on each other and it is that which interests me. Because when it comes to crunch, you put stress on it, it comes apart. It is so human made. (2005:229)

Conjugal relationship is the basis of all other relationships. As children learn from their parents, their relationship matters much. Marriage brings in the formation of a family, a man-made institution for the benefit of society. It is the distinction of every relationship. The seal of marriage makes a relationship complete.

But traditional arranged marriages do not consider husband and wife as equal partners. It considers husband-wife relationship as a master-servant relationship, a provider-dependent relationship and its concept of ideal match is that the man should have better prospect than the woman; that the man should be older than the woman; and that the man should be taller and fatter than the woman. It requires a wife to conform to playing stereo-typical role-looking after household, taking care of the elders and the children and making her husband feel special. Love and passion are viewed as a male right; women are supposed to fall in love and oblige. P Ramamoorthy points out: “Man’s relationship with woman is most often the bond that exists between a master and a slave.” (1991:115) Jasbir Jain makes a sincere attempt to put conjugal relationship in the Indian context when she says,

A woman’s whole life-her childhood and adulthood both-are totally geared towards a male centre in which a central male, above father and above son, is the husband. Unending fasts are observed by the Hindu woman, a continuous self-mortification disguised as pity motivated by the sole desire of avoiding widowhood. It is not human goodness which is privileged, nor it is the functional aspect of a relationship, but the physical presence of the man and his right of ownership. (2004:216-217)

Thus the institution of traditional marriage exploits a woman and treats her as a commodity. Husband and wife live together under the same roof and share the same bed but the husband treats his wife as a second class citizen. Consequently, a woman, as a wife, feels trapped, imprisoned, and oppressed and she asserts her equal rights with her husband and seeks her autonomy and recognition and self-identity.
Modern romantic marriages claimed to be based on love equally fail to make any difference as in reality such marriages are mostly based on attraction and not on understanding. Though romance as a prelude to marriage is frowned upon as marriage is viewed not as self-fulfilment but as fulfilment of familial and social responsibility, most of the protagonists in the novels of Shashi Deshpande rebel against the tradition and marry out of love even across caste line, but their idea of love vaporises when they are face to face with the harsh realities and crisis in the relationship and they are compelled to move from their romantic idea of love and marriage to a more realistic view of their relationships. Thus conjugal relationship is a gradual discovery of the nuances of man-woman relationship. To quote Jasbir Jain again: “…marriage is not a plain and simple contract, but is part of a larger human relationship, which traverses through attraction, love, sex, sexuality, living together and a whole lot of other phases such as parenthood.”(2003:79)

Shashi Deshpande’s novels begin at mid-point where the protagonists are adults and married. So, what comes to immediate focus is their conjugal relationship. But the conjugal relationship presented in her novels is hardly an easy relationship of companionship. It is rather an uneasy relationship because of male dominance and female resistance and it often delves into incestuous contacts, deception, lust, jealousy, betrayal, indifference and insensitivity. It reflects power rather than love. To quote Jasbir Jain again: “The unequal relationship between man and woman is the natural outcome of a social code that frames the institution of marriage in India in the way it does.”(256)

Any relationship entails responsibility and so does conjugal relationship. Once a man and a woman enter conjugal relationship they have to be equally invested in it. When either of them shirks responsibility, it leads to issues and problems. Again it is a matter of choice. One is in relationship because one wants to be in it, and not because one has to be in it. Mutual caring and sharing doubles one’s happiness. But when people in relationship do not go together but separately, change in relationship is almost inevitable. It may occur in the later stage when one grows older and one’s wants and desires change. When one’s partner fails to change along with him or her, it becomes difficult to adjust and stay together. When it needs much effort and sacrifice to keep the fire burning, it is time to part ways. Some marriages, therefore, may end in separation as we see in Deshpande’s novels.
Shashi Deshpande’s first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, begins with the description of a marital rape in which the wife’s words are strangled and her body is subjugated. Saru, the wife, describes:

The hands became a body. Thrusting itself upon me. The familiarity of the sensation suddenly broke the shell of silent terror that has enclosed me. I emerged into familiar world of rejection...I struggled to utter the usual words of protest to say ... “No, not now, stop it.” But the words were strangled into my throat. (11)

The novel presents a complex conjugal relationship between a successful doctor, Saru, and her professionally frustrated and irritated husband, Manu. But in the background, there are glimpses of many other conjugal relationships to offer comparison and contrast to Manu-Saru relationship.

Saru who feels deprived of her parental love and care marries Manu for love and security. Saru’s love for Manu is romantic. To her he is her ‘Prince Charming’ who has come to rescue her from the unsecure loveless existence and release her from her limited world of her natal home. Initially she was quite unnerved at the thought of marriage. It was perhaps the fear of sex, unknown. But after marriage she gives all over herself, is instantly aroused and has an infinite capacity for loving and giving, with a passionate desire to be absorbed by a man she loved. For her, sex and love are two aspects of one another and they go together. She reflects: “I was hungry for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love, of my being loved, of my being wanted.”(35) Her feeling of inferiority complex owing to her dark complexion, ordinary features and oppressive parentage gives way to the feeling self-confidence in the company of Manu, a handsome and virile man. Their conjugal relationship is sexually governed and the sexual drives indeed blur the boundaries of identities and bring intense loyalty to each other.

But their conjugal relationship remains normal only for a few years, until she was known as the wife of the poet, Manu. Their romantic love vanishes when the situation changes: Saru becomes a successful, well-known and reputed lady doctor and Manu who excelled in cultural activities in the college failed to make a mark as a poet and turned out to be simply a lecturer with a modest salary in a third rate private college. Now Manu is referred to as the husband of a lady doctor. Saru reflects: “Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband.”(40)This upsets the apple cart of their conjugal
life. The changed position and his inability to play the ascribed social role drain Manu of his self-esteem. He cannot tolerate people greeting her and ignoring him. He suffers from inferiority complex and jealousy. He resists her for her success but he cannot prevent her from surging ahead in her profession. His love for and attachment with Saru is gone. It is worthy to note that in patriarchal set up a wife basks in the glory of her husband but it is not the other way round. Saru remembers painfully: “ a+b they told us in mathematics is equal to b+a. But here a+b was definitely not equal to b+a. It became a monstrously unbalanced equation, lopsided, unequal impossible.”(41)

The change in social and economic status of husband and wife creates a rift in their conjugal life. Manu no longer loves her as he used to earlier. Sex is no longer a physical gratification and expression of love. It is only need now. Saru reflects:

Love...how she scorned the word now. There was no such thing between man and woman. There was only a need which both fought against, futility...turning into the thing they called ‘love’. It’s only a word she thought. Take away the word, the idea and the concept will wither away. (65)

The decline in their conjugal relationship is inversely proportionate to Saru’s rise in social status. Sarbjit K Sandhu assigns their problems to their social compulsion as he says:

While there is a decline in her conjugal relationship, her status in society rises day by day. It may imply at one level that her rise in importance is inversely proportionate to the fall in the importance of her husband, creating a conflict between her achieved position and the ascribed position of Manu.(1991:21)

Jasbir Jain also supports this view when she says:

A sense of failure and an overriding need for security overtake the romance of their relationship as Saru climbs the ladder of the professional success and Manu sinks further into mediocrity with his literary talents and ambitions having reached a dead end. (2003:76)

But there are domestic compulsions as well. Saru’s professional success and her increased work create tension in her conjugal life. When she returns home late at night, she feels bad to see her husband sitting and
waiting for her. She reflects: “I came late that night...when I came home I found
him sitting with a brooding expression on his face that made my heart give
painful quivering little jumps.”(71)

A critical examination of the situation which has developed
between Saru and Manu shows that such changes have taken place first at
functional level, and then at psychological level. The traditional role of husband
and wife is reversed-Saru earns more than her husband; Saru returns late at
night and her husband keeps waiting for her. These functional changes affect
Manu psychologically. The change in their relationship occurs because both do
not grow together. Saru becomes modern but Manu remains traditional. Saru
listens to her intellect and defies the social set up but Manu cannot. She is aware
of the emerging situation and she makes unilateral efforts to prevent the crisis.
Being an unwanted and unloved child, she has inherited a psychological fear
which does not aloe her to displease anyone. So, despite being superior to her
husband in qualification, social status and material calibre, she wants to
abandon her profession and stop dominating as the bread-earner of the family
for the sake of conjugal harmony. She offers to resign her job and become a
submissive wife .

But Manu who is accustomed to the luxury of her money,
would neither allow her to leave her job and live as a simple housewife
subordinated to his superior wisdom as he does not earn enough to maintain the
standard of living, nor tolerate her higher status as the bread-earner of the
family. He would just keep saturating her and assaulting her. She just keeps
suffering and finds no way out of it. As a wife she realises now that she had
only moved from one prison to another-from filial prison to conjugal prison.
She feels that wife does not have an independent existence; she is just a captive
companion of her husband; and she must be inferior to her husband in order to
be happy. She tells a group of girls from her own personal experiences:

A wife must be a few feet behind her husband. If he’s an MA, you
should be a BA. If he’s 5’.4” tall, you should not be more than 5’.3”
tall. If he’s earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more
than four hundred and ninety-nine rupees. That’s the only rule to
follow if you want a happy marriage...Women’s magazines tell you
that a marriage should be an equal partnership. That’s nonsense.
Rubbish. No partnership can be ever equal. It will always be
unequal... (137)
Her speech only underlines the essential code of patriarchal middle class Hindu marriage of putting the woman below the man.

Saru’s extra-marital relationship with her teacher, Boozie, brings no relief to her although it further vitiates her relationship with Manu despite its being inconsequential because Boozie was a homosexual and he flirted with her publically to hide his homosexuality. Manu, instead of displaying his masculinity and objecting to her affairs with Boozie, becomes indifferent to her. The rift between them gradually widens leading to communication gap. “And they began then...the silences that grew between us. Just grew and grew like Jack’s beanstalk.”(94)

Manu whose psyche is deep-rooted in patriarchy, has a painful realisation that his wife has risen professionally and occupied the centrist position due to her superior caste i.e. Brahmin and money power, pushing him to a peripheral position. Her social and financial ascendance renders him impotent and he chooses to regain that potency and masculinity through sexual assault upon her to prove that her power becomes redundant due to her being a woman and in the hierarchy of power structure, she will be powerless. A pinching question put to him by a journalist as to how he feels in the house when his wife is the primary bread earner, triggers the assault and he behaves like a brute to her in bed at night and avenges himself on her by committing marital rape. Saru tells her father, “He attacked me like an animal that night, I was sleeping and I woke up and there was this man...this man hurting me with his hands, his teeth, his whole body.”(200)Like a traditional male he asserts his superiority and power through sexual violence at night to degrade and feminize her while playing the loving husband during the day. Charu Chandra Mishra, however, dismisses this account of marital rape as Saru’s hallucination and blames her for painting Manu as a villain for denying her authority. To quote him:

The very person who provided a paradise of sex (or love) now turns a monstrous sadist inflicting inhuman torture on his wife. Is this real or imagined? Does not it point to a certain hallucinatory discovery on the part of the protagonist? (200)

But the novelist, Shashi Deshpande, herself rules out such a possibility when, in an interview by Lakshmi Holmstrom, she observes: “...this is the one area
where women really are exploited, where men do use their power, their sexual power, in order to subjugate women.” (1998:224)

Manu’s sexual assaults render Saru helpless. She feels terrified and trapped like an animal. She feels utterly humiliated at the thought of being used and reduced to a “dark, damp, smelly hole.” (88) But she bears it silently: “...and each time it happened, and I didn’t speak. I put another brick on the wall of silence between us.” (88) To her now ‘sex’ is a dirty word and the experience a terror, an inhuman insult to her personality as she is disallowed self-expression during love-making. Sex which is considered to be a uniting force becomes a force of oppression, exploitation and estrangement and disrupts the balance in the conjugal relationship. Commenting on the marital rape committed on Saru, Anne Collette observes: “The horrendous and suffocating act of violence—a violation that is played out night after night in the marital bed—is sourced to an imbalance of power between husband and wife.” And explaining the ‘imbalance’ Anne Collette adds:

   This is a gendered imbalance that sits in opposition to the socially prescribed ‘right’ balance in which the scales of married life are, under ideal conditions, weighted equally by material provision at one end—the male end—and emotional provision at the other end—the female end. If the roles are reversed, surely the scales remain balanced; but mathematical equations tend to operate in the field of the ideal, unaffected by the less than ideal conditions of social reality. (2004:63)

And for Saru it is not the cruelty of her husband that fills her with grief, but “the thing she knew she had lost for ever...the eternal female dream of finding happiness through a man. It would never come alive for her again. And it was like a silent mourning wail inside her.” (124)

   Her suffering is further aggravated by her realisation that even after her independent status as a bread-earner, she is unable to regain her dignity, emotional involvement and a sense of participation in a male dominated society and her discovery that she has become a money-making machine and lost the human touch. Her problems are the genuine problems of a sensitive, refined, working class housewife who cannot complain or seek counsel. She is not able to speak out and share her misery with others: “Bed, the one she shared with her husband, was to her an intensely private place. She could not, would
not, draw aside the curtain that hid it from the world.” (97) If her children-Renu and Abhi-come to know about it, she will never be able to look them in the face again. She feels utterly confused and helpless and needs someone’s help, support and guidance to come out of it:

If only someone would tell her what to do, she would do it at once, without a second thought. It was strange that often all these years of having been in full control of her life, she had now this great desire to let go. To put herself in another’s hands. And yet, how few they were, the people who could shoulder any burden at all, even their own. (97)

Commenting on the issue in the Indian context, Jasbir Jain observes:

By introducing the concept of marital rape, Deshpande not only anticipates the surfacing of this issue in feminist discourse in India, but also reflects upon feminist history in the Indian context and the rights of a wife vis-a-vis the husband’s. (2004:219)

Meanwhile, Saru receives the news of her mother’s death from one of her patients and she takes this opportunity to escape the violent world of her husband’s house and return to her natal home. But this shift seems to make no difference. Her mother dead and father engaged in doing domestic chores, she cannot fall back on her parents. But she gets an opportunity to introspect and judge her life and relationships and her interaction with her father helps her learn the bitter truths of human life. Finding herself “a homeless refugee, a lonely person” even amidst her blood-relations who are quite possessive and demanding all the time, Saru realises that loneliness is a painful but inescapable human condition. The question which she had asked earlier—“To be alone? Never a stretching hand? Never a comforting touch? Is it all a fraud then, the eternal cry of ...my husband, my wife, my children, my parents? Are all human relationships doomed to be failure?” (176)—now gets an answer: “All right, so I’m alone. But so’s everyone. Human beings... they are going to fail you...if we can’t believe in ourselves, we are sunk.” (220) She gathers awareness that she is not the only sufferer in this male centric world. She remembers the sufferings of her grandmother who had been deserted by her husband but “had never, she had heard, complained. “It’s my luck” she said, “My fate. It was written on my forehead.” (181)

Saru’s realisation that “My life is my own.” helps her overcome her dependence syndrome in relationship. (220) She gradually
develops the understanding that escape from the problems of life is a ridiculous idea; one has to face the events of one’s life. There is no refuge, no scurr other than one’s own-self. There is a life beyond marriage, parents, home and other social institutions. She cannot attain happiness through anyone else—be it a husband, a father or a child. She can attain it by her own efforts. She had been a puppet because she had made herself one: “If I have been a puppet it is because I made myself one. I have been clinging to the tenuous shadow of a marriage whose substance has long since disintegrated because I have been afraid of proving my mother right.”(220) She decides to give up living as a guilty sister, undutiful daughter, unloving wife and dotting mother and lead her life as an independent individual. Now she is not afraid of Manu. She has the confidence to face the greatest terror of her life—her husband. Her decision to face Manu is her decision to face life as it is. She is once again herself, a doctor, a woman and she sets out to attend a child patient asking her father, “...if Manu comes, tell him to wait. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”(221) This is a very significant step in revitalising her relationship with her husband, as Kamini Dinsh puts it: “The emancipation is not in repudiating the claims of her family, but in drawing upon untapped inner reserves of strength. The wife in the end is, therefore, not a rebel but a redeemed wife...one who is no longer afraid of the dark.”(1995:204)

Charu Chandra Mishra is of the view that Saru resolves her problem by giving in to her emotions and submitting herself to the tradition after her realisation, “My brother died because I heedlessly turned my back on him. My mother died alone because I deserted her. My husband is a failure because I destroyed his manhood.”(217) and develops the awareness that “victory is there, not in the subjugation and destruction of the male, rather in bringing him to see the indispensability of each other’s space.”(2001:87) But this interpretation tends to see Manu as a victim and is based on Saru’s previous statement. Moreover it does not conform to her later statement “My life is my own...somehow she felt as if she had found it now.”(220) There is nothing to infer that Saru feels guilty and will return home on Manu’s terms. Kailash Baral puts it in a different perspective in the following words: “Although at the end of the novel, she awaits Manohar’s arrival, her return to her home, if at all it takes place, will not be the same again.”(2005:91) But again it would be equally wrong to infer that Saru is herself a victim and Manu is coming to take her back on her own terms. M. K. Naik and S. A. Narayan rightly observe in this context:
Deshpande is too accomplished a novelist to present Sarita as an innocent victim-by the end of the novel, she realises that she cannot run away from her husband. She has to take the initiative to re-establish the proper relationship with him.(2003:85)

But this does not mean submission or surrender as P. Ramamoorthy suggests:

Saru who ran away from her husband and children, who refused to meet her husband is now ready to confront him. This does not mean that she will go back to her husband but it only suggests that she is capable of facing Manu and asserting her own right and individuality.(1991:126)

But despite Saru’s self-realisation and her father urging her to confront the facts, she packs up to take up an escape route unsure of where to go. It is not clear whether she is returning to Manu. Shashi Deshpande herself is of the view that Sarita is not going back to Manohar. In reply to Lakshmi Holmstrom’s question in an Interview in 1993, if The Dark Holds No Terrors has an open ending as suggested by some critics, she said,

Yes well, there is an open ending in one sense. In that there isn’t a single point in our actual lives at which one can truly say, “That’s all over?” one moves on from any one decision. However...in the Dark, there was no doubt at all in my mind that Sarita is not going back. I am perpetually surprised that people haven’t understood that. So in that specific sense, there isn’t an open ending in the Dark.(1998:247)

Saru’s attitude to her friends also bears testimony to the fact that there is little possibility of her retreat to her husband’s house. To quote Premila Paul:

Saru has absolutely no respect for the abject acceptance religiously practised by the wives. The wife of Manu’s friend accepts that effacement of her very presence and position. She remains a silent, unobtrusive, nameless waiter at the dining table, not even introduced. Vidya who posed to be a liberated woman pales into a shadow after her marriage. Saru has utter contempt for Smita who changes her name to Gitanjali, annihilates her personality and puts on the romantic mask of being a contented wife. Saru condemns them as “silly martyrs” and “idiotic heroines”...however, she has tremendous respect for the dignified self-reliant teacher friend, Nalu, who
 despises all compromises and remains single to lead a meaningful life of convenience.(1998:37)

Besides Saru-Manu relationship, The Dark Holds No Terrors presents some flitting glimpses of some unhappy conjugal relationships. Saru’s classmate, Padmakar Rao, complains that his wife does not relate to him on equal terms but waits on him and could talk of only middle class concerns like economising the family budget though she does not need to. “She cannot talk about anything but servants and children. And prices...she never has her food until I go and have mine, she cooks just what I like, and she never calls me by my name.”(120) This shows that all men are not like Manu who expect their wives to be educated and modern yet have the traditional qualities of devotion and submissiveness.

But Saru’s classmate, Smita’s conjugal life presents the picture of an oppressed wife and a domineering husband. Her name is erased after her marriage. Her husband changed her name to Gitanjali because he had been reading Tagore those days. Smita has to borrow Rs.100 from Saru because her husband had given her “just enough to buy a small gift for the boy.”(107) Her husband controls all her movements and runs her life. In Saru’s home-town, there is a woman who “had been tied to a peg in a cattle shed and fed on scrapes like a dog.”(87) There is another wife who repeatedly runs to a neighbourhood well to drown herself and eventually manages to do so.9147-148) There is Madhav’s mother who is punished by her husband who refuses to “eat anything she cooks.”(207) The wife of Manu’s friend suffers the same fate. She is treated as a non-entity by her husband even in the presence of the guests. She remains silent, non-interfering and non-demanding and her husband does not even care to introduce her to his friends. Saru’s father, on the other hand, is a non-interfering husband who leaves upbringing of his children to his domineering wife. He concerned himself only with what his wife asked him to do. He always depends on his wife and allows himself to be dominated by her not even daring to demonstrate his affection openly to his children except that he goes against his wife to support his daughter at crucial moments like providing her medical education and allow her to marry the man of her choice without opposing his wife’s attitude to her daughter. He obeys his wife in not informing Saru about her mother’s illness. Pointing out the unique personality of Saru’s father as a husband, Jasbir Jain observes:
He reflects the quiet, meditative man who does not necessarily consider that masculinity needs to be demonstrated through aggression. He is the equivalent of a sage, a non-worldly man who deviates from the accepted behaviour patterns in his own way. He does not interfere with the mother-daughter relationship, his routine is set, his interest in his grandchildren is non-worldly and controlled. He does not frame his wife’s photograph and hang a garland around it as is done in most Indian houses with the portrait of the dead.(2003:213)

Thus *The Dark Holds No Terrors* which has been interpreted by eminent Indian critics of Shashi Deshpande like S K Sandhu, Mukta Atrey, Vinay Kripal, Kailash C. Baral, Arindam Chatterjee and others, addresses a vital issue of conjugal relationship in the modern Indian context—the issue concerning a successful wife and an unsuccessful husband. While the truth is that few relationships can survive the stresses and strains of one partner being hugely more successful or famous than the other, the odds get even worse when it is the woman who is more successful. Rare is the man who can cope with the knowledge that his wife is the real player in the relationship; that she will always be the bigger name, the one whom people recognise. While a wife enjoys the success of her husband, a wife’s success becomes a threat to her husband and a burden and social embarrassment to her. In India where women are just beginning to taste success and get more ambitious in their career and men are trying to be more practical and adjusting with their working wives, the problems often crop up in conjugal relationship and there is all likelihood of an overly aggressive woman spurned by a man having dominant male ego as it happens in Saru-Manu relationship. Otherwise, there are men who prefer strong and aggressive wives; they like their wives to take charge and be strong, assertive and dominating a reflection of which can be seen in the conjugal relationship of Saru’s parents. But in either case, success and power has replaced love as the major intoxicant in conjugal relationship.

Shashi Deshpande’s *If I Die Today* presents the traditional conjugal relationship under severe strain because of rapid socio-economic changes taking place. The traditional husband-wife relationship has destabilized because of woman’s education, economic independence and motherhood. The strained conjugal relationship between Manju and Vijay is a telling instance of it. Theirs is not a love marriage-Manju’s first love was Rajiv. Both seem to be
normal but there is distance and distrust between them similar to Jaya-Mohan relationship in *That Long Silence*. Manju is a loving, affectionate, understanding wife but she turns into an emotional pretzel when she faces a husband who neither hits her nor says even a single angry word to her, but by his actions and sly comments makes her feel guilt ridden and censured. She finds her conjugal life controlled by her husband through this tender trap. She is not willing to submit to circumstances; she resists them. Even motherhood becomes a burden to her. She finds that motherhood adds to the miseries of a married woman. She feels “like a breeding animal” during her second pregnancy as she sees her first daughter against her wishes growing up and clinging to her father like a vine. She castigates the institution of marriage in the following words:

A marriage. You start off expecting so many things. And bit by bit, like dead leaves, the expectations fall off. But...two people who have shut themselves off in two separate glass jars? Who can see each other but can’t communicate. Is this a marriage?(24)

Cynthia and Tony too have a strained conjugal relationship. Cynthia is a much earlier version of Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, a doctor who earns more than her husband, Tony, just a Game Teacher. All was well between them before marriage, but after marriage, the ugly question raises its head—who earns more of the two?—and Tony suffers from inferiority complex. It creates a rift between the couple and the rift widens when Tony is chuckled out of job and develops into a cynic and a drunk. Cynthia understands the malaise that has crept in their marriage and the reason behind “his going downhill.” According to her, Tony “had an odd complex too about my being a doctor. If I’d given up my job and become the pathetically clinging female, may be things could have gone right between us.”(95) Tony dies in a ridiculous drowning accident but people find it difficult to believe that the tall and well-built athlete could drown in a mere puddle. Through Tony-Cynthia tale, Shashi Deshpande wants to highlight that all wives suffer in conjugal life irrespective of their socio-economic status. According to Dr. A. K. Singh:

The novelist examines the plight of women from a different perspective by presenting the case of an economically dependent no-Hindu family and thereby suggesting that the fate of a woman remains the same irrespective of caste, culture, religion, or economic status.(1998:63)
The conjugal relationship of Dr. Agarwal and Rani is marred by distance and extra-marital relationship. Rani spends much of her time in her flat in Bombay away from her husband and joins him when the children come to visit their parents from the boarding schools. She is having an affair with Dr. Kulkarni. Shanta, Dr. Kulkarni’s wife is a dull-drab woman patiently tolerant of her husband’s escapades.

The conjugal life of Vimala and Sumant is also not happy as she and her husband are still trying to live down the scandal of his first wife’s death. But unlike Manju and Vijay, they have no masks and communication gap between them. Guru’s words “If I die today, you do tomorrow” opens her eyes and makes her realize that the essence of tragedy lies not in the human existence but in the response to it and that living one’s life fully is a natural right of every man, not a privilege of a a handful. This realization saves her marriage as she confesses at one point:

At one time I was dead feared of revealing myself to anyone; I could not bear the thought of opening myself out to another person. That is what kept me off marriage. Now it seems wonderful to me...a relationship in which one dispenses with masks. That is what good marriage means. (41)

In this case death is not a destroyer but a saviour. Commenting on the unbalanced conjugal relationship in this novel, Awadhesh K. Singh writes:

_If I Die Today_, as in her other novels, one of the concerns of the novelist is to depict what happens to women after marriage: what they have been, what they have become and what is in store for them. On the surface, all is well with her middle class women. They have a relatively happy married life with their not so badly placed husbands and are blessed with children in most cases. Yet there is something rotten in the state of their domestic and married life, for which to a considerable extent their spouses are somehow responsible. Education, economic independence and motherhood disturb the existing equilibrium. (1998:113)

Dr. Singh is of the view that the problems in conjugal relationships as presented in these novels, does not lie in womanhood, wifehood or motherhood but in the attitude of the middle class male that deprivileges the
woman against the man the moment she becomes a wife. He makes a sweeping observation in this context:

Incidently, the pattern of relationship remains more or less the same in various ways in the novel—be it the case of Manju and Vijay, Sumita and Shyam, Sumant and Vimala, Shanta and Kulkarni, Meera and Ashok or Synthia and Tony. Even the “oh-so foreign” Dr. Kulkarni, after all, is “just a traditional Hindu male” longing for a son and heir, and has reduced his wife, Shanta to dull, colourless “shadow of her husband” (36) (1998:114)

_Come Up and Be Dead_ though a detective novel presents the glimpses of unhappy conjugal relationship of minor characters as the two woman characters—Devyani and Kshama who are cousins and who happen to be the chief female protagonists, remain unmarried. The third woman character, Mrs. Jyoti Raman, though married, remains a single parent with a daughter. She had a terrible conjugal relationship. After her marriage, she had never felt like a wife but like a victim of a marital rape. She had a terrible experience on her wedding night, which had left her mentally scared for the rest of her life. She had learnt about the physical and sexual relationship between man and woman the hard way: “desires which seemed to her both abnormal and insatiable.”(141) She felt violated when her husband had touched her. She suffered injustices at the hands of her husband.

And yet, she had born it silently. Something had told her it was just between the two of them. She knew you couldn’t scream ‘rape’...not when it was your own husband. And even if she did, who would hear.(141)

Her husband, on the other hand, was shocked at the realization that she could not bear his touch. He decided to end his marriage and seek divorce when Mrs. Raman had threatened to commit suicide. But her problem did not end with divorce. It alienated her from her family as they blamed her for everything. So she had to complete her education, get a job and move away from her disapproving family along with her daughter, Sonali, to start a new life as a school teacher in the Girls’ School.

Some other couples in the novel have to cope with their unhappy conjugal life. The relationship between Mridula’s parents, the Duttas, was not good. Their marital discord was in some way responsible for their
daughter’s death. Her father says, “The guilty people are us, my wife and I. We ‘re splitting up you know- now there’s no family. I wonder if there ever was one.”'(170-171)Mr. Verma’s wife had deserted him soon after marriage. So he turned a woman-hater and wanted all young women to suffer. Girish seems to lead a happy conjugal life, but he is under constant pressure to make his wife happy and maintain the high standard of living that she expected. This craving for money got him embroiled in the sordid murders.

_Roots and Shadows_, however, presents a conflicting view of marriage and conjugal relationship. The women of the old generation represented by Akka, Narmada, Sumitra, Kaki, Kamala, Kaki Atya, Sunanda and even the new generation Mini think that “a woman’s life is fulfilled in getting married, to bear children, to have sons and grandchildren.”(128) A woman becomes a ‘wife’ by shedding her ‘I’ and losing her identity in her husband.(54)The new generation represented by Indu believes in retaining her ‘self’ even after marriage and taking her own initiative and independent decisions in her life resisting the forces of customs and traditions.

Indu, the protagonist in the novel, is brought up in orthodox, traditional and rural background but she marries Jayant for love defying her family. Later she realises that she had married Jayant not for love as she used to think but for other reasons: she wanted freedom from the stronghold of family and tradition; she wanted to show her family that she was self-assertive and independent; and moreover she wanted to attain completeness. She says,

This is my real sorrow that I can never be complete in myself. Until I had met Jayant I had not known it...that there was, somewhere outside me, a part of me without which I remained incomplete. Then I met Jayant. And lost the ability to be alone. (31)

But after marriage she faces problems and her sense of gender equality suffers when she is not allowed to address her husband by his name as it shortens his age; when Jayant shows no inclination of sharing some of household work; and, moreover, when she has her own inclination of losing her own identity in the process of pleasing Jayant. She who considered herself independent, intelligent, logical, rational and assertive, gives herself to self-deception and hypocrisy and does everything at her own free will to please her husband. Instead of asserting herself, she learns to reveal to Jayant nothing but what he wanted to see. She has fallen into the patriarchal trap and she too is not different from traditional
women. She lies to Kaka when she says, “I dress the way I want.”(49) The reality is that she dresses for Jayant. She says,

When I look in the mirror, I think of Jayant. When I dress, I think of Jayant. When I undress, I think of him. Always what he wants. What he would like. What would please him. And I can’t blame him. It’s not he who has pressured me into this. It’s the way I want to be.(49)

She even curtails her expectations to a minimum to adjust herself with Jayant. But her conjugal life becomes a trap and she has become a fluid, with no shape, no form of her own. She even wants to die a suhagan. She wants Jayant to be always by her side. Years of social and cultural conditioning in patriarchal set up is responsible for it as she says, “But years of blind folding can obscure your vision so that you no more see the choices. Years of shackling can hamper your movement so that you no more move out of your cage of no choice.”(125)

Jayant too is deceptive and hypocrite. In spite of his seemingly Western style of living and being educated and progressive, he is no different from the average Indian male/husband who restricts a woman’s self-development and who, instead of becoming a source of freedom, becomes a barrier for her development. He wants his wife income to add to his status and luxury-a bungalow, a car and holidays abroad. She resents his dishonesty but he passes it in the name of being practical. He tells her, “What can a person do against the whole system. No point making yourself ridiculous with futile gestures. We need the money, don’t we? We have a long way to go.”(19) S. P. Swain who finds their temperament opposite to each other remarks;

The temperaments of the husband and the wife are diametrically opposite to each other. One is sympathetic to the ills of the society, the system, whereas the other is nonchalant. One is a writer in quest of an artistic selfhood while the other is a Philistine in pursuit of materialistic happiness.(1998:88)

Even the sexual relationship between them is a source of tension because Indu is passionate and the initiator in their love making and Jayant finds it shocking. He expects his wife to be passive and unresponsive. He wants her to be demur and coy in the privacy of their bed room. It shocks him to find passion to find passion in woman. Often she takes initiative for making love and Jayant would suddenly say ‘No’. He rejects her as an active partner in love making and makes her feel ashamed of loving him too much and too
passionately. He just wants to enjoy love making in his own way; he does not want to share it with his partner. Indu reflects:

Jayant and I, at the end of one of our moments of love making. And I, aghast at my total self-abandonment, had cried out. ‘It’s not fair.’ And Jayant, staring at me in bland astonishment, moving off me without asking me why I had said that and what it meant. (140)

She wants to discuss with him the issues that have beset their conjugal life but he would frustrate her attempts calling them nonsense. He takes her for granted. He never bothers to understand her feelings. M. Mani Meitei makes a very important observation in this context:

Shashi Deshpande brings out the boiling and broiling problem of marriage as an evil social practice because right from the beginning to the end it is a history of woman’s suppression, a long drawn out drama of negotiation in which she feels uncertain, is dragged and dragged all along the thrashing floor of humiliation till she blurts out helplessly ‘Yes’ whether the man is a rake or an idiot or an uncultured boor. (1998:84)

Indu finds Jayant incompatible and becomes aware of her wrong choice but she deceives herself into believing that that is what she wants because they there was no way out of it. She is unhappy with Jayant and toys with the idea of leaving him:

Sometimes, I wonder if I will leave him one day and live by myself. The only way, in which, I can be myself, my whole self again. I have often toyed with the idea. I even worked it out into a short story once, in which a young woman leaves her husband and goes away. (88-89)

She feels crushed under the weight of marriage and she would have left her husband as she had left her home only if it were a traditional marriage. But she cannot leave him lest it should prove that she was wrong in marrying Jayant and Akka was right in opposing it. She reflects: “But the hideous ghost of my own cowardice confronted me as I thought of this...because I was afraid of failure. I have to show them that my marriage, that I was a success...and I went on lining even to myself.” (115)

Their conjugal relationship is not based on love but on compromise and it is a big fraud. It is almost a traditional conjugal relationship
of dominating husband and submissive wife based on demand and dominance on one hand and deception, artificial show and a bit of diplomacy on the other. For Indu marriage has become a trap as she says, “A trap? Or a cage? May be the comic strip version of marriage...a cage with two trapped animals glaring hatred at each other...isn’t so wrong after all. And it’s not a joke but a tragedy.”(61) She later tries to give a picture of the conjugal life to Mini who is going to have an arranged marriage: “Marriage... means living with a man. You have to listen to him, endure his habits, his smell, his touch, his likes, his dislikes. You have to sleep with him, bear him children. Can you do all that with this man?”(124)

Indu gets a chance to get away when she receives summons from Akka from her death bed. Akka has chosen Indu as her heiress. After 12 years of her marriage and leaving home, she is eager to return to her natal home. But Jayant is not amused. He sounds possessive when he calls ‘Akka’ a distant relation and discourages her to respond to her call and return home. Indu feels hurt. It appears to her that he has drawn a magic circle round her. But she returns to her ancestral home which offers her ample opportunities to know herself and gather her courage and strength. Initially she does not allow her cousin, Naren, to take advantage of the marital disharmony and declares: “I am essentially monogamous, for me it is one man and one man alone.”(89) But her realization of love to be a fraud and her belief in the instinct of sex make her submit to Naren on two occasions and it can be seen as her desperate attempt to move out of the trap of her marriage.

She introspects her conjugal life and realises the need to seek freedom within the bounds of obligation and responsibilities when she discovers the actual facts of Akka’s life- how Akka had gathered strength from her convictions and asserted herself in critical situations. It is here that she is able to discover her roots as an independent woman, a daughter, a mother and a commercial writer. She decides to emulate Akka’s strength and act according to her convictions as the situation demands. She finds her roots in the home and with her husband. She need not be ashamed of her body and sexual needs. She is capable of taking decisions not only for herself but for others too, and life does not come to an end with individuals whether it is Indu or Jayant.

Thus in the end she realises that freedom lies in having the courage to do what one believes is the right thing to do and the determination and tenacity to adhere to it and that alone can bring harmony in life. Finally she
resolves her personal crisis in a way as far as practicable. She decides that she would stick to Jayant without feeling guilty about her sexual encounter with Naren and she would not tell Jayant about it because what had happened between her and Naren does not concern him. According to Ramamoorthy: “This sheds a brilliant light on Indu’s awareness of her autonomy, and her realization that she is an autonomous being, not a dependent on Jayant.”(1991:124) Jasbir Jain too supports this view when she says:

And when in a moment of sympathy, Indu slips into a relationship with Naren, she does not brood over it. There is no feeling of guilt despite this adulterous lapse. Instead Indu learns to take a rational stand where her marriage with Jayant is concerned. She realises that the romance which inhabits the mind of women enslaves them and that as an individual, she has a right to her body.(2004:214)

Indu also reconsiders her career as a journalist which forces her to be false to herself. She receives no support or sympathy from her husband, Jayant, who takes it easy and advises her to compromise and continue with the job. But now she refuses to be influenced by Jayant and resigns her job to devote herself to writing what she wants: “That I would at least do the kind of writing I had always dreamt of doing.”(205) She will no longer be a doll or a puppet to Jayant and live for him; she will no longer be merely a daughter, a mother, and a commercial writer as she used to be; she will now live for herself. She will now get out of the romantic submission to Jayant to make space for herself within her marriage and to do what she really wants to do rather than constantly bow to the necessities of the household. According to S. P. Swain:

The meek, docile and humble Indu of the early days finally emerges as a bold challenging, conscious and rebellious woman. She resigns her job, thus defying the male authority, hierarchy and the irony of woman’s masked existence. Her self-discovery is the frightening vision of the feminine self’s struggle for harmony and sanity. She comes out of her emotional upheaval and decides to lead a meaningful life with her husband. (1998:95)

But critics raise doubts against her decision to go back to Jayant which for her is not a matter of choice but acceptance of the inevitable as failure in marriage is considered to be a woman’s greatest failure. She goes back to him with the vain hope that things will change. She says, “Now I would
go back and see that home could stand the scorching touch of honesty.” (187) But there seems little scope of improvement as her renewed efforts are again rooted in dishonesty - she would keep her extra-martial relationship a secret. But Sarbjit K. Sandhu sees a positive twist in Indu’s decision as Indu represents the modern educated wives who “are rooted and shaped by the Indian customs but influenced by the scientific knowledge of the West.” (1991:34) Indu thus represents the new Indian wife who would like to hold on to both the ends - to retain her own identity as well as her traditional role in the family and society at the same time without overburdened with the shadows and ghosts of guilt and shame.

But the marriage of Padmini alias Mini’s who belongs to the same generation offers a contrasting picture. For Mini, marriage is the fulfilment of her destiny and her life’s ambition. To her it was marriage that mattered, not the man. She is confident that “once we are married and he becomes my husband, none of his faults will matter.” (139) For her a husband is a husband “A definite article. Permanent. Not only for now but for ever. To be accepted.” (126-127) Being not pretty, auspicious and dowry-rich, she is set to marry an elderly coarse widower as she wants security and fidelity in marriage and prefers a much older, ugly man to the eccentric and unreliable Naren, a sensitive young man but a no goodie in social terms.

The portrayal of the conjugal relationship of the old generation i.e. that of Akka, Indu’s great aunt, is the typical picture of an unequal marriage, a marriage when a child is tagged on to a fully matured man who may not be sensitive to the young child. Married at the age of 13 to a man of 30, her married life is sandwiched between an insensitive lecherous husband and a harsh and cruel mother-in-law. She was the victim of the practice of child marriage in pre-Independent India. For her conjugal life was full of terror and unhappiness. At a tender age when she barely understood the meaning of sex, she had to submit to her husband’s often violent sexual advances who forced himself on her disregarding her age and understanding. She was subjected to such brutality that she began to regard sex as “punishment”. She tried to escape from her husband’s house but her mother-in-law caught her and brought her back. Indu reflects about her fate:

(T)wice she tried to run away...her mother-in-law whipped her for that and locked her up for three days, starved her as well. And then, sent her back to her husband’s room. The child, they said, cried and
clung to her mother-in-law saying, “Lock up again, Lock me up.” But there was no escape from a husband then...(77)

Akka becomes pregnant even before she is out of her teens. Her immature, underdeveloped body gave birth to a dead child and it adds to her misfortune as she is branded inauspicious and evil because of her childlessness and ill-treated by her mother-in-law. But when her husband took a mistress she got some respite from his sexual demands. He took many more mistresses and, after being married for many years, was crazy about one woman for whom he would do anything—he even would have liked to take Akka’s jewellery and given them to her.

Akka had a chance to grab at her freedom after the death of her mother-in-law and the stroke of paralysis on her husband, but trained since childhood to be the ideal and dutiful wife, she could not desert a paralysed husband and it is through this fidelity to her old husband that she had survived through the relationship and earned the wealth of her husband after his death. Her traumatic married life came to an end when she exercised her will in not allowing her husband’s concubine to see him at his death bed despite his yearning. She lost her calm and cool and told him,

Listen to me. It’s my turn now. I’ve listened to you long enough now. She came here twice. She wanted to see you. She cried and begged to be allowed to see you just for a short while. I threw her out. You’ll never see her again. (71)

Her husband began to cry and tears poured down his face but Akka just looked at him. With this one act she had tried to restore her dignity and self-respect after long years of mute submission. Akka’s story carries within it the seeds of Mira’s story in Shashi Deshpande’s succeeding novel The Binding Vine.

That Long Silence presents the unhappy conjugal life of Jaya and Mohan. Jaya, a convent educated and English speaking girl is quite aware of Western view about gender, equality, equal opportunity and social justice. Her husband, Mohan, an engineer, has a typical patriarchal mind set. He wanted an educated wife who could be able to live up to the standards set by his peers and who could be flaunted as a prized possession, but he expected his wife to be as submissive to him as his mother was to his father. Theirs was not a love marriage but an arranged one. Jaya married Mohan because he was her brother’s choice and she saw marriage as a passport to freedom from the
oppressive control of the parental home, but having lived with Mohan at different places for 17 years and born him two children, she realised that her life, as a wife, was not a fulfilment but a deprivation. They were just “a man and woman married for seventeen years but with no bridge of understanding and love between them.” (8) They cannot even decide a meal or movie without bickering. (11) They lived together but they had only emptiness between them.

Initially Jaya emulated the ideals of Sita, Draupadi and other mythological characters to maintain a harmonious conjugal relationship, but this only allows her husband to take complete control over her. Mohan deliberately shapes her into the kind of wife he wanted. He persuades her to cut her hair short after the current trend and dress herself as per accepted style of dressing. Her name ‘Jaya’, given by her father and meaning ‘victory’ is changed by Mohan to ‘Suhasini’ which means “soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman” (15-16) and to fit into ‘Suhasini’ image, Jaya who had been bold and fearless, tries to behave like a nervous incompetent woman needing male support all the time. She blindly follows in Mohan’s footsteps. They are: “Two bullocks yoked together...it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful; and what animal would voluntarily choose pain.” (11-12) Commenting on this image of husband-wife relationship, Vijay Kumar Das says:

The image of the beast performing the duty mechanically undermines the husband-wife relationship, who are supposed to be united in marriage for love and not for leading a mechanical life terminating in mutual hatred and distrust. (1998:127)

Jaya cannot afford to endure it for long. But her first and only outburst with Mohan, soon after her marriage, results in days of Mohan’s silence. Since then she adopts silence stratagem and withdraws under it as a kind of strategy to keep her inner strength and relationship. Shashi Deshpande herself explains the meaning of silence when she says: “You learn a lot of tricks to get by in a relationship. Silence is one of them...You never find a woman criticising her husband, even playfully, in case it might damage the relationship.” (March 6, 1988) Jaya thus turns the direction of her anger on herself and her anger becomes self-destructive. She would not express her feelings lest it should spoil her conjugal relationship; rather she would reflect on past events.
Their conjugal relationship is further strained when Mohan is caught along with his Boss taking a commission and asked to go on leave till the enquiry is completed and they have to leave their posh Churchgate Bungalow and shift to her maternal uncle’s old Chawl like apartment in Dadar. She was like “Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband’s travels...”(11) But Mohan, instead of owning up responsibilities for his misdeeds, makes her and children responsible for his malpractices—he cares for them so much that he went out of his way to get things done: “I’ve always put you and the children first.”(11) As there is fear of losing his job, he feels vulnerable and demands more care and attention from his wife. This change in situation affects their conjugal relationship. This return to Dadar flat is a “home coming” for Jaya though Mohan feels uneasy and frightened like “a confined animal.”(25) Jaya was told by Vanitamami that “a husband is like a sheltering tree”(32) but instead she finds Mohan using her as a buffer, an opiate to soften the impact of the crisis of his personal life. Mohan’s sense of insecurity makes Jaya realise that if she needed him, his need for her was equally great. Thus she regains herself-worth and self-confidence and when Mohan, bossy as usual, demands the flat from her, she, the owner of the flat, refuses to be servile and handover the flat’s key to him. This is symptomatic of the subtle change in their relationship. Jaya is aware of what this signifies. She says, “It was not he who has relinquished his authority, it was I who no longer conceded any authority to him.”(9)

The marital sex between Jaya and Mohan is again the case of an extremely demanding and dominating husband and a submissive and suffering wife. For Jaya sex with Mohan was purely a physical encounter devoid of love and emotion. It was “a silent, wordless love making”(85) “feeling his heavy damp body on hers”(95) She is never deeply stirred. “We had never come together, only our bodies had done that.”(98) Their sexual relationship appears to be a forced relationship because it always ends with Mohan’s asking whether he has hurt her. So she began to distance herself more and more from the mere act of sex. “I could stay apart from him without a twinge; I could sleep with him, too, without desire.”(97) She wonders if there is anything like a real emotional involvement between them and then she confesses: “Love? No, I knew nothing of it.”(153) According to R. K. Sharma:

The trouble is that for Mohan, sex seems to exist in isolation, a fact which Jaya resents. Slapdash and superficial in most ways, he fails to
understand that a woman’s sexuality is a complex phenomenon, made up of physical as well as emotional factors. (1998:112)

Jaya’s suppression of her natural self to please Mohan badly tells upon her social life and writing profession. She used to explode into laughter at her father’s home but Mohan feels so much hurt by her laughter that she does not laugh in his presence. She even quietly leaves her neighbour, Mr. Kamat’s room while he was struggling to breathe his last, instead of attending him, fearing that it would hurt Mohan if the other neighbours gossiped about her presence in Mr. Kamat’s room. Even as a writer she goes to the extent of changing the very stuff she would have loved to write. In fact she would have loved to write the stuff of an angry woman. Instead she wrote the soap opera Sita stuff, which pleased Mohan and made him say proudly “My wife is a writer. She writes in English.” She had changed the stuff she wrote because once when she had received an award for one of her stories about a man “who could not reach out to his wife except through her body.” (144), Mohan, instead of admiring her, had felt hurt and sulked thinking that his wife had exposed to the world their own relationship. He had been quite incapable of understanding how a writer can aptly transmute experiences into artistic creation and, therefore, he had asked her to give up her original style of writing in favour of the one that was fashionable though frivolous. To him she was “no writer, only an exhibitionist.” (144) He tends to believe that he, and not his wife, knows what is best for her because she “belongs” to him. Thus their conjugal relationship is a typical power relationship, based on husband’s domination and wife’s compromise; based on social fear rather than on mutual need of each other. Jaya’s diaries which she ironically calls “The Diaries of a Sane Housewife” are the records of her submissiveness, surrender and compromises because it is accepted that a wife’s sanity lies in following her husband. This is put within the larger narrative of Gandhari in the Mahabharata: “If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too.” (61) Her sense of disorientation, helplessness and insignificance results from her long continued dependence on and domination by her husband.

The lack of understanding between Jaya and Mohan results into loss of communication between them. There grows an oppressive silence between them. Jaya’s silence is her armour against her dominating husband. Her inner turmoil is so bitter that she is unable to speak them out and remains
silent in order not to be frustrated and disappointed after the disapproval of her actions by the society. She is unable to unfold the truth because she is very much confused about the whole set up and the happenings around her. Mohan keeps on asking questions but she does not find a word to answer them: “I racked my brains trying to think of answer.”(31) Finally Mohan walks out of the house angrily one day and she feels that perhaps she had failed in her duty as a wife. According to Sarbjit K. Sandhu,

Jaya is basically a modern woman rooted in tradition, whereas her husband, Mohan, is a traditionalist rooted in customs. The difference between their outlooks is so great that they fail, time and again, to understand each other. To Mohan a woman sitting before the fire, waiting for her husband to come home and eat hot food is the real ‘strength’ of a woman, but Jaya interprets it as nothing more than despair. The difference in their attitude is the main cause of their failure to understand each other. (1991:40-41)

The exile in the Dadar flat gives Jaya enough time for introspection and self-discovery. When Mohan vents his frustration accusing her of being cold and indifferent towards him especially “when he is facing the biggest crisis of his life as she despises him because he has failed.”(121), she goes hysteric and , thereafter, spends her days alone. She becomes introvert and spends time recollecting the past events of her life, analysing her life and relationship with her husband and children and discovering that she had failed miserably in each of them. Her role as a traditional housewife had imprisoned her and reduced her area of freedom. “The job she had wanted to take up, the baby she had wanted to adopt, the anti-price campaign she had wanted to join, none of these were actions undertaken or completed.”(120)Her predicament has been described using an apt image of a worm crawling into a hole:

Middle class. Bourgeoisie. Distanced from real life. Scared of writing. Scared of failing. Oh God! I had thought I can’t take any more. Even a worm has a hole; it can crawl into it. I had mine-as Mohan’s wife, as Rahul’s and Rati’s mother.(148)

But now she realises that she cannot be a complete woman if she remains a wife or a mother and ignore the other equally important self, namely a writer. She says, “I’m Mohan’s wife, I had thought and cut off bits of me that had refused
Jaya’s awareness of her own incompleteness makes her more sensitive to the emotional needs of her husband. She realises that her failure to establish normal reciprocal relationship with her husband had enhanced her self-alienation. Negation alone can never lead a woman towards selfhood. A wife’s relation with her husband must take from within the totality of her life as a woman, only then it can lead to a harmonious existence. (2001:95-96)

According to Sarbjit K. Sandhu:

In order to have a well-balanced conjugal life, it is imperative that husband and wife be at par with each other. They should supplement and not supplant each other. Further, they should know each other well physically as well as emotionally. (1991:42)

After the self-realisation, Jaya breaks her 17 year long silence to communicate with her husband and to write and communicate with the world. The novel ends with the return of her son, Rahul, the receipt of Mohan’s letter from Delhi with the news of his rehabilitation to his job and house and a promise ‘to return’ on Friday morning and Jaya’s resolution to seek liberation from mediocrity in self-expression breaking out her long silence and to accept the hard truth that “Life has always to be made possible.”(193) Jaya’s feeling of revolt gives way to the need of adjustment and she interprets Mohan’s letter in positive terms-Mohan too wants to get back to his married life with Jaya, the strains and stress of the past notwithstanding. She feels contented that “...at the end of the day my family and I are under a roof, safe, enclosed in a secure world.”(181) and hopes for the better. But her return to the Churchgate Bungalow would not be the same again. She will only make adjustment; she will never be servile. Her journey into light has begun. According to Adesh Pal:

Jaya has fathomed the darkness of herself and has learnt to articulate her predicament. When she hears the news that all ends up well in the office of Mohan, and Rahul also comes back, she is again in the danger of falling entrapped in the prison house of marriage. She breaks her silence and refuses to be led by nose. Now she will continue as a writer and would not look up at the face of Mohan for an answer he wants. (1998:124)
Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan supports this view but with a difference. She says:

At the end of her story, Jaya chooses to operate within the self imposed limits of the family, resolving to change her life by negotiating the power relations and improving the interpersonal relationships within it rather than through the instrumentality of her writing. (2004:85)

But all such views are based on the assumption that Jaya is returning to Mohan. But to many critics and readers the novel has an open ending. There is no clear indication that Jaya is returning to Mohan. She may not. But Shashi Deshpande rules out even its open ending as she says to Lakshmi Holmstorm in an interview:

And as far as Silence is concerned, for me, the ending is not completely ‘open’ either. There is a conclusion in that Jaya has changed. That’s what matters, not whether she is going back to Mohan or not. It is what has happened inside her that is going to shape her life now. How that is going to happen, I don’t know. I’d have to write another novel to know. (1998:247)

Hence we cannot accept such views as held by Bijay Kumar Das that

Through Jaya’s character Shashi Deshpande expresses an ambivalent attitude of contemporary educated independent-minded Indian women who can neither reconcile themselves to a new situation when their husbands ignore them and crush their ambition in life nor can they cast off their husbands, for the “husband is like a sheltering tree” which they cannot afford to live without. (1998:129)

Rather it is worthy to note in the novel how the husband and the wife, in their separate ways, explore their relationship and finally come together as they learn to share the responsibility for the house they have created.

Besides the conjugal life of Jaya and Mohan, the novel gives some glimpses of the traditional conjugal relationship involving minor characters which are in sharp contrast to those of the major characters. These are based on the wife having a blind faith in her husband and accepting insults, injuries and humiliations with a stoic patience without any grievance or complain. Kusum and her mother, Venu and Mohan’s mother and sister are portrayed as representatives of the oppressed wives. Mohan’s mother was
exploited sexually to the point of brutality by her husband, her body abused by continuous child bearing finally keels her. She does not protest or complain though her husband piles humiliation upon her. Ironically, her only act of rebellion—the abortion—had resulted in her death. Vanitamami is childless, unattractive, awkward and incompetent and neglected by her husband. Yet she manages to live cheerfully, accepting in true Hindu tradition, that the husband is the wife’s protector and believing that as long as one is wife one is secure. Kusum, Jaya’a cousin, goes mad and drives herself to suicide because of frustration with marriage and family and craziness for a male child. The situation is almost the same in the lower class people. Jeeja, Jaya’s maid, and Nayana, the sweeper woman, have courage, perseverance and determination to live despite their oppression. Jeeja accepts physical abuse at the hands of her husband, his drinking bouts and his second marriage with equanimity as she could not produce a child. She values her *mangalsutra* realising fully that she is supporting a burden. Nayana perpetually gets pregnant and still waits for a male child to be born to her. She is reduced to a child bearing machine. She has no control over her body. Her husband ill-treats her because she has not born him a son. However, she remains cheerful and looks after herself and her daughter. Jeeja’s step son, Raja Ram, beats his wife in a drunken state. All these wives suffer silently. They never get angry and unless there is anger, the silence cannot be broken.

The conjugal life of Urmi and Kishore in *The Binding Vine* is different from the other husband-wife relationship in Shashi Deshpande’s novels. Theirs is a love-marriage. Urmi, a lecturer in a college, had fallen in love at first sight with this boy from next door and her brother’s friend on the day of her grandfather’s death by suicide. She had always adored him and she wanted to be a good wife. Kishore, an officer in the Merchant Navy, is a liberated man and an ideal husband, genuinely in love with his wife. He treats her as an equal, as a person with a mind and will of her own. He considers marriage a life-long bond as he tells Urmi on their wedding night. “The two of us in a closed room.” He said, parodying the words of a popular film song, “and we can’t get out. That’s marriage.”(134) But to Urmi it sounds like the marriage being a trap and so, she fails to submit herself to him and to feel a sense of belonging to him. She recalls how on her wedding night, she had walked across to her parent’s house(80) afraid to yield and unwilling to be absorbed. Jasbir Jain makes an important observation in this context:
Fulfilment through sex and love also gives woman a sense of power and a man may be afraid of being absorbed and contained as much as a woman. One of the reasons Urmi goes back to her parents on the night of her wedding is look on Kishore’s face. He looked trapped. (2003:89-90)

Urmi does not want to surrender her ‘self’ as Kishore is withholding his ‘self’. She is not for one sided surrender-wife’s surrender to her husband- She believes in ‘equality’ and ‘give and take’ relationship.

Urmi hungers for Kishore in many ways and tries to find pleasure in her home, husband and children. But she feels alienated from her husband who comes home once in a while. His long absence has a negative impact on their conjugal relationship. Urmi longs to have him permanently at home and she fears that she may lose him forever. She tries to tell him twice that each time he leaves her, the parting is like death. And both the times he finds solution in the physical relationship. He wants to alleviate her anxiety by having sex with her. She submits herelf to him in sex physically but mentally she has a repulsion for that as is evident from her reflection in the following lines:

He was knelling by me, his face close to mine, but the closeness was only physical His voice was cold. I could see the goose bumps on his shoulders, his chest. I did not look into his face, I was afraid of what I would see. I turned round and fell asleep.(140)

She had felt the broadening chasm between them earlier. On the night Anu was taken ill, Kishore and Urmi had a passionate togetherness and Kishore, after the act, lay smoking with one arm under his head, his face clear and calm. Urmi felt alienated and reduced to passivity. As he stubs the cigarette butt into the ashtray, the finality of the gesture provoked Urmi into rebellion and she ran out into the roaring wind and rain and got completely drenched. Kishore brought her back and after her bath, put her to bed. The incident was never discussed by either of them but it triggered of despair in her. She longed to reach the spiritual centre, but Kishore never tried to understand her spiritual aspect of life. There was only a sexual, legal bond. Urmi’s remarks that “Kishore will never remove his armour, there is something in him I will never reach. I have lived with the hope that someday I will...Am I to give up this hope?”(141)signals a deep
rooted insecurity in their conjugal relationship. John Gray makes an illuminating observation in respect of man-woman relationship in this context:

Men generally assume that once a woman is fulfilled, she should stay that way. Once he has proven his love, she should know it forever...From the male point of view this attitude makes perfect sense.

Women find this attitude hard to accept. It is just plainly inconsistent with their internal reality. A woman needs to be reassured that she is special, worthy, understandable and lovable. Men also need to be assured, but they get that encouragement mainly through the work. Women, however, primarily need reassurance through their relationships. (Gray:241)

This shows that the difference between men and women is more than biological. Men and women feel and respond differently so, husband and wife must understand the mental and emotional make-up of the two sexes and each partner must learn to communicate one’s need to the other and ask for fulfilment. Otherwise, even a love marriage between liberated man and woman can run into trouble for either spouse as it happens in case of Urmī and Kishore. Their relationship gives out the nuances of conjugal relationship and shows up the vast scope for improvement.

It is important to note that in Indian context couples often live apart by choice, driven by economic needs and aspirations, a better life for children, better career prospects etc. and this choice often strengthen or break their conjugal relationship depending on the maturity of the couples. Married women whose husbands live and work elsewhere, have to develop the needed skill to cope with the need in and outside home. Their status is unclear—they are single and yet they are not. If they have children, they may not always be welcomed in either couple circles or with single women. Men-single, married and relatives- think of them as fair sexual game and there are possibilities of anger and jealousy and opportunities for sexual and emotional bonding with others often leading to heart-breaks and abandonment. But one’ sense of autonomy, independent status, management skills and experiences in dealing with the world outside one’s homes help one remain loyal and faithful to the partner for the benefit of family and society. And Urmī has this ability and will power to guide herself. . Despite Kishore’s long absences, she remains chaste to
him. She does not show any positive response to Dr. Bhaskar Jain when he proposes to her in spite of knowing her marital status.

But in course of time their marriage becomes a trap and imprisonment and one day Urmì walked out one night after Anu’s death because she does not like the ‘trapped’ look in Kishore’s face, the tremendous pressure on him to keep alive a certain convention. Kishore had never complained or asked for adjustment or compromise. He never asked her why she had walked out that night nor does she try to explain. This is the mark of their equal relationship. Urmì is a sensitive vine and need Kishore as an oak to entwine herself around.

Urmì’s sister, Vanna has an unhappy conjugal life. Her life, after marriage, is fully anchored to the needs of her family. Like a traditional wife, she is more dependent on her doctor husband, Harish, and is always guided by him. It seems that her husband, even when he is away, has some remote control over her. She is unable to assert herself before him. He bulldozes her and she crawls before him. She always tries to please him, suffers from the fear of not pleasing him, and surrenders and self-abnegates herself to be loving. In the end she commits suicide. The shock of her husband’s destructive desire, the sense of betrayal she experiences, and the guilt she lives with make her life impossible for her.

However, the conjugal relationship of the couples of the previous generation, as presented in the novel, is a relationship of dominance and submission, exploitation and suffering. Kishore’s mother, Mira was trapped in a loveless marriage. She was a social misfit because she was born ahead of her time-educated, knowing English and aspiring to become a writer. She was not happy with her marriage at the age of 18 to a man obsessed with her. He could not understand her mind and heart, her psyche and artistic dimension. He wanted to possess her physically and demanded his conjugal rights from her in the name of ‘love’. She looked for love but meets with lust of her husband. In her diary entries she mentions her “fearing the coming of the dark clouded, engulfing night” and continues: “And so it begins. “Please” he says, “Please I love you.” And over and over again until he was done. “I love you.” Love! How I hate the word. If this is love, it is a terrible thing. I have learnt to say ‘No’ at least, but it makes no difference at all.” Her husband’s violent act of imposing himself on her unwilling body disrupted their conjugal relationship.
She learnt to hold herself back from him so that he might possess her body but not her soul. She writes in her diary:

“Talk” he says to me. “Why don’t you say something, why don’t you speak to me?” “What shall I talk about?” I ask him stupidly. “What did you do today, where did you go, what have you been thinking about all evening?”...But I have my defences; I gave him the facts, nothing more, never my feelings. (66-67)

Their conjugal relationship is a power relationship—husband’s power over wife. Mira has no option to opt out of the relationship. According to Jasbir Jain:

Mira’s relationship with her husband is one long nightmare. It is rape within marriage...Mira’s life illustrates the traumatic aspects of a loveless marriage and of one sided love. The male impulse to possess the woman and override female resistance marks an aggression which is backed by social approval through marriage. (2004:217-218)

Mira died at the age of 22 while giving birth to her son, Kishore, and her husband took Akka, Vanna’s mother as his second wife. Mira’s predicament reminds us of that of Akka in *Roots and Shadows*.

Urmí’s mother, Inni, also suffers deprivation as a wife. She who carried the child in her womb and went through the pain of child birth was not allowed the right to decide what would be the best for her baby, Urmí. Her husband took a unilateral decision to take his daughter to his mother at Ranidurg. She was made to feel that she was a bad mother and her husband did not trust her ability to bring up a daughter. He was unwittingly cruel and unjust to his wife and wronged her by imposing his inflexible will on her.

There are unhappy, estranged and broken conjugal relationships even in the lower classes. Shakutai, the newly married bride, follows her husband to Bombay, afraid of being a burden on her parents, and finds herself living in a room full of men, where her husband, quite indifferent to both her feelings and the presence of others, wishes to sleep with her. She discovers that her husband was without a job. Yet bravely she continues to work on her marriage, cooked for the men and took up all kinds of available jobs. To her all that marriage really amounted to was “sex in the open passage, open to public view like ‘animals’ and unwanted pregnancies.”(110-111)Initially she
wanted to have a *mangalsutra* made of gold, but she finally realised the futility of the endeavour: “The man himself is so worthless, why should I bother to have this thing made in precious gold?”(110) Later Shakutai is deserted by her husband but she continues to enjoy her married status as she finds security in marriage—she is “safe from other men.”(88) Marriage is a mere shelter to her. Only once her husband joins her when their daughter, Kalpana, after being raped by Prabhakar, is hospitalised, but he does it more as a father and less as a husband.

The conjugal life of Shakutai’s sister, Sulu and her husband Prabhakar is another sad tale. Sulu regards Prabhakar as a good man as “…he does not touch drink, not even cigarettes.”(144) But Sulu is childless and her husband desires the youthful Kalpana, Sulu’s niece, who, however, is not available—she has a boyfriend and her own aspirations. Shakutai speaks about her sister, Sulu’s life after marriage: After marriage she changed. She was frightened, always frightened. What if he doesn’t like this, what he wants that, what if he is angry with me, what if he throws me out? What kind of life it is.”(195) When Prabhakar breaks her trust and rapes Kalpana, Sulu commits suicide—she burns herself to death to avoid telling a lie to save her husband from police. Commenting on her suicide, Shakutai imparts the wisdom to Urmi at the end of the novel:

> You can never opt out, you can never lay it down, the burden of belonging to the human race. There is only one way out of this *chakravyuuha*. Abhimanyu had to die. There was no way he could get out.(202)

Deshpande’s *A Matter of Time*, according to Vimala Rama Rao, deals with a peculiar problem concerning conjugal life “a person assuming *sanyasa* of a kind which is often encountered in our society.” (*JIWE*: 1997: 136) Gopal and Sumi’s is an unusual conjugal relationship marked by their pain, suffering, endurance, understanding, love and support extended to each other. They had a love marriage. Gopal initially reciprocated Sumi’s love and needed her warmth, her humanness, and her womanness. He “wanted it all” and did “everything”—caring for babies, tending them caressing them with joy and passion. He was free from complexes and he “could cross the barriers between the sexes with ease...and do something most men found hard–present his whole-self to female, not just a part of himself.”(107) But his passion for idealism defeats his physical desires. His body now fails him. He could lie “beside Sumi
night after night, quiescent, feeling nothing.”(69) He feels disillusioned and deserts his wife and their three children-Aru, Charu and Seema. It is his betrayal and cruelty to his wife as the novelist puts it: “Gopal’s desertion is not just a tragedy, it is both a shame and disgrace.”(13)

The irony is that disgrace clings not so much to the husband who walks out on his family but to the wife who is deserted. She does not know how to respond to this sad event. She tells Devi,

I’ve never been able to cry easily, you know that. And what do I say, Devi? That my husband has left me and I don’t know why and may be, he doesn’t know either. And that I’m angry and humiliated and confused? (107)

Unlike his daughters she is not angry with Gopal. She does not blame him. She does not accept her 18 year old daughter, Aru’s suggestion for filing a case against him. But if she ever meets him, she would certainly ask him:

What is it Gopal...that makes a man in this age of acquisition and possession, walk out on his family and all that he owns. Because it was you who said that we are shaped by the age we live in, by the society we are part of. How can you, in this age, a part of this society, turn your back on everything in your life? (27)

According to Usha Bande, Gopal committed a grave injustice to his wife by deserting her. To quote her:

Gopal leaves his family in the mid-current: his daughters are in their teens(a difficult period for growing up adolescents”); his wife is not employed and is not economically equipped to meet the day to day requirements: his in-laws are economically sound but they have their own problems. Add to this the social disgrace and psychological “displacement”. (2005:196)

Gopal’s desertion has created a vast void in Sumi’s life and left her purposeless and directionless. But she exhibits her dignity in exploring the ways of coming to terms with the painful reality and going on with life. Vijay Guttal sees a new light in Sumi’s attitude when he says:

But it is in Sumi that we see the struggle to learn to leave alone and assert oneself against the tide of tragedy. If Sumi is trying to work out
a strategy to withstand the shock and the emptiness left behind by Gopal, and create a life for herself and her daughter, Aru is full of the sense of injustice and protest against her father. (2005:174-175)

According to R. S. Pathak, Sumi suffers silently, learns to become her own refuge and preserves her self-respect. To quote him:

Sumi appears to be an epitome of silent suffering and passive resistance...She blocks out unpleasantness. She has a good opinion of herself. She is more concerned with getting on with life. She does not want pity. She would do anything for pride. She distances even her husband. (1998:158)

After desertion Sumi needs to vacate the house and look for other means of support. When she decides to live at her own and goes house hunting, she realises how difficult it is for an all-woman family to hire a house or, as in her case, to be able to afford it. She gets a job and gets involved in it. She writes a play “The Gardener’s Son” for class performance. Her creativity gets revived and she proposes to write another. She also writes a play subverting the Surpanakha episode of the Ramayana-she writes the story from the point of view of Surpanakha herself. She thinks that Surpanakha was “neither ugly nor hideous but a woman charged with sexuality, not frightened of displaying it.”(191) So then men felt threatened and they disfigured her to put her down. Thus, by deconstructing the story of surpanakha, Urmi is eager to place man-woman relationship on a sound, nonpartisan footing.

Sumi meets Gopal several times after the desertion. They meet; they exchange news; she tells him of her new ventures and about the daughters. She speaks freely of life and leaves Gopal wondering at her vivacity. She confronts the past with such admirable self-control that Gopal longs to possess her. Thus Sumi, after desertion, progresses in a positive direction. She is just beginning to discover herself when she, along with her father, dies in an accident as they rode a borrowed scooter to enable Sumi to take up a new responsibility in a school. Gopal, on the other hand, continues living over his pupil’s printing press in ascetic self-contained manner and finally leaves for Alaknanda in his quest for peace.

What happened between Sumi and Gopal was not sudden. Gopal had his own inner emptiness. He was conscious of man’s essential loneliness and futility of human relationship. After marriage, he had admitted
that conjugal life made demands and it was not possible for him to “tolerate a life time commitment.”(69) He could not believe that marriage is a union of two souls. Rather he believed that two people have two bodies and two hearts and they can never beat in such unison that there is only one sound. According to Jasbir Jain what makes him walk out is “the need for a sense of privacy and of freedom, the need to keep a part of oneself in one’s possession, the need to preserve the self that may disrupt a relationship.”(2003:110) But there is yet another reason which Gopal mentions for walking away, based on his patriarchal mindset and gender discrimination: “...For a woman from the moment she is pregnant, there is an overriding reason for living, a justification for life that is loudly and emphatically true. A man has to search for it, always and forever.”(68) And Gopal does not have son for his support and redemption as the Epigraph to Part-II “The Family” suggests thus: “Whatever wrong has been done by him, his son frees him from it all, therefore, he is called a son. By his son a father stands firm in this world.”(91) But such an explanation is biased against women and favourably disposed towards the rights of men. Why can’t the women have the same privilege?

But the two other things here are not in keeping with the genuine Indian concept of renunciation/sanyasa. First, Gopal renounces the world before discharging all his responsibilities and fulfilling his commitment towards his family. Second, he is still haunted by the desire of body. He remembers that he touched sumi’s bare flesh “in the river and could feel it respond” to his touch. At later stage when Sumi visits him in a room, and as they talk about their marriage and their daughters, Gopal realises that “the space between them in the room is filled with desire, his desire, that his body after all these many months, is awake. Why now? Why here?”(223) Obviously he was mistaken and Urmi’s mother, Kalyani, with her experience of life, is able to perceive that Gopal is “driven by a need he does not know himself” and that all his efforts are directed to “make peace with himself.”(245) According to N. Poovalingam, Gopal’s renunciation is far from the concept of Vedic renunciation. To quote him: “Gopal’s abandoning the family is not the result of saturation in the worldly life. His is more a withdrawal in pain than a renunciation due to contentment.”(1998:174)

But Gopal cannot be called a coward as he admits his fears quite candidly. Besides, after renunciation, he never looks back and regrets. He cuts himself from worldly pleasures, reduces his needs to bare minimum and
prefers to live in the hermit like solitude. After Sumi’s death, he is able to hold himself in with an iron self-control holding the essence of wisdom that “Everything passes, nothing remains.” (237) But the winner is, in fact, Sumi who endures all with a quite magnanimity. She is a real wise person, a true renouncer who neither hates nor desires and is capable of transcending the pairs of opposites such as pain and pleasure, loss and gain, and defeat and victory and one who, while doing all these, believes that one is doing nothing. She is wiser than Gopal. She does not want to hold him against wishes. It is the triumph of Sumi, the New Age Wife, who questions Shankar’s mother’s words, “What is a woman without a husband?” (167) Gopal’s renunciation, seen from this angle, appears to be skin deep and a beginner’s attempt.

The novel juxtaposes human bondages with sanyasa as the two different ways of attaining self-fulfilment. While Sumi seeks fulfilment through the human bondage, Gopal tries to it through sanyasa. Forging and maintaining human relationships are certainly more difficult than becoming a sanyasi. Gopal also realises that human beings are not free but time’s captives. He admits: “Only the creator is free; only the creator can be free because he is out of it all. I (Gopal) didn’t know it then. I know it now.” (55) Shashi Deshpande seems to be in favour of human relationships which give fresh lease of life in the face of recurring crisis. Suvarna Shinde appreciates it in the following words:

This understanding between Gopal and Sumi makes their relationship a unique one in Deshpande’s fictional world. All the man-woman relationships in her novels are oppressive, strange, uncomfortable or silent. Sumi and Gopal stand out uniquely in spite of the fact that Gopal leaves them for something unattainable. (2001:132)

The novel also adds another dimension to Conjugal relationship—the husband deserting the wife and children unilaterally. Sumi-Gopal relationship collapses and goes through crisis that devastates the whole family and ends in death. Their relationship is a serious comment on marriage than the earlier novels which work primarily through a psychological base. It leads to a reconfiguration of relationships and a reworking of emotional responses. Aru, the elder daughter who has gathered a very negative impression of marriage, declares: “I’m never going to get married.” (76) Besides, A Matter of Time is the first novel of Shashi Deshpande in which she makes an effort to highlight a male protagonist. According to Jasbir Jain “the Gopal-Sumi
relationship can be seen in direct contrast to the Manu-Saru relationship.” (2003:109)

The conjugal relationships of the previous generations presented in the novel are also marred by desertions. Manorama, Sumi’s maternal grandmother, was married to Vithal who was crazy for a son. Manorama, a typical product of the patriarchal value system had resented the birth of her daughter, Kalyani, as it made her feel insecure and she feared that Vithal might marry another woman for a male heir. Vithal had suddenly withdrawn from his family—it was a retreat from involvement—and Manorama’s life was spent in sexual starvation. She avenged herself on her daughter by fixing her marriage with her younger brother, Sripati, to keep the property in the family.

Kalyani and Sripati had a queer conjugal relationship. They were two unwilling partners forced to marry. Sripati deserted Kalyani to punish her for her carelessness when their only male child, four year old and mentally retarded Madhav, wandered away to be lost in the crowd at Bombay railway station when she was going to her parental home and waiting to board a train to Bangalore. The boy had disappeared when she was attending to the crying baby and Sripati had gone to check for reservations. Sripati had stopped speaking to her “since the day it happened—about thirty-five years ago.” (140). Madhav’s disappearance had the finality of his death and it distorted their conjugal relationship and upset their relationship even with their grandchildren. Sripati sent Kalyani back to her parents, along with the two remaining daughters. Kalyani resisted her husband by blocking all communication. Their conjugal life for 35 years was filled with an oppressive silence. According to Usha Bande, Sripati had neglected his duty to his wife:

Sripati blocks himself up against all communication because of frustration, anger and despair. For him nursing his suffering self is far more significant than caring for his wife. He forgets or rather does not wish to recognise that the grief of having lost the son is not alone, it is Kalyani’s as well. By severing all ties, even speech with her, he tortures her doubly. (2005: 195)

But in the end it is Sripati who is confined to an accursed loneliness, not Kalyani. She does suffer hurt of desertion and anguish of rejection, but she appears to Aru not as a victim but as a woman come out of all that victimization
intact. She exercises full control over the decisions on behalf of her daughters—Sumi and Premi.

*Small Remedies* focuses on the conjugal relationship of Madhu, a writer, and Som, a neurologist. Like Kalyani in *A Matter of Time*, Madhu has lost her son, Adit, and this has affected her conjugal relationship. But the problem in their relationship had cropped up earlier than the death of Adit when she, waking up after a nightmare one night, revealed to Som a secret which was locked up in the inner recess of her mind: that she had sex with Dalvi, her father’s young artist friend, when she was only fifteen. It had happened when Madhu believed her father to be dead and Dalvi tried to comfort her and assure her. Dalvi had later committed suicide: he had hanged himself because of what he had done to her. Som had been a good husband by any standard and shared a wonderful relationship with his wife. But he was unable to come to terms with that revelation of Madhu’s first sexual experience which for him was an act of betrayal because it was desired and consensual although it was performed in innocence and ignorance. Jasbir Jain is of the view that such a sexual act is neither lust nor betrayal but only an act of communication. To quote her:

> It is at this particular time that the love and warmth of a human being is able to provide sustenance. Human touch and belonging can pull someone out of despair, the sexual act is also a release of tension and a restoration of balance. In both cases, lust is absent; instead it is either an understanding that is extended or tender affection that is offered. The bodily act does not foreground the body and is in direct contrast to Som’s savage love making and Manu’s sadistic perversions. (2003:120-121)

Som who is totally devastated after the revelation wants Madhu to talk about her first sexual experience as something thrust on her, to condemn the act as rape and profess innocence. But Madhu to whom this episode with Dalvi was neither rape nor love, is unable to comprehend his attitude and oblige him. She refuses to surrender to his condescending attitude, his angry outbursts and his allegations of infidelity. This leads to breakdown of normal communication between them. He turns to savage love making for a while before withdrawing from the relationship. She says,
But it is the single act of sex that holds on to, it’s this fact he can’t let go of, as if it’s been welded into his palm. Purity, chastity, an intact hymen—these are the things Som is thinking of, these are the truths that matter. (262)

Jasbir Jain compares the situation with that in Nayantara Sahgal’s *The Day in Shadow*:

Her husband, Som, almost a carryover from Nayantara Sahgal’s *The Day in Shadow* looks upon her with suspicion regarding her premarital friendship with a man. The distrust arising out of this suspicion destroys their relationship. (2003:223)

Som is tormented by the thought of his wife’s sexuality. He traces his way through Madhu’s past and brings up all the names he is aware of, suspecting her of having had a relationship with each one of them—Venkat, Ketak’s brothers, her cousins, Hamidbhai’s nephews and even Tony who is her foster brother. He is possessed “by a madness that seems to have no end.” (257)

Madhu-Som estranged relationship affects their filial relationship and Adit begins to avoid them. The day Adit is killed in the bus blast, he had left home in disgust after a noisy scene between his parents. So Madhu lays the blame on the male ego that traumatised Adit and sent him away and holds Som responsible for his death. She voluntarily withdraws from Som, undertakes the task of writing Savitribai’s biography and lands in Bhawanipur to get away temporarily from her Bombay flat and her husband and to relieve herself not only from the agonizing memories of Adit’s death but also from the bitterness seeping into her conjugal life. Her writing is one of the small remedies to repair her hymen or restore her dead child to life.

Madhu-Som relationship is not a mature relationship based on love and trust but an immature one marred by suspicion and jealousy. Madhu, as a wife, is a liberated and self-aware woman, but her husband is not able to consciously resist cultural influences he has inherited pertaining to the pre-martial affair of his wife though he himself had a full-fledged relationship with another woman before his marriage. He considers it a male prerogative to have any number of affairs. But to him, a woman must be virgin before marriage. It is all the more indigestible to him that his wife had been a willing partner in her pre-marital sexual act. Madhu thinks “…that he could perhaps, have born: that I had been raped, forced into act; that I was a victim, not a
participant.”(260) He is not able to rise above the fear and insecurity created by the sheer possibility of any pre-marital relationship on the part of his wife. He is not ‘forgiving and forgetting’ like Vasant or Joe. Y. S. Sunita Reddy comments on the Indian mindset in this context: “Our society has been so conditioned as to categorize women as immoral on the slightest deviation on their part from the normal course of behaviour.”(2001:154)

Som, otherwise, always feels concerned for Madhu. Even during Madhu’s stay at Bhawanipur, he tries to reach out to her in several small ways. Finally it is Tony who tells Madhu to go back home, to be with Som. For Madhu, it is not only the loss of Adit but also the estrangement prior to his death and the manner in which he died alone and far from her. She wants to get into Adit’s mind, to know what he had experienced during his time away from home. She wants to share her agonies with him as her imaginary conversation with Adit shows:

What do I tell you, Adit? That I slept with a man when I was a girl, a child really, and your father can’t take it? That your father is tearing himself apart and me too, because of something that happened and only once-years ago?(258)

As she fights her own ghosts, she gets a letter from Som and realises that there is a great deal of sense in what Som has written: “Come home, we need to be together at this time.”(323) She admits that they need to be together as “Only in this is healing possible.”(323) Thus like other novels of Sashi Deshpande Small Remedies also ends with the retreat of the protagonist to her home and husband.

Besides Madhu-Som relationship, Small Remedies also gives indication of abnormal and unhappy conjugal relationship of the elders of the preceding generation-Madh’s father had a mistress and Munni’s mother, Savitribai Indorker, had left her husband and forged a live-in-relationship with Ghulam Sab to pursue her passion for song and music. Other conjugal relationships portrayed in the novel-Leela and Vasanth, Leela and Joe and Lata and Hari-stand in contrast to Madhu-Som relationship.

Madhu’s aunt, Leela, and Vasanth had a normal and mature conjugal relationship. Vasanth, unlike Som, is able to resist cultural influences pertaining to the pre-marital relationship of his wife and encourages and supports her for study. He had been unemployed for long and had been drinking to relieve himself of tension. He had died of T. B. Then Leela, committed to the
communist ideology as she was, lived in chawls and worked for the welfare of the women afflicted with T. B. This brought her in contact with Joe, a doctor especially for T. B. Patients and a widower with two children. Joe fell madly in love with her. They had an unusual marriage as Leela, a widow, married Joe, a Christian, offending her family. They belonged to different religions and spoke different languages but they forged a lovely conjugal relationship and wonderful companionship. They supported each other and they gave enough space to each other for both idealism and activism. Leela was fully supportive and loving in her role as a wife and surrogate mother.

Lata and Hari who happen to be Madhu’s host and hostess at Bhawanipur during her stay for interviewing Savitribai Indorker, have a unique conjugal relationship as both have freedom and yet belong together. Madhu, as she watches them, thinks of them as lovers:

I’ve realised I’m sharing the house, not with a married couple, but with a pair of lovers. The air between them, when they’re together, seem to crackle with excitement, their feelings hover thick and palpable, about them...I can hear their love in the way they speak, their laughter...in silence. (39-40)

Between them, there is hardly any fuss about food, there is no hierarchy and no inequality.

Moving On presents a variety of conjugal relationships of two generations. While the focus is on Manjari-Shyam relationship, those of Badri and Vasundhara, R. K and Gayatri, B. K and Kamala, Laxman and Mangal, Ratna and her husband and Raju and Rukku have been seen through the eyes of Manjari and juxtaposed with her own relationship with Shyam.

Manjari, an eighteen year old student of Medicine, abandons her studies to marry Shyam, a cinematographer against the wishes of their families. They had a happy conjugal life despite their family members being indifferent to them. Manjari reflects:

Happiness, which I’d got in measly little doses in the room when Shyam came home, when he was not too irritated, when he was not irritated by the voices beyond the wall-happiness now came in like the sea, huge bounding waves which swamped me.(262)
She came to know more about Shyam when they shifted to Ocean Vista, a house on the sea beach, after six months of their marriage. Once Shyam refused intimacy with her and says, “Leave me alone.” Manjari is hurt but she realises that there is some part in us that is always closed against others. She does the same to him when she was engrossed in Anand after becoming a mother. But such type of mutual understanding failed when Manjari found it very difficult to live in a dark and dirty room which Shyam could afford with his modest income. They quarrelled at night and their land lady announced in the morning, “I heard you quarrelling at night.” Anand’s crying all night irritated Shyam and he often said, “I need my sleep.” making it her fault. Manjari wanted good things for the baby but Shyam would not understand. He would not share his problems with her—that the films he expected to earn from were either abandoned or flopped and that he kept himself busy in some piece-meal work. Love and intimacy between them gradually disappeared as Manjari reflects:

Closed in one small room as we were, we seemed to be living on two different continents. In bed, we lay close, but without touching. It was like the game of pebbles, I’d played as a girl, a game in which, if two pebbles touched, you were out.

One night when Manjari insisted on doing something for ailing Anand, Shyam got angry and walked out of the room. In the morning Manjari went to her parents and did not come back even after Anand recovered. Shyam accepted it and they stopped quarrelling but their conjugal feud widened and things could never be the same again. Manjari reflects: “We stopped quarrelling after that, but there was a huge space between us. It was like I had gone back to being Baba and Mai’s daughter.” Manjari had further shock and regret in store when she learnt from Malu through Mai that Shyam had raped her and made her pregnant. Shyam wanted to explain to her but she did not listen as it was to be a traitor to Mai and Malu. After Malu’s death Gayatri advised her to keep Malu’s daughter and go back to Shyam. Mai too had agreed to it. But she had no contact with Shyam and she did not want to keep the baby as she would always remind her of Malu. She stayed in the same flat as she had nowhere else to go and it was here that she heard from Laxman the news of Shyam’s death by drowning in the sea. She was not sure whether it was an accident or a suicide but Shyam’s death devastated her. In losing him, she had become a woman without a partner. She reflects:
I had entered a dark airless tunnel after Shyam’s death, a space in which nothing could grow, nothing could survive...I had lost the innocence which makes it possible to face each day with hope. Time is the greatest healer, they say. But for me time was the enemy as well, taking me further and further away from Shyam, turning him into a memory, eventually making even the memories fade, so that I was finally left with nothing. (326)

She was 21 when Shyam died but she did not remarry though she had sex with her tenant to satisfy her physical needs. The hard lesson that she learnt from her conjugal relationship was that one should seek compromise and reconciliation rather than pressure and withdrawal for a smooth and working conjugal relationship lest one should regret it later:

I learnt the truth of it when I lost Shyam. I knew then the dangers that lie in wait for us, I learnt that our very feelings can turn into lethal weapons that can hurt and make us bleed, sometimes even fatally.(293)

Manjari’s parents-Badri and Vasundhara-also made an incompatible pair. Badri who had fallen in love with 18 year old Vasundhara, had pursued her and married her. As a young couple, they had a romantic relationship. He often brushed her cheeks gently saying “rose petals”(102) He called by her short name ‘Vasu’, waited for her reply and looked for her with much eagerness. Manjari recollects:

It was as if his courtship of her never ceased; he was always wooing her, always trying to please her, to proclaim his love for her. Of the two of them, he was the admirer, she the one who let him admire her; she was the one in control, he was the one who gave in to her wishes. (26)

A wooden plaque with “I am the master in my house and I have my wife’s permission to say so.” Was given as a joke to him by B. K. But Vasu had objected and the plaque was removed.

Badri loved Vasu passionately but she did not respond to his passion. He became suspicious and thought that she loved someone else or she found him repulsive. But it was not so. In fact, like him, she did not think that love meant physical passion. Her attitude is revealed later in her comment on
Manjari-Shyam love affair: “You’re just like your father.” (115) meaning that her love for Shyam was nothing more than physical passion. His physical passion for her remained unrequited; she gave him “a permanent place in the house, giving him his due as head of the family, as the bread winner.” (122) She valued above all her freedom—freedom to be herself, to be on her own. They had differences too but they yielded to each other out of love or persuasion. Once she did not want to go for their annual visit to Gayatri and R. K at Bangalore but after being persuaded by him she finally agreed and went along with him. He sided with her against Manjari’s marriage with Shyam because of his love for her and loyalty to her though he could not stop her.

But Badri-Vasu’s conjugal relationship crumbled after Manjari’s marriage as she could not accept her defeat and withdrew herself from the world and life. They drifted apart when they shifted from Bombay to Bangalore. Manjari reflects:

*Years later, when I came to be with Mai, when she was dying, I saw their two rooms, Baba’s and Mai’s, each with a single bed, both celibate, ascetic almost...I saw those two rooms and remembered their bed room in Bombay, their things making into a harmonious whole so that the room was Baba and Mai’s, the bed was Baba and Mai’s. In these two rooms I saw a reflection of the life they had led since coming here, I glimpsed the estrangement between them the room making a loud statement that love had ended. (103)*

They had stopped communicating as there was nothing left for them to say to each other. They had turned their backs on past as the only way to survive. But he could not be distant when she was terminally ill. Their physical separation seemed to have renewed their love. Her illness brought her closer to him. But, in fact, it was compassion rather than love. After R. K’s death, Gayatri wished to die and join him in the next world for his comforting presence; but it would not be the same for Badri and Vasu. Badri writes in his diary on 17-03-1997: “Vasu would never be a comforting presence for me. Our relationship was flawed.” (58) And his regret is similar to Manjari’s: “Vasu and I did not manage well. We could have done better; the regret remains.” (304)

Gayatri and R. K had a long lived conjugal life as they had got married when she was just 17. They had no children but their relationship was complete even without children. Theirs was an unusual companionship—the
way they communicated, without words or gestures or even any kind of eye contact-like there was telepathy between them. Badri calls their relationship “something more than the usual word ‘happy’” (11) Gayatri is devastated by R. K’s sudden and unexpected death but she manages to come out of it. She immersed his ashes in the Holy Ganges at Kashi and wept wildly when she returned to the hotel. But when she turns after a wash, she says, “I’ve left his body behind, now I can go back to him.” (58) She wished to go back to R. K in the realm of death because he would be a comforting presence to her. But so long as she lived after R. K’s death, she kept her connections with other human beings intact and alive. R. K continued to be a part of her life even after his death. Badri wrote in his diary; “Theirs was a companionship that could take in all the things, that happened to them, even death.” (202) Their conjugal life is juxtaposed to that of Kamala and B. K who were such different people that they shared nothing but a house and three children and their marriage seemed to work until it collapsed because of Hemi.

The conjugal life of Mangal, the daughter of a respectable doctor, and Laxman, a criminal is unhappy. Mangal eloped with Laxman and married him when her father filed a case against Laxman. But Laxman was very cruel to her. Once Mangal had run away from home to Vasu with “a huge bruise on one side of her face, a rent in her blouse, the sleeves almost completely torn off.” (174), the marks of violence Laxman had inflicted on her. When Laxman was shot dead in Bombay, outside his house, the rumour was afloat that Mangal in connivance with Laxman’s rivals who had become her lover, had hired the killers to kill Laxman. Likewise the conjugal relationship between Ratna and her husband is a relationship of dominance and submission. Ratna’s husband asserts her conjugal rights on her unwilling body. Ratna is tough. She resists and fights back but when it becomes too much for her, she often escapes to Manjari and requests her to allow her to sleep in her house to keep away from her husband. But in a few days she gathers herself and goes back home with a strong conviction that she would not give in to him. Manjari reflects on their relationship: “The eternal conflict between man and woman, the man asserting his rights, claiming his right to her body, the female denying him.” (276)

Shashi Deshpande’s *In the Country of Deceit* primarily deals with the predicament of a young spinster, Devayani Mudhol alias Devi, the protagonist, and her extra-marital relationship with Ashok Chinappa, but it also presents glimpses of the conjugal relationship of various couples associated
with Devi and seen through her eyes—her grandmother and grandfather; her parents; her uncle and aunt; her elder sister, Savitri and her doctor husband, Shree; her cook and maid servant, Kusuma and her husband; her student, Bhawani and her husband; her friend, Rani and her husband, K. N; K. N’s parents; K. N’s friend, Iqbal and his wife, Naseem; and Iqbal’s parents. As the novel happens to be the recent one dealing extensively with the human relationships, a brief discussion of the conjugal relationships presented in it is of utmost significance.

Devi’s grandfather, Krishna Bhatt, had an unhappy conjugal life because of his wife’s superior social status. She was the daughter of a well-to-do lawyer and a prominent political leader while he had started his career as a helper in a ‘Khanavali’ (cafe), completed his matriculation while doing his job and finally become a banker. It was not a marriage of choice but compulsion—he could not refuse her father who had helped him when he was studying. She was ashamed of his past. She never liked him to speak of the time when he had worked in ‘Khanawali’. She made his life hell but he never spoke a word against her. Devi notices a gap between them even in the family photograph taken just before the wedding of their elder daughter, Kamala. In the picture, they are sitting on straight-backed chairs side-by-side, but not touching. ‘The invisible thread that binds them as couple is missing. Each seems unaware of the other.’(104) Her posture in the photograph gave an impression that she was forcing herself to sit there and her mangalsutra, which should be properly displayed, is almost lost in the numerous strands of the chandrahaar. K. N’s mother calls their marriage a “terrible marriage”(162) but holds her grandfather responsible for it—he had driven his wife to madness by going to his mistress every single day. Perhaps his extra-marital affair had spoiled their conjugal life but Devi could not substantiate this reason as her mother had never spoken about it. However, his having extra-marital relationship shows that he, as a husband, was not a captive companion.

Devi’s parents, Vasant and Pushpa, had somehow a happy conjugal life. Vasant had always failed in whatever he did but Pushpa just called him ‘unfortunate’ or ‘unlucky’. “He was her hero, her Knight in shining armour, her Lochinvar, her Galahad, her Prithviraj Chauhan.”(61) She was obliged to him for marrying her despite knowing that she suffered from fits of epilepsy. Devi says: “In my mother’s eyes, my father could do no wrong.”(62) People thought that Vasant had married Pushpa because her father was a wealthy man.
But Vasant had told his sister, Sindhu, that Pusha had a sweet face and a sweet voice and when Sindhu conveyed it to Pushpa after Vasant’s death, her face glowed as if she had received a slice of Heaven. He had borrowed money from the money lenders for his daughter’s wedding even though there was enough money in his wife’s bank account to pay for the wedding. He was against spending his wife’s money to pay for his daughter’s wedding. And his wife went along with him as she could not let him be humiliated. But she asserted herself for the first time and got her jewellery remade for her daughter’s marriage. They argued about it and he was deeply unhappy, but she insisted. For the first time in their life together, there was a division between them. Later, he could not pay the money lenders and he and his family members had to suffer humiliation. He could not bear it for long. He became a lonely person and died within a year of Savi’s marriage. Pushpa sat by his dead body and cried, “I tried Sindhu, I tried my best, but I failed.”(115) But she seemed strangely more relaxed after his death. She had let go the burden of his unhappiness.

Devi’s aunt, Sindhu, had an easy and comfortable relationship with her husband, Keshav. When she married Keshav, it was her second marriage. Her first marriage was very brief; her husband was sick most of the time and he died. Keshav had fallen in love with her at first sight and he had no problem in marrying a widow. He had waited for her for seven years as his mother was opposed to his idea of marrying a widow. She had finally relented when she realised that if he did not marry Sindhu, he would remain unmarried. Keshav calls her not Sindhu but Sindhuri, Sindhura or many other variations. They are complementary to each other. Devi comments:

He’s easy going, slow, tolerant. She is flashing-quick quick to react, to respond, unwilling to compromise. And yet they are happy together. Very happy. They’re friends. They joke, they argue, they converse, they are silent together. (27-28)

When Sindhu’s breast cancer was diagnosed, Keshav wept like a child and before the surgery Sindhu made Devi promise that she would look after him if she died. They cannot live anywhere without each other.

Devi’s elder sister, Savitri alias Savi, had married Shree for love in the face of opposition from Shree’s mother. She did not like her mother-in-law and she interfered with his relationship with his parents. When Arjun falls ill, she forbids Shree to inform his parents and asked him to call Devi for
assistance. Shree gets disturbed but she did not mind. She did not accept Devi’s suggestion that she was playing into her mother-in-law’s hands when she antagonized Shree. Failing in filial duty affects Shree’s conjugal life.

Devi’s friend, Rani’s relationship with her husband, Kaiash Navilur alias ‘K. N’ was formal. Theirs was the second marriage. Their previous marriage had failed. Both had children from their previous marriage. They had come together for mutual convenience. She had married him for his wealth; he had married her for her beauty. Devi comments: “For her, an easy life with a wealthy man, a heaven after the turbulence of her earlier life. And for him, a beautiful wife, one more possession he could be proud of.”(158) K. N loved Rani generously and took proper care of her. He had no objection to her joining the film industry or meeting her daughter from her previous marriage. He gets concerned when Rani feels restless and worried about the revival of her career in the films. He requests Devi to support her and offers to finance the film for Rani despite knowing that the film had been her lover’s idea and she was working out his dream. He gave a new car as birthday gift to her. When she was injured in the car accident, he took her to the U S for treatment and change. He wanted to spend more time with her. But they had separate bedrooms. Like royalty, he visited her occasionally after giving her advance notice. They were polite with each other but never intimate. They conversed in English and it was quite formal. Devi comments when she sees them together in their room: “It was the first time, I was seeing them together...But even here, in private, there was something formal about the way they spoke to each other.(88) But K. N’s parents’ conjugal life was marred by betrayal and bitterness. When K. N’s father, a teacher in the National School, left his wife and children and ran away with a student, his betrayed wife burnt all his books.

Devi’s student, Bhawani holds her husband in high esteem. He is in politics-a low party worker. She wanted to learn English to help her husband’s career, to improve her own status and social life so that her children should not be ashamed of her. She was confident of her husband’s success and his rise to the position of a Minister and the Chief Minister. So she was preparing herself to talk to the journalists, to the TV people from Bangalore and Delhi who would come to interview her husband and, hopefully, her as well. But Devi’s maid, Kusuma had walked out on the first time her husband raised his hands against her. Her husband had a long time mistress-a woman old enough to be his mother. Kusuma called her “that fat and ugly whore.”(149)
Devi’s lawyer, Iqbal, was a demanding husband and Naseem, his submissive wife. Naseem was always busy with her children, husband and work-facing their questions and demands all the time. Iqbal wanted her to lie to his clients calling him and tell them he was not at home. She had done her law. She had hoped she would work with him. But she had her children and relatives to look after and could not spare time to do what she wanted to do. Iqbal neither knew nor cared for her ambitions. But Iqbal’s father was contrary to his son in this respect. When Iqbal’s mother had a stroke, his father abandoned all his ambitions to give his wife all his time. Else he would have been a District Judge.

A study of conjugal relationships in the Shashi Deshpande’s novels seems to shows the continuation of as well as departure from the traditional conjugal relationship in which the husband most often calls the shot and the wife has to survive in the face of frequent physical abuse, mental torture, endless drudgery and continuous lechery. A wife may be regarded as goddess Lakshmi but she is treated as a commodity. A woman, as a wife, becomes a captive companion as she, despite being modern, educated and employed, chooses to submit and endure-staying rather than leaving the oppressive patriarchal set up. According to Shalmalee Palekar,

“Do as you desire resolution of wife” happens...because it is never easy for woman in societies like India to break away from traditional notions of womanhood, especially as there is no widespread system of support available, such as woman’s support groups. The extended family is often the only support network women have, and there is very real fear of being completely isolated with no means of survival. (2005:64)

But, on the other hand, these novels have also deconstructed the myth of traditional conjugal relationship as most of protagonists as wives in conjugal relationship, showcase the woman’s qualities of strength, compassion, wisdom and harmony while their male counterparts or husbands are often feeble and laidback despite the fact that some of them are sexually aggressive and support mistresses.

Conjugal relationships presented in these novels may be categorized as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ but none of these is a perfect conjugal relationship. Jennifer Aniston once said, “Only fools believe perfect
relationships exist.” However a study of these relationships brings home the truth that almost all relationships are easy to forge but very difficult to sustain because love based on physical beauty and possession, and attraction based on the exhibition of the better sides gradually recede and bring in scorn and disenchantment posing a serious challenge to conjugal relationship. But qualities like maturity, companionship and mutual respect, frank and heart to heart communication, allowing one’s space and observing one’s limitations, etc. help the couple brave the challenges and keep the relationship working. Perfection can probably not be achieved in conjugal relationship but commitment for the most part of the marriage can certainly be worked upon if issues become clear and there is a common will to resolve it.

Shashi Deshpande’s novels, set in modern Indian context, point out that conjugal relationships need to be responsive to social changes taking place at a fast pace. Women of earlier generations were confined and limited in their role as wives. But one cannot have urbanization, education and women as persons and, at the same time, insist on the fixity of their age-old roles. Behind the projection of these conjugal relationships, Deshpande is for the basic unity between man and woman as human beings as she says in her “Telling Our Own Stories”:

My search has led me to the discovery that above all we are humans, that what we share as human is far greater than what divides us as being men and women. The thought that I have the same potential as any other human being has been the most liberating discovery of my life. (2003:100)

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