just about the family. It definitely does not limit my canvas. On the contrary, that is where everything begins. (Ibid)

C. D. Narsimhaiah is also of the view that family relationship is a theme on which epics after epics can be written.

III

LITERARY INHERITANCE AND CONTEMPORARY LITERARY SCENE

Shashi Deshpande, with a long chequered literary career, is a part of the long tradition of woman writing in India and abroad. According to Jasbir Jain, Shashi Deshpande, in some measures, has inherited a tradition that is varied and different even as we place it against women’s writing in India.

There are at least three different traditions she relates to, two which she acknowledges, and the third which she does not. She is vociferous in her acknowledgement of Jane Austen’s influence and refers to her on several different occasions. By doing this she acknowledges her affinity with a woman writer who turned to realism in age of romanticism. The tradition of the nineteenth century Women’s writing is acknowledged in many different ways as is her affiliation with women writers of the regional languages or other Indian languages. But she is silent about her predecessors.(2004:18)

Shashi Deshpande seems to be influenced by Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beavouir, Kate millet and Elaine Showalter in her attitude to women. She values the realism of the novels of Jane Austen and a host of women writer like Elizabeth Gaskell George Eliot, Margaret Drabble and Amy Tan, the writers who reject equally the polarities and unidimensional portrayal of women; who deconstruct both romantic and heroic images of women. Commenting on the formative influences of the Western women writers on Shashi Deshpande Sarabjit K Sandhu writes:

Shashi Deshpande is a widely read person, well acquainted with other literary mind, but does not wish to belong to any other group of
writers.... Nevertheless, to some extent, she has some influence of English writers like Margaret Drabble, Dorris Lessing, Erica Jong, Bronte Sisters, and Jane Austen. Writers like Simon de Beavouir, and Germaine Greer stimulated her writings and, at the same time, she enjoyed reading Dickins and Tolstoy. (1991:17)

Shashi Deshpande who, in her long literary career, has written spontaneously out of her own experiences and addressed many contemporary social and domestic issues through her prolific writing, denies any direct influence on her writing, but she acknowledges the lasting influence of Jane Austen and G. B. Shaw and endorses her debt to a good number of feminists such as Simon de Beavouir, Betty Frieden and Germaine Greer who cleared her confusion and gave her insight. She is unlike Jane Austen in painting the human spectacle- Jane Austen paints the comedy of human life whereas Shashi Deshpande depicts the serious, the painful, the agonising aspect of life verging on the tragic. But like Jane Austen, Shashi Deshpande’s range is narrow but intense. Like Jane Austen, she concentrates as if “on two inches ivory” but highlights only the agony, the suffering of higher middle class Indian families living in both urban and small town environments thickly populated with sprawling extended families.

Now the question naturally arises what kind of Indian tradition Shashi Deshpande inherited when she published her first collection of stories in 1978 and what tradition she carried forward in her successive works written over a period of four decades. The tradition of Indian women’s writing in English dates back to Toru Dutt’s (1856-1877) Bianca (1878). It is approximately, a hundred year old tradition. But Bianca represents by and large the European tradition, not the Indian one. So Jasbir Jain is in favour of those early novels which represent the Indian stream and according to her, among the early Indian women English novelists, Krupabai Sathianadhan’s (1862-1894) two novels deserve attention with reference to Shashi Deshpande as they focus on Indian issue of child marriage, women’s exclusion from both education and decision-making and religious conversion. In Saguna (1892), Saguna, a Brahmin, converts to Christianity. It is a story of family relationships and it describes women in domestic situations and the problem of their education. Her second novel Kamala (1894) explores a father-daughter relationship and comments upon social institutions like marriage and joint family. But the women’s writings since the 19th century have shifted from domesticity to
broader spaces from time to time and from culture to culture and women protagonists have moved out of confines of domesticity to public spaces in the 20th century.

Among the 20th century Indian Women English novelists who carried forward the tradition but mixed with it their individual talent and who happened to be the immediate predecessors of Shashi Deshpande, there are many reputed male and female writers as her contemporaries, and a proper study of the novels of Shashi Deshpande in respect of the depiction of human relationship is not possible without recognising the major thrust which her contemporaries provided to or exercised upon her works as in their works they portrayed human relationships which are markedly different from the portrayal of human relationships in the past. In fact, changes in the social, economic and cultural spheres have a profound impact on human relationships in the contemporary life and the works of these writers present them honestly and truthfully. Many of these writers have redefined human relationships in their seminal works of fiction. According to Suman Bala:

Indeed, man-woman relationship is one of the most significant themes of modern Indian fiction. The relationship is the dominant theme of the fiction of Shashi Deshpande. Both in her short stories and in her novels, she reflects a realistic picture of contemporary Indian women and her relationship with her husband. (2001:11)

Raj Rao’s novels also deal with a variety of human relationships. *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) deals with conjugal relationship, filial relationship and sibling relationship. Man-woman relationship is presented on spiritual plane. Madeline, the French catholic, marries Rama, the Hindu Brahmin, but she drifts away from Rama towards Buddhism. *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) is a sequel to *The Serpent and the Rope*. *Comrade Kirrilov* (1976) deals with the conjugal relationship of Padmanbham Iyer and Irne, his Czech wife. Padmanabham, as a Communist, adopts anti-Quit India stance but Irne could see his elemental love for India. She dies in childbirth leaving Kamal behind. K.R.S. Iyenger makes an important observation in this context:

As in *The Serpent and the Rope* in *Comrade Kirrilov* also Rao’s deeper intention seems to be to show that for an Indian ‘holy wedded love’ is impossible with a European wife, however unacceptable otherwise... (1987:739)


The Big Three remained undisturbed after four decade of pre-eminence and their frequent additions to the corpus of their creative works kept them relevant till the end of the 20th century. They have a marked influence on their succeeding Indian English novelists-male or female.

But Shashi Deshpande, being the author of over last four decades, owe her vision and craft to a host of successful contemporary Indian woman writers of fiction in English and a proper study of the novels of Shashi Deshpande cannot be possible without recognizing the influences of R. P. Jhabwala, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Shehgal, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shobha De, Geetha Hariharan, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Kiran Desai, Namita Gokhale, Chitra Banerjee Devikaruni, Gita Mehta, Manjula Padmanabham, Nisha Da Cunnha, Raji Narsimhan, Anjana Appachan, Suma
Fatehally, Anita Nair, Suniti Namjoshi, Kaveri Namvisan, Dina Mehta, Indira Ganeshan, Sunetra Gupta, Meena Alexander, Sauna Singh Baldwin, Sagarika Ghosh, and others who are closer to her in their themes and perspectives regarding women issues and human relationships. Each of these writers has her own special area of interest, concern for certain issues and deep conviction regarding certain ideas, but all of them present in their novels the urges, the dreams and the desires of the Indian women particularly those of the educated middle class women exposed to the present situations—the new women who go for marriage with the men they loved, get involved in extra-marital relationship if they want to, choose the career they like and divorce their husbands or seek divorce from them if needed; the women who are individuals with freedom of choices unable to cope with a husband who could not care for his wife or share with her.


Ruth Prawar Jhabwala (1927-.2013) was born to a Polish parent in Cologne, Germany but shifted to England in 1939 to escape Nazi Germany. She came to India in 1951 and married a Parsi architect, Cyrus Jhabwala. She lived in India till 1975 and gave an artistic expression of her experiences of life and society in this country. Her knowledge and awareness of the Indian character, the Indian family system, the Indian society and the Indian sensibility was so impressive that Khushwant Singh calls her “adopted daughter of India”. India continued to influence her writing even after she
moved to the USA in 1975. She herself says about it in the following words: “I cannot claim that India has disappeared out of –synonymously myself and my work; even when not overtly figuring there, its influence is always present.”(2001:77)

Her novels: To Whom She Will(1955), The Nature of Passion’1956), Esmond in India(1957), The House Holder(1960), Get Ready for Battle(1962), Like Birds Like Fishes(1962), A Backward Place(1965), An Experience of India(1968), A Stronger Climate(1968), A New Dominion(1972), Heat and Dust(1975), In Search of Love(1983) and Three Continents(1987) critically examine Indian society, especially middle class people, their custom, their behaviour, their morality as they tend to make profit from increasing urbanization and materialization and explore human relationship in the light of ideological conflict between men and women, husbands and wives, and parents and children in traditional Indian society. Her novels depict how Indians are perceived by the Western and vice-versa and explore various possibilities in inter-personal relationship in the context of cultural disparity. Her much admired novel Heat and Dust which brought her the Booker Award, and A New Dominion and Three Continents deal with man-woman relationship between lovers and husband and wife in pre-marital terms, extra-marital terms and even explores homosexuality and sexuality in human mind but exclude cross cultural relationships, romance between the Whites and the dark skinned.

Nayantara Sahgal (b.1927), a daughter of Mrs. Vijayalakshmi Pandit, is considered to be an exponent of the political novel but her fiction is also preoccupied with the unsatisfied women in high class society and modern Indian woman’s search for sexual freedom and self-realization in the male dominate Indian society. Her novels: A Time to be Happy (1957), This Time of Morning(1965), Storm in Chandigarh (1969), The Day in Shadow(1971), A Situation Delhi (1977), The Rich Like Us (1985) which won her the Shitya Akademi Award in 1986, Plans for Departure (1985) and Mistaken Identity(1988) show politics as her main concern but she never loses sight of woman’s sufferings and to that extent her novels take up the theme of emergence of the new woman who are aware of their emotional needs and creative urges, the reflection of which we see in the protagonists of Shashi Deshpande.

But the real breakthrough in the portrayal of human nature and the depiction of the sufferings of women came with Anita Desai(b.1937) who, according to Neeru Tandon, is concerned with the
exploration and delineation of psyche, with examination and presentation of inner being of people, and not with the external life of systematic thinking, coherent speaking and intelligible actions based on the principles of causality. She is a psychological novelist in thought, content and technique and is often called ‘the Virginia Woolf’ of Indian English Fiction. Her novels: *Cry the Peacock*(1968), *Fire in the Mountain* (1977) which won her the Sahitya Akademi Award, *Clear Light of the Day* (1980), *In Custody*(1984), *Baumgartner’s Bombay*(1988) came like a breath of fresh air in the world of Indian writing in English dominated at the time by the themes of East-West encounter. She moved away from India in 1990s but she, like most diasporic writers, continued to write about India. Her *Fasting and Feasting* (1999), is a typical diasporic work but her latest work *The Artist of Disappearance* (2011) is a collection of three novellas: *The Museum of Final Journeys, Translator Translation* and *The Artist of Disappearance* which deals with Ravi’s relationship with an English woman and his servant Bhola. Her novels explore the travails and agonies of women trapped in the domestic walls of family life and alienated from the general stream of life. The new trail which Anita Desai blazed was lapped up by other writers in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s and the trend consolidated as, inspired by experiment in psychological novel, they took up the issues which were previously ignored and remained unexplored and unexploited eg. deprivation, loneliness, discontent and exposure to the world of patriarchy. M. K. Naik makes an important observation in this context when he comments on Anita Desai’s heroines: “Her heroines in particular deserve mention as they are able to protest and express their pent up emotion in terms of monologues or symbols.”(1982:242) Neeru Tondon also takes note of Anita Desai’s influence on Shashi Deshpande as a novelist and says,

Memory plays a significant role in her novels. The narrative keeps on moving back and forth in time. The non-linear arrangement in her novels gives them the integrative structure they have. The novelist also uses some devices of stream of consciousness, flash back, light of memory, interior monologue and so on to probe into the psyche of her character. (2009:11)

She deals with the inner working of the minds of her protagonists; their hidden and silent thoughts rather than their appearances. However, Shashi Deshpande also differed from Anita Desai. According to Vimala Rao: “Shashi Deshpande does not like Desai’s vision of
India which is “a foreigner’s” and finds most of her novels lacking in the “density of human relationships” which Deshpande values so highly.” (1997:133)

Besides, in Anita Desai’s novels, the places/cities like Calcutta, Delhi and Bombay create an ambiance and pressure of their own. But in Shashi Deshpande’s novels places are often left vogue as she concentrates more intensely on families and relationships, on the collapse of communication as the male ego becomes more and more self-absorbed and focuses on worldly success.

Indian Women English novelists like Bharati Mukherjee, Gita Mehta, Githa Hariharan, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai appeared on the literary horizon in the 1980s and 1990s. The last two decades of the 20th Century provided an enormous quantity of Indian novels in English and many writers won national and international prizes and awards for their works resulting in increased recognition from discerning readers and critics and celebrated publishing houses such as Faber & Faber, Random House, Picador, Chatto & Windus, OUP, CUP and others coming forward to publish them. There came a marked improvement in terms of trends and techniques in Indian English novels of the 21st century. Among the host of Indian Women English Novelists, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Bharati Mukherjee are taken as triad.

Bharati Mukherjee (b.1940) who moved to the USA in 1961 after obtaining her M.A. from Calcutta University is chiefly concerned with the problems of immigrants, identity crisis, conflict between two cultures and racial discrimination but her overall concern is for the women who always feel alienated and marginalized whether at home, in country or abroad. As India and Indian immigrants to the West always form the background of her novels, her works are often categorized as Indian American Literature. She wrote The Tiger’s Daughter (1972), Wife (1975), Jasmine (1989), The Holder of the World (1993), Leave It to Me (1997), Desirable Daughters (2002) and The Tree Bride (2004) in which she depicts women and their different relationships in traditional Indian society in grip of patriarchy as well as in modern foreign societies which seek to liberate and empower women. She highlights their struggle to establish their own world and live there as autonomous human beings resisting all forms of their marginalization. Her protagonists show patience, courage, and indomitable spirit to face life as it is and move on to
make the best of it. Sometimes they make painful adjustment and compromise to come to terms with the situation. Her works are explorations of woman’s journey from traditional social order to liberal and open socio-cultural set ups in their quest for self and self-fulfilment. Her works are quite relevant to the situation in contemporary India in which the increasing number of women entering various professions, women’s migration has also increased and the plight of the Indian women migrants has become the central point of interest. P. Krishnanunni writes about the relevance of Bharati Mukherjee’s works in the following words:

Perhaps there is not a single field of literature where these writings do not have a claim. Both from the post-colonial perspective and the critical stand of the feminist scholarship, Bharati’s writings have a special relevance of their own as they situate ideas and contexts of the characters and experience of most of them in a diversified field of interpretation.((2010:269)

Shobha De (b.1948), a journalist turned novelist in the 1980s, portrays the life of the socialites in the metropolis and exposes the moral breakdown of the high class society in which helpless and forsaken women long for pleasure and want to fly freely in the sky of freedom. Her novels: Socialite Evenings (1988), Starry Nights (1991), Strange Obsession (1992), Sisters (1992), Shultery Days (1994), Snapshots (1995), Second Thoughts (1996), and others read like the picaresque novels, the picaro being a woman who, being avid of experiences, goes from place to place seeking fulfilment. Her women protagonists are new Indian women eager to defy the well-entrenched moral orthodoxy of patriarchal social system and her male characters, variably portrayed as seducer, exploiter, wife-beater, rapist, torturer, or a cruel and callous husband, serve the dictates of feminist ideology. Man-woman relationship presented in her novels is almost hollow, ineffectual and compromising and it completely shatters the complementary man-woman image of traditional novels. The new concept of marriage in her novels envisages complete sexual freedom with no notion of fidelity which brings in frequent extra-marital relationships. She has dealt extensively with lesbianism in Starry Nights and Strange Obsession.

Geetha Hariharan who is originally from Mumbai but based in Delhi is a serious writer working for the solution of women’s problems but like Shashi Deshpande she does not like to be labelled a ‘feminist’. Her

Arundhati Roy whose Booker Prize winning novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) won recognition for Indian English Fiction and created a storm in the world of writing in the fag end of the 20th century, contextualizes the women problems in a multi-cultural and multi-religious dimensions. Deeply rooted in the cultural ethos of South India, the novel presents love affairs, marriages, divorces, the questionable Christian morals, hints of incest, wild passions, the dying feudalism, the Marxist movement and the Civil Disobedience Movement, advocates a woman’s birth right to love the man of her choice and opposes its scuttling in the name of religion, caste, colour and class.

Manju Kapur (b.1948) whose debut novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998) received huge international acclaim and got nomination for the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize for the best First Book in Eurasia Region in 2000 deals with the Indian middle class life which always faces a tension between tradition and modernity. Her three successive novels: *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006), and *The Immigrant* (2008) present educated and enlightened middle class women as protagonists who struggle against all odds and tackle real issues in daily life seeking a better deal for themselves. The stories in her novels are narrated mainly from the daughter’s perspective and the mother-daughter relationship is often and at once intensely ambivalent, redemptive and painful. However, her latest novel *Custody* (2011) has a man named Raman as the protagonist and deals with myriad urban issues like infidelity, remarriage, infertility and the battle for custody, and complex relationships.

Kiran Desai (b.1971), the youngest child of Anita Desai, who left for England at the age of 14 when her mother got a job there and now lives in Park Slope Brooklyn, did not follow her mother’s depiction of inner psyche, intuition and dynamics of relationships at least in her debut novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) which is a light ironical novel mocking the common illogical ways of India. But her next novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) which won for her the prestigious Man Booker Prize,
2006, is about people who have been travelling between East and West for several generations. Set against the backdrop of political insurgency in Gorakhaland, it tells the story of an embittered judge living near Kanchenjunga whose life is transformed by the arrival of his orphaned grand-daughter and seeks to explore colonial neurosis, multiculturalism, modernity, immigrants’ bitter experiences, gender-bias, racial discrimination, changing human relations and impact of globalization.

Namita Gokhale, a celebrated author and Founder Director of the Jaipur Literary Festival and the Director of Yatra Books, is not even a B. A. but she is often addressed as Dr. Namita Gokhale because of her literary contribution. Her novels: Paro: Dreams of Passion (1984), Gods, Graves and Grandmother (1994), Himalayan Love Story (1996), The Book of Shadows (1998) and Shakuntala (2005) present the predicament of middle class educated women who are cheated and exploited in the name of love and suffer acid attack by spurned lovers, who face divorce owing to extra-marital relationship and become insane owing to patriarchal oppression but refuses to be consumed by the monstrous schematization of the male dominated institution.


Uma Vasudeva’s Shreya of Sonagarh depicts a woman’s efforts to seek love outside marriage and her struggle to strike a balance between her family and her love affair and her Song of Anusuya probe deeply into man-woman relationship and emphasises the importance of sex in a relationship as it results into some supreme physical moments in a secure personal relationship. Gita Mehta’s Karma Cola (1979) presents East-West Encounter in a different perspective-East-West Encounter is a joke as the visitors from the West in quest of instant ‘nirvana’ (deliverance) seek out Indian ‘gurus’ who are unable to control their own bodies but claim to control others’ and the transactions between the Indian ‘gurus’ and foreign disciples thrive on mutual incomprehension. Her another novel Raj (1989) is about the transfiguring
experience of her protagonist in post-colonial India and *River Sutra* (1983) depicts contemporary India in the image of a river—the river of life in which flows the essence of truth. Manjula Padmanabham’s *Hot Death Cold Soup* (1996), a collection of short stories, breaks with the continuities of women’s fiction as her female characters with careers, who are also often single mom and even women who choose to be single as widows/spinster, fiancées and refuse to marry—are marked with defiance of convention. The female protagonists in the stories successfully negotiate with the male world, including the family—a widow feels delighted at the death of her husband and an older and aggressive woman frightens and humiliates the adolescent eve-teaser by deliberately touching the curving ridge under the zip of his jeans and makes him empty out. Padmanabham’s short stories present modest triumphs for the small, the poor, the weak, the non-conformist-among whom are women victims-against family, wealth, custom, traditions, constitutions, etc.

Some other notable Indian Women Novelists in English, who have made their marks during the last two decades of the 20th century and their important works are Indira Ganeshan’s *The Journey* (1990) and *An Inheritance* (1997), Sunetra Gupta’s *Memories of Rain* (1992) which won her Sahitya Akademi Award in 1996, *Glassblowers Breath, Moonlight in Marziphan, and A Scene of Colour*, Meena Alexander’s *Nampalli’ a House*, and *Manhattan Music*, Shauna Singh Baldwin’s *What the Body Remembers* and Sagarika Ghosh’s *Gin Drinkers*. Many other contemporary novelists like Nisha Da Cunha, Raji Narsimham, Anjana Appachan, Shama Futehally, Anita Nair, Suniti Namjoshi, Kaveri Namvisan, Dina Mehta, have also contributed significantly to the modern Indian English fiction and enriched it in terms of themes and techniques. Some other women writers like Rani Dharkar, Radhika Jha, Jayshree Mishra, Lakshmi Kanan and Sunny Singh are quite important but they have not moved beyond their first novel and produced novels consistently. According to Veena Singh:

These women writers of the post-colonial India portray life in all its depth and complexity in their novels....The novelists show a deep insight into human nature and at the same time they catch the epiphanies of life in their work. They view life with a keen perception, sharp sensibility, an acute sense of observation and a fine sensitivity. Their achievement is recognized not only in India but in the world. (2003:1174)
Among the Indian women novelists in English, it may be noted, there is no sharp difference between the old novelists and the new ones. In fact, Many important senior novelists like Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal produced some of their best works in the 1980s and Kamala Markandaya and R. P. Jhabwala moved to UK and USA and disappeared from the Indian literary scene but they continued to write novels in the 1980s.

As a writer Shashi Deshpande has been immensely influenced by the social milieu and literary scene of the country and she admits their contribution to her development as a creative writer and her emergence as one of the mainstream women writers in India today and her works are comparable to those of the established writers like Anita Desai and others in matters of sensitive but realistic representations of human relationships operating in modern Indian context. She values in her novels “destiny in human relations” very highly and shows that the web of human relationships stays intact while things change from generation to generation.(1997:133) The thematic complexity of relationship, between personal and social, private and public female lives and selves, serves as the energising, directing engine of much of her works and among the Indian women writers in English she stands up as an individual writer in her own right, writing predominantly about Indian women as they undergo major life changes.