Chapter Two

Women in Trap

We talk of revolution — political and economic and yet the greatest revolution in a country is one that effects improvement in the status and living conditions of its women.

- Jawaharlal Nehru

Feminism has its origin in the history of women’s oppression all over the world. From the time of Adam and Eve it is clear that men’s superiority over women is an age old concept. Adam is presented as the master as he names Eve, as and how he names all the beasts and animals.

The Koran also emphasizes the superiority of men over women, supporting the cause of the warring males in society. Judaism declared women as “unclear from a religious point of view, and she was non-entity from a political point of view” (Kidwai 4). The Buddhists regard the company of woman as an obstacle in the development of man. The secondary position of women also finds magnification in the numerical symbolism of Pythagoras. He maintains that number one stands for God, head and maleness, whereas number two represents femaleness.

It is an irony that women of the so-called developed countries are the worst victims of male tyranny. They are assigned an inferior place as far as culture and religion are concerned. With the introduction of education, woman has come to know more about her roles and values in society. She does not
want to lead a passive life which consists of such banalities as getting married, giving birth to children, involving in household work etc. A woman is seen in terms of the male oriented world—a world which identifies her by the male counterpart, as one who is gentle, dependent, submissive and passive.

The inferior status of women is established right from her birth. The birth of a girl child is annoying as she is considered to be an economic burden. The relationship between man and woman is very similar to that of master and his slave. Woman is used as an object and she is essential to man for his pleasure and family need.

The early Indian epics portray only good wives like Sita and Savitri and they are always chaste, virtuous and faithful. Uma Chakravarthi observes, “For both men and women in Hindu society the ideal woman has been traditionally personified by Sita who is portrayed in the Ramayana as the quintessence of wifely devotion” (7).

The Hindu religious scriptures and myths have created a paradoxical position for women. Though they revere woman as a goddess to be worshipped, in reality, woman is treated only as object of sexual gratification and man’s possession which he can use to perpetuate his name by producing his offsprings:

Man provides the seed, the essence for the creation of the offspring, the seed determines the kind; the child’s identity is derived from the father for the group placement. The role of the
mother is just to receive the seed and through her own blood
provide warmth and nourishment and help it grow. (Desai 24)

Though the Indian constitution (Article 15) provides for the equality of the
sexes, by and large the Indian society is male dominated and women are given
secondary status, and they face exploitation, subjugation and subordination.

Now-a-days literary authors lift up women to the height of liberated
womanhood, but in reality, they are not given equal importance as men.
Though they have a greater share in social responsibilities and they have
infinite number of opportunities open before them, the general notion about
woman is that she is a shadow figure to a male caretaker, be, he a father, a
husband or a son. The situation calls for a connected attempt to demolish such
notions and to affirm the dignity of women in the family as well as in the wide
social life. Anita Desai herself asserts in her Indian Women Writers: The Eye
of the Beholder:

“Literature cannot be torn away from the fabric of life as though
it were decoration or an excrescence — it is woven into it,
inextricably. Virginia Woolf said of the working classes:
‘Genius is not born of labouring, uneducated, servile people’s
and that is all women have been in Asia for a very long time’.

(56)

Socialization plays an important role in the construction of gender and bears
the link between social values and the paradigms of male domination. It has
vast influence conditioning not only a girl’s but also a boy’s psyche since its
influence begins early in childhood. The growth of a girl in the Indian society is seen mainly in relation to the attitude towards her family and her duty towards it.

For a girl-child, socialization begins early enough within the family. There is a strict list of dos and don’ts in matters of conduct and behaviour that circumscribe the girl children in the family. Girls are tutored in their thought that they have to put other’s needs before theirs. They are taught to consider their preferences last. This is to prepare them to fit in their marital home. The fact that they do not belong to their natural home is drilled into their mental make-up very early in life. The general attitude is that even education is a waste for a girl.

Deshpande’s novels are mostly concerned with the suppression of middle class women. They are made to suffer due to the traditional, social customs and different imposed roles in the family. There is an effort to understand the inner dimensions of the female characters and to study their place in a society overridden by androcentric norms.

Deshpande does not merely stop with a superficial portrayal of the oppressive cloistered world of women — a world divided from the world of men, a pre-colonial feature. Similarly, she does not simply document female resistance to patriarchal society. On the other hand, she focuses on the readjustments and choices that her female protagonists make on coming face to face with reality.
In *Roots and Shadows*, Deshpande portrays a series of girl-children, where each girl faces a different problem within the family circle. Mini inculcates in her all the traditional feminine qualities since her childhood. Devoid of any aim in her life, she devotes herself to the cause of her family members. Her obedience, silence and submission never allow her to go beyond the rules and regulations set by the family for girls. Brought up under strict supervision, guidance and restrictions, she becomes acquainted with the expected duties of a girl at a very early age.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru thinks of her childhood which has only scars. She is treated as an extra baggage, an unwanted member in the family and so Saru has no love for her family. Her hatred towards her mother deepens as her mother treats her with a step-motherly attitude preferring her brother, Dhruva, for the simple reason that she is a girl. In the Indian tradition, a male child is preferred to a girl child and Saru’s mother quite often says that Dhruva is different as he is a boy. These words make Saru safeguard herself all her life against her tradition bound Indian mother and in anger tells her mother: “If you are a woman, I don’t want to be one” (*TDHNT* 63).

Parental love is denied to Saru at the cost of her brother. Dhruva, being the male child of the family, is the centre of attraction in the family. His birthday is celebrated pompously as he is the one to perform the rituals for his parents and take the generation further. As Sarbjit Sandhu aptly remarks:

The mother is very attached to her son. Her attitude is a typical one-after all, he is male child and therefore one who will
propagate the family lineage. In another sense, also, the male child is considered more important than a girl, because he is qualified to give ‘agni’ to his dead parents. The soul of the dead person would otherwise wander in fervent. (19-20)

Though Saru is the first born in the family, she has to sacrifice her desires for the sake of her brother, Dhruva.

Saru, as a growing child, feels unwanted, unloved and insecure. Her aspirations for love and security remain unfulfilled. Her mother’s hatred towards Saru becomes double-folded on her brother’s death. Her mother blames her for Dhruva’s death though it was only accidental and Saru can never make her mother understand the fact. The mother sees Saru only as a burden to be eased, a problem to be solved, a responsibility to be dispensed with and a person who has no right to pick up any choice in life.

The family as well as the society seems to give same importance and care to the female children of their family only because of the males who want to have fair-complexioned persons as their partners. Saru expresses this kind of care which is given to her in an unpleasant manner:

*Don’t go out in the sun. You’ll get even darker.*

*Who cares?*

*We have to care if you don’t. We have to get you married.*

*I don’t want to get married.*

*Will you live with us all your life?*

*Why not?*
Gender discrimination is a prominent issue in Deshpande. Nalinabh Tripathi, commenting on the gender issue in Deshpande’s works writes:

The male-female polarity is kept up and a merger is not encouraged. Saru is a study in conflict. She goes out to deconstruct the socially imposed gender roles framed by the patriarchal society but she comes back in to reconstruct her intuitive role(s). (45)

The same discrimination is pictured by Deshpande in her novel *That Long Silence* also. In the case of Jaya, it is evident in her mother’s attitude towards her and her brother Dinker. Her mother is much interested in the welfare of Dinkar but Jaya is not at all cared for by her mother and she remarks ironically about her mother’s special care of her son, “Dada was Ai’s son” (*TLS* 41).

Even the very conduct of a girl is conditioned by the family from her early childhood. Jaya is chided by her grandmother for her curiosity. Some oft-repeated phrases for the ‘would be wives’ reveal how women are viewed in a society controlled by men and traditional women. Jaya often hears the words, “a husband is like a sheltering tree” (*TLS* 137), and, “The happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you” (*TLS* 138). Thus the suppressed feelings, aspirations and agonies of Jaya make her break the silence in future.
Both Jaya in *That Long Silence* and Madhu in *Small Remedies* feel secure in the hands of their fathers during their childhood. The love and affection they receive from them provides them a secure childhood.

Deshpande exhibits a very poor mother-daughter relationship. The Indian mothers treat their daughters as if they are highly vulnerable creatures. They need be handed over to another family before something untoward happens. The mother sounds quite strict while talking to her own daughter. Saru hates to talk face to face with her mother. When her mother questions her on her late arrival, she is not interested to answer her: “I felt full of sullen hatred I could not find words to express adequately. I kept silent and that enraged her even more”. Her mother taunts her: “Can’t you talk? Am I so much below your notice? You can talk to your friends for hours, but you can’t speak a sentence to your mother. What am I? An enemy?” (*TDHNT* 170).

The traditional outlook of the mothers is primarily responsible for the misunderstanding between the mother and the daughter. Saru’s mother being traditional cannot imagine her daughter being indifferent towards her. Education, according to her, is a meaningless luxury to a daughter. She attempts to stop Saru from studies. Ignoring the presence of her mother, Saru discloses her desire to study to her father:

‘You mean you want to become a doctor?’

I did not reply. I would not answer her. I stared at Baba instead, waiting for him to say something.
‘Baba’, I said louder this time. ‘I said I want to go in for medicine.’

‘Where is the college?’

Again I ignored her and spoke to him. (TDHNT 141)

Mother-daughter relationship remains a major issue for Deshpande. Her mother characters differentiate themselves from their own children, even though they have equally suffered and taken equal pains both for boys and girls. Saru does not regret showing an unkind face to her mother because of her harsh attitude towards her. Her rejection is explicitly revealed when she is slapped by her mother, as she says “yesterday night I dreamt you died. I saw your body burning” (TDHNT 143).

Saru experiences strange sensation in her adolescence, unaware of what is happening to her. She is not willing to share her personal affairs with her mother. Observing her mother’s womanhood, she hates to step into womanhood. The way her mother conducts herself in the house and the surroundings puts her to shame and she resents being a woman. She recalls the day of her puberty:

I can remember closing my eyes praying. . . Oh god, let it not happen to me. Just this once and no more and let me be the one female to whom it does not happen. But there were no miracles. It was torture. Not just the three days when I couldn’t enter the kitchen or the puja room. Not just the sleeping on a straw mat covered with a thin sheet. Not just the feelings of being a
periah, with my special cup and plate by my side in which I was
served from a distance, for my touch was, it seemed, pollution.
No, it was something quite different, much worse. A kind of
shame that engulfed me, making me want to rage, to scream
against the fact that put me in the same class as my mother.

(TDHNT 62)

Saru’s mother advises her how to behave from that day onwards. The free bird
is trapped in a cage. Saru feels ashamed even of the look of her own mother.
Her mother warns her:

‘You should be careful now about how you behave. Don’t come
out in your petticoat like that. Not even when it’s only your
father who’s around.

And it became something shameful, this growing up, so that
you had to be ashamed of yourself, even in the presence of your
father’. (TDHNT 62)

No mother can dislike her own daughter with such fervour, but Saru’s mother
is an exception, that Saru says “I will pray for her unhappiness. Let her know
more sorrow than she has given me” (TDHNT 197). Saru is surprised to know
that her mother died peacefully in spite of having caused her so much pain.

Indu, the female protagonist in Roots and Shadows has an estranged
relationship with Akka. Like Mini, Indu too, as a child, is advised by the
elderly women to inculcate in her the cherished feminine qualities as it is the
only way of service in male dominated families. Indu however has her own
dreams and promises herself not to become their replica. She replies:

As a child, they had told me I must be obedient and
unquestioning. As a girl, they had told me I must be meek and
submissive. Why? I had asked. Because you are a female. You
must accept everything, even defeat, with grace because you are
a girl, they had said. It is the only way, they said, for a female to
live and survive. And I . . . I had watched them and found it to
be true. There had to be, if not the substance, at least the
shadow of submission. But still, I had laughed at them, and
sworn I would never pretend to be what I was not. (RS 158)

Indu also bitterly recollects how rudely the ideas of her womanhood were
thrust upon her. Naren’s question as to why she always fought for her
womanhood makes her think in retrospection about the day when she was first
made aware of it:

My womanhood . . . I had never thought of it until the
knowledge had been thrust brutally, gracelessly on me the day I
had grownup.

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

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

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

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

As Indu’s mother belonged to a caste which was not appreciated by her father’s family, her father Govind had developed revulsion and resentment towards them. After the death of her mother, Indu is shocked to see the rigidness in her father’s attitude as he is unconcerned about his family duties.

She gauges her father as a callous person:

How else could he have parted leaving me, a fifteen-day-old motherless baby, with the family he hated and despised? He had not even come to see me until I was more than a year old. But that, perhaps, was because I was a girl. If I had been a son. . . .

(RS 163)

Indu resents her womanhood as she is made conscious of her femininity by the elderly women of her family. The onset of puberty perplexes her and makes her conscious of her own body. Indu too, accepts life as a curse without a husband but she does not believe in the superstitious rituals supposed to save oneself from the widowhood. She is always accused of questioning the established norms and for being cleverer and more educated than her predecessors. She points out: “It had always been thrown at me like an
accusation. As if it was a disgrace to be clever. I had sobbed out my hurt to Old Uncle one day. And he had said, ‘For a woman, intelligence is always a burden, Indu. We like our women not to think’” (RS 33).

The attitude of Jaya’s mother to her daughter is in no way different from that of Saru’s mother to her daughter. She confronts her mother in verbal attacks, “‘I hate you’, I had raged, ‘I hate all of you, I know you all hate me, I know you wish I was dead, I know . . .’” (TLS 82). When Jaya is mentally upset, she develops an inner drive to hurt her mother by total rejection to avenge her mother’s rejection of her, for her son.

During her childhood, Jaya is taught to assist the elderly women of the family in the household chores. She is forced to engage herself in the domestic works which are specially assigned to the woman folk, as if she has been born and brought up for that sole purpose only. Such kind of enforcement from her mother and other elderly women in the family makes Jaya alienate herself from other women of the family. The approach of Jaya’s mother with her preaching of how to behave as a girl child drives her to find shelter and comfort in the company of her father. She feels depressed whenever the question of her untimely return home is raised.

Deshpande is of the view that economic deprivation and physical tortures are the instruments used to curb the spontaneous growth of women. In Indu’s ancestral home, the partition between the male and the female worlds is always very sharp. Women are not allowed to join family discussions, not even Akka in her heydays. However, Indu just thrusts upon others when there
is a discussion how the big house is to be maintained and, how Akka’s money, which is left to her is to be distributed. Although Indu is an educated, successful journalist, it is not without opposition that she is admitted to participate in family discussion. To her family, Indu is just a woman and she has no right to inherit either money or property because she is a married woman. To the uneducated womenfolk, Indu is a childless woman, no matter, how educated she is and how successful she is in her profession. Women, like Kaki and Akka, spend their lives slaving for others without expecting even a word of appreciation. By contrast, the men in the household lead indolent lives and are waited upon by the women.

Mini, another suppressed woman in *Roots and Shadows*, never enjoys any rights of her own. She inculcates all the traditional feminine qualities since her childhood. Devoid of any aim in her life, Mini devotes herself entirely to her family members. Her obedience, silence and submission never allow her to go beyond the rules and regulations set by the family for girls. Brought up under strict supervision, guidance and restrictions, she becomes acquainted with the routine duties of a girl at a very early age. Indu, her cousin, recalls Mini as a child: “Mini had always been very much of a girl the way a girl was expected to be, helping the women with small odd chores from a very young age, waiting on her father and brothers and being generally docile. Our worlds had rarely touched” (*RS* 122).

Indu contemplates on the existence of inner strength in the women of her family who have spent their whole life slavishly without a word of
appreciation for their services. While following their footsteps, Mini too accepts that the life of a girl is devoid of ‘choices’. Indu could gauge the reason behind Mini’s submission before her parents’ decision of getting her married to a man who is neither properly educated nor mentally sound. Indu states:

A women’s life, they had told me, contained no choices. And all my life, specially in this house, I had seen the truth of this. The woman had no choice but to submit, to accept. And I had often wondered...have they been born without wills, or have their wills atrophied through a lifetime of disuse? And yet Mini, who had had no choice either, had accepted the reality, the finality, with a grace and composure that spoke eloquently of that inner strength. (RS 6)

As Mini’s father, Anant faces a financial crisis with no job in his hands, his family depends on the cultivation of the land they possess. Anant is aware that with his weak financial position, he will not be able to get his daughter married. Finally, he agrees to marry off Mini to a distant relative of Akka, as she promises to pay for Mini’s wedding. In India, a girl’s marriage is consummated only after satiating the demands of the groom and his parents. Vrinda Nabar, in *Caste as Woman*, writes about the dowry system of India:

The bride’s father gives according to his means, frequently out of proportion to them, borrowing if necessary, since he believes that his daughter’s prestige and happiness are at stake.
Ironically, no one who is party to such a transaction appears to wonder what happiness measured in these terms implies, or whether it exists at all, or is worth acquiring at that price. (160)

Anant imposes the proposal as it is easy for him. Mini’s lackadaisical face makes Indu understand that she has found the match incongruous. However in order to save her father from further complexities of her marriage, Mini poses a semblance of agreement and decides not to show her disagreement. Indu, on perceiving solidness in Mini towards her own marriage, requests her uncle to look for a better match. Anant rejects the idea, stating:

‘May be the boy is a little ugly, may be a little stupid . . . but everything else is fine. The family is good, it’s known to us, they have money, she’ll be quite comfortable. And Akka had promised she would pay for the wedding expenses as well as the dowry if this came through. What else could I ask for?’

(RS 51)

Women, like Mini, who are always involved in the fetishes of traditions and household work, have no other option but to remain satisfied with the things provided. She is also toned or conditioned to merge her aspirations and desires by the elder women of her family:

‘Of course I’m marrying him because there’s nothing else I can do. I’m no good at studies. I never was. I went to school because . . . I had to. And then to college because Akka said I must go. Boys prefer graduates these days, she said. So I went.
But I failed and it was a relief to give it up. There’s only one thing, I’m really good at . . . looking after a house. And to get a home, I have to get married. This is not my home, is it?’ (RS 125)

In this connection Vrinda Nabar comments: “Moreover, even if we concede, that the girl is an alien in her father’s home, it is man-made laws and social structures that make her so. Right from birth, a girl is made to feel like a bird of passage in her father’s home” (56-57).

As long as society remains patriarchal in its role, allocation and division of labour, the culture of the second sex is found to be eclipsed. A woman’s mind is shaped by hammering constantly that she is weak both physically and mentally and is subordinate to man. In *Roots and Shadows*, the dominant culture and the marginalised culture are displayed in the form of suppression of the later by the former. Indu is very conscious of the unfairness prevailing in the society with regard to women. There are so many small incidents in everyday life which are simply taken for granted but Indu highlights these incidents and makes one look anew at them and wonder at the injustice. Men are not even aware of the drudgery and the disgust involved in the countless household chores performed regularly by women. One such scene is graphically described by Indu:

I went into the house avoiding the hall, ugly now with all the aftermath of an eaten meal. It disgusted me to see the strewn plates, the scattered remnants. And yet, for a whole life-time,
the women patiently cleared up the mess with their bare hands after each meal. And women like Kaki even ate off the same dirty plate their husbands had eaten in earlier. Martyrs, heroines, or just stupid fools? (RS 67)

Domestic chores as Indu describes, can be terribly tiresome, boring and frustrating. Simone de Beauvoir observes:

Few talks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition; the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over day after day. The housewife wears herself out making time. She makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present. (470)

There are several other examples to show how sharply Indu is aware of the prevailing injustice in society. If most people are unaware of this injustice, it only proves that they have been nurtured since childhood in such a society, which perpetuates such inequalities. In the early formative years of the child, which are critical for later personality development, he or she is exposed to traditional patterns, which sharply define the male/female pattern of behaviour. It is indoctrinated in the girl child to play the role of a disciplined daughter, a submissive wife, a meek daughter-in-law and a sacrificing mother. The exaggerated importance given to the virginity of a girl is also greatly responsible for enforcing a restriction on her movements as soon as she reaches puberty. Any girl who tries to rebel against such rules is severely reprimanded and she is shown her due place.
Right from her childhood, Indu observes the secondary position occupied by women in the family. It is unthinkable for a woman to have a cup of tea sent to her room. The tonsured head of a widow, reminds Indu of the plight of all widows — those who tonsured their heads to avoid censure that those who are treated like out-castes. Looking at the widow’s shaven head, Indu says:

The bare skull with its short hairs, looked somehow, not only indecent, but obscene when bared. And I understood why Kaka had, when Atya was widowed, so stoutly resisted the idea of her becoming a shaven widow. He had won but at the cost of Atya’s status. She was now a second class citizen in the kingdom of widows. The orthodox would not eat food cooked by her. (RS 118)

In The Binding Vine Urmila’s relation with her mother is direct and frontal. Her hostility towards her mother is evident from the angry tone and the language she uses when speaking with her or about her to others. She hates her for having sent her to Ranidurg as a child to be brought up by her grandparents. Shakutai also has love-hate relationship with her daughter Kalpana.

In Small Remedies, one finds that Savitribai Indorekar’s relationship with her daughter Munni is not so warm. Munni feels unwanted, unloved and rejected by her mother and she develops a feeling of aversion towards her or her identity. Her mother dissociates herself from her daughter in turn; she too
dissociates herself from the mother. Bai “never speaks of her daughter Munni, the daughter she neglected for the sake of her career” (SR 154). Due to this, Munni even goes to the extent of taking a new name, Shailaja Joshi.

The aspirations of the protagonists of Deshpande are greater than many other girls of their age. They not only want to be professional women but are also ready to revolt against social customs to be successful career women. Their hatred for their mothers is due to their mothers’ traditional view to control the daughters as the society expects them to be. The protagonists, however are unwilling to be the traditional daughters of the traditional mothers as they are endowed with urges to achieve heights in the society. They are not satisfied with their economic independence and they want to enjoy social status and their independent thinking lands them in insecure positions.

The new generation is passing through a transitional period and the daughters are sandwiched between tradition and modernity. Resentment and hatred drive them away from home. The parental home, a symbol of tradition and old values has no room for them. The air they breathe there — the air of rituals — hinder their growth as individual. Their mothers, the possible models after whom they are expected to mould their life happen to be bad models and are rejected. They feel the need to prove to their mother and to the entire world that they are not inferior to the male species. They want to attain financial security, social status and personal identity which will contribute to their independence as an individual.
Saru, gets temporary relief when she revolts against her parents to get married to the person of her own choice. As she feels insecure in her parental house, she strongly feels that Manu is the ideal hero to rescue her from her loveless existence. Her hunger for love is not satiated until she turns her attention towards her profession to emerge into a well-known and reputed doctor. Her marriage however begins to crumble under the burden of success in her profession. Manu, a cheerful normal human being, a loving husband during day, turns into a rapist at night. It terrifies and humiliates Saru so much that she cannot even speak about them, even to him: “I should have spoken about it the very first day. But I didn’t. And each time it happens and don’t speak, I put another brick on the wall of silence between us. May be one day I will be walked alive within it and die a slow painful death” (*TDHNT* 96). Saru realises that her marriage to Manu, instead of promised freedom, leads her once again into unwanted bondage of Saru into “a terrified — trapped animal” (*TDHNT* 134). This state is explicated by Indu in *Roots and Shadows* in the following lines:

> It’s a trap . . . that’s what marriage is.
> A trap? Or a cage? Maybe 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. But what animal would cage itself? (*RS* 60-61)

Saru’s married life crumbles as she attains heights in her professional career and Manu fails to become a famous poet. Unable to accept his failure, Manu
manifests his frustration in the form of sexual sadist attacks at night. Men punish women by ridicule, exclusion or ostracism if they attempt to interpret their own roles. Saru shows remarkable restraint in order to have some peace for her family life: “We belong to the same caste really. Both of us despise ourselves. What he does to me, he does it not so much because he hates himself. And I . . . I hate myself more for letting him do it to me than I hate him for doing it to me” (TDHNT 107).

The desire to become indispensable for someone, to belong and to be loved make evident the internalized feminity in Saru:

As a child my fantasies, my dreams, had no relevance to the fact that I was a girl. The fact had not meant to me then what it would later. But as I grew up, they became the dreams of a total female. I was all female and dreamt of being the adored and chosen of a superior, superhuman male. . . . I saw myself humbly adoring, worshipping and being given the father-lover kind of love that was protective, condescending, yet all-encompassing and satisfying. There was no ‘I’ then, not as yet, craving from recognition, satisfaction. (TDHNT 53)

Saru, a professional woman dislocates the binary of husband as provider and protector versus wife as recipient and protected. Saru’s employment is acceptable only because it supplements her husband’s income. The story of Saru clearly depicts a duality deeply entrenched in the psyche of Indian society which sways societal definitions and expectation of the public and
private roles of women. Consequently, women are expected to be both
traditional and modern in domestic and public spheres. Saru’s economic
independence makes her husband feel insecure. Though she tries to conform
to her husband’s expectations, his male pride is questioned when an
interviewer from a woman’s magazine asks Manu, “How does it feel when
your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?” (TDHNT
200). This remark shows the dualistic approach of the Indian society to
women’s employment. These complex situations in Saru’s life focus on the
pathetic state of Indian middle class working women:

My mother had no room of her own. She retreated into the
kitchen to dress up, she sat in the dingy room to comb her hair
and apply kumkum, she slept in her bed like any overnight guest
in a strange place. And I have so much my mother lacked. But
neither she nor I have that thing ‘a room of one’s own’.

(TDHNT 135-36)

Through this narrative, Deshpande questions the assumption that the
employment of the wife can serve as the means of her economic independence
and self-actualization. Unfortunately the profession of women does not entail
the potential to reduce the gap between men and women. While Saru’s income
provides a higher living standard to her family, her contribution remains
unnoticed. The hierarchic nature of marital role is acknowledged by Saru in
the following words:
Don’t ever try to reverse the doctor-nurse, executive–secretary, principal–teacher role. It can’t be traumatic, disastrous. And, I assure you, it isn’t worth it. He’ll suffer, you’ll suffer and so will the children. Women’s magazines will tell you that a marriage should be an equal partnership. That’s nonsense. Rubbish. No partnership can ever be equal. It will always be unequal, but take care that it’s unequal in favour of your husband. (*TDHNT* 137)

Manu tells Saru, face to face, that no partnership can be equal. Moreover, he tries to instil in her mind the fact that a wife can never equal her husband even if she occupies a higher position professionally. This makes her think very deeply about life:

> . . . the human personality has an infinite capacity for growth. And so the esteem with which I was surrounded made me inches taller. But perhaps, the same thing that made me inches taller, made him inches shorter. He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband. (*TDHNT* 42)

Manu is no ordinary male chauvinist. He has absolutely no reservation about treating his wife as an equal and as a person, but, when her success begins to highlight his failure, he degenerates. In Saru’s attitude one finds not just an itching for domination but a total ignoring of Manu. In her self-centred march to progress, she nullifies Manu’s existence. She thinks that her husband will
be a sanctuary and finds the sanctuary becoming a prison because of her husband’s attitudes.

Saru adopts marriage only as a means to get away from her family which curtails her individual freedom. She wants to break away from the clutches of her mother and the traditional values she represents. She is not at all for motherhood though she has two children of her own and her role as a married woman proves to be an illusion. Her financial and professional success leads to discord and disharmony and she experiences sexual disappointment and humiliation:

I was insatiable, not for sex, but for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love. Of my being loved. Of my being wanted. If I ever had any doubts, I had only to turn to him and ask him to prove his love for me. And he would . . . again and again and again. (TDHNT 40)

Deshpande is of the view that many a time marriage hampers the individuality of a woman. This is true in the case of Saru who sees marriage more as a trap rather than a bond. Saru declares “love. . . . There was no such thing between man and woman. There was only a need which both fought against, futilely, the very futility turning into the thing they called ‘love’” (TDHNT 72). A similar situation is found in R. K. Narayan’s novel The Dark Room. In the novel Savithri has a feeling that she earns her food and shelter by reducing herself to a mere plaything in the hands of her husband. Unable to bear her condition, she bursts out, “What is the difference between a prostitute and a
married woman? — the prostitute charges the man and the married woman does not; that is all, but both earn their food and shelter in the same way” (120).

In the Indian tradition, a woman has to follow certain codes of conduct with regard to marriage. While discussing the problems of Indian women, Mulk Raj Anand also speaks about the conditions to be followed by the Indian girls before marriage. In his *The Road*, Rukmani’s mother explains to her the importance of a husband. She tells her daughter that she should have a peaceful married life, which she can have only if she is obedient to her husband. She says “A woman has a precious gift to give, and it may be preserved for the man to whom she is given in marriage” (16). In his autobiographical novel *Seven Summers*, Anand describes the customary blessing of the father to the daughter: “Be like Savithri, be like the Suttees of the gurus, loyal to your husband unto death” (68).

Manu cannot tolerate Saru’s importance in the role of a doctor as her earnings and professional status is greater than his. Manu, as he cannot ask her to give it up, attempts to soothe his male ego by trying to assert his superiority as a male over Saru. His transformation from a doting husband into a sadist causes terror in the heart of Saru. She comes to detest the very word love: “Love . . . how she scorned the word now” (*TDHNT* 72). Like Indu, in *Roots and Shadows*, Saru also refrains from announcing it to the world that her marriage has been a failure. She admits that she had been clinging into the tenuous shadow of a marriage whose substance has in its long service been
disintegrated because she had been afraid of proving her mother’s rights. She confesses, “I had come away from my parents in a fever of excitement after the last battle. The die was cast, the decision taken, my boats burnt. There could be no turning back. Then, this ridiculous anti-climax” (*TDHNT* 37).

Saru returns to her parental home only to experience her mother’s total rejection: “Daughter? I don’t have any daughter. I had a son and he died. Now I am childless” (*TDHNT* 196). Instead of feeling overjoyed at being back home, she feels enclosed and even fails to relate to her father.

Defying the traditional role, Indu in *Roots and Shadows* seeks fulfilment in education and in career. She continues her education and goes for an inter-caste marriage with Jayant, a man of her choice. Deshpande writes about Indu in her essay in *The Writing of a Novel*, that “Indu sprang out of the claustrophobic world with a courage I admired. She was free. But often to be free is too lovely. I shared his bleak thought with Indu” (4).

Like her mother, Indu is segregated from the family for transgressing the traditional mode of setting marriages. Deshpande has given a glimpse of the rigid system of marriage in India which is decided not on the basis of compatibility but on caste and religion, “And finally, if everything was fine, there was the dowry” (*RS* 126). She speaks against the traditional mode of setting marriages when she sees Mini being pushed into an incompatible marriage by their elders. In her marital life, Indu cannot free herself from the “shadow of submission” (*RS* 158).
Mini perceives her husband’s house as her final abode and her husband as an oracle. Indian women are trained to accept their husbands with whatever flaws they have trying to live up to their desires and demands by transforming and moulding themselves. Predecessors act as archetypes for them and the women absorb the trends set by them while discharging the feminine qualities imposed on them. Yet they find it difficult to free themselves from its bondage. Indu analyzes her state:

‘What choices do I have, Indu?’ she asked me, resuming her snipping. . . . Millions of girls have asked this question millions of times in this country. Surely it was time they stopped asking it. What choices do I have? Surely it is this, this fact that I can choose, that differentiates from the animals. But years of blindfolding can obscure your vision so that you can no more see the choices. Years of shackling can hamper your movement so that you can no more move out of your cage of no choices. (RS 125)

When Indu reflects on her marriage with Jayant, she realises that a love marriage is not really different from an arranged marriage in the freedom of choice that it offers a woman. She makes adjustments in the name of love but understands that she has actually been deluding herself. Marriage, after all, is a sort of trade.

In India, the home itself is a bondage and trap. Indu says: “Waking up each day and thinking . . . I can’t go on. Feeling trapped, seeing myself endlessly chained to the long dusty road that lay ahead of me” (RS 18). With
this idea, Indu also closes the chapter of her relationship with Naren who is
drowned in a pool. Her infidelity fills her with guilt and she assesses herself
for cheating Jayant by bidding her true self pretending to be what she is not. In
Indu’s march towards emancipation and self-hood, the contemporary Indian
woman has to struggle against the insensitive fatality of options and the
indoctrination of centuries which silently yet persistently endeavour to
fashion her into the mould of womanhood as her husband defines her to the
society. “The true woman”, Simon de Beavouir remarks, “is an artificial
product that civilization makes, as formerly eunuchs were made. He presumed
‘instincts’ for coquetry, docility are indoctrinated, as is phallic pride in man”
(131). Indu moulds herself to satiate Jayant and prevents herself from
retaliating, as it will certify her marriage a failure. Indu foresees it and
decides to hide the frictions of her marital life from her family. She analyses
herself:

The hideous ghost of my own cowardice confronted me as I
thought of this . . . that I had clung tenaciously to Jayant, to my
marriage, not for love alone, but because I was afraid of failure.
I had to show them that my marriage, that I, was a success.
Show whom? The world. The family, of course. And so I went
on lying, even to myself, compromising, shedding bits of
myself along the way. Which meant that I, who had despised.
Devadas for being a coward, was the same thing myself. I had
killed myself as surely as he had done. (RS 159)
Indu says that as life partners, they should overlook their vices and appreciate their virtues. Indu throttles her desires not because of Jayant’s pressure but because it is her own decision with which she has given up her identity and individuality. Soon she realises “And one day I had thought . . . isn’t there anything I want at all? Have I become fluid, with no shape, no form of my own? At that moment a savage truth had stared me in the face . . . without wants there is no ‘I’” (RS 49).

Deshpande in her talk “The Indian Woman Stereotypes, Images and Realities” states that “The good woman — whether she’s the wife, mother, sister or daughter-in-law doesn’t matter — is always so selfless that she negates herself to the point of extinction” (30 Oct. 1997). Indu too experiences a void and emptiness in her life, even though it is shielded by a deceptively beautiful screen of her social graces and obligation. Her stream of consciousness makes it clear that even in the educated upper middle classes, the intrinsic value of highly intelligent and capable women are invariably affected by their social or marital status, since the society treats them as an object and a possession and never as an individual.

Indu submits before Jayant’s decision to continue with the job she despises as they have a “long way to go” (RS 17), and not to opt for a career as a writer. Indu hopelessly and unwillingly acquiesces to his decision and continues with her job. She finds that her marriage has made her “dependent” and defines love as “a big fraud, a hoax, a trap” — a process of making one “humble and dependent” (RS 157).
Having been alienated from her family, Jaya in *That Long Silence*, as Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and Indu in *Roots and Shadows* anticipates a better married life to accommodate herself. All their anticipations for a long happy married life with the companions of their own choice derive them temporary relief from their pain of rejection, isolation and negation of their own mothers.

Jaya has got English medium education and is more exposed to knowledge of western ideas. At her parental home she is more attached to her father and is left with no responsibility of household chores as she keeps away from her mother. After the death of her father, she dreams of enjoying a married life where she would be well accepted and more independent. Even from the beginning, the life becomes a sour one as it happens in the teasing game. The post-wedding ceremonial games are conducted to make the couple come closer to each other as well as to predict who would rule over the family at home. Though it is mostly done for fun. Jaya finds the coin but Mohan, her husband, feels disappointed that he has been reduced to a worm. Jaya considers their relationship an equal one: “Ours has been a delicately balanced relationship, so much so that we have been snipped off bits of ourselves to keep the scales on an even keel. A pair of bullocks yoked together . . . that was how I saw two of us the day we came here” (*TLS* 7). The image of a pair of bullocks yoked together suggests that yoked bullocks should share the burden between themselves, but no one knows whether they love each other or not. The image of the beasts performing their assigned
duties mechanically undermines the genuine relationship of husband and wife who are united in marriage for love, but not for leading a mechanical life which results in ending up in mutual hatred and distrust.

Jaya becomes an apparently satisfied housewife. Having married a responsible man, and blessed with two children, Rahul and Rati and a home and material comforts, she seems to have almost nothing to ask for in life. To achieve this stage of fulfilment as a woman, Jaya systematically suppresses every aspect of her personality that refuses to fit into her image as wife and mother. Deshpande uses an apt image of a worm crawling into a hole to describe the state of Jaya, a budding writer doomed to dwindle into a stereotyped Indian housewife:

Middle class. Bourgeois. Upper-caste. Distances from real life. Scared of writing. Scared of failing. Oh God, I had thought. I can’t take anymore. Even a worm has a hole it can crawl into. I had mine-Mohan’s wife, as Rahul’s and Rati’s mother. (TLS 148)

Jaya’s early training at home has made her obedient and submissive towards her husband. Her relatives impress upon her importance of being with a husband: “. . . a husband is like a sheltering tree. And it was as if she had said ‘man’ to me. I ignored her. After so many years, the words came back to me. A sheltering tree. Without the tree, you’re dangerously unprotected and vulnerable” (TLS 32).
Unconsciously following her aunt’s advice to treat her husband as a “sheltering tree” (TLS 32), Jaya, like Gandhari of the Mahabharata, symbolically bandages her eyes and grows blind to his weaknesses. Like Sita who followed her husband into exile, she follows Mohan into the concrete jungle that is Bombay. Jaya proceeds to “keep the tree alive and flourishing even if you have to water it with deceit and lies” (TLS 32). As a girl, Jaya is not very practical but she romanticises love. When she grows up into a young woman, circumstances make her look at marriage practically and not romantically.

Generally, a woman’s identity is defined in terms of her relationship with a man as a daughter, a wife and a mother. This means that a woman does not have an identity of her own. In keeping with the ritual of renaming the bride on the wedding day as in some Brahmin communities, Jaya also has been renamed as ‘Suhasini’ by Mohan. ‘Suhasini’ means a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman who makes herself loving and also lovingly nurtures her family. With this new name, it appears that the light-spirited and courageous Jaya is been reduced to a mere proud housewife and mother, though she wants to retain her own name given by her father which means victory.

Jaya’s married life is been lived almost on the same lines of the sparrows. “She has built an edifice of security around her husband and children believing it to be a burrow into which she can crawl, reptile-like and feel safe” (TLS 148). Her absorption into the family fold is so total that from
a fiercely independent girl, she gradually deteriorates into the “Stereotype of woman: nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support” (TLS 76). Jaya’s story, in the larger context, is the story of generations of women. She accepts the reality of the situation and her existence in relation to her family though at times she feels dissatisfied with her life.

Considering the woman as weak and dependent, the Indian tradition had empowered the men to take control of women’s lives. Mira, in *The Binding Vine* is one such woman who becomes a victim of such traditions. A budding poet and an eager student, Mira loses her right to education because a man decides to marry and her interest in studies has no significance for the man who nourishes the dream to possess her. Afraid that they may not get a better match, Mira’s parents decide to marry her to a man much older to her in age, instead of letting her discover her poetic talents or pursue studies. Her fear of marriage and the right it grants to a man over a woman’s body is expressed in her verse: “But tell me friend did Laxmi too twist brocade tassels round her fingers and tremble, fearing the coming of the dark — clouded, engulfing night” (TBV 66).

Mira’s inability to cope with her husband’s forced love making makes her nurture a dislike for him. She realises that the patriarchal Hindu society and its traditions do not acknowledge a woman’s feelings. Thus submitting to the traditional role of a wife she writes: “I give him the facts, nothing more, never my feelings. He knows what I’m doing and he gets angry with me. I
don’t mind his anger, it makes him leave me to myself, it is bliss when he does that” (TBV 67).

One of the primal and seminal concerns of feminism is to declare that a woman is a being, and that she is not an appendage to man. A woman is not the ‘other’, she is not an addition to man. She is an autonomous being, capable of, through trial and error, finding her own way to salvation. It is this prototype of women that Deshpande portrays in her fiction. Most of the women characters in her novels consciously try to come to terms with themselves as individuals.

Among Indian women writers, Deshpande is specifically committed to the re-organisation of female subjectivity. Her concerns related to the feminist questions are important in the interest of the feminist praxis. Her fiction holds a great promise and helps in finding ways in which the historical ‘location’ of Indian women can be interpreted in terms of their subordination, accentuated by law, in sacred literature and practice.

Deshpande’s feminist ideology stems from her belief in a ‘self-striven’ approach towards women’s empowerment. It is a kind of empowerment without antagonism. She prefers to indulge in adverse orientation or intemperate expressions towards men. She attributes profession to her protagonists as a ‘strategic interest’ which enables them to enter the prevailing and andocentric system and to dismantle their politics. Her treatment of issues like Indian woman’s autonomy, identity, space and desire may lead to an
Indian model of feminism which will be workable, honest and more violable for indigenous condition.

Deshpande’s novels deal with the tensions underlying women’s aspirations and their cultural identities. Their urge for self-definition culminates in the identification of the areas of conflict. They are engrained and suffocated in the patterns of andocentric culture and their desire to perform is taken over by the necessity to conform. These women are steeped in the conventions and customs of a patriarchal society which dislocates and alienates them from the process of being and becoming. In short, Deshpande’s novels are polemical attacks against the patriarchal world, where women are treated as a kind of ‘non-man’.

Like Margaret Atwood, Virginia Woolf and Betty Friedan, Deshpande also argues that the male assigned role of wife and motherhood entraps women in the masculine plot of desire and thereby marginalizes them from other socio-political, economic and creative spheres of life. Deshpande explores the traumas and agonies of being a woman. Her novels expound the indelible mark carved on the psyche of women by the conventions and norms established by the society which restricts them from exhibiting their true self. The mode and style of their development inculcates in them submissiveness, silence and passiveness which has a strong hold on their psyche. Even modern, educated women consciously drape themselves with these traits and find themselves in a fix.
Deshpande often concentrates on the tortures and sufferings of middle-class Indian women who happen to be educated and sensitive and who are conscious of their legal, social and conjugal rights. More often than not, Deshpande highlights the household conflict between mother-daughter, wife-husband and totally between man and woman. This conflict which operates at the emotional, intellectual and sexual levels leads them to a dilemma, whether to be or not to be traditional women.