Chapter Three

To Be or Not To Be

I have given you knowledge
Now make the choice
The choice is yours
Do as you desire

- Shashi Deshpande

The Hamletian state of being tossed between two extremes of life is perhaps the hapless predicament of many a woman in India. Certainly this is a puzzle, a riddle and a challenge encountered by women in general and the gender justice activists in particular, especially in the backdrop of the fast emerging modern woman. Just like a larva that breaks the cocoon and flies away and around as a free being, enjoying a life of its own, uninhibited and unrestrained by a law of existence and principle of survival of its own, a woman is also vested with similar stages of existences as part of the evolutionary process of growth and development or not. This problem continues to loom large for ever over the ambiance of a woman’s existence.

Deshpande endeavours to draw the contours of the dazzling dilemma in her depiction of the woman protagonists. This chapter deals with the question of professional women in the Indian context and the inter-role conflicts and dilemmas in Deshpande. The traditional criticism on
Deshpande’s fiction recognises her significant contribution to the field of feminist studies. The strength of Deshpande’s work lies in her awareness of gender-disparity and sexual division of labour both at home and in public and private lives.

Sociologists agree that the middle class educated Indian women have a changed consciousness. With their education and their social awareness, these women have thrown off their conditioning and the whole psychology of oppression to some extent. Still they bear the burden of the past and the aspirations of the future. They desire to overcome the dependence syndromes and have an urge for self-definition, but also care for sensitive family relationships and emotional involvement of the self. The complex situations in the lives of professional women have changed the picture of the Indian families and have also questioned the values and politics behind matrimony. In tune with this changing scenario, Deshpande portrays a picture of Indian women who are sensible, educated, attached to their roots economically independent and yet different from their past image as a full-time homemaker, an angel at home, an evil counterfeit and a weak vessel. The degree of self-reliance achieved by these professional women is limited and the patriarchal society interprets their self-sufficiency as deviance from their ‘femininity’ i.e. the stereotype of a woman: nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support. Krishna Chakraborty in her book *The Conflicting Worlds of Working Mothers* records the dilemma of a working woman, who is created by the contradiction between their occupational pursuits and domestic
obligations: “There is an unconscious fear among all including women themselves that too, after the traditional arrangement might change or even destroy the family and femininity” (19). These professions provide economic privileges as well as creative outlets for women. They get an opportunity to erase their long silence and grapple with the questions of identity and self-assessment. Social institutions accuse them of being defiant, disobedient and egoist. Malashri Lal in her *The Law of the Threshold* locates her feminist theory in significations of home and not home. She argues that traditionally “men pass over threshold unchallenged” whereas “for women, a step over the bar is an act of transgression” (12). Deshpande’s Saru, Indu and Jaya are examples of women who make complex negotiations in the space on and around the threshold.

Sadly, an Indian woman is both a larva and a butterfly. They remain a larva forever never, ever, daring to break the shackles of slavery, and a butterfly, of late, perhaps not merely enjoying, but challenging the male-dominated-masculine space and offering in its place a female-equalled feminine space. However, the woman characters of Deshpande still toe in the line with the fossilized tradition that perpetuates only a saga of sainthood in an insane male-solar-system for the wrong reasons. This is an unshakable reality in the female or feminine universe of Deshpande. Her women’s efforts to reorient and renovate the fossilized pond of oppression, marginalization and injustice through a painfully continuous process of desilting fail miserably to fructify. Perhaps, the most viable option is that of the pendulum of women’s
state swinging between the two extremes of liberative binaries — oppression and freedom, injustice and justice, weakness and empowerment, encroached space and enlightened space.

The women characters of Deshpande, mostly the characters in transition, are found to be in pains, not being able to decide which road they ought to take. Muted by patriarchal society, Deshpande protagonists feel crippled by a sense of inferiority, non-entity and loss of ‘self’. They do realise that their honour and dignity are at stake, but are not able to choose which road to take. They are torn between salvaging their own honour and the presumptive family honour. ‘To be or not to be’ befittingly characterizes their state of being confused and indecisive.

Indian tradition subjects widows to hardship and austerity. Their heads are shaven, good clothes and ornaments are forbidden to them and they are expected to take a small amount of vegetarian food only. They spend their days in prayer and fasting and yet they are deemed inauspicious and debarred from all social ceremonies. Transgression of the rules is hardly tolerated. Atya in Roots and Shadows is not a shaven widow, and therefore is treated as a second class citizen in the kingdom of widows. She prefers to break away from the fetters of tradition and become a liberated person. Remaining unshaven is symbolic of her being ‘not to be’ to the ‘to be’ category. On that account, she has to suffer humiliation and social ostracization. She accepts suffering rather than surrendering her true self to the traditional notion.
It is unjust that people humiliate not the rapist but the victim. If the victim is unmarried, chances of her marriage become uncertain. So it is not strange to find a victim’s family in India trying to conceal the fact of rape occurring outside marriage. Kalpana in *The Binding Vine* is a girl of tender age, who is raped by a man much older and as a result she loses her consciousness. But for the bold intervention of a kind lady, the incident might have been hushed up as a case of accident. “She is going to die anyway, so what difference does it make on paper, whether she dies the victim of an accident or a rape” (*TBV* 88), says a police officer to Dr. Bhaskar and further adds that otherwise “her name would be smeared” (*TBV* 88). Deshpande further highlights a fact generally ignored in society, the fact that rape occurs in marriage too. Mira in *The Binding Vine* is an instance to the point. Her diary is a glaring revelation of her “intense dislike of the sexual act with her husband, a physical repulsion for the man she married” (*TBV* 63) — torn between two extremes. Though mind does not take part in the physical role, she yields to the manipulation of her husband because of respect for the society. She does not see a clear path ahead but having coming into the bond of marriage, she is in a typical Hamletian’s ‘to be or not to be’ position.

Subordination of women takes place in many forms. Preference for male children, discrimination against girls and denial of freedom to choose the partner of life, restrictions of the choice of occupation — all these are the ordeals women in India pass through and which push them into the external dilemma of to be or not to be. A woman’s early life generally means a
preparation for marriage, not a decent education and a career. She is taught to
be submissive and shun anger, not to speak aloud as that is unwomanly. She
has to marry the groom chosen for her by her guardians on traditional
considerations of caste, status and property. The marriage takes place only on
payment of dowry even if the groom is good for nothing. Girls, like Mini, in
*Roots and Shadows* who are neither beautiful nor brilliant have no choice in
this respect. “A woman’s life, they had told me, contained no choices” (*RS* 6),
confesses Mini. What follows after the marriage is even worse as life becomes
hell if the husband is alcoholic or ill-tempered. As many a husband does not
take meals with wife, he does not know if she is getting adequate food. Indu
feels so sorry and annoyed and bursts out “And women like Kaki even ate off
the same dirty plate their husbands had eaten in earlier” (*RS* 67). Though she
is angry at the suffering of another, she also suffers the repression as other
talented women like Saru and Jaya.

Savitri Bai in *Small Remedies* comes from an affluent Brahmin family
of which she is the eldest grandchild and, hence is endowed with love. She is
initiated into the world of music by her mother who is also gifted with a
melodious voice but has restricted her singing only to devotional songs.
Overjoyed by Bai’s talent, her mother gives her lessons but her father
prohibits her from pursuing music further. Tradition has made the art of music
and dancing a talent in notch girls and therefore it is below the dignity for a
daughter of a high class Brahmin family. Deshpande means that “. . . the artist
was born of the woman. First there was a woman and then the artist” (*SR* 133)
and also “She’s a woman, a Brahmin woman, a married woman” (SR 132). This is the conflict faced by Bai. She has to be an artist and at the same time, she is required to be a Brahmin married woman. After marriage, Bai’s desires to pursue her dream finds hope when she learns about her father-in-law’s love for music. His encouragement gives her confidence and she begs him to let her learn music though “It is impossible to realise today what a radical step it was for a man of that class to let his daughter-in-law learn music” (SR 218). A number of traditions are broken and a female trainer is arranged for Bai, soon followed by a Muslim tabla accompanist. Unfortunaltely this breach of tradition creates a furore in the family and gives rise to many discussions — “They tell me I made a mistake,” (SR 126) and Bai demurs, unable to bear the struggle.

Bai’s success does not make her a self-realised person as she struggles to attain her lost respectability. In pursuit of her dream, Bai has the unstinted support of Ghulam Saab. A relationship like theirs in patriarchal Indian society is bound to malign Bai’s character, “A woman who’d left her husband’s home — what morals would she have, anyway! Bai was obviously damned by everyone” (SR 223). Apart from this, there are rumours of other lovers who helped her in the progress of her career like the station director of the radio station in Neemgaon. Yet, when Bai speaks of her life, she does not talk of Ghulam Saab and her daughter, Munni. Madhu too is left unaware of what made Ghulam Saab return to his family. As Madhu understands her in the real sense:
She had drawn a line through Munni’s and Ghulam Saab’s names and erased them from her life. This is something she did long back, when she turned to respectability, when she began her journey to success and fame. Perhaps she thought that to attain these things, this denial of her lover and daughter was necessary. I imagine that the denial also made it possible for her to live with herself. (SR 154)

Bai’s efforts to prove her identity show her desire to reclaim her lost dignity. Madhu even notices that it is after her separation from Ghulam Saab that she appears again as a married woman wearing her old mangal sutra. Her efforts signify that she may have achieved her dream but her life is spent in her struggle to regain the identity she has lost. Thus even towards the end of her life, Bai strives to find her identity by ignoring a part of her life, but to Madhu, her biographer, the real Bai remains elusive even to her own self. Although Bai’s position is ‘the singer woman’, it does not allow her some measure of freedom or oddity and Madhu observes that “it didn’t take away the aura of disapproval, or the curiosity, either” (SR 139). Thus Bai undergoes a dilemma of continuing her marriage-bond and breaking the bond to attain her desire of becoming a famous singer.

Akka’s story in Roots and Shadows is an example of the sufferings a girl undergoes due to traditional evils like child marriage.

She was just twelve when she got married. And he was well past thirty . . . He was a tall bulky man with large, coarse
features. And she . . . she was small and dainty, really pretty, with her round face, fair skin, straight nose and curly hair. Six months after her marriage, she “grew up” and went to her husband’s home. (SR 69-70)

Akka becomes a victim of her husband’s lust. She fails to satisfy his needs which are beyond her comprehension. Her attempt to escape her nightly tortures by running away from home is foiled by her mother-in-law who catches her and beats her up. In spite of being locked for days without food Akka would beg her mother-in-law “Lock me up again, lock me up” (SR 70), and not to send her back to her husband’s room. Through Akka’s condition, Deshpande brings out the brutish treatment of woman especially young girls in the name of tradition, which compells a wife to please her husband, no matter how brutal he is to her. She highlights the Indian tradition which denies a woman any right over her own body and makes her a victim of marital rape. As a result of such inhuman conditions, Akka begins to view sex as a punishment and accordingly her mother-in-law says, “Now your punishment begins” (RS 70).

Akka’s tender age had made it difficult for her to give birth to a living child thus making her unable to fulfil the greatest purpose of a woman’s life, “But every time she had a miscarriage, her mother-in-law blamed her for it and made life hell for her” (RS 70). Adding to the misery of failed pregnancies and being ill-treated by her mother-in-law, Akka’s husband’s debauchery takes a new turn with his love for a particular mistress as “He had a weakness
of women. . . . He always had mistresses” (RS 70). In spite of repeated ill-
treatment, beastly assault and humiliation, Akka serves her husband like a
dutiful wife even after her suffering from a stroke. Now, his cry for his
mistress does not melt Akka’s heart, which has been hardened by years of
suffering. Refusing to be humiliated again, she tells him “‘Listen to me. It’s
my turn now. I’ve listened to you long enough. 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’” (RS 71).

In control of her life and situation for the first time, Akka asserts
herself and refuses to be humiliated again, but her mournful tears at night tell
the tale of a loveless and mortifying marriage. Her experience in marriage is
an example of the condition of girls who are trapped in marriage even before
they realise the need for it. The Hindu tradition, which has always adulated
husband-worshiping, self-effacement and subordination in a wife leaves girls
like Akka with no choice but to endure in silence. Y. S. Sunita Reddy opines
that, “Sex as a punishment was perhaps, how it was viewed by such child
brides who nevertheless did not raise any banner of revolt but on the other
hand continued to suffer and helped to perpetuate such oppression” (35).

However, in Akka’s context some parts of this statement is most disagreeable
as a close reading show how twice, Akka a girl of thirteen tries to escape but
is caught. Besides one should not forget that revolt against marriage is not
acceptable and a woman who chooses to do so is often treated as an outcast.
Thus girls like Akka undergo a dilemma of whether to continue the marriage-
bond for the society or whether to break away the bond to attain their own individuality.

A tradition bound woman may sacrifice anything for the sake of her family’s welfare and may not jealously guard her individuality. In the case of educated women, happiness is minimum because of the divided self between husband and children and then between work and herself.

Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* falls in love with Manu and marries him against her parent’s wishes. Her orthodox mother is against her daughter marrying a man from a lower caste:

“What caste is he?
I don’t know
A Brahmin?
of course not
Then, cruelly... his father keeps a cycle shop.
Oh, so they are low-caste people, are they?
The word her mother had used, with the disgust, hatred and prejudice of centuries had so enraged her that she had replied... I hope so”. (*TDHNT* 96)

Saru considers herself the luckiest woman on earth, as the initial years of her marriage are sheer bliss. Manu is a saviour and romantic hero who rescues Saru - a damsel in distress. Later, her success as a well-known and reputed doctor becomes the cause of her strained marital relations with Manu. In a
In a retrospective mood she says: “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 uncomfortable with Saru’s steady rise in status, as he feels ignored when people greet and pay attention to Saru. Besides, she is unable to spare enough time for Manu and the children. With the change of circumstances, she feels a gradual disappearance of love and attachment towards husband and children. The most solemn duties towards them remain unattended to. The children are denied due love and care as she comes late in the evenings. While her social and financial status rises gradually, there is an inverse decline in her conjugal relationship. Her relationship with Manu would have somehow moved on smoothly, had she remained content with treating people in the neighbourhood. She knows that:

For me, things now began to hurt . . . a frayed sari I could not replace, movie I could not see, an outing I could not join in. I knew now that without money life became petty and dreary. The thought of going on this way became unbearable and thus had moved forward with her career. (TDHNT 92)

On one occasion Saru presents a perfect recipe for a successful marriage. On being asked by her friend Nalu to talk on Medicine as a profession for women, Saru says:

A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he is an M.A, You should be a B.A, If he’s 5’4” tall, you shouldn’t 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. (*TDHNT* 137)

The novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* may be said to be a study of a guilty consciousness. Although Saru returns to her parent’s place in a detached frame of mind, she feels strange despite the fact that nothing had changed in the house except her father who sounded strange as he talked like an unwilling host to her as if she were an unwelcome guest. She is in grave need of sympathy but absolute confusion prevails upon her. Now, she feels, “If only someone would tell her what to do, she would do it at once, without a second thought” (*TDHNT* 97). This reminds her of the fate of a sister of her friend who had come home after her disastrous marriage. She remembers how she received care and sympathy from her parents, because her marriage had been an arranged one and so the parents too were party to her misfortune. Since, Saru’s is not an arranged one, she makes herself solely responsible for her disastrous marriage and is guilty. She is totally confused and feels that she has done great injustice towards her brother, mother, husband and children.

At her parent’s house, before her marriage, Saru had wanted to break away the traditions and to be what she wants to be. So she had revolted against her parents and ran away from home to get married to a person of her choice. Had her mother not been so against Manu, she would probably not have married him and brought herself to such a miserable condition. She later recollects “If you hadn’t fought me so bitterly, if you hadn’t been so against
him, perhaps I would never have married him” (TDHNT 96). She feels so sorry:

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. To defy your parents and family, to resolve to get married in spite of them, and then to be obstructed by the lack of a home! (TDHNT 37)

When Saru comes back to her parental home after the death of her mother, she becomes an emotionless human being. She is not able to speak about what she wants or what she expects from her father and “Silence was an essential part of the life they lived together now, Baba, Madhav and she” (TDHNT 95). She feels guilty that she had deserted her parents in order to marry Manu. She expects sympathy from her father, but to no avail. Now she thinks that had her marriage been an arranged one, her parents would have come to her rescue and at least they would be receptive and sympathetic for her sufferings. She is reminded of her mother’s words — “I know all these ‘love marriages’. It’s love for a few days, then quarrels all the time. Don’t come crying to us then” (TDHNT 69). She wants to be a liberated person with a free will to marry a person of her choice, but her guilt has caused pain to her parents and pushed her to a situation where she wants ‘not to be’ a lover who runs away from home.
Deshpande accepts working women both as subjects of victimization and as agents of change. Working women appear in her novels not merely as the passive victims of an oppressive ideology but also as the active agents of their own positive constructs. Mohan in *That Long Silence* opts to marry Jaya since she is convent educated and can speak English. At the time of her marriage, Mohan was working as an engineer at Lohanagar. To please him, Jaya starts to wearing clothes of his choice and has her hair-cut like his boss’s wife. She even puts aside her career as a writer just to please him. Mohan never encourages Jaya to write and also strongly objectes to themes which he suspects to have strong autobiographical overturns. When she becomes successful, he takes pride being the husband of a writer. She relinquishes the stories which were taking shape in her, “because, I had been scared, scared of hurting Mohan, scared of jeopardizing the only career I had, my marriage” (*TLS* 144) and settles down to writing middle to a newspaper. Thus Deshpande projects the typical dilemma of middle class educated and employed women though Jaya.

Like post-modernist commitment to heterogeneity, fragmentation and difference, Deshpande also recognises difference in the understanding of gender issues, which have specific roots in linguistic, cultural, socio-economic, political, sexual and psychological grounds. She deconstructs the misnomer of unified subjectivity by delving deep into fragmented subject problems. With the dissolution of unitary subjects, it becomes easier for Deshpande to facilitate feminism of differences. One step in this direction is
her construction of women subjects within their social positions which is evident in her treatment of middle class working women. She imparts plentiful details on the interplay between individual lives and particular social structures.

For seventeen long years of her marriage, Jaya successfully manages to suppress her feelings as she thinks it more important to be a good wife than being a good writer. In her zeal to play the role of a loyal wife and a caring mother, she suppresses her desires that might lead to self-actualization and fulfilment. She not only suppresses her writing career but also her association with her one-time neighbour, Kamat. Her career as a successful writer is jeopardized right in the early years of her marriage. A short story of hers bags the first prize and also gets published in a magazine. She is on the threshold of getting recognition as a creative writer of some merit, when Mohan expresses his displeasure at a particular story written by her. The story is about a man who cannot reach out to his wife except through her body. Mohan knows that the man portrayed in the story is not him but he is apprehensive that people might take him as the man in the story. She thinks, “Looking at his stricken face, I had been convinced I had done him wrong. And I had stopped writing after that” (TLS 144), but the writer in Jaya goads her on to keep writing. She begins to write under a pseudonym, which does not help, and her stories are rejected one after another. Her neighbour Kamat analyses the reasons behind the successive rejections and tells her that her stories lack strong emotions as she has suppressed her anger and frustration. Unfortunately she cannot
express her anger or feelings lest it should damage her relation with Mohan. She has learnt to control her anger, as Mohan considers this trait in a woman “unwomanly” (TLS 83) and she tells Kamat: “Because no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman?” (TLS 147). Later, she begins to write light humorous pieces on the travails of a middle-class housewife in a column entitled “Seeta”. She not only gets encouraging response from the readers but also a nod of approval from Mohan. Jaya says:

Seeta had been the means through which I had shut the door firmly on all these women who had invaded my being, screaming for attention; women I had known I could not write about, because they might, it was just possible, resemble Mohan’s mother or aunt or my other or aunty. (TLS 149)

This reveals how Jaya glosses over the reality or truth, and smothers her inner conscience to avoid endangering her marriage. She denies her writings of the reflections of her individuality or self to play the role model of a typical Indian middle-class woman. Kamat understands her literary capability and criticizes her for writing such stuff: “I can never imagine you writing this” (TLS 149). Adele King aptly observes: “In Jaya’s stories they lived happily ever after although she knows the falsity of the view of life” (97).

Jaya’s association with Kamat, a widower living above her flat, lends yet another dimension to Jaya’s personality. She is drawn towards him as he treats her as his equal, and offers constructive criticism on her writings. He even receives her mail at his address to help her avoid any confrontation with
her husband as Mohan disapproves of her writings. Kamat showers his attention on her, as he is lonely. Unlike other men, he does not have aversion to cooking and such other domestic chores meant to be performed by women exclusively. Jaya feels so much at ease in his company that her womanly inhibitions wither and she shares frankly her problems with him. He warns her against wallowing in self-pity and asks her to pursue her literary career by giving expression to her real inner self.

Jaya becomes so open towards Kamat that their relation leads to physical attraction. At times his behaviour with her is father-like but there are occasions it turns into lover-like. The two are so much at ease in each other’s company that he even makes personal remarks about her physical appearance. He says: “I prefer clean, spare lines in a human being. You, for example your name is like your face” (TLS 152). On one occasion, Jaya even comes close to surrendering herself when he tries to console her at her remembrance of her father’s death. In the seclusion of his apartment, she has ample opportunity for physical indulgence but she restrains herself for fear of jeopardizing her marriage. It is yet again for this very reason that she feigns detachment towards his death, when she finds him lying dead on the floor in his flat. She remains passive, as she does not want to endanger her marriage. This incident is proof enough of the fettered selves of the so-called educated middle-class wives.

Mira, in The Binding Vine, one of the most accomplished of poets is a worshipper of Lord Krishna, whom she regards as her lover, her husband. The
attempt to tie her to the earthly plane through the marital route proves futile as she also has the courage to reject her husband whom she has never accepted. Urmila, the protagonist of the novel, *The Binding Vine* not only learns about her mother-in-law Mira’s fears and dreads, her steely futile protests and frustrated resistance but also applies them in her own life as well. She is the opposite of Mira in her attitude to love. Mira squirms at the mention of the word love but Urmila cannot do without it. Both of them are true to their feelings but are not ready to submit. Even when Urmila’s feelings are stirring within, she resists herself:

\begin{quote}
I want to submit too. But I know that if I walk the way of submission once, I will walk that way forever. Yet I never ask him ‘why?’, when he goes away from me even in our few days together, I never reveal my hurt, my longing to keep him by my side. . . . *(TBV 82)*
\end{quote}

Urmila, who had once visited the house where Mira stayed, now relives her experience as she again travels with her writer mother-in-law. In the room where women were kept sequestered for three days, Urmila visualizes Mira in an old sari, sitting on the floor, her hair dishevelled fearing her touch might pollute the children who rushed in through the window — “My companion for three days, window in the corner room” *(TBV 98)* — she looks at the street outside bustling with life. This is a room where Mira could be her own self. As Virginia Woolf in her essay *A Room of One’s Own* clamours for a space for the woman writer, Mira too must have felt the need of a space that
remained inviolate. Even if physical space is unavailable, Mira can create a mental space of her own by withdrawing from the world in general and writes in her diary:

Shall I surrender to this Maya-world
dancing peacock, displaying its feathers?
Or shall I, defying the market world
retreat into my shell tortoise-like? (TBV 98)

Another ‘to be or not to be’ character, Deshpande portrays is Indu, a woman who is caught in the functional dilemma of a career. In Roots and Shadows she deals with women’s conditioning in relation to their choice of career. Indu seems to be bound within the traditional roles of caring, curing and nurturing. Though she has natural capacities or qualities of compassion the society circumscribes her to same specific roles of a traditional woman.

Indu caught in the matrix of age-old custom or tradition, like Deshpande’s other women characters, cannot break herself free from the clutches of tradition. She painfully realises that despite her education and exposure, she is no different from the other women who circumambulate the tulsi plant to increase their husband’s life span. Even her husband Jayant who is educated and apparently a modern man, is only a typical Indian husband for whom she has to remain passive and submissive.

Several instances prove that all along Indu is playing the role of wife to perfection to keep Jayant happy and satisfied. Despite her reluctance, she has to continue the frustrating job of writing for the magazine just to keep him
satisfied. She is against working for the magazine as she gets disillusioned by her experience with a so-called social worker, who has received an award for social services. Indu is first much impressed by that “soft spoken, . . . seemingly sincere and dedicated” \( (RS 16) \) woman who she has written an article on. After reading an article she received on that woman, as she realises that it is “a story of shameless exploitation of ignorance, poverty and need. A story of ruthlessness and unscrupulousness in the pursuit of fame, power and money, all of which had come now” \( (RS 16) \). When she shows the two stories about the same woman to her worldly-wise editor, he rejects the later story knowing full well that it is true. Appalled by the woman’s hypocrisy and the editor’s attitude, she tells Jayant about it, who, steeped in his middle-class values merely says “‘That’s life! What can one person do against the whole system! No point making a spectacle of yourself with futile gestures. We need the money, don’t we? Don’t forget we have a long way to go’” \( (RS 17) \).

Thus, Indu continues to write what suits the magazine and not her own conscience. Gradually, but surely, she realises the absurdity of the existence, as she has to compromise against her conscience with the values of a hypocritical society where success is counted sweetest, but all this is not to go for long. Circumstances bring her to the proverbial crossroads where every individual has to do some introspection sooner or later. Had Akka, her old domineering matriarch not called her, she would not have had time enough to think about her identity and selfhood, which she has effaced just to prove that her marriage a success. Her belated realisation is manifest in her private
conversation with Naren where she bares all. It is the height of hypocrisy she practices just to flaunt that Jayant and she belong to the smart young set. She speaks out:

   We are rational, unprejudiced, broadminded. We discuss intelligently, even solemnly, the problems of unemployment, poverty, corruption family planning. We scorn the corrupt, we despise the ignorant, we hate the wicked . . . and our hearts bleed, Naren, for Vietnam, for the blacks, for the Harijans. But frankly we don’t care a damn. Not one goddam about anything but our own precious selves, our own precious walled-in-lives.

   (RS 25)

Indu, who had considered herself smart, educated, independent and clever, comes to the painful conclusion that she is no better than her Kakis and Atyas.

To the women of Deshpande, their professions have a therapeutic effect on their lives and sensibilities. Whereas these professional women, attaining reputation in their fields of arts and skills, holding prestigious positions and well paid jobs generally tend to feel competent and productive and possess high self-esteem, they also derive interpersonal satisfaction from their family and job. The compartmentalization between home and workplace in equal order and the stress and vexatious demands inevitably frazzle them and create a sense of guilt and fragmented self in them. This is very typical of maiden womanhood. It is quite paradoxical, yet true that Indian women feel honoured and humbled even when pressing demands are placed on them.
Betty Friedan in her *The Feminine Mystique* recognizes that, while women have been pulled into the public domain, men have not been enticed into the private realm. Women like Saru, Indu and Jaya attempt to excel at both the traditional female sex roles and the role of paid labourer by working in two shifts.

In the Indian context, the domestic division of labour remains gender specific and the lop-sided division of familial responsibilities leads to the condition what Friedan in her *The Feminine Mystiques* terms as “super woman syndrome” (282). In spite of being in a constant state of stress they try to evade the paths of passivity, interdependence and emotional depravity which ordinary women walk through during their life-journey. By her portrayal of working women, Deshpande puts in contrast the plight of women who have been confined and constrained by the marriage contract which gives unlimited power to a husband and the right to demand unpaid work — housework, bringing up children — and other obligations like co-habitation and forced coitus.

Alice Walker’s in her *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, pictures women as “exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey” (178). The rich inner life of women never finds any expression outside because of the external subjugations. In *The Binding Vine*, Urmila’s search is a quest for the voice of the poet in Mira who lived and died without recognition. Armed with a treasure casket — a black steel trunk containing her mother-in-law’s writings — Urmila dives back into the past. The books, diaries, a file where Mira had
neatly copied her poems and the photographs help Urmila to understand her long-dead mother-in-law and bring to light her hidden life.

Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* accepts the biological determinism as the basis of segregation in the power and status of men and women. She understands that the ideological mechanism of patriarchy is maintained by women’s co-operation and her childhood memories are of the discriminations shown by her mother in favour of her brother, Dhruva. This brings to light how women themselves become complicities in the system of oppression. This co-operation is secured by various means: denial of access to production resources and economic dependency on the male head of the family, class privileges and honour bestowed on conforming and dependent women of the upper classes, ideologies of male superiority or separate spheres, and the threat or the actual use of force when required as and when the ideologies and practices of patriarchies are resisted. Fighting against the established traditions and systems portends only danger and the participants may plunge into unknown oblivion. This is why Deshpande just stops not by suggesting any definite courses to be followed. Rather she presents the suppressed women characters with windows to look into the other side of the spectrum and find out the various possibilities by themselves.

Saru is a successful and reputed doctor. She becomes a busy doctor and this ultimately upsets her family life. Her husband gets annoyed of her popularity and her busy life makes her concentrate less on the domestic front. This is an awkward situation in which she is placed. At the personal level, she
feels a gradual disappearance of love and family attachment which she had once developed. Now what she faces is a psychological conflict which becomes inevitable. She, as a wife, is not able to devote her time to attend to her husband’s need and the children are not taken due care of:

And as I looked I could see them, my husband and children, Abhi hidden by his father, Renu looking tiny by his side. Sitting there in that bright glass-enclosed room, watching them move away, I felt a deadly fear. As if I was isolated from everyone, from the whole world, by what was happening to me . . . .

*(TDHNT 112)*

Manu, Saru’s husband, is not ready to accept her popularity and so her family life and happiness start declining as her popularity increases day by day. A conflict that ensues in her mind is due to her achieved position and the ascribed position of her husband and she feels, “My husband is a sadist” *(TDHNT 97)*. The financial ascendance of Saru makes Manu feel less significant and impotent. He thinks that the only way he can retain his potency and masculinity is by turning into a rapist at night:

. . . at night, waiting for the terror to strike, she became just a terrified animal. Thinking of how she could do nothing against his maniac strength. Of her panic that made her incapable of resisting. Of the children in the next room who pinioned her to a terrified silence. And when it was over, thinking . . . I can’t, I
won’t endure this anymore. I’d rather die. I can’t go on.

*(TDHNT 99)*

Saru does not receive any real love and Manu’s attitude towards her becomes torturous. Sarabjith K. Sandhu is of the view that:

The financial ascendance of Saritha, at the same time, renders Manu impotent. The only way he can regain that potency and masculinity, is through sexual assault upon Saritha, which, for him, becomes as assertion of manhood leading to a sort of abnormality at night, as he is a cheerful normal human being, a loving husband during day, turning into a rapist at night. *(22)*

For both at one stage, it becomes a psychological problem and Saru’s condition, is being between the devil and the deep sea.

A tradition-bound woman may sacrifice everything for the sake of her family’s welfare without thinking of her individuality. In the case of educated woman, it becomes, more often, a dilemma because of the divided self between husband and children and then between work and herself. Love is no longer for them a sweet thing to posses and enjoy and Saru says:

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, futilely, the way 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.

*(TDHNT 72)*
The educated heroines like Saru, Indu and same others are all in the eternal ‘to be or not to be’ situation because of their inability to surrender to the dictates of tradition and to the desire of the heart. *Roots and Shadows* is a symbolic representation of the dialectical nature of man and woman who get against each other in material terms for power struggle. ‘Roots’ stands for ‘tradition’ the ‘Shadows’ stands for ‘the marginal culture’. Indu’s life and her problems reveal the truth that she has been running after shadows in search of happiness, and that the source of her unhappiness is in her roots. She has rebelled against this traditional role for fear of becoming like one of her predecessors at home. She says, “With a sudden distaste, I knew this was no place for me I had to get away” (*RS* 22).

Indu feels entrapped and wants to escape into freedom but hesitates to come out of her entanglements. Her realization that she too is being moulded into the very image of woman, she tries to break away from, worries her. In the first place, she has broken from her family because she wants to prove herself to be as different from and as unlike as possible from women like Akka, “Just like her. Narrow-minded. Bigoted. And thinking only of herself. Never of others” (*RS* 22). This is her sole reason for her rebelling against the family norms and marrying Jayant:

I had left home full of hatred for the family, for Akka specially.

I had sworn I would never go back. Which had not prevented me from dreaming of the time when I would. Childishly crude,
technicoloured dreams of revenge, forgiveness and death with
the star role, of course, being mine. (RS 18)

Indu resembles those whom Ann Ulanov describes as individuated woman:

If a [woman] knows her self, she can avoid developing her own
sterotypes of woman and avoid living those of others foisted
upon her. She falls neither into the trap of thinking and acting as
just a housewife or only a career woman nor into the opposite
horror of being unable to accept the pluralism of the contending
forces within her that might lead her to be more than one kind
of woman. (210)

Indu finds that she has lost her identity as a person in the process of becoming
a wife and surrendering to Jayant. She submits rather unwillingly to the
demands of marriage and reshapes herself up to the dictates and expectations
of her husband. Deshpande writes in her essay, The Writing of a Novel about
Indu: “Indu sprang out of the claustrophobic world with a courage I ad\n
mired. She was free. But often to be free is to be lonely. I shared this bleak thought
with Indu” (35). She specifies in the essay mentioned above- “love leads to
the certainty of marriage. But marriage invariably takes you back to the world
of women, of trying to please, of the fear of not-pleasing, of surrender, of self-
abnegation” (35).

Saru has great respect for Boozie, her “fairy godfather” (TDHNT 92)
who has been behind the resounding success of her career. But for his
guidance and encouragement, Saru would not have achieved her ambition so
quickly. Boozie is a handsome and efficient senior doctor who comes forward to help Saru professionally as well as in developing her overall personality. She says he gave me work in a research scheme that brought in some badly needed extra money every month” (TDHNT 92). The chasm between Manu and Saru narrows the intimacy of Saru with Boozie.

The acquaintance of Saru with Boozie begins with a dramatic misunderstanding. The report of a lumbar puncture on a patient enrages the doctor for it had been improperly handled, but the same offers her an opportunity to get closer to him. The doctor who is fond of pretty and intelligent girls, takes interest in Saru who is someone’s wife. Saru enjoys every bit of the man, his language, his accent, his stride, his quick movements, his pandering with patients and the whole of his aura created around him. His dexterity in performing the assignment impresses her. Very soon their relationship reaches a stage where Boozie helps her with enough money to set up a practice in a decent locality. She manages to fulfil her desire of attaining higher education and also better quality of life which otherwise may not have been possible for a common girl like her. A lot of scandalised talk about them does not hamper their liaison, “It took me a long time to realise that his interest in me was as a woman not as a student” (TDHNT 91), says Saru. Boozie very casually puts his hands on her shoulder, her hands her back and hugs her too. Speaking her mind, Saru says:

I told myself my relationship with this man couldn’t, wouldn’t hurt Manu. It was just a teacher-student relationship. If he put
this hand on my shoulder, slapped me on my back, held my hand or hugged me. . . that was just his mannerism and meant nothing. It had nothing to do with me and Manu. (TDHNT 91)

Saru has contempt for Manu for not questioning her as to why Boozie has given her so much money for opening a new consulting room. She becomes more and more resentful of her husband, who deliberately closes his eyes to Boozie displaying his affection towards her in public, at the inauguration of her consulting room.

It all lasts until Saru reaches her ambition. She comes to know about the real personality of Boozie in his personal life. Frustrated at her sadist husband, unable to take legal right to claim her individual right, Saru is impulsive to call on Boozie. As usual, she is overwhelmed by his masculinity in his homely attire. The awareness of his being a drunkard pulls down her fantasy for him. Furthermore, he pretends to be a henpecked husband who takes pretty girls to play as his pawns. The distant ray of hope to find consolation in the company of Boozie once for all disappears and she says, “I’ve got the money, Boozie is giving it to me. And he had, a little later, tried to possess me and failed. And I had turned my back on him” (TDHNT 93).

Earlier the disillusionment Saru’s marital life makes her look for other avenues, but even affairs with Boozie and Padmakar Rao are temporary substitutes for her unfulfilled marital life. Commenting on Saru’s relationship with the two men, Kamini Dinesh says:
In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* also there are other men but the relationship gives no solace. On the other hand, the homosexual Boozie and the frustrated Padma bring to Saru the disillusioning realisation that there can be no happiness or fulfillment in these relationships. They cannot be an escape route from the tension of married life. The woman seeking a crutch has, finally to fall back on herself. (200)

Saru realises that a woman is expected to behave in accordance with the whims and fancies of her husband and economic independence and independent identity are not meant for a woman.

Saru feels that she has done injustice to her mother, husband, children. When Saru goes away to her father’s house, she does not remember the little needs of the children, like seeing Renu off to school every morning and covering Abhi with a blanket every night. She wonders at herself: “Was she an unnatural unloving mother? She had sworn that she would never fail her children in love and understanding as her own mother had done” (161). Saru realises that the concept of a happy family is a mere façade—a bubble that bursts at the slightest tension.

Like other female protagonists, Jaya also finds herself in the midst of a domestic tension when she tries to know about her husband Mohan’s corrupt practices at office. In order to avoid exposure in public, Mohan shifts from his posh Church gate flat to a small apartment in Dadar, where they had once lived soon after their marriage. Here the couple sinks into utter silence in a
mood of frustration and depression, without talking to each other and without sharing their ideas. Jaya is terribly disturbed by the prevailing circumstances in the family, and she starts questioning herself. Consequently, her husband loses his status, and she her identity, her selfhood. She comes to realise. “The real picture, the real ‘you’ never emerges. Looking for it is as bewildering as trying to know how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces” (*TLS* 1).

Indu’s problem is different from that of Saru. Even in her professional life, Indu is expected to curtail her freedom and submit to the demands of the editor, and thus indirectly to the society. She cannot even give up her job which fails to be self-satisfactory. Though Indu is not happy with Jayant, she dares not to leave him. All that she longs for is completeness within herself. Indu finds it not so easy to achieve and confesses “This is my real sorrow. That I can never be complete in myself” (*RS* 31).

Like the other protagonists Jaya and Saru, Indu is caught in the web woven by age-old custom and tradition. Her husband Jayant, though he follows the western style of living, is essentially an average Indian male. He expects his wife to be passive and submissive. Though Indu is encouraged by her education and exposure to free herself from the clutches of tradition, she cannot but accept the code of conduct for Indian women. She finds that she is no different from the traditional women who believe that a woman’s good fortune lies in dying before her husband,
Deshpande presents Indu as a powerless woman who plays the role of a perfect wife in order to keep her husband happy and satisfied. This is evident when she obeys her husband’s orders that she should continue to work for the magazine. She does not want to hurt the feelings of her husband and so she works for the magazine though she hates every moment of it. She exercises extreme control over herself to protect her marriage. As Bhatnagar rightly comments:

> It baffled her to realise that she who had considered herself to be so independent, so intelligent, so clever, she who had been so proud of her logical and rational thinking; she who had been all set to reform Indian womanhood had fallen into the trap waiting for her. (121)

Thus Indu becomes a candid example of a woman without power who is eventually pushed into a ‘to be or not to be’ predicament.

Deshpande’s portrayal of the women of different generations presents the world of women divided into the traditional and the modern. Her heroines of the second generation rebel against the traditional way of life and patriarchal values. They struggle to transcend the restrictive roles. They rebel, reject and seek freedom from the traditional norms and way of life. The first generation women however are used to living within the cocoon. Through her characters, Deshpande reflects the reality that better education and employment opportunities have created awareness among Indian women. Veena Noble Doss rightly observes, “The Indian woman caught in the flux of
tradition and modernity bearing the burden of the past and the aspirations of the future is the crux of feminism in India” (11).

Winning of a husband, prayer for his longevity and the propagation of his lineage through a male child are the only prescribed goals of women. The very conduct of a girl is conditioned by the family from her early childhood. Jaya in That Long Silence is chided by her grandmother for exhibiting curiosity of knowing about her “would be husband” (TLS 137). Some oft-repeated maxims for the “would be wives” (TLS 137) reveal how women are viewed in the society controlled by men and the traditional women of the family. Jaya often hears sentences like “a husband is like a sheltering tree” (TLS 137) and “The happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you” (TLS 138).

The stay at Dadar flat helps Jaya to define herself in her own right. She defines herself with reference to others, tries to correct the situation, and says “‘Plug the ‘hole’ in the heart. I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to ease that long silence between us’” (TLS 192). The movement is from a passive existence to rebeling against the silence imposed by the society around. Jaya says “we can always hope . . . life has always to be made possible” (TLS 193). The ending of the novel That Long Silence with this note of humanness and free action gives rise to myriad choices. Jaya might try to be assertive or might sink in indifference but she admits, there is scope for growth and change.
The social stigmas associated with divorce in the Indian society haunt Sumi, in *A Matter of Time* and she has to struggle and suffer at various levels — economic, emotional and psychological. A woman may get relief from the painful life of a wrong marriage through divorce, but it will not always re-establish her socially, psychologically or financially: “Perhaps things will work out, maybe we will be able to go on, even if, we can’t go back” (*AMT* 30). Moreover, it can also turn out to be the beginning of another phase of troubles as the divorcee has to further bear the onslaught of a harsh society which does not allow her to be free and happy.

Sumi wonders at the fate of women being measured only through their marital status. A woman in the society gets respect only if she has her husband, irrespective of the number of wives or mistresses he has, their incompatibility, his cruel treatment of or his stony silence with his wife. It is enough if they live together under the same roof because “what is a woman without a husband?” (*AMT* 167). Sumi thinks of her parents — Kalyani and Sripathi, who live like strangers under the same roof and have not spoken for years. “But her Kumkum is intact and she can move in the company of women with the pride of a wife” (*AMT* 167). Sumi cannot comprehend the meaning of such an existence, which is no existence in the true sense. She ponders:

Is it enough to have a husband, and never mind of the fact that he has not looked at your face for years, never mind the fact that he has not spoken to you for decades? Does this wifehood
make up for everything, for the deprivation of a man’s life, for
the feel of his body against yours, the warmth of his breath on
your face, the touch of his lips on yours . . . . (AMT 167)

Kalyani, like a majority of women, accepts life as it is, and when she has to
put her signature, she signs her name very carefully as Kalyani Bai Pandit.
Aru is amazed at this, and wonders “how can she still have his name for God’s
sake?” (AMT 140). It is not easy for a woman, separated or divorced from her
husband, to begin a new life because she feels guilty of violating the sacred
bond of marriage and seeking divorce.

To conform to the ideals of a wife and a mother, the protagonists of
Deshpande suppress their emotional needs and become lovely but vulnerable.
The childhood experiences of Jaya in That Long Silence have conditioned her
to find social and psychological justification in her marriage. She wants to
fashion herself according to the dreams of her husband imitating the life
pattern of women in orthodox families, as that way “lay, well, if not
happiness, at least the consciousness of doing right, freedom and guilt” (TLS
84). She even accepts her new name after marriage and wants to remain a
“soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her
family. A woman who coped” (TLS 16). Her innate sensitivity however,
revolts against these attempts to cram herself into the ideological mould of a
conventional wife, and she speaks out: “I had to admit the truth to myself that
I had often found family life endurable. Worse than anything else had been the
boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony” (TLS 4).
Marriage and home do not give any autonomy to Jaya as a woman. Her devotion to her family does not make her happy, as it fails to provide any domestic, intellectual or emotional fulfilment. Her creativity is merely an outlet and not a passion. Her relationship with Kamat is also an escapade to find empathy and sharing. Keenly aware of her own imperfect freedom, Jaya opts for silence — obedience, surrender, subordination, timidity and passive acceptance of things in life. She passionately bursts into rumination: “He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire, but I saw despair. I saw despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender” (*TLS* 36).

Mohan easily takes up the role of a protector, provider and custodian without trying to understand the real nature of her silence. The novel *That Long Silence* records the fact that the changing social dynamics have brought about a change in the socio-economic-educational-rights-awareness among the women but they still have to create a niche for themselves. The recent upsurge of fundamentalism in various modes too threatens the emancipated future of women. Economically independent and financially liberated women are also driven to feel such constraints: “Stay at home, look after your babies, keep out the rest of the world, you are safe. That poor idiotic woman Suhasini believed in this. I know better, now I know that safety is not always unattainable. You are never safe” (*TLS* 17).

Deshpande’s attempts are always to portray the new Indian woman and her dilemma in her novels. She concerns herself with the plight of the modern
Indian woman trying to understand herself and to preserve her identity as wife, mother and above all as a human being. The growth of a girl in the Indian society is seen mainly in relation to her attitude towards her family and her duty towards it. The successful formation of a girl’s identity depends upon the delicate balance that she maintains between submission and revolt.

The burden of the female child is more tedious than that of the male child because of the aspects of her body — the function of her femaleness intrude upon the growth of her personality. This is a great hindrance in the inner growth of the child. It is in the adjustment that the family makes to the changing biological process, and the girl’s attitude towards the family and parents, that the identity of the child gets defined and firmly established.

Down the ages, the place of women in the tradition-bound, male dominated society has been very inevitable. Despite epochmaking changes, the position of women — economic, social and cultural — has not shown much change. A vast majority of women are reconciled to a life of humiliation in the form of gender bias while performing the roles of wives and mothers in a rigidly custom bound milieu in which they live. Even women with liberal modern education, with the yearning to break away from time honoured crippling and iniquitous social law, do often lose their mooring and find their self in perilously embarrassing situations. Even economically independent women like Saru have not been able to clear off the besetting pitfalls created by the customs and beliefs sedulously preserved in the tradition bound Indian society.
The women in Deshpande are caught between a traditional upbringing and the longing for freedom in the modern sense. Being a traditional middle class woman, Jaya hovers between submission and assertion. In her traditional role model, she upholds the maxim that a husband is like a sheltering tree, and she hardly ever steps out of his shadow and she reduces her wants and desires to the bare minimum. Trying to be an ‘ideal’ wife, and mother, Jaya always thinks of only the comforts of her man. “I know you better than you know yourself”, I had once told Mohan. And I had meant it; wasn’t he my profession, my career, my means of livelihood?” (TLS 75). Mohan had named her Suhasini after their marriage. Jaya stood for ‘victory’ and Suhasini for ‘submission’. To Jaya, Suhasini has become a symbol of a pains-taking and fastidious housewife, who looks after children very well and who maintains the house in order. She regards herself as a travesty of the noble Gandhadri for her Dhritasashtra, king of Hastinapur:

If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly. I did not want to know anything. It was enough for me that we moved to Bombay, that we could send Rahul and Rati to good schools, that I could have the things we needed . . . decent clothes, a fridge, a gas connection [and] traveling first class. And there was enough for Mohan to send home to his father — for Sudha’s fees, Vasant’s clothes and Sudha’s marriage. (TLS 61-62)
It is significant that Jaya decides to break her seventeen years of silence and gives up being a mere passive partner to Mohan, her husband. She decides to assert herself as an individual and a woman, wife and mother. Though she chooses to remain within the family, a change is wrought inside.

Indu’s self-alienation increases as she becomes aware of the contradiction between her desire to conform to a cultural ideal of feminine passivity and her ambition to be a creative writer. This results in Indu perceiving herself only as a shadow of the female self, a negative and an object. Miller observes that “when one is an object not a subject, all of one’s own psychical and sexual impulses and interests are presumed not to exist independently” (63). Indu is hedged in, unable to ‘go on’ through the ordeal of life. She feels trapped and endlessly chained – to the long dusty road that lay ahead of her.

The fight of sensible, educated and economically independent Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is worthwhile and yet she remains a weak and neglected woman. Though religious and cultural perceptions continue to influence societal and individual approaches to the status of women, both within and outside the household, Saru has to struggle against numerous monolithic systems to maintain herself. Though she makes all efforts to overcome the scarcity syndrome and identity-crisis, she is also vulnerable, submissive and conformist, to a certain extent. Manu, Saru’s husband, tries to instill in her mind the idea that a wife can never equal her husband even if she occupies a higher position professionally “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).

Saru, being a professional woman, dislocates the binary of husband as provider and protector versus wife as recipient and protected. Her 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 the Indian society which sways societal definitions and expectations of the public and private roles of women. Consequently, women are expected to be traditional both in domestic and public spheres. The complex situations in Saru’s life focus on the pathetic state of an Indian middle class working woman. Though the employment of the wife can serve as the means of her economic independence and self-actualization, it does not entail the potential to reduce the gap between men and women.

Saru thinks that her husband will be a sanctuary but it becomes a prison because of her husband’s attitude. She wants to break away from the clutches of the traditional values the family represents. Saru tries to overcome the trauma and agonies of being a woman. She wishes to lead a peaceful and prosperous life and tries to be friendly with others, but her attitude and self-respect keeps everyone at a safe distance. Gradually she understands that she has to bridge the gap and bring about a change in life.
Young modern women like Indu are sandwiched between tradition and modernity. Those who leave behind the convention and take the initiative to join modernity are entangled as Maria Mies observes:

The non-conforming conduct of the women is not the consequence of an external necessity but of changed consciousness. They are not satisfied with the rhetoric of equality between man and woman, but want to see that the right to an individual life and the right to the development of the individual capabilities are realised in their own lives. (29)

According to Indu, one should listen to the dictates of one’s own conscience and be true to oneself in word as well as in deed. Indu realises her position in the ancestral house and responsibilities, fears and frustrations do not touch her. The turmoil and distaste that had filled her, slowly begin to seep out of her. She is viewed as an assertive woman with an emerging new self. She realises what she lacks, “I knew... what it was that my life had lacked. It was the quality of courage” (RS 150).

Indu asserts her position as a human being equal to that of a man and does not want to submit herself to anyone’s dictates. This is the focus of her bitter struggle through conflicting trends between the age–old traditions and the emerging new ideas. Deshpande seems to have carved out the character of Indu to effectively depict her own reflections on the travail of a modern Indian woman passing through the cotemporary transitional stage in the evolving social values. Sarabjit Sandhu in his The Image of Woman in the Novels of
Shashi Deshpande summarizes this aspect of the matter in the following words:

Deshpande has very exquisitely pinpointed the inner struggle and sufferings of the new class of Indian women through the character of Indu who has raised many basic questions regarding modern women who are rooted and shaped by the Indian customs but influenced by the scientific knowledge of the West. (48)

It is true that Deshpande presents a very conventional idea of feminism. Within the four walls of domesticity, she presents a certain image of middle class ethos. There is a deep struggle with the previous generation of women and distancing of mother, but this situation again creates a lacuna as in the case of Saru. Saru is able to overcome her separation anxiety only when she returns to her parental home and talks to her father. Deshpande recognizes the importance of interaction among different generations of women. She emphasizes the fact that women’s strength lies in their acknowledgement of their desires not only sexual but creative as well. Deshpande’s work exemplifies that women need to be assertive in order to regain their mental equipoise and individuality.

The women in Deshpande not merely oppose tradition with modernity or Westernization with Indian culture. They grapple with their struggle which drags them through innocence and experience, ignorance and knowledge, girlhood and adulthood, repression and submission and rebellion, joy and
To Deshpande, life as a girl is an integral part of an adult life. She recognizes the childhood influences and tendencies, and in time of crisis, her characters turn back to the past to search for reasons within and in the family. Her fiction is an example of the ways in which a girl child’s particular position, social reality and psychological growth determine her personality. Deshpande argues that it would be psychologically unrealistic to imagine that awareness within a woman emerges suddenly, that she becomes a ‘person’ with the onset of adolescence. The role of early life experiences, the role of education, closeness to parents, relationship with siblings are some very crucial elements that go a long way in creating a woman’s personality. However good a woman may be, even if it were a Sitadevi, she has to undergo the fire trial. The trial may take on so many forms, but a woman must go through them all.

According to Deshpande, the choice is left to the individual. The modern Indian women should express their courage in their choice to stay and face fresh challenges boldly and with self-confidence. A woman has to realise her position and uplift herself. There is no one else to give her a helping hand. She has to help herself, express herself and find a firm footing for herself in the family and the society.

Deshpande is of the view that obedience and intelligence are virtues. Meek submission and servitude are not matters of intelligence anymore for the women characters of Deshpande. Hence it is natural for them, alienated by the suppressive atmosphere, to try to be in the real world where they can
synchronise with intelligent people, with their ideas and with their behaviour. Their desire is not to go into the world to get lost but to find out means to remain themselves in spite of the world. They want to shed all the past conditions and drop all those things which cannot be explained. Their search is for a new existence where they can fight and get out of the trap.

The question is life or no-life. When women take the plunge into the unknown and untested, it is impossible to declare who the winner is. It does not matter what they are doing; what matters is that they are moving and knocking at the doors of comforts and a new life. This leads the women characters like Saru, Indu and Jaya to be on a quest that will bring them to new shores. They desire to open, to blossom, to open petals and release their fragrance. Most importantly, it is an effort to live life on their own. It is an individual phenomenon and a constant unburdening of all that is dead, so that life can go on growing and is not crushed under the weight of the dead. This quest is an effort to be themselves. The protagonists realise that the home and parents of traditional concepts are not their refuge but that they are their own refuge. Hence, after rejuvenating themselves, they start their lives with a new vigour, hoping to emerge as “beauteous being[s]” (TBV 65).