A Passage to Darkness
Deshpande in his preface to the published text of *A Passage to Darkness* says:

“It might be said that, in a way, Dubey shaped this play. Today champions of the experimental play in Marathi have become a rarity. Of those that remain, Dubey is in the forefront. He is the pioneer. Marathi drama must acknowledge its indebtedness to him”.

Two reasons emerge from the above to justify the choice of *A Passage to Darkness* as the focus of study here: the participation of Satyadev Dubey, arguably the most imaginative, committed and adventurous theatre director in Maharashtra, in its making; and the fact that it was written and produced at the beginning of the ‘new age’ to which the next section of this book is devoted.

There is third reason. *A Passage to Darkness* is generally held to be Deshpande’s most complex, nature and successful play.

Deshpande’s response to the question why *A Passage to Darkness* tends to pessimism could equally well apply, along with its hope of change, to the theatre scene as it existed in Pune and Mumbai since the time of its writing. He says:

* The page no’s in parentheses refer to G.P. Deshpande’s *A Passage to Darkness*, (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1998).
"I can offer only one reason for my pessimism. For the moment, at least, I cannot see any other end for the kind of social change a person like me is interested in. Perhaps in ten years from now, the situation will have changed and Andhar Yatra will be transformed into Prakash Yatra... And then this play will serve only as a marker of a specific historical situation."²

Vasundhara always believes in parallel existence. Her philosophy says, all unhappiness comes from involvement or attachment. She made it her motto. To her, that alone is the way to keep unhappiness at bay. But she is oblivious of her indirect attachment to son-like Ashwath through whom she wants to create a new ‘Sankhya’. She wants to foster Ashwath on her milk through whom she dreams of the creation of new ‘Sankhya’. “Kapila in the Mahabharata fostered Panchashikha on her milk and thus emerged the ‘Sankhya Philosophy.’³ In the same way Vasundhara too wishes to create a new Sankhya. But the very purpose of her life gets lost with the wrong step of Ashwath resulting in his death. That is the irony of Vasundhara’s ideology.

Vasundhara: I told Ashwath that story in Mahabharata where Kapila suckled Panchashikha, her husband Asuri’s disciple, and from her milk originated Sankhya Philosophy… Ashwath too could have been like that. (p. 138)
Vasundhara’s married life with Parikshit is a tragedy. Though she shows love and affection towards her husband, she is reduced to a commodity by him and that leads to a break in their relationship:

Vasundhara: Parikshit and I were married only for 5-6 years. He could see quite a few things in my looks. He decided to use them as a ‘commodity’. I don’t know how I became a part of the game. But that is what happened. Parikshit decided to use my body to political and financial ends. (p. 118)

Here, Deshpande compares Vasundhara to a mythological character Draupadi. Draupadi though a powerful character in Hindu mythology got defeated by her fate. Her fate was at the mercy of the cast of the dice. She was used as a pawn in the game by Yudhishter. Vasundhara’s predicament is made explicit here. She is turned into a pawn by Parikshit.

Vasundhara: I was used as a pawn in the game. That is what I was to Parikshit. Shripad, in this society ‘woman’ has always been used as a pawn. That was the fate of Draupadi too. (p. 119)

In this context Vasundhara can aptly be related to ‘Sarita’ in Vijay Tendulkar’s Kamala. Arundhati Banerjee remarks: “Like Kamala, Sarita is
also an object in Jadhav’s life, an object that provides physical enjoyment, social companionship and domestic comfort.”

Vasundhara never wants to get entangled in the marital knot again. So, she smoothly rejects the marriage proposals from both Daulatrao and Shripad.

**Vasundhara:** When I walked out on Parikshit, this man, Daulatrao Rajmane was much too willing to be mine openly. It was I who said ‘no’ to him. This was my way of scoring over the history which wanted to reduce me to a pawn. I am self-sufficient. I am living an independent, parallel life and that is what I want for myself now and always. (p. 119)

Yet she is unable to deny her involvement with both of them. This is quite evident from her words.

**Vasundhara:** (to Shripad) It is very clear and simple. Your hand moving on my body stopped abruptly. I was in your arms – all yours. Your hands fondling my intense body stopped suddenly. The passion in your fawn-like eyes … (p. 115)
The marital knot is an obstacle for her obsession as it would lead to her dependence. That’s why she abstains herself from marriage. She knows the mentality of men and is very good at handling them at various situations. In this context, Vasundhara can be rightly compared to ‘Madhuravani’ of Gurajada’s *Kanyasulkam*. Madhuravani understands the psychology of all the people surrounding her. She can easily discriminate the good from the bad. She can handle any man and any situation with ease.

Daulatrao, in the beginning starts as a politician and towards the end evolves into a cultured, sensitive human being. He was earlier fascinated by Vasundhara but later understands her:

**Daulatrao:** How does one get angry with you? You have made up your mind not to get involved. In fact your neat division of body and soul is so perfect that even the spiritual stalwarts could learn a thing or two from you!

(p. 130)

Through the interludes, while talking to Vasundhara, Daulatrao makes his political stance amply clear. He is not the sort of a stereotypical politician who pervades in any literature. In being what he is, Daulatrao shows the futility of the forms of living chosen by Vasundhara and the other protagonists. At the same time he says to the audience that this is what a politician is, or at least has been. Now he cannot be dismissed so easily as corrupt and despicable.
The majority of them are corrupt but they are not the only ones who are corrupt. Corruption is a multifarious phenomenon, of which the venality of the politicians is just one aspect. Normally we tend to ascribe this phenomenon called 'corruption' solely to the politicians and bureaucrats. But this amounts only to self-deception.

Daulatrao is an altogether different proposition. He transcends both the convenient indifference of the people and the stereotypical projection of the politicians. One can properly understand his political game only when one thinks of his politics and these traits in his character. What is true about his politics is also true about his personality. As G.P. Deshpande opines:

"Maharashtra has known many generations of Maratha politicians from Shahu Maharaj to Yeshwantrao Chavan, including Keshavaraao Jedhe and Shankarrao More, who have been progressive, far-sighted, well-read and capable of thinking beyond caste. I wished to present those generations, their culture, their humaneness as it was...

I created Daulatrao in order place before the Marathi audience a politician who went beyond the self-serving apathy which I had observed about politics and the false images of it that had been put about".

Another character drawn from observed reality, is the vice-chancellor of the university, Sadashivrao. In him, as in Daulatrao, one can see hidden
depths. Their ideas, and the language in which they express themselves have a tried-and-tested quality about them which make them totally credible.

The confrontation here is between a complacent academic, who has deluded himself into believing that he is a man of principle refusing to submit to political duress and the astute politician who, while he sees right through people's fancy self-images, appears to take them at face value:

**Daulatrao:** Listen. Both you and I know this Prasad Trivedi's background very well. He's moved from Lohia-ism to Marxism to power-ism. He's a chameleon.

You mustn't take him seriously.

**Sadashivrao:** Look here. I haven't come to discuss his political journey. I came to talk about his politics - the politics he is playing in the university. His phone call was just an excuse. Don't tell me tales about how his politics is inevitable and how I must put up with it. I am a vice-chancellor, not an aspiring candidate for Panchayat Samiti ticket.

**Daulatrao:** *(Some what brutally, though still smiling)*: What, exactly, would you say was the difference between the two? Could you explain it to me? *(p. 109)*
Shrewdly, Daulatrao moves Sadashivrao from discussing his having Prasad Trivedi dealt with, to Shripad’s not being given the promotion that was due to him. He sees straight through Sadashivrao’s excuse that this was a committee decision and sees it as what it is—a decision taken by Sadashivrao to please the political bosses.

**Daulatrao:** You should have taken the lead in this matter. A distinguished scholar victimized for political reasons, such situations need to be avoided. Our party, our government, is more progressive than that. Dear vice-chancellor. Please do not worry so much about our welfare.

**Sadashivrao:** Look, I know a gross injustice has been done to Shripad. I regret it as much as anyone else.

**Daulatrao:** You still don’t get the point. This government isn’t scared of a hundred or so Marxists and the world must know it...

(p. 114)

Daulatrao’s command over the situation and its ramifications is total. In this part of his life, he is completely credible. In contrast, let us look the scene between him and Vasundhara, after which the above scene between the two men comes as a flash back. In this scene, Vasundhara stands like a piece of sculpture; her back and partial profile are observed by Daulatrao. His eyes rove over her, tasting her beauty, while he expertly cuts and eats betel nut:
Daulatrao: I am late. I haven’t had any time this week. Are you very angry? These never-ending meetings. I often feel like giving up everything to sit at your feet...looking at your feet...actually, not your feet at all...looking at your smooth calves. But I just don’t have the time. Angry? Now that vice-chancellor, our Sadashiv. He suddenly turned up. I hadn’t had a talk with you. I have learnt how to talk and behave with these professor-type people from you. But I still get a little jittery even now if I haven’t spoken to you. (p. 107)

This is the first encounter with Vasundhara where she has been introduced. She has come on as the nati to introduce the play, dressed in a nine-yard sari, traditional jewellery, her hair in a bun with a string of flowers around it, suggesting an upper-caste woman. She says she has no name but we can call her Vasundhara, which, of course, means earth. The meeting between her and Daulatrao takes place on two levels. He eyes her and later ‘feels her up’ as sex object. When he talks to her, however, he assumes the helplessness and inexperience of a callow youth. For she disbelieves his assertion that she has taught him the ways of the world. It is after this introduction that the scene between Daulatrao and Sadashivrao takes place as Daulatrao’s flash back narration, where we see Daulatrao in total command.
What, then, is Vasundhara all about? What is the nature of the relationship between Daulatrao and her? What is the most reliable clue to this entity? Is she the earth? Is she an idea? Is she a woman?

As the play proceeds, we gather the following information about Vasundhara, delivered in large chunks. Vasundhara is the daughter of a logician philosopher. She has been sexually exploited by her husband, Parikshit, for his own material ends. Because, 'beauty, too, has its own power', she met her lover, Daulatrao, in the course of one of these transactions. She has left Parikshit, but has refused to marry Daulatrao either for she doesn’t want to get entangled in the marital knot once again. She wishes to live a life of a non-involvement.

His involvement with Vasundhara, in fact, speaks only of his sensitivity and sense of aesthetics. Besides, 'he is educated, sagacious and far sighted.' He is humane in his attachments. Even after turning down of his marriage proposal by Vasundhara, he continues to be friend and always cautions her against the impending catastrophe. He cautions her about the things involved in the kind of politics that Ashwath and Shripad are playing.

Daulatrao: Now listen carefully to what I say. There are so many things involved in the kind of politics that Ashwath and Shripad are playing. Have you heard the term ‘Police Encounter?’ Try to dissuade him.
Try to dissuade Shripad too. There is no point in risking one’s life like that. This is an impending catastrophe you have to deal with. I am so involved with you that I thought I would be failing in my duty if I didn’t caution you against it sufficiently in advance. (p. 132)

In keeping with this resolution, she later refuses Shripad, the Marxist University lecturer who proposes marriage.

Vasundhara: Mask? And you want to strip it off? You want to expose me? Shripad, I am no class enemy (laughs). I am aware of the storm raging inside you. You want to know my history. Your passion even for history is irrepressible. Isn’t that the reason for the abrupt arrest of your kindling hand?

On the other hand, Shripad’s protégé Ashwath has drifted away from him politically.

Ashwath (to Shripad): What you say may be right, but I can’t sit tight here doing nothing. To tell you frankly, I don’t agree with you at all. I must go. I must do something about it. I shall go to Nandoshi. (pp. 135-136)
Shripad is a trifle surprised at his resolve. Vasundhara’s rejection of his proposal and Ashwath’s taking a wrong step are the two things which seal his fate. Being a leftist he has to carry on his sense of duty:

**Shripad:** No, Vasundhara, I can’t explain myself very clearly but I think going to Nandoshi is my foremost duty at the moment. A duty which is extremely personal. Ashwath is missing and so is Sayaji. I feel as though both my arms are severed. I must go to the battlefield now...

(p. 139)

Ashwath, the young marxist student Vasundhara has been coaching in Sanskrit, gets killed in a police encounter at the Andhra Maharashtra border.

**Shripad:** You have liquidated them! You came to inform me of the police encounter. You got rid of them finally… Get lost, Ghanashyam. Get out before I kill you.  

(p. 138)

Shripad who advised him against going there, himself rushes there after Ashwath’s murder. But the plight of Shripad leads him to his imprisonment. Ghanashyam who is also an activist brings this news to Daulatrao.

**Ghanashyam:** Shripad left for Bhadali immediately after hearing about the police encounter. I had contacted Gunasekhar Reddy. Presently Shripad is in Adilabad jail.

(p. 143)
“Even if Daulatrao arranges for his release there is nothing much left for
him to look forward to in life.”⁶ And the son-like Ashwath who was the only
hope in the looks of Vasundhara, dies. Vasundhara has got everything she had
lived and hoped for. She sees her story as tragic.

On the mythical level, she is Anasuya who transformed Brahma,
Vishnu, Maheshwara into little infants. The three men in Vasundhara’s life and
her motherly love for Ashwath suggest the triumvirate. She is also history
transformed into myth, symbolizing the history of this nation:

“A historical movement becomes a story and this story becomes a
myth... Before your eyes Vasundhara also becomes a myth...
Hers and this nation’s history are not different. That history, as
Agarkar has stated, is the history of a society that began its
journey towards destruction in the Maurya period itself.”⁷

Vasundhara is also:

“... the eternal form of woman. She is as much the past as she is
the present. In Indian tradition, the woman is one who suffers and
there by grows in moral stature. In eastern societies many have
to bear unending hardships in life, but none as much as women.
Consequently, if a reflection of Indian society is sought, it is to be
found in their suffering, rage and grief. Eastern societies have
created nothing where by woman should feel hopeful. That is why this play is Vasundhara's, and more importantly, pessimistic."8

The first time we hear Vasundhara as herself is in her scene with Shripad. The exchange between the two lovers seems to be constructed largely to reveal Vasundhara in her many symbolic forms. For instance, Shripad says at the beginning, ‘The chemistry of your spirit is mysterious. I have still not understood it. Even when you give yourself in all your fullness to me, I keep thinking there is an impenetrable cocoon around you.’ Soon after this he says, ‘you say you want to live a free life, unattached, independent. Yet you are involved with this man. Tell me, how true and how much of a facade is your detachment?’

This is certainly not an invitation to recount to him the history of her life; yet she interprets it as such and proceeds to do so. But before launching on her long narration, she makes a statement with regard to another aspect of her symbolic self - ‘Shripad, I do not lust after history. I am a Hindu. I acknowledge mythology. I do not acknowledge history. I do not understand the value that the European culture attaches to history.’ Despite being broken, she asserts that she is still whole. Citing the line from the Upanishads which states that a whole subtracted from a whole is still a whole, she says, ‘Shripad I am certain that the experience of a woman lies behind this Upanishadic
She goes on to say, 'I am a myth from the Puranas.' After this comes her personal history. And then, without any real provocation, she launches into her theory of detachment, of which the key line is, 'All sorrows proceed from involvement, from attachment. That is why I have made detachment my 'dharma'. Finally she answers Shripad's warning that she must not fill Ashwath's mind with her theories, but stick to teaching him Sanskrit, I want nothing more than to spread over Ashwath the coverlet of my love.'

In her scene with Ashwath, Vasundhara again makes long statements instead of engaging in a dialogue. Arguing against Ashwath's active participation in left politics, she looks back upon her life and forward to what she sees as her tragic future and says:

An inner voice tells me my world is ending. Ashwath, who are you to me? My son! The desire for a son has remained unfulfilled in me. Parikshit saw an exchange value in my beauty. He used me as a coin. I allowed him to do so, too. Coins have no wishes, no dreams, no desires. Others desire coins... what is it that I feel for you?...

(pp. 126-127)

Vasundhara has done her M.A. in Sanskrit but has also worked as a model. While she refers to myths and puranas, she also speaks of glossy magazines and investigative journalism. If she quotes from the upanishads, she also cites *lavanis*. If she is made sublime in the eternal values of her being, she
is also pulled down to earth by her erotic sensuousness. Yet, with all that, she remains a widely differentiated assortment of attributes without achieving a wholeness to which we can respond at a human level.

Shripad says that he does not believe in Vasundhara’s philosophy of parallel existence and detachment. He opines that there will never be anything like parallel or independent living. Their politics insists that there is no life without society.

**Shripad:** Don’t waste time in non-sensical talk. You want parallel living with everyone. If you ask me, there is not and never will be anything like parallel or independent living. (p.120)

Vasundhara fails to see any point in Shripad’s and Ashwath’s persistence to understand history in order to bring about change as “she has ‘purana’ ingrained in her psyche.” To her, it is only a wasteful exercise.

**Vasundhara:** Are you put off, SHRIPAD, I have no passion whatsoever for history. I am a Hindu, born of a Shastri. I don’t accept history. I respect puranas. (p. 116)

She says, “Vedanta names ‘action’ as the basic cause of despair while according to Buddhist philosophy all unhappiness stems from ‘desire’. Vasundhara relates to such philosophy and that’s why her peculiar detachment,
with-holding herself from total involvement, is a road to salvation. In the end, she does face excruciating torture but not because her hopes crumble\textsuperscript{10}. Even if one knows that destiny is destiny, it does not lessen the intensity of her agony. The plight of the traditional Indian woman has no parallel. "The Indian woman's suffering and agony give a real glimpse of Indian society."\textsuperscript{11}

Even Daulatrao tells in the beginning that we do not evaluate the disasters in their proper perspective because each wants a parallel life for himself.

**Daulatrao:** I will tell you what I think. It has become extremely important for you to know of certain things without any further time loss. If you do not know it sufficiently in advance, it will shatter you. At this stage neither you nor I can afford such a thing. I have come today specially to caution you. The decision, of course, will be yours. (p. 131)

"Nobody is interested in exploring an all encompassing theory and practice. Vasundhara's insistence on parallel and independent living is identical to that of those who refuse to take up the problems one by one and then seek answers acceptable to all"\textsuperscript{12}. And such people move from one impasse to the other and confront their inevitable doom. Here "Vasundhara's tragedy is our tragedy."\textsuperscript{13} The confidence of the progressives like Vasundhara,
“their trust in parallel living and reluctance to plan action well ahead of time to meet particular crisis.”¹⁴ find their echo is Vasundhara’s character.

The internal difference within the leftists in India is evident with the Ramnathan’s case which traces out the differences between the thinking of Shripad and Ashwath:

**Ashwath:** Ramnathan has been killed by the police. I am thinking of going to Nandoshi. Sayaji and Bhivrao are with me. If you have to keep the fire burning, you have to add fuel every now and then …

**Shripad:** That is taken care of by the ongoing struggle. You need not go Ashwath, people like you and Sayaji are not the friends of the government officials. Unless you are fully equipped you should not take on the enemy.

**Ashwath:** What you say may be right, but I can’t sit tight here doing nothing. To tell you frankly, I don’t agree with you at all. I must go. I must do something about it. I shall go to Nandoshi. (pp. 134-136)

“What is important here is that the difference of opinion within the party leads to their destruction. Ashwath’s disappearance, Shripad’s arrerst and such things are part of this. ‘Catching them alone and finishing them’ is the strategy...
of their enemies. The revolutionaries have to accept such defeats as their lot.”\textsuperscript{15}
After all, “politics demands a price of its own.”\textsuperscript{16} Now the similarity between their difference and Vasundhara’s ‘parallel living’ is clear.

It is said in the play that if at all Daulatrao is sad about anything, it is only that he thinks that Vasundhara does not really appreciate the nature and extent of his dependence on her. But he has never been explicit about it to her:

\textbf{Daulatrao:} There are so many things you could do. You know it pretty well. Are you testing me? Or are you making fun of my dependence on you? Why am I dependent on you? I have thought this over several times, but I can’t get an answer. (p.128)

Not only Daulatrao’s but also same is the case with the rest of them - Shripad’s and Ashwath’s too.

At last, Vasundhara’s experiment of a parallel existence has failed. With that “Vasundhara on whom they all thrive, realizes at a critical moment that she herself has become suddenly and inevitably dependent on some one else.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{Vasundhara:} So you had your Vendetta! I turned down your proposal and you chose to settle the scores thus. Tell me, Daulatrao, didn’t you bring this about
purposely? You could not really put with my wish for parallel living so you taught me a lesson.

She has no recourse left but to throw herself into Daulatrao’s open arms in self pity.

Her ideology of parallel existence has failed. Her utopia of the creation of the new Sankhya could not materialize. Now the cycle of her search and suffering is complete. As Deshpande says:

“It is my belief that this insistence on parallelism is responsible for the defeat we have all had to suffer. Our elites understand only too well how these movements and ideas are to be separately trapped and killed. They do get killed and the seats of the powerful are strengthened in the process while tragedy awaits those who fight in their parallel streams.”

Thus the history of this society is not very different from that of her own. It is not a grand well-defined glory. It is a passage to darkness.
REFERENCES


4. The Literary Criterion, XXXIX, p.59.


8. Ibid, p.23

9. Ibid, p.23


11. Ibid, p.99

12. Ibid, p.99

13. Ibid, p.100

14. Ibid, p.100

15. Ibid, p.100

16. Ibid, p.101


18. Ibid, P.98