CHAPTER - V

THE DETECTIVE NOVELS

If I Die Today (1982) and Come Up and Be Dead (1983) are different from the other novels of Shashi Deshpande, not in their philosophy but in their narrative technique. The first one was originally published as a short story and later developed into a novel, the second one was meant for serial publication. Both have much of the paraphernalia of detective fiction and hence there is some propriety in clubbing them together here for discussion.

In both the novels there are murders committed and murders attempted, but the criminals betray themselves and get caught red-handed though not through anybody else's ingenuity. There is no Sherlock Holmes after them. The stories are illustrations, it may be said, of the moral "Murder will out". Dr. Vidya is caught red-handed attempting to stab Dr. Vijay, though she has been successful in murdering two persons earlier. Dr. Girish, in Come Up and Be Dead, is caught red-handed because the police come in search of Devayani. The identity of the murderer of Pratap and Mrs. Raman is known and he will be caught. There is nobody's intuition at work or the
infallible logic of a Sherlock Holmes. There is no complicated puzzle-solving game in either of the novels. Where these two novels differ from the true-to-form detective novel is the murders and the detection are not the central things in them.

In fact, in *If I Die Today* no one suspects that Guru and Tony have been murdered, since both the deaths could have been due to natural causes — Guru is suffering from cancer and Tony an alcoholic who could have fallen into the tank and got drowned.

Even in *Come up*, the death of Pratap could have been the result of a fall from the top of a ladder. Only the death of Mrs. Raman is apparently a murder.

There are no niceties of deductive technique, primarily because the purpose of Shri Deshpande is not to titillate the curiosity of the reader to find out "who dun it" but to illustrate her philosophy of life, which is existential-humanistic. However, one cannot help but notice that there is a little too much of sermonizing in both the novels, particularly the former.

*IF I DIE TODAY*

Blurbs on the covers of a paperback or on the jackets of hard covers are meant to attract readers to purchase and
peruse the book. Since they are advertisements, the theme and treatment are usually couched in eulogistic terms. The blurb on If I Die Today makes it out to be a kind of crime fiction, a detective story in which two persons are killed by one amongst a group of doctors. To quote a part of the blurb:

"This is a gripping story of men and women charged with fear and with the sense of violence around them."¹ The description applies only to a small part of the novel but entirely misleading as far as its theme is concerned. True, the usual characteristics of a detective novel are all there -- murders, the unsuspected criminal, hints dropped here and there which are noticed during a second reading only, and the final discovery of the criminal, but the real theme of the novel is not murder and violence, but the existential humanistic philosophy that man can achieve true freedom only through revealing himself to himself and not by wearing masks to conceal himself from himself and others. This involves the two fundamental principles of existentialism, viz., (a) a search for self-identity and (b) man is free to choose, but he is entirely responsible for his choice. And it is an irony of

¹The outer cover of If I Die Today (Sahidabad U.P. India: Tarang paper backs, a Division of Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd. 1982); hereafter referred to as If I Die.
life that the man who advocates and practices such philosophy in this novel should be looked at with ambivalent feelings by the people who know him. The entire action is seen through the eyes of Manju who is the mouth-piece of the writer, Smt. Deshapande. Manju is eminently suited to be the narrator for several reasons. She is essentially honest, straight-forward, broad-minded, kind-hearted and intelligent. She is a lecturer in a college, well-educated and well-read. She is sensitive enough to notice nuances of feelings not only in herself but in others.

The action takes place against the background of a medical college campus. The Sethji who built the college and campus chanced out the plan with an eye for every detail, saying,

"The hospital ... here, Hostels for the students ... here. Houses for the staff ... here." He thought of everything from schools and playgrounds for the children, and parks and shops, to trees that lined the little avenues in the residential colony. A different type for each avenue. We have gulmohar on ours. Each morning in May, when I step out of the house and raise my eyes to the blazing scarlet canopy over my head, I think of him, the Sethji. But it was the hospital which was his joy, his pride, his favourite child. For it he had cast his net wide ... all over the world, in fact ... and snared the best he could. A list of the departments reads like a comprehensive schedule of the various specialists. Nothing was spared in equipping them or staffing them. Yes,
he thought of everything, our Sethji ... I see our lives as idyllic. There we were, in our neat, well-built, bright, comfortable houses, with enough money, scarcely any troublesome dependents and just one or two children. We were, most of us, intelligent, liberal and modern in our outlooks. Our children were healthy, had their shots at the right time and drank boiled water only as long as was necessary. Most of us, too, were doing the kind of work we wanted to do. What more could one want? (pp.2-4)

The terms that Ms. Deshpande uses to describe the hospital and the medical campus remind one of the perfection of the Garden of Eden created by God for Adam and Eve. The theme of the novel is like an allegory of the story of Adam and Eve continued beyond the Fall. It was, in a sense, a fortunate Fall, for Adam and Eve have a chance to rise again through their own conscious efforts and not through any fortuitous circumstances. But unlike Adam and Eve and their progeny, on earth, most of the characters in the novel succeed in reaching the point of self-identification under the guidance of a man who bears the symbolic name of Guru (spiritual teacher), but who is dispatched undeservingly early, as Christ was.

The Sethji thought that the hospital and campus were perfect, "and yet he had left one thing out of his calculations ... the one great incalculable ... human feelings
and emotions. For they were not just surgeons or physicians or whatever; they were also men and women. Men and women who wore white coats and an air of professional detachment and superiority. But this professional armour had chinks in it."

(pp.2-3) There are several doctors specialising in different branches, but there is no psychiatrist. (If there is one, we do not meet him). These doctors cure the illness of people coming from outside, but nobody realises, least of all the doctors, that a psychiatrist has become indispensable for the doctors themselves. "Physician, heal thyself" is as much applicable to them as to anybody else. The Sethji has overlooked this, but luck fills the gap.

This gap is filled by Guru, not a professional psychiatrist but a patient suffering from cancer. He comes to the hospital for treatment and lives with a cousin on the campus, Dr. Ashok and his wife, Meera. Meera looked tiny "with the rounded softness of a child, rather than that of an adult. And her eyes too ... so open and unguarded. But more than that, it was her manner, spontaneous and direct. No evasions. ... With Meera anything that isn't glorious is a catastrophe. There are no in-betweens." (p.4) She is unhappy with Guru's expected arrival. She tells Manju, "'Ashok tells me there's
no hope for him at all. He’s going to die. I mean, they’re
going to operate on him, but Ashok says it won’t make much
difference, really. He’ll die in any case ... What’s worrying
me is ... how do I talk to him? What do you say to a man
who’s dying? What do you talk about?” (p.5) Meera is not
only pleasantly, but happily surprised that when she meets him
she does not think of him as a patient at all. Manju’s
experience is no different. When she meets him for the first
time and is lost for words, he puts her at ease immediately by
leaning forward in his chair and telling her, “’Let’s accept
the fact that I’m dying and go on from there.’” (p.7) Manju
laughs in relief and happily enquires, “’You understand what
others feel, do you?’” (p.7) Guru assures Manju and her
husband Vijay (a pathologist in the hospital) that there is no
difference between him and others and in justification,
probably intentionally, misquotes Sir Thomas Moore, “’If I die
today, you die tomorrow.’” (p.7)

Guru has an irresistible influence on everybody he comes
across. It is ironical that a physically ill patient should
/treat successfully the doctors who attend upon him, but who
are all sick in their own way. They are wearing-masks and
concealing themselves not only from others but from
themselves. We know that Guru is no saint. He had feet of clay and once upon a time he had sown his wild oats.

According to Meera,

He was quite a character, I believe. The fun-loving type, you know. Everything but work and studies. And as he grew older, an eye for pretty girls as well ... Well, he kept failing in exams. It wasn't that he was stupid. It was as if he just didn't want to make the effort. And then, I believe, he got a girl into trouble. Which means, I suppose, he got her pregnant. The family will never spell that out distinctly. It's still very hush hush ... Guru did what he shouldn't have and then he refused to marry the girl. His father, Ashok's uncle, they say, thrashed him. He took it silently, and then disappeared. They couldn't trace him and he didn't turn up either in spite of the 'come back, all forgiven' notices being put in all the papers. And ten years back he reappeared, just as suddenly and quietly. Sober, serious, ready to turn his hand to any work. He never said a word about where he'd been all these years or what he'd done." (pp.39-40)

In spite of these not too flattering details, Guru has something in him which attracts people to share their unhappy secrets with him. Some of them insinuate that he goes out to ferret unsavoury details from people's personal and professional lives. On the contrary, people go to share their secrets with him so that they can find a solution, at least solace. He knows that faces hide multitudes of secrets. People wear masks even in their relationship of marriage where there should be no masks, no pretences, no fake emotions.
whatsoever. It is significant that in this novel, all are married couples except for three adults, one of whom is a psychic case (Dr. Vidya), the second (Dr. Gautam) an apparently nice man but something wrong with him, though it is not made clear what is wrong, and Guru himself who regrets that he had not got married. "'If only I had known it earlier!' His voice trailed off into a plaintive murmur. For the first time, I heard regret in his voice. 'At one time I was dead scared of revealing myself to anyone. I could not bear the thought of opening myself out to another person. That's what kept me off marriage, perhaps. It scared me ... the intimacy of a marriage. Now it seems wonderful to me ... a relationship in which one dispenses with masks. That's what a good marriage means, doesn't it?" (pp.40-41) It may be assumed that Guru fled the occasion of his marriage in spite of his love-affair because at that time he was still afraid of opening out all his secrets to his wife, of completely unmasking himself. The intervening period between his disappearance away from home, nobody knows where, and reappearance is like the forty days spent by Moses on the Mount or by Christ in the wilderness, where he, like them, had attained wisdom.
Guru has realised in his wisdom that in marriage, the most intimate of human relationships, integrity, honesty, frankness are the important qualities that bring true happiness. In the novel there are seven married couples, all of them unhappy to a more or less extent for some fault of their own. No two couples or individuals are unhappy for the same reason. In fact, there is a kind of artifice in the way each one is provided with a different cause for unhappiness. It is too neat. Things fit in too well, which may be said to be one of the flaws of this novel. The course of the marital relationship of Manju and Vijay is the one described in some detail and naturally so since Manju is the narrator of the story. They had planned their lives well, both of them had the kind of jobs they wanted -- he is a pathologist in the Hospital and she a lecturer in a Bombay college. Vijay has the slightly irritating "habit of giving every question ... even the most innocuous one ... its due weight and answering with deliberation." (p.8) There is nothing wrong with the habit as such; actually it has the advantage of saving one from embarrassing contradictions or corrections later. But it obviously lacks the spontaneity that should be characteristic of any talk between friends and even more so between husband
and wife. This habit of Vijay irritates Manju. She, on the other hand, is honest and frank. She has told him that she had been in love with one Rajiv who could not marry her. The result was that Vijay felt hurt and their relations are even now slightly estranged. They are more cordial than affectionate. They do not probe into each other's thoughts.

As I have said, it was that kind of marriage. But I wondered ... if I hadn't told him about Rajiv, would we have had a better chance? I remembered, what Vijay had said to me once ...

"You make a fetish of the truth, don't you? You won't tell a lie even to save someone from being hurt, will you?

"Would you?" I had asked in return. "Of course", he had said without any hesitation. And that, I had thought later, was the cruelest thing he could have said to me. Letting me in for a kind of long drawn out torture. For, the thought was always in me after that ... is this a lie? Or this? Or this? Better, I always thought myself, to have things in the open which was why I had blurted out the truth about Rajiv and me one day. I had told Vijay everything, not sparing even myself, for it was Rajiv, after all, who had backed out.

"I can't, Manju," he had said. "I can't go against my parents. I can't hurt them. I would never be happy if I did that." (p.31)

Vijay comes to the conclusion that Manju does not care for him. Manju ruminates, "I'd heard of pregnancy bringing a husband and wife together. With Vijay and me, it seemed to have the opposite effect. We had drifted even further apart. This child I had made my own, the fight to bring it to life,
my own struggle. I don't know if Vijay had sensed this
feeling of mine, but he kept himself aloof. He looked after
me, but it was the detached kindness of a stranger. We had
even, I realised one day, stopped quarrelling as if we had not
even any areas of disagreement between us." (p.43) Manju had
expected much from marriage as any young woman would. "A
marriage, you start off expecting so many things. And bit by
bit, like dead leaves, the expectations fall off. But this
... two people who have shut themselves off in two separate
glass jars? Who can see each other but can't communicate? Is
this a marriage? (p.24)

The pressure of the unnatural deaths of Guru and Tony
almost forces Manju and Vijay to come together. Neither of
them can bear to be aloof from each other under the tension.
She begs of him to speak to her and he, too, of her. Vijay
tells Manju about the Dean's pressing him to change the
autopsy report falsifying the cause of Tambe's death.

"And why didn't you tell me about it?"
"How could I? I thought you would despise me.
I should have been the strong, virtuous hero,
refusing to knuckle under. Instead ... I thought
you didn't care about me, anyway. That you
had never cared. You married me because ... well you
had to marry someone. You had told me about
Rajiv, remember?"
"No, no, Vijay," I stammered out, eager to convince him, desperate to make him understand, furious that I couldn't get the right words fast enough ... "Now that seems to be another person, not myself at all. What is all that to the life we have together? To the kind of life we can build together with our children? I was a damn fool, Vijay. I thought I was doing the right thing, the honest thing, by telling you about it. I didn't ever think of how it would hurt you. I was just proud of my honesty, Rajiv ... " I smiled. A shadow now. A ghost. No, not even that. A mirage. "He doesn't exist any more. There's only you. And Sonu."

There was a storm raging outside... But within me there was peace. I was no longer alone.

We sat in silence for a long while, content to be together." (p.105)

When heart speaks to heart, words are redundant.

Manju's closest friend is Meera, the wife of Dr. Ashok. She is of the same age as Manju, but looks much younger. She is almost childlike in her behaviour, in her impatience, in her delightful informality. She keeps her finger pressed on the bell until the door is opened. What makes her lovable is she is "one of those persons who behave as naturally in other people's homes as they do in their own." (pp.17-18) Her manner is spontaneous and direct, her eyes so open and unguarded. She loves house-keeping and is a good cook. She loves to see people enjoying her dishes. As Manju puts it,
she "is a woman's libber's despair. She positively enjoys being a wife, mother, house-keeper, cook and all that it involves." (pp.4-5) She has spoilt her husband by waiting hand and foot on him. She has a womanly heart and when Guru dies, she bursts into tears, though she had met him only once before he came to stay with them for medical treatment.

Her husband Ashok is a very charming and attractive person whom ladies (including his wife) find irresistible. Unfortunately, he has a weakness for women. For him flirtation is but a bit of fun, nothing more. He has taken his wife for granted. She knows about his flirtations, she is hurt about them, but she has not mentioned it to anybody, not even to Manju. All that she says to Manju when she is telling her about Guru's early life and his eye for pretty faces is, "I suppose it runs in the family." (p.39) Manju comments, "I was startled, Ashok's flirtations were well known, but for some reason, may be her silence, I had imagined Meera knew nothing about them. Seeing the surprise on my face which I tried to hide, just about a bit too late, she said, 'Oh yes, I know about Ashok. I've known it for a long while. But I also know it's never very serious. If I ever thought it was, I'd ... I'd put a knife into him. Or myself.'" (p.39)
In fact, the only time that she cannot conceal her wounded heart is when Tony, being drunk, taunts Ashok about his love-affair with Leena, a nurse.

Tony irritably shook off Ashok once again. "Oh, get off it, man, Leave me alone," he said, "I know about you, too. You and your little sweetie from the Theatre. Phoo." Tony made a sound of disgust, "Bringing her home ... Think I didn't see her that day? I saw you both together. And poor Guru lying there dying."

There was a rasping sound, like a piece of cloth being torn. It was Meera. She burst into tears. While all eyes turned from Tony to Meera, she buried her face in her hands and sobbed. I stared at her aghast, then put my arm round her. But she wrenched herself loose from me, and saying, "No, no, no," ran out of the room. (p.75)

That must have been the most humiliating moment of Meera's life. Once Guru had come for treatment and heard about Ashok's activities, he must have spoken to him about it. (Probably Guru was not aware that Meera had known it all along). Ashok appears to have come to realise that his loyalty to Meera was a pretence and his words of love to the women he flirted with were only fake emotions. His compartmentalisation of Leena as a seductress, he as the erring, yet loving husband and Meera as the good and forgiving wife is too trite to be convincing.
Another person who is even more of the traditional Hindu wife is Shanta, the wife of Dr. Kulkarni. There are no other husband and wife on the campus with less in common than Dr. Kulkarni and Shanta. "Dr. Kulkarni stepped out, banging the door behind him, impeccably dressed in white shorts and a T-shirt. All set to play tennis. He saw me and smiled. "Good morning", he said.

"A man more English than the English, we joked. He was almost like a caricature of an Englishman, with his polite formalities, his clipped, curt speech, his perfectly idiomatic English, his pipe. You didn't just drop in on Dr. Kulkarni. You rang him up and asked him if it was convenient. And he did the same by you. You called him Dr. Kulkarni, never by his first name; nor did he call you by yours." (p.33) Contrast this with Shanta who comes out "in an old faded sari, her face greasy, her hair dishevelled." (p.35) She is utterly gutless. Even her own daughter Mriga has no respect for her. She tells Manju, "'Sometimes I talk to her rudely, I say things to her I really want to say to him. It's no fun, though. She's not real. She's only a shadow. His shadow. Sometimes I even feel sorry for her.'" (p.90) Mriga's opinion of her father and of his attitude to Shanta are equally frank.
"'I know he dislikes me. And my mother too. And he lies. I heard him last night. He came home very late and I heard my mother asking him ... 'Were you with her?' And he said ... 'Stop acting like an idiot. I told you I was held up in the hospital.' It was a lie. I saw him with her.'" (p.91)

Indeed Shanta is so much of a shadow that she rarely comes on the stage. In the parties few notice her presence even when she is present. She is utterly without backbone. She knows that her husband is having a love-affair with Rani, but we do not learn if she ever protests, except at the end. Dr.Kulkarni knows that Mriga has discovered his illicit love-affair and is afraid that she may talk about it to others. So he keeps her in the house more or less as a prisoner and does not permit anybody to speak with her. And Shanta is so gutless that she co-operates with him in this!

Shanta rarely smiles. After all "shadows" have no face to smile with. But she accompanies Dr.Kulkarni to the Dean's house and sits by him. "She had smiled at me when she entered. It was almost cataclysmic ... a smile from her." (p.123)

Cynthia is just the opposite of Shanta. Cynthia is a doctor and Tony a P.T.Instructor in a school. They had loved each other intensely. Tony loses his job, it is never
explained why. That is not the tragedy, though it contributes its share to the denouement. Cynthia explains to Manju what the real tragedy is:

"He held it against me that I didn’t ... I mean, I couldn’t ... It made no sense to me, Manju. There were never going to be any kids, see. Without that, it seemed just a selfish indulgence. I had already sinned once. Before marriage. Oh, I was crazy about Tony then. There was still a year to go for my finals and we were to get married only after that. Since we were to be married, I thought ... What’s wrong? I should have known, a wrong is a wrong. You can’t escape the consequences. When I realised what had happened, I panicked. I took the wrong way out again. For a medical student, it wasn’t very difficult to get it done. It didn’t seem a sin then, either. Just something that had to be done. After all, we thought, we can have kids after we are married. They never came. It was a punishment for what we did. I know it now. Tony could never see it my way."

She sighed, then said, "Maybe, it’s better as it is, He’d begun going downhill recently. My God, how fast he was doing it. He had an odd complex, too, about my being a doctor. If I’d given up my job and become the pathetically clinging female, maybe things would have gone right between us. Tony ... poor man, he was made to be a father, the head of a family. Without that role to play, he went to pieces." (p.94-95)

Tony, too, opens his heart to Manju, who is the conscience-keeper of several of the characters.

"Don’t let them tell you it doesn’t matter who earns more money in a marriage. It does. There was Cyn before marriage, crazy about me, looking up to me, ready to do anything for me. It didn’t matter at all that I was just a Games Master and she was
a Medico. We were just crazy about each other. God!" He swallowed. I saw his Adam’s apple move up and down. "I don’t know if you’ve felt it, Manju, but these doctors ... they get to feeling they’re something above other humans. Perhaps it’s having human life in their hands that makes them feel like God. Maybe it’s the patients looking so much up to them, maybe it’s the habit of instructing. I don’t know what it is, but they get that air of authority, superiority all right. I started feeling Cyn was patronising me." (p.84)

To others, as to the Dean, he was no more than Cynthia’s husband. When Tony is murdered by Vidya, Cynthia’s heart is broken. Perhaps she herself did not know that she had loved him so much. Manju says, "She looked serene, if a little paler. But I had a strange feeling that something had gone out of her: as if she was just a husk of herself now." (p.93)

But a marriage which ends on a happier note is that of Rani and Ram Agarwala, the Dean of the Medical College. Rani had not had much of an education but she had beauty and her father had money and they were enough to get her a well qualified bachelor for husband, but

It was common knowledge that the Dean and his wife had long since agreed to go their own separate ways. When the wife is like Rani and the husband like Dr. Agarwala, I suppose such a thing is inevitable. And being what they were, there was no ill-feeling, either. Rani spent most of her time in Bombay ... she had a flat of her own there ... and some of it with her husband, who accepted the arrangement equably. When the children ... two of them, both in boarding schools ... came home, the
family stayed together. The rest of the time, Vidya managed the home, the Dean had his hospital, and every one seemed happy. Rani too, for we often saw her photographs in glossy society magazines, sitting a glass in her hand. (pp.20-21)

Even then nothing could make her forget that she was the wife of the Dean (even if she was unfaithful to him) and that the other ladies on the campus, wives of his subordinates.

There appears to have been little in common between husband and wife as far as tastes are concerned. "A dainty woman, with the face of a Rajasthani miniature, with large almond-shaped eyes and a straight nose, she was beautiful. And conscious of it. She was dressed and made-up as none of us were, but it didn't make her look garish. On the contrary, it made the rest of us look pale and colourless. Her jingling glass bangles, the silver key chain at her waist, the filmy blue chiffon which showed her brief choli and her still slim waist and rounded arms ... " (p.22) The Dean, on the other hand, is extremely simple, a dapper figure in a cotton bush shirt he always wore even for the most formal occasion. His sister Vidya is also simply dressed like him, but elegantly. This similarity of tastes between brother and sister is the first hint that Vidya is unconsciously attracted by her brother, that he is the model of men for her. This imitation
indicates suggestively a psychological obsession which becomes clear only at the end of the novel.

With things as they were, Rani should not have cared at all about what could have happened to the Dean when he disappeared for some hours without telling anybody about where he was going. But she remains a good wife (apart from her former adultery) and "without warning she flung herself off the sofa on to the ground, her face buried in her arms, her body shaking and heaving as she gave away to sobs." (p.119) She is comforted only when he comes back. When he returns, "he smiled at her. It was the smile of an adult to a child. Comforting, reassuring. Rani responded to it instantly. The distraught stranger of the last few hours disappeared. This was Rani once again." (pp.128-129)

A family which suffers for no fault of theirs is the family of Sumant and Vimala and their three kids. Vimala had been a nurse in the hospital where Sumant had been working. They were good friends, nothing more. He was married to a spoilt kid who never grew up and one day she committed suicide. When Sumant's wife committed suicide, he was in such a bad shape that Vimala married him. When they get married, the windmills of rumour start whirring and they start
receiving anonymous letters accusing them of murder. To escape this torture, they go to America and they return to India after fifteen years with their three children. But the rumours follow them and they begin to live aloof from the rest of the community. "The Shah's front door opened and Vimala came out in her crisp cotton sari, a cloth bag hung over her shoulder. The picture of competence. Her house was the most spotless, her children the quietest, her garden the neatest. And yet none of us felt at home in their house. Not that we had much of a chance to be there. Vimala rarely invited anyone. She taught for a few hours each day in a school for the mentally retarded and kept to herself the rest of the time." (p.17)

"Vimala, the earnest social worker, utterly domesticated, wrapped up in her home and kids; and Sumant quiet, unassuming, coming from the hospital to his gardening and stamp collecting." (p.38) They keep their children too secluded, apart from their going to school. Vimala has tried to draw up a curtain over their past by refusing to admit that she had been a nurse. But this is no secret to many people. Sumant and Vimala are more like hunted animals. Guru advises them to tell their children about it, but somehow they cannot do it. It is only when the secret becomes common news through Tony's
drunken indiscretion that they and their children become free and "the Shah children come occasionally out of their homes and sometime they smile at us and greet us when we meet them." (p.138)

Like other couples in the novel, Sunita and Shyam are unhappy though for reasons other than those which have come in the way of the happiness of other couples. In fact, every couple has different reasons for its unhappiness. "Sunita and Shyam Puri, a radiologist and surgeon. A perfect husband and wife team, a made-for-each-other couple." (p.16) They have lived in America for some years. Their son Anand has spent eight of his nine years in America, which he considers to be his home. He talks American rather than English. He uses words like "Gee", "cookies" (for biscuits), "guess" to mean "think", "nuts" to mean "mad", etc. He has an American attitude to things. He dislikes his grand-mother's (Sunita's mother) affectionate terms for him. Sunita wants her mother to stay with them, but that is an idea liked neither by Anand nor Shyam. Whenever there is a problem, Shyam says, "Let's go back," as though going to America would solve all problems.

Manju is, as I have said earlier, the mouthpiece of the writer, but Guru is the central character. He dies by the time
the novel is barely one-third over, but his influence continues to work and his presence felt even after his death in the same way as Julius Caesar's presence is felt even after his murder in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. He arrives on the scene as a patient, appears to recover after an operation, but there is a relapse and he soon passes away, not naturally but because of an extra injection of pethidine, stealthily administered by Dr. Vidya. Within those few months of grace, he becomes a "Guru" (moral teacher) to the doctors and their families on the campus. There are only three people whom he does not appear to influence, for they have closed minds -- Dr. Vidya, Dr. Kulkarni and Dr. Gautam. Dr. Vidya, the sister of the Dean, is a pathological case. Vijay explains to Manju:

"The Dean was four years older. He must have been a tremendous influence on her, right from her childhood days. From what little I know of her family, they were two of a kind, friends and allies, in a large family. Later, it was he who educated her and gave her a chance to become what she did. She must have admired him and looked up to him. Let's just say that and not get too Freudian'. He had given me a rueful grin. 'That may be one of the reasons why she never married!'" (p.135) These subconscious incestuous feelings for her brother, which he does not suspect at all, make her jealous of
Guru, who was getting close to the Dean and she murders him. Guru has had no earthly chance of having any influence over her, violently prejudiced as she is.

Dr. Kulkarni is a frustrated man, because he has a daughter but no son to carry on the family heritage. "I thought of the oh-so-foreign Dr. Kulkarni. Behind the pipe-smoking, perfectly mannered, phlegmatic style that he cultivated, was he after all, just a traditional Hindu male, longing for a son and heir? And taking it out on poor Mriga because she was only a girl?" (p. 36)

In the eyes of Guru, Dr. Kulkarni has committed two serious offences -- professional carelessness in the case of Prabhakar Tambe which resulted in his death and moral turpitude in having a love-affair with Rani, the wife of his friend and boss. Guru protested against both to Kulkarni and Kulkarni's reaction was typical of him. A nurse tells Manju what happened:

"My, was he angry! He was white, you know, and shaking all over. 'I won't stand for interference. I tell you', he was shouting. 'What right have you to talk to me that way? It's none of your business, understand that!'" (p. 69)
Dr. Gautam is a different type altogether. He is the Chief Gynaecologist at the Hospital. He has an air of casual charm. His bantering and his levity conceal the seriousness with which he took his profession. But Guru does not like Gautam. "I had been praising his professional skill one day when Guru said, 'I always feel it isn't enough for a man to be skilful. I mean, he's got to be a good human being too. Otherwise, he's incomplete, if you know what I mean?" (p.42) Guru would not say anything further because, as he said, it was not his secret. On his part, Gautam says nothing. "He was not a man who spoke ill of others. In fact, he rarely spoke of others. His was a kind of 'you leave me alone and I'll leave you alone' policy. How little we knew about him, really! He lived alone, read a lot, had a weakness for Hindi movies ... that was about all that we knew. But Guru .. what had he done to Gautam?" (p.43) After Guru's death, all that Gautam says is, "'I'm tired of hearing his name. How I wish ... he had never come here.'" (p.69) When Vidya departs a demented woman, he never again refers to her either.

Gautam never speaks ill of others. And except for Guru who knows the secret, nobody knows anything ill of him. He remains a mystery. Is he meant to symbolise the mystery of the
universe? The universe has remained a mystery with all its beauty and ugliness, good and evil, sublimity and meanness. All the scientific investigations, all the philosophic explanations have not been able to unravel it so far. Like nature, he is a-moral and indifferent and goes his own way.

The characters in the novel -- some love Guru, some hate him, but nobody can ignore him. Their opinions vary between "Guru was a saint," and "He was a blackmailer." (p.68)

What had Guru done to rouse such strong reactions? Manju puts it succinctly when she says, "Why couldn't Guru have left us alone? What were we, after all, but men and women like so many others, made up of many parts, some good, some bad? Perhaps the evil in us would have lain dormant, if Guru hadn't stirred things up and brought it to the surface." (p.123) Manju loves him because she yearns for a perfect friend and he is one. But even she says, "Maybe Guru was not a catalyst who changed us. Maybe he just showed us up for what we really were. And yet the thought remains ... if only he had left us alone. If only he had not interfered." (pp.9-10)

From one point of view it does appear that Guru interferes with the personal or professional lives of people
with whom he was not really concerned. Why does he do it? He justifies himself. He tells Manju, "I know how much time I have left. Approximately, that is. I can plan and do something in it. I can't leave anything to the vague future. I must do it now." (p.9) Manju begins to think that "Guru had begun to see himself as a spectator, above and different from all of us. That's when a man becomes dangerous, yes, dangerous, because he imagines himself God and loses his touch with humanity." (p.9) That is, Guru sees himself above humanity and wants men and women to overcome weaknesses which are usually associated with human beings. Besides, he was in the company of doctors, who, as Tony says, "'get to feeling they're something above other humans.'" (p.84) It turns out to be a kind of conflict between self-consciousness which means people dropping their masks and seeing themselves as they truly are (the Delphic "Know thyself", the Upanishadic, "Know that you are the Brahman," the psychologist's self-identification and the existentialist's self-awareness) and a kind of egoism that affects the medics, students and doctors alike, though it may be in different degrees. He makes them remove their masks and realise what they are, admit mistakes openly and atone for them, if possible. He succeeds in this because he has something which draws people to him.
Before he came to Dr. Ashok and Meera's house, Meera is nervous because she does not know what to talk about with a man about to die. After a few days of his arrival, when Manju asks her how Guru is, Meera replies, "'It's impossible to think of him as a patient.'" (p.6) Dr. Sunita, the radiologist, treats him at the hospital but visits him every day at his place. She declares, "'Goodness, I never think of him as a patient!'" (p.6) This is surprising if we remember Manju's impression of Sunita: "I was never very comfortable with Sunita. Somehow she was too chic, too smart, too well assured for that. There was something rather daunting about her. Now suddenly she smiled, showing her beautiful teeth ... one woman who never used lipstick.'" (p.6) The Dean, too, visits him everyday. What is that special quality in Guru that made the doctors step down from the pedestals they occupy in their relationship with patients? Guru has "the gift of breaking all barriers, ignoring all formalities and approaching a person directly as a human being. That, I think, was what made all of us succumb to him finally", comments Manju after meeting him for the first time. (p.9) She thinks he is "unique." (p.87) Her husband Vijay considers him "unusual." (p.8) Dr. Cynthia is surprised that her husband, a physical instructor in a school, is so fond of Guru, "'My Tony has taken strongly to him. They
talk for hours. Though God knows what they have in common, Guru and my football playing Tony!" (p.26) She continues, "'Everyone seems to be bitten by that bug [philosophy] since Guru came.'" (p.26) When Guru dies, Manju says, "We had never known till then how many friends Guru had made." (p.60) This does not mean that everybody loves Guru. Some of them hate him for an interfering fool. What is more interesting is almost everybody at sometime or other wishes that he had never come there. The only persons who loved Guru always are Manju, the Dean and Meera. For Manju, he is the perfet friend. Guru's and the Dean's thoughts were the same and the Dean "was an upright man, really honest and straight." (p.135) Guru's advice to the Dean that the real cause of Prabhakar Tambe's death should not be concealed even in the interests of the Hospital is the same as the Dean's idea. The Dean admires Guru. That is why the Dean finally resigns. Earlier he had given a dinner to celebrate Guru's recovery. The Dean has not had the slightest grudge against Guru.

Now of those who hate Guru, Mriga and Anand are kids, Mriga being fifteen and Anand just nine. But even they have some childish grudges against Guru -- Mriga, because Guru once called her "poor child" (p.16), and Anand because Guru has
suggested to him that he should continue to live in India and his mother’s mother be with them. Mriga later begins to love Guru and says "'Guru was my friend,'" (p.61) and Anand comes round to hold Guru’s point of view.

When Guru dies in his sleep, Ashok suspects foul play, though he cannot guess who could have been the culprit. Manju just cannot believe that anybody would have liked to kill Guru. She demands of Vijay, "'No! who would want to kill Guru? Who could have done such a thing?'" Vijay replies, "'I don’t know about the second question, Manju, but I can answer your first one. Plenty. Plenty of people who wanted to kill him, I mean. I myself,' the smile became a grimace, 'often wished him dead’. And looking at his face, I knew he wasn’t joking." (pp.67-68)

So when Guru passes on unhonoured in his own country like any other prophet, the cloud of suspicion descends on almost everyone, as it happens in Agatha Christie’s novels, which are some of the favourite reading of Sm. Deshpande. Vimala had not listened to Guru’s advice, though she probably knew he was right. She never had the courage to tell her children about the false rumour on account of the embarrassment it could cause them all. Guru must have guessed it and he himself told
some people about the real facts behind the rumour. Certainly not to embarrass her but to make it easy for her to explain. Tony was one of them and in his drunken mood taunts Vimala about it, and when Vimala denies it, he declares that Guru had told him. When she hears of the death of Guru, she must have wept. "I was surprised to see that her eyes were red with weeping," says Manju. (p.87) But when Vimala came to see Guru's body, she hears Tony's voice. She remembers Tony's telling her that it was Guru who had told him about the facts behind the rumour and feels for a moment a kind of malicious satisfaction that Guru was dead. She tells Manju, "'Just twelve hours ago he was here!, and then, reflectively, 'and now he is dead', with a faint note of satisfaction in her voice." (p.80) So Vimala is suspected.

Leena the nurse disliked Guru because he had advised Ashok to stop meeting her. She is desperately in love with Ashok, though both Ashok and Leena are married to different persons. Ashok tells Manju, "'I had promised Guru I wouldn't have anything to do with her ... She kept blaming Guru for my refusal to see her.'" (p.81) So Leena is suspected.

Ashok could not have liked Guru for the same reason. He, therefore, becomes a suspect.
Sunita is a friend of Guru. She does not look upon him as a patient. She visits him everyday. She has a family problem. Her husband Shyam and Anand want to go back to America, and she does not, for good reasons. She does not want Anand to be brought up in that culture. Then she has her old, lonely, diabetic mother whom she will have to leave behind. Her only brother is in America. Her mother is, perhaps, meant to represent all the sad, deserted Indian mothers (symbolising India) left behind by their sons to go to America in search of opportunities for research and gold. Anand (with his dislike of the sentimental grand-mother) and Shyam (with his typical American attitude to mothers-in-law) do not want her to stay with them. "'I wish I was like Shyam. Thinking of no one but myself. How much easier life would have been for me if I had been made that way!'"

"She gave me a crooked smile "'But I can’t blame anyone. I married him with my eyes open. I knew about him. I wanted him on any terms. No, I can’t blame anyone, except Guru. I wish he hadn’t come here. Sometimes I hate him!'" (pp.96-97) All because Guru advised her to keep her mother with her!
Shyam hates Guru because of his advice to Sunita. Again, Guru knows the mistake committed by Shyam in operating upon Prabhakar Tambe and he wants all the four, Dr. Kulkarni, Shyam, Vijay and the Dean, to come out with the truth. Prabhakar was a popular leader and if his followers had come to know that he had died due to the carelessness of the doctors, things might go hard with the hospital. Therefore, the Dean in the interest of the Hospital and under pressure from the Shetji, has persuaded Vijay to change the autopsy. Guru holds them responsible and he wants them to make things right with themselves by first coming out with the truth and then help Tambe's family.

Dr. Kulkarni hates Guru because Guru had spoken to him about his illicit love-affair with Rani, which the doctor does not like. So he is suspect, too.

Vijay also has some reason to hate him. Guru had told them that changing the autopsy for the specious reason that it was in the interests of the Hospital was wrong. In the case of Vijay, Guru went further and held over his head the threat of exposing him to his wife. So he becomes suspect.
Cynthia also hates him for having too much influence on Tony, so when Guru passes away, the cloud of suspicion descends on her also.

With so many of them having hated Guru at some time or other and everyone knowing why everyone else hated Guru, it is only too natural that they should suspect one another with good reason almost. Even Mriga suspects Anand, surprisingly. Anand suspects Mriga, which is comic enough, because he sees her burning some paper (which is really a copy of the photo of Rani found in her father’s coat pocket). She knows of the love-affair between Rani and her father and to her, burning Rani’s photo is equivalent to burning her. When he went near, she called him a “snoopy kid”, which enrages him. He tells Manju, “‘May be she murdered him herself. And was burning the evidence’ (p.72) -- apparently an imagination fed on American mysteries. The only ground for his suspicion is she called him a “snoopy kid.”

A major casualty of this suspicion all round was social informality:

"'Come in, Sunita’, I said...
'No, thanks. Some other time...’" (p.73)
It was this way now with all of us. Always some other time. Everyone seemed wary, on guard, yet no one admitted openly to any uneasiness. We tried to keep up a front of normality. But we knew, we could not keep up the pretence for ever."
(p.73)

How does Guru, a patient about to die of cancer, become so central to a community of medicos and their families that his murder raises waves of indignation and suspicion among themselves? He comes as a stranger to take medical treatment but becomes a "Guru". He becomes a kind of psychiatrist to whom people open their hearts. He is sincere, good and honest. For him, integrity comes first. This integrity comes from a faith that there is coherence in this universe. Conception is the result of coherence and once a man is born, his life has to be in harmony with the universal coherence. Birth is not an accident and man’s life should not be a series of chance accidents, but conscious, responsible actions. When Manju calls men and women “cosmic accidents”, he asks her, "'But seriously, Manju, can you believe that birth, life on the whole is a meaningless accident?... But look... you spoke of the sperm and the ovum... Think of all that marvellous timing, that beautiful precision... Can you call the result an
accident? No, Manju, there's always a meaning, a coherence. Only if you look for it, of course. The pity is one realises this too late.'” (pp.10-11) Once one perceives the coherence, the least one can do is to follow certain principles which are in harmony with this coherence. Man has to behave as a gentle, honest, decent human being, for no other reason than that he is born as a human being. Audacity, presumptuous arrogance, dishonesty in the largest sense of the term should have no place in his life. Dr. Kulkarni is an instance of this hateful arrogance. Such a man places himself above others. This alienation cuts him off from the rest of humanity. He builds barriers around himself and by fencing others out, he fences himself in. Good fences may make good neighbours, but they do not make good friends. Barriers make man an island by himself. It is by refusing to recognise barriers that Guru "made the doctors step down from the pedestals they occupy in their relationship with patients." (p.6) As Manju puts it, "'He's all of a piece, I mean, there's no false facade to him.'” (p.39)

Removing barriers is like removing blinkers, which prevent one from seeing in other directions. Cynthia being a Christian, and probably a Catholic, believes that she
committed a sin when she gave herself to Tony before marriage. The natural result was pregnancy. She underwent an abortion. Later they get married but they do not get children. Cynthia believes that this is a punishment for those two sins. Since there were going to be no children, sleeping in the same room seemed to her a selfish indulgence. The result is tragedy for both. Cynthia tells Manju, "'Tony... poor man, he was made to be a father, the head of a family. Without that role to play, he went to pieces.'" (p.95) If only she had not worn religious blinkers about what sin was, and recognised that sin was essentially a social concept, both Cynthia and Tony could have been happy bringing up the child conceived before marriage. It is even possible that they would have had more children, too, if the first child had a normal birth. The process of abortion, perhaps, only perhaps, caused certain damages or changes in the mother's body. The reason would be physiological, not moral. Shashi Deshpande has commented on pregnancy outside marriage vis-a-vis Guru's escapade. Meera says, "'He got her pregnant. The family will never spell that out distinctly. It's still very hush-hush. Why does a pregnancy become so indecent when there hasn't been a marriage ceremony, Manju? The process which leads to it is the same, isn't it?'" (pp.39-40) The only inconsistency here is that
Manju has told us that Meera "is a woman's libber's despair" (p.4) and it is difficult for the reader to imagine such radical views from her lips. Though Meera may not know the scientific aspect of conception or the metaphysical point of view of it, what she implies is that it is a-moral and the question of sin does not come in — a humanistic point of view. Cynthia's sin (if sin it has to be called) lies not in the conception but in the abortion, for abortion in her case is a refusal to hold herself responsible for her earlier acts. As Guru declares on another occasion, "'You're always responsible for what you do'" (p.28) — an existential idea. If they had accepted the responsibility and allowed the child to live, they would have attained happiness, which is one of the tenets of humanism.

If removing barriers between you and others is important, removing barriers between you and yourself is even more important, for the first removes the mis-understanding between you and others, and the second your lack of understanding of yourself. "Perhaps the evil in us would have lain dormant if Guru hadn't stirred things up and brought it to the surface." (p.123) That is, they would not have become aware of the evil in their hearts. They hated him during the process, for the
process of self-knowledge is very painful, but when they "have all been punished" (p.134) and they have attained integrity, they are grateful to his dead memory. Manju and Vijay come to a perfect understanding of each other and the ghost of Rajiv is laid to rest. Shyam stays on in India, Sunita's mother lives with them and Anand is proud of the good cooking of his Nani. Ashok is still not too sure that Meera has forgiven him, though she looks just as she had always been -- the symbol of traditional Hindu womanhood, ever loyal, ever obedient, ever happy with her lot. The Shah children have become slightly more social and are on the way of becoming more so. Ram Agarwal has a clear conscience now that he has resigned as the Dean of the Hospital. He has realised that he was partly responsible for his and Rani's drifting apart, and Rani "is looking after Vidya in a way I could never have imagined. Such magnanimity in her amazes me, for I know that Vidya had always despised Rani and never bothered to hide her contempt, either", says Manju. (p.134) That Vidya's breakdown and the Dean's resignation should come together so conveniently is rather unconvincing and improbable, and the family moves away. In a sense, Vidya becomes a nemesis for Rani for having drifted away from her family and for being free from all responsibility. And a life-long nemesis, too.
For a society butterfly like Rani, who "didn't have much time for any woman" (p.22) and who sat at parties "alternately languishing at the men and being vivacious with them," (p.26) to take devoted care of a sick woman who had looked down upon her denotes a sea-change.

But of all these people, the person whose mind has broadened the most is the Dean. He tells Manju that formerly he had looked upon Tony as nothing more than Cynthia's husband, but now he thinks of him as a human being. He says, "... We don't think of them enough. Ideas we say, principles and ambitions and success, so many other things come first. But it's wrong, all wrong. It's people who matter most. Nothing should matter more than they do." (p.110) While he was saying this, he was tracing the letters RA in the dust on the table with his finger as though he was attesting his signature to his testament.

Dr.Kulkarni and Dr.Gautam are the same as ever, almost beyond redemption. Evil cannot be eradicated completely at least as long as every human being does not try to do so consciously.
Guru’s motives are no doubt good. He wants people to be better than what they are by understanding themselves, and in his attempts to make them so, two people lose their lives. But not in vain, entirely. Manju sums up, “Life, as I said, goes on as before. Almost, that is. I wish I could say that we are all better persons, that we have come through the ordeal purified and cleansed, that we have learnt our lessons. But life is never so definite as all that. We can never change overnight. We are chained to our old selves, and can do no more than muddle on, coping with each day as it comes.”

(p.137)

That the name “Gauri” was selected for their second daughter by Vijay, who at one time liked Guru much less than Manju did, explains everything. The writer rather unnecessarily points out through Anand that the name sounds like “Guru”, a fact which could have been left to the imagination of the reader. Gauri is the new dawn in the life of Vijay and Manju and, by implication, in the life of the whole campus.

Through creating a character whose principles are admirable, Shashi Deshpande has shown her vision of a better
and a newer world. She has been realistic enough to see that an attempt to follow these principles literally is likely to land men in situations which can be crushingly ambiguous. One such problem is that of crime and punishment. It is a platitude that crime should be punished and that the punishment should fit the crime. But that is more easily said than done. Besides, the nature of the punishment has varied from age to age, from country to country, from religion to religion. If in Islam a man’s hand is to be cut off for a minor crime like theft, in India for pick-pocketing the punishment would probably be nominal, unless the amount involved is huge. The author appears to be very much interested in the problem of crime and punishment, for, apart from two references to Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, three different cases of unnatural deaths are discussed in *If I Die Today*. In the first, the accused had confessed to murdering more than forty people, but had been declared of unsound mind and, therefore, not punishable by law. Manju thinks he should have been hanged. Guru agrees unequivocally for there was no element of repentance or sorrow in him and no man has the right to destroy life without paying for it. Shyam says that such punishment is unjustified because he was born that way, without moral sense, for which he cannot be
held responsible. Sunitha asks why money should be wasted in keeping such a man alive. Vijay says that there are punishments other than hanging. Guru agrees, "There are different ways of paying. But no one can ever escape punishment. You pay in some way." (p.30)

This leads to a discussion of the death of Prabhakar Tambe, "a man in a million" (p.103) on the operation table. Tambe had become a leader because of genuine feelings for the workers. Dr.Kulkarni had diagnosed the case wrongly. It was a case of cardiorespiratory arrest. He had an enlarged heart. He should not have been operated upon. Dr.Shyam was far too casual. The tragedy was the result of complacency. Plain simple negligence. It was suggested to Dr.Vijay by the Dean, under pressure from the Shetji, to change the autopsy report in the interests of the Hospital. Dr.Kulkarni and Dr.Shyam were given a clean bill of health.

But Guru felt that the doctors ought to do two things, first, the doctors concerned should "make things right with themselves," (p.104) That is he "wanted us to come out with the truth first. Help Tambe's wife and children next." (p.105) Guru does not suggest any more severe punishment, though law provides for it, if carelessness on the part of the doctors
can be proved. Guru started with Dr. Kulkarni but was brushed off. He spoke to Dr. Sham, but we do not come to know what he said. Dr. Shyam is a sensitive person and when Guru remarks that no one can escape punishment, the plate which he had kept in his lap slides off and breaks into pieces. Such was the shock he received when the opinion about punishment was expressed. At other times we hear him telling his wife that he wants to go back to America because there are no opportunities for research here, but I think the more potent reason is he cannot face himself in the hospital where he had committed that blunder. Guru threatened Dr. Vijay with exposing him to his wife. He spoke to the Dean, too, and the Dean resigned.

The death of Tambe has serious consequences in a direction entirely unexpected. Vidya who was a pathological case, did not like Guru having so much influence on her brother and she murders him. Tony thought that Dr. Kulkarni had murdered Guru because he had come to know that Dr. Kulkarni had shouted at Guru in anger. He started boasting that he knew who had killed Guru. Vidya, not knowing that Tony was mistaken, killed him, too. When she saw her brother speaking with Vijay, she tried to kill him also. When her attempt to kill Vijay with a knife proved unsuccessful, she cracked up completely. She was no longer Vidya.
The very persons who had been so categorical about hanging the man who had killed more than forty people, and about punishing persons who had been responsible for Tambe’s death, are not so particular about putting Vidya on trial. Manju says,

"I remember how glibly we had talked of crime, criminals and punishment that evening at the Dean’s. Punish them we had said. Hang them by the neck until they are dead. Oh yes, we had been sensible, rational and objective.

"And now ... I could only agree with Vijay. To punish Vidya, try her, hang her ... somehow, it made no sense at all. It's a terrible thing to think of Vidya ... Ashok says the same thing. "Maybe we are conniving at another wrong by letting her off. But how will it help if we turn her over ... That woman whom no punishment can touch now ... to the Police? We will only be punishing the Dean. And Rani. And they have been punished enough. Life imprisonment, I’d call it. (pp.133-134)

When they talked of the punishment that should have been given to the first criminal, they were being dogmatic, for they did not know the men; when they talk about Vidya, they are being reasonable for they know her. They are now more human and more humane.

Paradoxically, the happiest woman in the novel is Meera, a married woman, She is a "woman's libber's despair. She
positively enjoys being a wife, mother, housekeeper, cook and all that it involves." (pp.4-5)

Shashi Deshpande is often associated with feminist writers, but in this novel there is no strident call for feminism, though there are a few unmistakable references to it. For example, to male egoism. When Manju tells Guru that Meera waits hand and foot on Ashok, Guru comments, 'Oh well, surgeons are supposed to be egoists, aren't they?'

'It has nothing to do with his being a surgeon. It's the Indian male. Look at Sumant and Vimala. He's not a surgeon, he's an anaesthetist. But the pattern's the same, isn't it'"? (p.27)

Cynthia, too, becomes conscious of this male egoism. Theirs was a love marriage, she is a doctor and he a P.T.Instructor in a high school, who has now lost his job. She tells Manju, "'He had an odd complex, too, about my being a doctor. If I had given up my job and become the pathetically clinging female, maybe things would have gone right between us.'" (p.95)

A stronger hint of feminism is to be found in the derogatory description of the harsh behaviour of Dr.Kulkarni.
towards his wife Shanta and only daughter Mriga. He dislikes Mriga for her uncouthness, but her uncouthness is the direct result of his inconsiderate treatment of her. The tragedy is he mistreats her because she is a girl and not a boy. That a girl can exist in her own right in something he cannot recognise.

Dr. Kulkarni looks down upon his wife probably because she has given birth to a daughter and not a son. She is browbeaten and tyrannized over. She is voiceless and gutless. Because he has no respect for her, she has no respect for herself. She is "dull, colourless, a shadow of her husband." (p.36) She knows that her husband is having an affair with Rani, but being a "shadow", has no voice to protest. It is only when Manju takes to task Dr. Kulkarni for his treatment of his daughter that Shanta plucks up enough courage to ring up the Dean and tell him about Rani’s adultery. Perhaps the strongest statement for feminism is through Meera’s contention that a pregnancy before marriage is not indecent. (p.39)

In the still-male-dominated Indian society, the most important virtue a woman can have is sexual morality, though licence on the part of men is tolerated if not approved. Men refuse to understand that there can be genuine goodness apart
from sexual morality. The change in Rani — a change from being an adulterous, pleasure-loving woman to becoming a devoted nurse of a sick woman -- is an instance.

Another ambiguity which can have no precise answer is the problem of telling the truth. To the question, "Should one speak the truth?", the answer is "Yes". "Always?", we cannot be sure. If you speak frankly and always, you would probably be in the boots of Alceste of Moliere's *The Misanthrope*. He forgot that the shortest distance between two points in human nature was not necessarily a straight line. Therefore it is said in Sanskrit "Na bruyat satyamapriyam" (Don’t give utterance to unpleasant truth.) What happened to Alceste also happens to Manju for speaking the truth about her early love for Rajiv. Celérome refused to marry Alceste; it hurt Vijay so much that heart-to-heart talk became impossible between husband and wife until the misunderstanding was fortuitously cleared up.

Still another ambiguity is the idea of "fate". When Meera says that it was her "fate" to drink lukewarm coffee, Manju insists that Kamala prepare two fresh cups of coffee, which they drink with a rare enjoyment. Manju argues, "No, there's no fate, Meera, there's only us. And we can control our own lives." (p.20)
About Tony and Cynthia being very fond of children but not having any, Manju says, "That's how it is." (p.25) Manju does not believe in "fate" in the sense of a particular power dictating how things are to be, or predestination which means that whatever happens has already been determined to happen that way, but just the way things may be as a result of several factors.

Again, when she cannot manage her daughter, Sonu, she ruminates, "I am a failure, I often thought. I can't manage my own child. Perhaps this time ...? But I couldn't fool myself it would be different this time. I would go on making the same mistakes. We can rarely help being what we are. And that, I thought, is the real meaning of Fate." (p.44)

(ii)

COME UP AND BE DEAD

There are three aspects in the novel *Come Up and Be Dead*, all of which are equally important -- three bizarre deaths, the ambivalent influence of her father on Kshama and the philosophy of good and evil. But there is no artistic synthesis of these three elements. The "whodunit" aspect of the novel holds one's interest, but Kshama, the protagonist of
the novel, does not influence the action, and the philosophy that evil is omnipresent and has the potency to corrupt man unless he is very watchful does not emerge naturally from the story. Perhaps this is to be expected since the moral of detective fiction can usually be little more than "Crime does not pay," and the talk of good and evil between Inspector Prasad and Kshama is merely an imposition from without.

If the theme of *If I Die Today* may be expressed with a quotation from *Hamlet*:

"...to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man."\(^2\)

the theme of *Come Up and Be Dead*, that evil is omnipresent, may be expressed with another from the same play: "Get thee to a nunnery; why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?".\(^3\)

The statement about being true to oneself comes from the lips of the shallow Polonius as a piece of advice to Laertes, while the cynical advice to Ophelia comes from a disappointed and disillusioned Hamlet. The first one, though a platitude, is a profound truth, for some of the universal truths are only repeated platitudes. Hamlet's presumption that all men are


\(^3\) Ibid, Act III, i, ll. 121-122.
born evil is a Christian idea. That no children are born in nunneries may be correct, but the implied assumption that there is, therefore, no sin in a nunnery is not necessarily so. Though a nunnery is like a fortified island secluded from the rest of the world, evil may manage to sneak in. The situation in the old, exclusive girl's school, of which Kshama is the Head-Mistress, is no different.

Miss Kshama Rao is the new Head-Mistress of the high school. She happens to be only the second Indian and the first non-Christian to be its Head-Mistress. She has been appointed through the good impression she made on the Chairman of the Body of Governors whom she encountered by chance in a train. She was already head-mistress of a girl's school and she freely mentioned some of the ideas she wanted to introduce. She had no ulterior purpose in speaking of her new ideas. They had exchanged addresses and she had forgotten the whole thing, but, to her surprise, she received the offer of the head-mistress's post a month later.

She comes to see the school before deciding to take up the appointment and the Chairman, Mr. Matthews, takes her round. The first impression that the narrow gate and the high wall topped by shards of glass make is rather forbidding. She
says aloud, "Rather like a nunnery." "The building has acquired the soft, grey patina of old age." (p.2) It was beautiful. At the end of the visit, she enquires,

"You assure me I will have a free hand?"
"I've said so once."
"Then I agree," she said calmly. (p.4)

She felt an "exultation which she soon quelled. It's nothing more than I deserve, she told herself." (p.4)

This fact of her egoism, of being entirely certain of herself is one of the results of her father's influence. "Her father was a remarkable man, an intellectual, a research scholar, an eminent professor." (p.28) The plus points of Kshama -- intelligence, efficiency, competence, an ability to think, and the capacity to work hard -- are the result of her father's training. The negative points --self-centredness, egoism, inability to stand criticism are the indirect influence of her father's contemptuous and sarcastic attitude towards her younger brother Pratap, whose tragedy was "the tragedy of a mediocre person being born in a family that had two brilliant intellects like Kshama and his father." (p.45)

Kshama knows what is good for the school. She has made

several improvements. She has brought in male teachers and
the school ceases to have the look of a zenana. She has
abolished things which have only snob value, has done away
with "those horrid blazers the girls had to wear till then.
Those childish pinafores, even for girls above fifteen.
Celebrating things like... of all the absurdities... Guy
Fawkes Day, western music, western dancing. Oh, so many
things that had no reference to now and here, things that cut
off the girls from their real world." (p.100) She works hard.
"The Head Mistress was, as always, the first to arrive... She
unlocked her room... and settled down to an hour’s undisturbed
work. She cherished this hour when no claims were made on
her." (p.76) She is competent enough to earn even a police
officer’s praise. When Mrs. Raman’s murder is discovered, she
takes the action necessary in such circumstances. "He [the
Police Inspector] had to admit that this woman had been
superbly competent. The moment she had realised what had
happened, she had kept people out of the tent, had collected
the persons who could have had any idea of what had happened,
had rung up the ACP." (p.174) Sapna, a teacher in the school,
has the good sense to appreciate what Kshama has done for the
school, but discriminating enough to distinguish between a
good thing and the way it is done. "'No, it's not the HM's
action, she's right as always, Sapna said a little wryly. 'It's not what she does, but the way she does it; going her own way, crushing those who come in her way!' (p.54) She has the "ability to see a thing not in itself, but in relation to other things, other times, both in the past and the future." (p.94) And "she felt that only she had this understanding, this grasp of the school as a thing belonging not just to here and now, but as being part of a whole that she alone could see." (p.94) To admit that she does not know something is to her a humiliation. She did not know that Mridula and Pratap were interested in gardening and were friends. When Devi tells her this, she remarks, "'I didn't know that. I didn't know'" The words tasted strange and unfamiliar, she had said them so rarely in her life. It felt humiliating, admitting to ignorance." (p.35) The virtue of humility is entirely unknown to her at this stage of life of hers. The glitter of her intelligence is thus diminished by her egoism which borders on conceit. The cause was Pratap, though indirectly. Kshama "had been sixteen when Pratap was born. It had seemed a disaster to her... What she had realised then was that Pratap was a threat... 'My son...' the way Appa had said those words somehow diminished her. It had struck terror in her. Don't I matter at all? Don't I count any more?
"Luckily, Pratap had been a whining child and Appa had never taken very much to him. She had remained the focus of his interest in the family. And she had been able to ignore Pratap after that." (p.105) Pratap got a good job but he proved a failure at it. He broke his leg in an accident and when he was taken to hospital, it was soon clear that there was something more wrong with him than just a fractured leg. After he was treated by a psychiatrist, she went to Delhi and brought him to her house. "There was no anxiety on her face... only irritation and impatience." (p.45) Her "unconcern about Pratap was magnificent." (p.51)

This magnificent unconcern, intelligence and confidence have made her the monarch of all she surveys. Shashi Deshpande gives an impressive picture of her:

There was no doubt at all that the woman who stood on the dais was fully in command, both of the situation and herself. Small-made and dumpy though she was, there was an unmistakable air of authority about her. It showed in her perfect composure, in the way she dressed, (each hair in place, the sari hanging in geometrical straight lines from waist to feet, from shoulder to hip), in the subdued faces of the teachers and the awed silence in which the girls shuffled in. Looking at the steady eyes which watched them, one would have thought ... here's a woman who knows what she wants. And gets it. (pp.6-7)
This beautiful piece of description of her majestic control has a piece of underlying irony, for it is the description of a condolence meeting for the death of a fifteen-year old unmarried pregnant student (Mridula) of the school. She thinks she is in complete command, but at that very moment, her command has started to slip. By the time the meeting is over, she realises that with the death of that girl, something that would not end simply or soon had begun. The death is bad enough but it is worse because the girl's name comes to be somehow associated with that of the Head-Mistress's younger brother, Pratap.

Pratap has been recovering from a relapse and Devayani (Devi for short), the cousin of Kshama, is taking care of him. She is working as the house-keeper, too. Though Kshama and Devi are cousins (their mothers are sisters), there is little resemblance between the two. Kshama's father was a well-known scholar, while Devi's father, as she put it, "was... a poor old man, a failure in life. He never did a thing in his life that could be called an achievement. And whatever he did, he did wrong." (p.28) He loved thrillers. He read all of them from Wilkie Collins and Conan Doyle to Agatha Christie. He read good literature, too, and extensively at that,
particularly the Russian. Devi followed his reading habits. In the course of the novel she quotes from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Chekov’s *The Bear*, Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* (from which the title of the novel is taken), *Pickwick Papers* and *David Copperfield*. Synge, the Bible and Shakespeare of course. It is probably because of her reading of literature that she has more human qualities, particularly those of understanding and sympathy than Kshama who is better trained and qualified for a profession. Devi was over-joyed when Kshama had offered her the job of a housekeeper on [rupees] two hundred a month because she knew that she was not qualified to get a better one. She has a sense of humour and a mind clear enough to look at herself as she is. She describes herself as “a 27-year-old spinster, insignificant and undeveloped, as Jane Eyre would say. In fact, there had been a time when I had imagined myself a Jane Eyre. With, of course, a Mr. Rochester waiting for me somewhere. A man who would look beyond this insignificant exterior and see the exciting person I really was. Well...!” (p.39) She had an epileptic mother and had been afraid that her children, too, might prove to be epileptic, and, therefore, gave up the idea of marriage, though marriage had been the only idea her parents had placed before her when she
was young. Besides, when her sister got married and went away, she had to be there to look after her mother. And when she died, she had to look after her father. But there is an occasion when she realises that she has missed a profoundly satisfying thing by not getting married - intimate human companionship. She had the police officer in the drawing-room of Dr. Girish's house, waiting to meet him.

A woman spoke softly, then I heard Girish's laughter. In a moment, the women was laughing too, and listening to the two of them, something happened to me. It was as if a terrible kind of knowledge of myself came to me in an instant. I knew that I would always be outside that room of human companionship. It was not my mother's illness that had kept me out. I had been fooling myself all these years thinking that way. I was the diseased one, not my mother. (p.216)

However, she has not become dissatisfied, disappointed or disgruntled. Her fine sensibilities have not been blunted.

Kshama felt "a resentful anger in her" (p.47) against Pratap. She felt her responsibility was over once she brought him home. He was to be the responsibility of Devi. Devi did not like the responsibility either, but she did whatever was to be done. In any case, let it be said to her credit that she was not indifferent or unconcerned, for indifference is worse than hatred.
Pratap's name is associated with Mridula's when she dies. There are many people who are interested in doing so. The school-girls find it exciting to spread rumours though they have no ulterior purpose. Some of the disgruntled teachers take it for granted that Pratap is the culprit and blame the Head-Mistress for keeping him on the campus. Then there are those who are really behind the death of Mridula and they quietly stir up trouble against Pratap, because as long as Pratap is openly blamed, nobody would suspect them. Sapna sums it up neatly when she says, "Not just the usual anti-authority stuff. There's something spiteful and unpleasant, as if some one is deliberately stirring things up." (p.68) The story is the discovery of the truth behind the trouble, a discovery made after two murders (of Pratap and Mrs. Raman), two attempts at murder (of Sona and Devi), and a stabbing (of Sharmila).

Sharmila and Bunny are friends. Sharmila is seventeen and Bunny a little younger. Sharmila has become the mistress of Bunny, a cousin who has managed to seduce her. He is a big show-off, with a loud motorbyke. He is associated with the hotel "Open Sesame" which used to provide call-girls. The young man is active in this operation. He tries to make friends with Bunny, but she is too intelligent for him.
Mridula is a simple-minded girl who has a fascination for smart, well-dressed girls. Her parents are too much interested in themselves to care much for her beyond providing money for education and good clothes. She tries to make friends with Bunny, but when Bunny does not accept her friendship, she, not being too intelligent, becomes a friend of Sharmila. She then foolishly tries to attract Sanjay and she falls into his trap. What follows is described by Dr. Girish—Pratap's doctor—to Devi, "It was Mridula who told me about that boy, Sanjay—Sharmila's friend. He took her with him, she said, to this place, "Open Sesame." They had dinner together, and he took her to a room. There was another man there, she said, and they had something to eat and drink with him. They must have got the girl drunk, I suppose, for the next thing she remembered was that she was alone in that room with the strange man. And also she realised that something had happened to her." (p.251) Dr. Girish wants money for his wife to live in style. So he goes to Sanjay and tells him that he knows about the call-girl business that is going on at the "Open Sesame", and that he would keep silence for a price. The Big Chief sends for Girish who agrees to keep his lips closed for a consideration. That is how Girish starts having a good regular income.
Girish, who has a very beautiful wife, wants Devi and Pratap to meet his wife and he invites them for dinner at the "Open Sesame". Mrs. Girish does not attend (perhaps because she is in one of her tantrums). Pratap sees by chance Sharmila with two of her friends there and he comes to know the truth. Now Sanjay has to get rid of Pratap to keep the secret safe. Next day early morning Girish, whom Pratap trusts, calls him out and goes away. Sanjay hits Pratap on the head and Pratap dies.

Sanjay hears that Mrs. Jyoti Raman wants to leave the school and go to another with her daughter Sonali (Sona for short) because things are not all right here. Sanjay gets funky and suspects, though wrongly, that Mrs. Raman knows about the racket. During the school festival, when Mrs. Raman acting the fortune-telling gypsy, he gets confirmed that the gypsy is indeed Mrs. Raman and when there is nobody at the door of the tent, he goes in and strangles her.

Then Sanjay suspects that Mrs. Raman might have passed on the information to Sona. So he wants to kill her, too. He tells Sharmila to bring out Sona, but Sharmila is sure that Sona does not know it since she had overheard Sona telling a
friend of hers that her mother had insisted that she go with her to another school elsewhere, but had refused to say why. However, Sanjay does not want to take any chances and he tells Sharmila that he does not want to kill Sona but only ask her what she knows. Sharmila agrees to bring off Sona, but in the evening goes to Devi and tells her seriously to send Sona away somewhere. At ten o'clock at night Sona hears a tapping on the window and when she switches on the light, she finds a letter asking her to come to the junior school building. Sona goes to the school and sees Sharmila coming down the steps from the first floor. Before she has descended, she sees Sanjay coming down behind her with an open knife. Sharmila realises Sanjay's intention and shouts to Sona to escape. Sanjay in anger stabs Sharmila and runs away. Sona starts screaming and Devi, who has gone in search of her because her bed is empty, hears the screams and rushes to help her. Kshama rings up the police who come and remove Sharmila to the hospital. She recovers after some days and fills in the missing links in the story, which she alone could.

Meanwhile Sapna takes Devi to see a film by Satyajit Ray. In the lounge during the recess Devi sees the advertisement for the films of Satyajit Ray that are going to be screened at
that theatre and one of them is *Jana Aranya*, a film about call-girls. The title immediately reminds her of the last word scribbled by Pratap on a piece of paper the night before he died. The word was *jana*, but it looked like "Jane" and Devi could make neither head nor tail of it. That paper she had given to Dr. Girish hoping that he would understand it.

Now she suddenly realises what Pratap had been trying to convey. She is so excited by this discovery that she rushes out of the theatre pushing against the crowd going in. Dr. Girish, who has come to see the picture with his wife, sees her and asks her the reason for her haste. She is so simple-minded that without suspecting anything, she tells him that she has to see the Police Inspector to pass on this discovery of hers. Girish leaves his wife in the theatre telling her that he has an emergency to attend to, and brings Devi to his dispensary telling her that they can ring up the police from there. He leaves her in his office and goes into the next room to ring up the police. She peeps in and finds that he is not ringing up the number she has given him. Now it dawns on her that she has been brought there to be killed. He does not mind now telling her many missing details of this horrendous story since he has decided to kill her and once she is dead she can do no harm. He reveals to her the most
damning detail of all — Varma, an influential member of the
Body of Governors of the School, is the man behind all that
immoral and antisocial activity. Luckily for Devi, Sapna had
rushed to Kshama and told her that Devi was missing. They
ring-up the police who rush to Girish’s office just in time to
save her and take him away. Before he goes, Girish gives a
bunch of keys to Devi to hand them over to his wife. The
Inspector of Police assures Kshama and others that Sanjay and
Varma will not escape.

Kshama had been requested, during that period of great
tension, to leave at the end of the term, but she wants to
resign immediately. However, she is requested to continue,
since many members, parents and teachers support her. Devi
leaves and goes home.

The story as summarised above does not do justice to the
narrative skill of Shashi Deshpande. In fact, no summary of
any novel can to its original, but even more so in the case of
detective fiction. The tension, the holding of one’s breath
about what would happen and the reasoning through which a
mystery is unravelled cannot be reproduced. Not that *Come Up*
is faultless -- the writer has slipped in some places, to
which we will come in a later chapter. Exciting as the story
is, the different reactions of the two cousins to various situations are more interesting and significant.

Kshama is so self-centred that though she brings Pratap from Delhi to her place after his illness, she leaves him in Devi's charge, of Devi. She feels only resentment towards him. Devi feels angry because she justly thinks that Kshama should have taken care of him. She herself takes care of him, though she does not come too near him. She starts feeling pity for him though. Devi is simple-minded and good at heart, but she does not know that she is good -- like the man who was asked what prose was and he said he did not know, although he had been speaking prose all his life. When the scandal breaks out that Pratap is responsible for Mridula's pregnancy and consequent death, Kshama feels, "Surely, I am above such dirt, such trash. It would never have dared to come near me, it never has until now, if it hadn't been for Pratap..." (p.84) She is not even interested in finding out whether the scandal has any basis. But not so Devi. She finds that the friendship of Pratap and Mridula was innocuous. Both of them were lonely spirits and they had a common hobby, gardening. When Mridula's mother comes to the Head-Mistress's house to find out the truth, Devi tells her firmly and frankly,
"There's nothing more. You've got to believe me. They were just two lonely people with a common interest."

Kshama believes Devi's assertion and she repeats it before the Chairman who has come to make enquiries. He believes her but suggests that Pratap should be sent away. She agrees. After the Chairman has left, she sends for Pratap and tells him he has to go.

He sat silent for a while, then suddenly looked up at her and said, "You haven't even asked me if it's true about me and the girl, I mean."

"I know it isn't."

"And yet you want me to go away. Isn't that like admitting it is true? Isn't that what will be made of it?"

"It isn't my doing."

"...there's something wrong here..."

Something wrong? There's nothing wrong. If there is, it's you...

"...And anyway, what does it matter?"

"Matter? Why it mattered enough to a poor girl who had to die. I must find out who did it, who pushed her to the brink so that she had no choice but to jump...."

"But you've to go, that's clear."

"...Don't you care about anything but yourself?"

(pp.108-110)
Later Pratap is killed just outside the house and when Devi sees the body, she sends word to Kshama through a servant.

Kshama came out... how much later?... her steps unhurried, her appearance unflurried, her face unruffled. It seemed to me as I watched her approaching that I had never seen her till now. She waited till she came right up to me before asking, "Is he dead?"

"No, not yet."

Only later I realised what I had said "Not yet". As if it was something she was waiting for, not dreading. (p.140) (Italics added.)

Everybody including the police comes to the conclusion that Pratap died accidentally by falling from a ladder because a ladder was found lying by the side of the body. Devi discovers enough evidence to suspect murder. When she mentions this to Kshama, she is told to keep her mouth shut and not to mention it to the police. But Devi does and Inspector Praasad comes to discuss it with Kshama. She wants the Inspector not to believe Devi and so she runs her down:

"She's a very sensible, practical girl. But she too... in a sense, she's very innocent. I mean she believes in people. She's lived a very sheltered life, you see. She has no experience of the world at all. her father... he was content to stay at home all his life, doing nothing. He used to read a lot of trash, I remember. Mysteries." Her voice reminded him of his wife's expression when she picked up a dead cockroach... "She stayed at home all these years... A repressed life." (pp.190-191)
Then came Mrs. Raman's death through strangling. The Governing Body asks Kshama to leave at the end of the term. She tells Devi, "'They want me to leave. They want me to resign. To give up my position and go. Because of Pratap. it's ridiculous. Incredible. What have I to do with the death of that woman? That girl? And Pratap... must I be punished because of him? It's not fair." (p.207)

At ten o'clock of the night Sharmila is stabbed. Devi goes into Sona's room and finds it empty. She sees Kshama coming from Pratap's room. "She sounded waspish, complaining, weak, quite unlike her usual self. Her hair, I now noticed, was not tied up neatly as it always was, but straggled loosely on her back. It gave her a peculiar look, not of untidiness, but disintegration. I felt as if she was going to pieces." (p.225) When Devi hears the screams of Sona, Devi rushes to the building. Kshama follows and she sees Devi standing by the side of a body lying there.

"Then she saw me and the girl who lay on the ground. Her face changed. Even as I looked, it sagged. She squatted down beside me and said in a kind of whimper, "Oh God, no, oh God, no!" For a moment she reminded me of my aunt, her mother, a defeated woman, who had been nothing even in her own home."
"Kshama", I said sharply and she looked at me as if she had never seen me before. As if everyone and everything had been wiped off for her and all that was left was some private hell of her own."
(p.228)

From the time Mridula died at the beginning of the novel it has been a steady decline in Kshama's self-confidence and egoism until she reaches the nadir of her egoism, which becomes the moment of the birth of humility. She goes to her house, rings-up the police and returns to the spot. That is her first step in the upward curve of her moral regeneration. She goes to the hospital with Sharmila in the police jeep. That may be called the second step. Next morning Devi meets Kshama, who had returned after midnight. Comments Devi, "There were just a few hours separating this woman from the distraught woman of last night; and yet there was so great a difference between them, I could scarcely connect the two women." (p.236) Kshama is apparently on the way to self discovery -- an existentialist idea. She obviously makes further progress in that direction.

Next morning Kshama wants to meet the Chairman to hand in her resignation, but before she goes out she tells Devi about her intention since that would affect Devi's stay. This is the first time that Kshama had ever taken into consideration
the convenience of others. Devi says that she would go back home. "Home" becomes a symbol for Devi's attaining whatever she wanted to. There are no more desires or ambitions yet to be fulfilled and make her unhappy if they are not. For Devi it is a home "where the champak flowered in the front yard; and where, in the backyard, the gutters flowed into a swamp in which the bananas proudly flourished." (p.238) The champak and banana symbolize knowledge and moral fulfilment. There was a time when she had felt that since she was a spinster she would always be outside the circle of human companionship. But her noblest moment of identification with another comes when she goes to meet Dr. Girish's wife and hand over to her the bunch of keys given to her by Dr. Girish when he is arrested by the police. She can imagine the grief that Saheeda would feel when she would learn about what had happened to her husband. Kshama, Sona, Sapna become unreal to her and "there was only one face that was real, only one that I could see. That frail-looking, vulnerable figure waiting for him." (p.255) She goes to Dr. Girish's house and hands over the keys and conveys the sad tidings with all circumspection possible.

"No, "she said, "no, it isn't true. You're lying to me. I don't want to listen to you, go away, go away from here ..."
The voice rose to a shriek, the hands clawed frenziedly, ineffectually at me. I felt a searing pain in me, as if her nails had torn at me, though they had, in fact, not even touched me. And I knew it was her pain, not her nails, that had reached me. I cringed into myself, my body, my whole self revolting against the thought. I wouldn’t let her get at me. I wanted none of her pain, it had nothing to do with me, I would not be involved with it ...

And then I remembered him saying ... "I was not involved". For the last time I saw his face. Then it receded, becoming just a blur in the darkness, something left behind at an unknown station, while I moved on in the speeding train.

But now I knew where it was I was going, what it was I had to do. I crossed the line, put my arms around her and let her pain flow into me. (pp.258-259)

This moment of identification with Saheeda and her sorrow is a moment of glory for Devi. She forgot that Girish would have killed her if the police had not saved her in time, forgot that he had encouraged for the sake of personal profit the immoral traffic going on in the "Open Sesame", but only remembered the sudden shock of bereavement and sorrow that this young woman was suffering from. She puts her arms around her and tries to absorb into her own body the sufferings of another. That is her moment of fulfilment, the moment of reaching home.
Devi leaves, but Kshama is asked to continue as the Head-Mistress. But she is a new woman. She realises that "what happened and what I did to Pratap, is now part, not only of my memory, but of my very being." (p.263) She is left alone, a wiser if a sadder woman, to continue to be in charge of the school, the improvement of which is nearest her heart. She will make this voyage of human life alone, economically independent, intellectually self-reliant, but, it is hoped, not emotionally unattached to others.

In all crime fiction evil has the upper hand in the beginning and the rest of the novel is its unravelling and destruction. In *Come Up*, evil pervades the novel, even strides through it, except at the end when it is worsted. Bunny flirts with it, Sharmila is tempted by it, Mridula pays for it. So do Varma, Sanjay and Dr. Girish. Pratap gets killed for trying to unravel it and Jyoti Raman for trying to run away from it. But the novel ends on a (morally) satisfactory note, as all crime fiction has to.

Inspector Prasad comes to meet Kshama and request for admission for his daughter (and to fill in some gaps in the narrative). When he leaves, she comes up to the door to see him off. She sees the high wall and remembers how she had
noticed it on her first visit and had remarked to herself, "'I must break down that wall. Get the girls out of it.'" I wouldn't dare to say that now, she thought. I know we have to break our own walls." (p.265) She has now realised that the walls to be broken down are not the physical walls of brick and cement external to us but the internal walls within us, the walls of egoism and alienation that make human beings prisoners within their own hearts, make islands of human beings cut off from the rest of humanity.

The theme of the novel could apparently, be said to be the Biblical statement that love of money is the root of all evil. This may be supported by the significance of the title, *Come up and Be Dead*, which is a quotation from Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*, the theme of which, according to J.Hillis Miller, is "Money in its proliferation is hopelessly separated from any authentic human value." In *Come up*, Sanjay wants money for pleasure like any reckless young man without morals. Girish wants money because he wants to keep his wife in style. That quite a rich old man like Varma runs a call-girl's business is shocking.

Inspector Prasad, who is a thoughtful, philosophising type of person, explains why he entered the police force:

"A group of young men had committed a number of murders, for no obvious reason. It was the worst crime... a casual kind of killing. I saw the accused in court. They looked like any other group of young men, decently dressed, talking and laughing among themselves. When I saw them there that day I had a strange feeling. A strange thought, rather. Why was it those men there? It could so easily have been any one else. Me, for example. The distance between us and them...I mean, between the spectators and them, seemed very small. Somehow, it frightened me. I thought...I must make the demarcation very clear. To myself. And so I decided to become a policeman." (pp.213-214)

He becomes sad and frightened at the evil doings of the younger generation. "There was the same cold frightened feeling in him when he listened to this girl as there had been when he had looked at those casually murderous young men in the court room. There was anger too, anger, not so much against this girl, as against the young man who had made her what she was. She had been only fourteen when the boy, a cousin, had seduced her. Since then she had been besotted about him, totally under his influence." (p.261)

From his experience of evil in society (and who can have greater chances of meeting evil than a policeman?), Prasad
comes to the philosophical conclusion: "I believe in the theory of evil. Just simple evil that drives men and women to deeds that seem incomprehensible to others. And yet, the truth is that all of us carry this potentiality for evil within us. We have to struggle against it all our lives. Some prefer not to struggle, that's all." (pp. 264-265) No external reason for a man to succumb to evil is valid or defensible. Dr. Girish wants money for the sake of his wife whom he loves so much that when he mentions her, he feels a fervour that transforms his face. "It was actually an exaltation that was close to madness. He reminded me of a man raising his eyes to some vision." (p. 247) Devi wonders whether he would have indulged in such activities if she had not been so beautiful. But that is no excuse. Varma's business of call-girls cannot be justified by an explanation like: "Varma carried a canker of hatred for young women within him because his own wife deserted him soon after marriage." (p. 264) The philosophical conclusion about the omnipresence of evil and the necessity of man's struggle against it cannot be gainsaid. But this piece of philosophy reads like a moral attached to a fable.
We come across the feminist point of view to a little extent in Shashi Deshpande's novels. In this novel, too. But she is not a rigid or uncompromising feminist. Certainly not a bigot. The writer's point of view is best seen in the delightful scene, almost at the beginning of the novel. The scene is the staff-room of the school. The lady teachers are holding forth good-naturedly against Gopal, a shy, young teacher, and he can barely escape by rushing out. He almost collides with an exquisitely pretty young teacher, Mona, who is aware that Gopal admires her. She enters and asks, "What's wrong with Gopal?"

"The usual war of the sexes," Dolly said mischievously. "Gopal on one side and the rest of us on the other, Pai leading us, of course"...

"Say what you like," Sapna said, trying to change the subject, "I for one enjoy seeing men around. Women, women... what with my sisters and mother at home, and here all these girls and us... it's maddening. Lovely to see a few non-females around, even if it's only little Gopal and surly old Das. What do you say, Mona?"

"You bet!" Mona said so fervently that all the three women burst into laughter. (pp.16-18)

She is aware that most men in our society treat women as though they are inferior creatures, but she is also aware that some women are developing unhealthy and unjustified prejudices against men. Miss Pai, one of the teachers in the school,
bursts out angrily, "'What right do men teachers have in this school? Do they have women teachers in boy's schools?'" (p.17) No logic or facts can convince her that her prejudices are mostly unjustified. She goes on, "'A fifteen-year-old getting pregnant. Would it have happened 'if we hadn't had these men around?'" (p.18) We do not require a doctor to answer her question. In spite of protests, she continues. "'I wouldn't be surprised,' she said darkly, 'if someone right here in this school was responsible. You know how these girls are about older men...'" Sapna shared a disgusted look with others. "'What wild exaggerations! You can't accuse the men that way. It's irresponsible. A man could lose his job...'" (p.18)

One suspects that if somebody had married Miss Pai, she would not have had so many objections to men. If spinsterhood is the reason for Miss Pai's prejudices, marriage is the reason for Mrs. Raman's.

Mrs. Jyoti Raman had been used by her husband as an object of sexual gratification with utter indifference to her feelings. On the contrary, "the more reluctant she was, the more he had seemed to enjoy it. It had seemed enormously to excite him, her resistance. She had learnt then not to protest, to endure silently. She had wondered bleakly whether
anything would get her out of that hell." (p.161) She tried
to commit suicide and her husband decided he wanted a divorce.
"She had been very happy that day, though her parents had
behaved as if it was a great tragedy... She completed her
education, got a job and, with her daughter, moved away from
her silently disapproving family." (p.162)

But her mind is so warped that she does not want her
grown-up, school-going daughter Sonali to be friendly with any
girl who is suspected to have a boy-friend. She thinks the
atmosphere of the school has become so contaminated that she
wants to go to another school in another town with her
daughter tagged to her. Sona is not told why she has to go.
Before things come to a head, Mrs Raman is murdered, a fact
which saves Sona from all the humiliation.

If Sona’s is a case of being tied by a leash against her
will, Mridula’s is a case of both the parents being too much
interested in their own rights and privileges and pleasures to
care for her beyond providing for her education and good
clothes. When Pratap once asks her whether her parents did
not worry about her if she went home late, she replied, "How
can they? They are not at home, either of them themselves.
Once when Daddy asked Mummy to give up her work, in the
evening... for me, you know... she said, 'If you don't care about being home, I'm not going to be here either, sitting and twiddling my thumbs.'" (p.71) And when Inspector Prasad questions the parents about Mridula's death, the father admits, "The guilty people are us... my wife and I. We're splitting up, you know...now...there is no family. I wonder if there ever was one.'" (p.193)

This is the kind of situation which Prasad wants to avoid in his family. He has a young daughter, Sucharita, and he speaks about her to Kshama, "She is too sensitive, though. I wonder if we... her parents, I mean...let her down. She's resentful I'm so little at home. She keeps comparing me to other fathers. And her mother... Sometimes I wonder whether between my right to my life and my wife's right to hers, the children are not the real losers, after all.'" pp.260-261

These two cases of Mridula and Sucharita make it clear that Shashi Deshpande's concept of feminism does not absolve the mothers of the responsibility of bringing up their children in the atmosphere of a happy family, the members of which do not compete but co-operate with each other.

The writer wants people to recognize that women have an identity of their own. Girish tells Devi,
"You are both so emphatically your own selves."
"She, of course. But I... I'm nothing."
"You'd rather be nothing, wouldn't you,
than a shadow of someone else?
Is that why you haven't married?" (p.133)

The atmosphere of the school and her contact with some of
the teachers, particularly Sapna and the student Sona, have
revealed to her that "the doors were wide open. I had always
imagined that my sex had put me into a closed room. I'd never
dared to open the doors. Perhaps now was the time." (p.134)

If Shashi Deshpande had been keenly interested in
feminism, she could have made Kshama a cult figure of
feminism. Kshama has all the qualifications -- intelligence,
education, a firm mind, and egoism. The only quality that she
lacks for being a hard-core feminist is she does not treat men
as rivals. She appreciates and recognises their good
qualities when they have them. For example, she has appointed
two men as teachers in her school, much to the displeasure of
a teacher or two, and both Mr. Das and Gopal have proved to be
good teachers, justifying the trust the Head-Mistress kept in
them.

Could Shashi Deshpande have written this if she had been
a rabid feminist?