The Binding Vine (1993), the latest novel of Shashi Deshpande, is her *magnam opus*, with its broad canvas, well-knit plots, intertwined lives, emotional insights, human relationships, a variety of feminine disabilities represented by Mira and some others, and the journey of self-discovery traversed by Urmi.

While the main plot is concerned with Urmi (Urmila), there are six sub-plots which add complexity and depth to the life of Deshpande depicts: (i) of Vanaa (short for Vandana) and her mother Akka, (ii) of Mira and her husband, (iii) of Aju and Baijji, (iv) of Inmi and Papa, (v) of Shakutai and Kalpana, and (vi) of Sulu and her husband. But all these subplots are so organically knit with each other and with the main plot that we think of all of them together as one story only. The phrase, "the binding vine" of the title, occurs initially in the last poem Mira wrote and it refers to the umbilical cord which connects her to her yet unborn child. Urmi uses the phrase sentimentally to express her emotional attachment to her late infant daughter whom she cannot forget.
and does not want to either, for, according to her, "to forget is to betray". Again, the cord joins together figuratively all the women in the novel who suffer from the passions, oppression and indifference of men, and by implication all the women of the world under the patriarchal system.

Urmi is married to a neighborhood young man whom she had been in love with and whose sister Vanaa had been her close friend and schoolmate. The young man is Kishore, the son of Mira who had bled to death within an hour of his birth. Almost immediately after Mira's death the father marries again because he requires somebody to take care of the infant. His second wife (Akka) gives him Vanaa who later becomes a medical social worker, while her husband, Harish, is a doctor. As children, Urmi and Vanaa lived at Ranidurg, a small town, Urmi with Aju and Baiajji (her grand-parents) and Vanaa with her parents. As grown-ups and married persons, they settle down in Bombay. Urmi is a lecturer in a college and one evening on the way back she goes to the hospital to accompany Vanaa home. And there Vanaa tells her about Kalpana, a tragic case of a violent rape by Prabhakar, the husband of Sulu, the younger sister of Shakutai who is the mother of the outraged girl.

that is, she has been raped by her own uncle. The junior
doctor in the hospital has either through ignorance or
indifference or both diagnosed it as a case of an automobile
accident and the police find it convenient to concur, for a
rape case is always troublesome. Soon after the senior doctor
examines the patient and finds it a clear case of rape and
tells the police so. The police to avoid trouble persuade the
doctor to keep quiet, since it would bring the junior doctor
into trouble and the victim's family into disrepute. The
mother of the girl not only agrees but begs of them to keep it
a secret at any cost. The chances of the girl's recovery are
rare and after a few months the hospital authorities want to
more
shift her to a distant hospital since there is a shortage of
beds in the present one. But that would make it extremely
inconvenient for Shakutai to visit the patient. She appeals
to Urmi who has taken great sympathetic interest and visits
Shakutai and Kalpana often, and Urmi persuades Shakutai to
speak to Malcolm, a former class-mate and now a journalist,
whom they meet by chance in the hospital. Shakutai is not
willing, but knowing that it is the only chance to keep
Kalpana from being shifted, gives him the details. The news
gets published in the papers, there is a public protest by
women and the Government orders an enquiry. Sulu comes to
know that it is her husband of all people who is the criminal. After giving this information to Shakutai, she sets herself on fire.

Urmí is the narrator of the story. She tells us about the rape, about which she learnt from Vanaa at the hospital. She would not have learnt about it if she had not gone to the hospital to meet Vanaa and she would not have gone there if Vanaa had not been her friend and sister-in-law. About the rape of Mira (and it is a rape though it is within the legitimised bonds of marriage), Urmí would not have known at all if she had not been given by Akka all of Mira’s papers, diary, poems, notes, etc., as part of the heirloom and she would not have been given the papers if she had not been Mira’s daughter-in-law.

The narrative given above, bare as it is, shows how tightly woven the texture of the novel is. Take away a single sub-plot and The Binding Vine gets unbound.

The story gains in significance and universality by being provided with parallels within the novel. One parallelism is of Mira and Kalpana. They suffer in the same manner — both are victims of rape by men whom they hate. Kalpana is in a
sense luckier, for the shock of violence has sent her into coma from which she will not recover, and she will not be aware of her suffering as long as she is alive. She had better be dead, for her being alive is agony to her mother. Mira is raped by her own husband. She is eighteen when she gets married and twenty-two when she dies, but the four years in between are plain hell for which the only refuge is writing poems about her ravaged body and blighted feelings sitting by the window in the dark after everybody else has slept.

Another parallelism is between Urmī’s morbid obsession with the death of her infant daughter Anu and Shakutai’s with her daughter’s death-in-life. Still another is both Akka and Inni (Yamini) are the second wives of their husbands and each has been married primarily to take care of the child of the first wife. Mira dies in child-birth and Kishore’s father has to marry somebody to take care of the baby. Only disillusionment awaits Akka because the moment she steps in as the new bride, her husband’s sister rather callously tells her:

"My brother was crazy about his wife... I’ve never seen any man like that. And since her death... it’s his son... What he really wants now is a mother for that motherless child”.

The cruelty, the enormous cruelty of that silenced us. We said nothing. As if our silence was reproof, she (Akka) said, "I’m glad she was frank. I knew then what to expect." (pp.47-48)
Akka knows that she has no room in the heart of her husband. Only Kishore had room there. From his behaviour it would appear that the father was not even aware of the existence of his second wife's daughter Vanaa. But Akka was never jealous of the deceased Mira or her son Kishore. She is a kind-hearted woman and a stoic, too. Years later when she reads Mira's poems for the first time, Urmi and Vanaa are shocked with her sudden bout of grief. Akka, who hadn't cried when her husband died, who had been stoical while Vanaa sobbed like a child when she went to Bombay to study, who had been calm even when Vanaa got married and went away -- why had she broken down now?" (p.48) Probably because she had suffered as much as Mira had, only in a different way - Mira had suffered brutal violence, Akka utter neglect.

Inni was luckier. Papa was both affectionate and cruel to her.

Coincidentally, Kishore, the stepson of Akka, marries Urmi, the step-daughter of Inni.

The parallels pointed out above give an element of universality to a work of art by creating the impression that such events are not isolated incidents but common occurrences, in this world of ours.
The plot of the novel is intricate but never becomes improbable. On the contrary, it is completely believable. It is difficult to believe that such a beautiful novel could sprout out of such a sordid event as a rape. 

She herself stated that the novel is about a rape. But in her interview with Lakshmi Holmstrom, she qualifies her statement: "But at the same time this is not the only theme nor the central theme. This novel has got three strands, the stories of three women: Kalpana, who is unconscious throughout; Mira, a poet who is now dead; and Urmila, who discovers Mira's poems and also learns about Kalpana. But Urmila is more than a filter, a medium through whom the other stories come through; she is also part of the overall theme. The biggest problem was weaving them together, bringing out what is common to all three." The story is unfolded following the moods, emotions, memories of a strong-willed, if moody, protagonist and the novel becomes nothing short of captivating.

The novel is a microcosm of mankind as far as human relationships are concerned. The relationships, the feelings

3 Holmstrom, p.26 ii.
involved, the emotions aroused, the complexes and complexities of human behaviour make the characters come alive. Different people react in such divergent ways to similar circumstances that we can only wonder at the variety of human nature. Urmi and Vanaa are, for example, of the same age, close friends, school-mates, sisters-in-law, and love each other, but they are so unlike each other in their attitudes to their children, mothers, fathers, husbands and even each other. It is through their different reactions and feelings that they become fascinating.

Urmi's relationship with her father is of a kind quite different from that of Vanaa's with hers. Urmi's father has such a high opinion of her that he considers her teaching in a college as something too lowly for his daughter. And for his son nothing less than going to America. Few people can reach the heights of scathing sarcasm that Papa is capable of. No wonder, therefore, that Urmi does not try to become anything higher than a lecturer and Amrut, when his father dies, studies for the I.A.S. instead of going abroad, for which of course his love for his widowed mother is partly at least responsible. When Urmi tells her father that she wants to marry Kishore, his reaction is typical of him. She reports the interview to Amrut:
"Papa gave in... Do you know how he did it?
He quoted a line to me. Sokamayata bahsyam prajayeya iti..."

"What does that mean?"

"That's what I asked him. And he explained with a scornful smile on his face -- you know how he used to look. It's from the Upanishads, he said. It means, every living cell desires to multiply. And so, he said, I know I can't stop you. That put me in my place. Merely a living cell wanting to multiply".
"Yeah, that's Papa all right". (p.134)

But Papa's attitude to life is sound. He tells his daughter, "'You have to believe in the normality of things'". (p.77) He means all things will become normal with time. His rational attitude is to be appreciated even more:

I remember how he demolished the story of Babur dying for his son Humayun. I read the story in my history book and it so impressed me I narrated it to him: "Babur took his son's illness upon himself by praying to God and so Babur died and Humayun lived", I said in an awed voice. Papa was angry. "They shouldn't fill your heads with such irrational stories", he said. "The truth must have been that Babur caught that illness from his son and, being older, died, while his son recovered."(p.77)

It is her father's attitude to life that makes Urmiself-reliant and self-willed, too, to some extent. Whether it is as simple a matter as the kind of clothes she likes to wear, or going out to dinner with Dr. Bhaskar, or going to
Shakutai's house to console her, she goes her own way irrespective of what others feel or say about it.

In this respect Vanaa is quite different from Urmia. In her case, too, it is her father's influence or rather neglect which has made her so. She has grown up in a family where her father has completely ignored the presence of Vanaa and her mother. So she has a tendency to agree with, not to say flatter, people. When Urmia takes much interest in Kalpana's case, Inni demurs. Urmia and Vanaa are alone:

I take a breath and laugh. "Ch well, I've taken it on myself, I can't complain. But Inni shouldn't either".
"She wasn't".
"She was. And all that you could say was, 'Yes, Inniauntie' and 'No, Inniauntie' and 'That's right, Inniauntie'".
"What do you expect me to say?"
"Couldn't you have said, 'Inniauntie, Urmia is my friend and I can't listen to any complaints about her.'... What's the matter with you, you idiot?"
"Really, Urmia, you're too absurd. Just imagine me saying, 'Inniauntie, Urmie is my friend'". She can't go on. She breaks into spluttering, uncontrollable laughter....(p.105)

In fact, Vanaa is so soft that of her two daughters, Mandira complains that her mother spends too little time with them because she has a job. She even tells her that when she grows up, marries and has children, she will not take up a job but devote all her time to the care of her children. True,
Dr. Harish (Vanaa’s husband) is too devoted to his duties to have time to help her. Vanaa tells Urmi how both her husband and elder daughter find fault with her, “Harish says I’m not firm enough with both of them (Mandira and Pallavi), Mandira says I neglect them.” (p.74) Urmi gives her sensible advice, “Well, you have to put up with her tantrums then. And stop having them yourself.” (p.75) It is difficult to believe that Vanaa can.

While Vanaa finds it a task to manage her two kids, particularly because Mandira is jealous of her younger sister Pallavi, Urmi does not find it a problem. Her young daughter died early and her son Kartik is a thoughtful boy who is no trouble at all. Actually it is the relationship between Urmi and her step-mother Inni which is more interesting.

Urmi’s mother died when she was still a baby. Papa married Yamini (Inni), a very beautiful girl from a well-to-do family. She was too young to manage Urmi who used to cry constantly. Her mother had sent an old servant, Diwakar, to help her. Diwakar had been in the family for years and was old enough to have taken care of Inni when she was a baby. Once Inni left Urmi in the charge of the servant and went out. Papa came home and found Urmi in the charge of Diwakar. He
became so incensed with Inni that she had left a baby girl
with a man(!) that he took the child to Ranidurg where his
parents lived and left her there. Inni fell at her husband’s
feet and begged him to bring back Urmi, but he did not relent.
Urmi grew up at Ranidurg with Aju and Baiajji until she was
fifteen when they died and it was there that Urmi and Vanaa
became friends. Papa’s feelings for Inni were a mixture of
love and cruelty. His anger and silence were weapons against
which Inni had no defence.

At such times, I could sense her constant
pre-occupation with his feelings, her groping
towards him, her hurt when he rejected those
overtures.

"You’re cruel," I said once when he’d reduced her
to tears.

"Cruel? Am I cruel, Yamini?"

And then he put his arm round her, a thing he did
so rarely in public that it seemed an
astonishingly overt sexual gesture. And Inni’s
face when he did that, was radiant. I
acknowledged defeat. It was Inni’s love that
defeated me. (pp.81-82)

Though Urmi had been quite happy at Ranidurg with her
grand-parents, she had always agonized over why her parents
had sent her there and had imagined all kinds of reasons for
it. Some years later she came to know the real reason, Inni
herself tells her.
"There's something supplicatory about her; it's as if I'm seeing that girl-mother of long ago, kneeling before her husband for understanding, forgiveness. She wants me to give it to her, the absolution Papa never granted her. I do. I put my arms round her. I tell her I believe her, that she never wanted me to be sent away. I say these things over and over again until she is calmer. She seems not only reassured, but unburdened, as if she's passed on her load to me." (p.200)

The clarification, unsought by Urmi, does not, however, put an end to all the petty skirmishes between her and Inni. They have different attitudes to many things. Inni always wants to go about by taxi, which they cannot afford; Inni does not want Urmi to go to the hospital to see Shakutai often; she does not want Urmi to accept Bhaskar's invitations for dinner; surprisingly, she wants Urmi to wear good clothes, and if they are cotton ones, they should be starched. Inni is fond of good clothes. Even to watch the T.V. at home as usual, Inni gets elegantly dressed as if prepared to go out. "Suddenly it occurs to me that Inni is more aggressive when she's dressed up, with all her make-up on." (p.94)

On the other hand, the relationship of Shakutai and Kalpana is marked by love, disagreement and cruelty, Shakutai is poor and illiterate but worldly-wise. She has been deserted by her husband for another woman. Kalpana, the
eldest of her three children, is really good-looking. She is bold and intelligent, but does not know the world. She is of an age when young people have the tendency to show off their beauty to their best advantage. She does not care to listen to her mother's advice to be careful and not to make herself too attractive. "She walked out of that ramshackle building with gaily painted nails and lips, brightly coloured clothes and sleek shining hair, loudly proclaiming the miracle of that existence. All young people do it." (p.149)

Shakutai has a younger sister, Sulu, whose husband Prabhakar is enamoured of Kalpana and wants to marry her. Kalpana refuses as she wants to marry a young man she is in love with. Prabhakar hears of it and rapes her. The violence sends Kalpana into a coma from which chances of recovery are almost nil. The mother's anguish at her daughter's state is palpable. But she does not want the facts to become public as it might affect the chances of marriage of the second daughter and damage the reputation of the family. She looks at the incident as though it is Kalpana who is culpable. Even when the identity of the criminal is known, Shakutai does not want to pass on the information to the police, though the author suggests at the end that she may do so.
The case of Priti and her mother is even more tragic. Priti and her parents lived in America. Both the parents worked and Priti had rather a lonely childhood. The mother, on one of her annual visits to India, ran her car over a number of people sleeping on the pavement, since which time she had become a manic depressive. She became an alcoholic and life became impossible for Priti, who then returned to India. One can understand Priti's desire to blank this part of her story but not the dishonesty with which she connected her return and the American national event of the death of Robert Kennedy. She claims that she could not stay in a country that could suffer such pointless violence. And she becomes an aggressive film-maker on feminist themes. She is very keen to do a film on Mira when Urmi by chance tells her about her tragedy, but Urmi refuses because she feels that she will turn the life of a sensitive poetic mind into a story of feminist propaganda.

A relationship between two human beings particularly women, is rarely without friction. As a Tamil proverb has it, "Three heads (men) can stay together but not three breasts (women)." Naturally so, too, for both are individuals and no two individuals can exactly be alike, not even twins. Urmi
and Vanaa are childhood friends and they are unlike each other. But like unlike poles they attract each other. They are a really fine pair of friends in spite of their different attitudes to life. It was at Ranidurg where Urmi lived with her grand-parents that they became friends. Vanaa had been dazzled by Urmi’s family from the very beginning. She confesses to Urmi, "'I fell in love with your family. I thought Inniauntie was the most beautiful woman in the world and your father the most dignified, and yes, the richest... It was because of those cars standing before your house whenever he came. And Amrut and you dazzled me. You were so different from all the children I'd known till then.'" (p.34) They were so close that people thought they were sisters. Vanaa’s mother once told Urmi. "'I always wanted Vanaa to have a sister. I only have brothers and I know what they are! It always grieved me that Vanaa doesn’t have a sister, either. And then you came into our house through that hedge; I’ve never worried about Vanaa not having a sister then.'" (sic) (p.79)

The one thing they did not agree about as children was the kind of clothes Urmi wore to school. Inni used to send her smart and fashionable frocks, skirts and jeans from
Bombay, but Urmia wore only ill-fitting, badly stitched clothes made by Baiajji, because she did not want to appear different from others. This love of simple clothes persists in later years and even as a lecturer in a college she wears only cottons. Once when she has gone out, Inni and Vanaa (by that time Vanaa and Urmia are sisters-in-law) are having a critical look at Urmia's saris. Urmia comes back and enquires:

"Will you tell me what you are doing?"

"Really, Urmia, You're the limit! Not one of your cottons is starched."

"I hate my clothes standing away from me, as if they're disowning me. I like them to be part of me."

"Don't talk pretentious nonsense. And look at these sleeves... Why don't you make sleeves all the way down to your wrists and have done with it?" (p.128)

This thrust and parry is between Inni and Urmia and Vanaa does not open her lips though she entirely agrees with Inni. Yet Urmia and Vanaa remain friends. As Urmia says,

But there is greater ease between us than there is between sisters or cousins. I've noticed a kind of tension between sisters, a straining at the bonds, or shame at being too close, too much alike. There is none of that between us.

"I sometimes think," Inni said to me once, sourly, and with what was surely an unusual perspicacity for her, "that you married Kishore so that you could be related to Vanaa."
But she was wrong. I didn’t need to be related to Vanaa. In fact, by marrying Kishore, I distanced myself from her; as if she, as Kishore's sister, and I, as Kishore’s wife, moved away from each other, Kishore coming between us. We’ve managed to bridge that gap by silence. (pp.79-80)

But no relationship can be perfect — that would be against human nature. However, "each relationship, always imperfect, survives on hope." (p.141) But there can always be an agreement about disagreement. About the relationship between Akka and Inni, Urmi writes, “I can see that Inni is slightly tense; she is always apprehensive about Akka’s visit and so is Akka. If Inni finds Akka’s air of calm strength formidable, Akka is intimidated by Inni’s beauty and sophistication. I used to have my own doubts earlier about bringing them together, my mother and my mother-in-law, two women wholly unlike, having nothing in common. But after the initial hiccups, they get on well together. ‘Like oil and water,’ Kishore had said once. ‘They don’t mix, but it’s a peaceful combination.’" (p.151) Thus the novel has become a ballad about the lives of mothers vis-a-vis their children, of wives vis-a-vis their husbands and of the tenderness and attachment of women vis-a-vis other women.

Sm. Deshpande suggests that all relationships where a strong emotion like love is involved make persons vulnerable.
"Parenthood makes you vulnerable" (p.77) seems to be the moral of the story of Babur and Humayun, thinks Urmi. What makes her arrive at this conclusion is her own experience of the death of her little daughter Anu.

Let them go? But it's Anu who won't let me go. She comes to me, over and over again she comes to me. I have hallucinations. I wake up to hear the soft snuffling sounds of her breathing by my side; I can smell her sweet baby flesh. Sometimes, as if I have gone back in time, her milky, ammoniac, talcum odour comes back to me; my breasts feel heavy and painful, as if they are gorged with milk. Once again I can feel the softness of her body in my arms, the heaviness of her head flopping over my shoulder, I can feel her toes, scrabbling at my midriff. (p.21)

Again,

Strange that the memory that haunts me most often is that of her angry face when I tried to wean her. How resolutely she refused the bottle, how angrily she glared at me. (p.21)

Still again,

And suddenly I remember Anu, her little sparrow mouth open to receive the spoon, banging her own spoon on the table, turning her head to follow Kartik as he dances about the room to amuse her, the spoon scraping her cheek. (p.63)

Since her death "I am haunted by fears -- what if Kartik falls ill, too? What if he dies?" (p.70) she asks. Her fear is intense because she has experienced or heard of the deaths of several persons she knew. They died different ways.
Baiajji's death was like a person falling asleep; Aju hanged himself; Papa's was a lingering painful death; Mira bled to death; Sulu burnt herself; Bhaskar's sister was run over by a bus; Shakutai will one day die carrying the burden of Kalpana's suffering on her behalf; Anu herself passes away without even a glance at her mother. Even the advice of the great Buddha that deaths have occurred in all families is no consolation to one who has lost a dear one. It sounds like a platitude at least until the intensity of sorrow becomes less.

Marrying the person one loves leads to the same kind of vulnerability. "The most important need is to love. From the moment of our births, we struggle to find something with which we can anchor ourselves to this strange world we find ourselves in. Only when we love do we find this anchor. But love makes you vulnerable." (p.137) Urmi saw the same kind of fear, the fear of being trapped, on Kishore's face on their wedding night. That is why she walked out of the bridal room to her grand-parent's house and returned next morning. Probably Kishore saw the same kind of fear in Urmi's eyes and, therefore, did not prevent her from going. They never discussed the matter.

But humanity cannot live without relationship with other human beings. They make friends, they love, they get married
and beget children with the full knowledge that as a result they make themselves vulnerable.

At one point in the novel, Shm. Deshpande gives an anatomy of death, how a dying man slowly loses interest in the act of living. It is a description of Urmii’s father’s slow dying:

"Papa, you are being morbid. And ghoulish."

"No, realistic. I can’t close my eyes to the truth. I have bronchogenic carcinoma." He’d said these words easily and naturally. "And, if you want to do something for me, promise me one thing. No heroic life-saving treatment for me. I’m depending on you."

Yes, he was very matter-of-fact. But now I know it was just a blind. He was terrified, he didn’t want to die. He made his will, wound up his affairs, but he was never really prepared for death. No one can ever be. I could see it in the way he changed. At first he had been full of love and tenderness for all of us. I can remember his face when Inni broke down after she was told the truth about his illness; it was overflowing with pity for her. Later, as if he needed to save up all his emotions for himself, he became disinterested, withdrawn, his attention turned inwards, absorbed in the process of his own death. He was morose and irritable. When we tried to involve him with routine life, he turned away with great weariness, as if saying, "Why do you bother me? Leave me alone."

And then he changed again. He came back to us, but he seemed to be looking for some reassurance none of us could give him. There was panic in his hand that gripped mine hard, there was anger in his eyes when we spoke of ordinary everyday things in his presence. What did he want from us? None of us knew, none of us could help him. Dying is a terribly lonely business. And so he turned his
face to the wall and died... Is that what the
living have to do -- to carry the burdens of the
dying and the dead? (pp.114-115)

Urmi realises that death is real and final, that Anu is
gone and that she will never return. "It's cruel to leave the
dead behind and go on, but we have no choice, we have to let
them go". (p.21) Dr. Bhaskar, who has experienced the sorrow
of the death of his twin sister, adds something to the
experience and wisdom of Urmi, "'I can imagine you thinking
this an impertinence, but what I'm trying to say is, I know
how it is. And after everything passes -- grief, shock,
anger, bitterness, I've known all of them -- this remains:
that life is worth living. Or else, why would death be so
terrible?'" (p.86)

There is one thing more terrible than death and not
inevitable either. That is, the treatment of some women by
men in a patriarchal society. The protest against the
disabilities of women has been called the Feminist Movement.
Formerly S. M. Deshpande claimed that though she was a feminist
in her own life, she was not consciously so as a novelist.
The feministic elements in her novels were a matter of
coincidence. But by the time she came to write *Silence* and
*Vine*, she had become a confirmed feminist. Feminism has
become an important component of Vina. No less than seven women are the victims of male hegemony—Vanaa, Inni, Akka, Shakutai, Sulu, Kalpana and Mira.

Akka comes to her husband's house as the second wife of a widower and more as a convenience to the family to take care of the first wife's child than as her husband's partner or as the mistress of the house. She is twenty-seven and her parents accept the offer only too eagerly because they have been afraid that she may never get married. The day she comes to her house, her sister-in-law gives her the exact picture of the situation. Neither she nor the daughter she gets has any room in the heart of her husband because it is entirely occupied by Kishore. For all practical purposes, he is not aware of their existence.

Like Vanaa's mother, Inni, too, is the second wife of Urmii's father. He takes away Urmii for no fault of Inni's and leaves her with his parents and no amount of tearful begging on Inni's part changes his mind. This kind of cruelty is mixed with his love for her which he does not demonstrate any time except once when Urmii charges him with cruelty towards her step-mother. However, neither Akka nor Inni is given her due. They are treated as second class citizens.
These are arranged marriages. The way Dr. Bhaskar's mother goes about choosing a bride for her son is the typical way most marriages in India today are arranged. She has collected the names of as many eligible girls as possible, with their photos. When one of them gets married, the name is struck off and other eligible names are added. An arranged marriage is a perfect business deal -- wealth, family status, height, weight and the educational qualifications of the bride and groom are calculated. Feminism would of course consider such marriages foredoomed to failure. But Sā. Deshpande is not so prejudiced as to take it for granted that they will all fail. She makes Urmī narrate an instance where on the marriage night she found the hands of the bride trembling uncontrollably, but a few days later found her flushed and radiant (vide, pp.63-64).

Nor can we take it for granted that in all love marriages there will be equal partnership. Vānaa has a degree in Medical Social Service; she is working in a hospital; her husband Harish is a doctor; Vānaa knew Harish and his family for two years before they were married. So one could call it a love-marriage. Harish is so devoted to hospital work that he rarely attends to any work at home. Vānaa has to do it all alone. Particularly during the first few years of marriage,
almost every other sentence that Vanaa speaks begins with "Harish says", until Urmi teases her out of it. Everything in the house runs according to her husband's wishes, even the lunch hour, though he is hundreds of miles away. Vanaa is so mild that he tells her she is not firm enough with the kids, while Mandal, the elder daughter, complains that she does not spend enough time with them. Urmi senses "her constant preoccupation with his feelings." (p.81) What between the job she holds, a husband who does not take the least interest in the routine of daily life and the elder daughter who has her own ideas about the duties of a mother, Vanaa leads a harassed life.

Shakutai's position is altogether different. Her husband has left her with their children for another woman. She works hard and brings up her children well. She is a self-respecting woman who has even purchased a T.V. set for her children so that they will not be required to go to somebody else's house to watch it. She does not want Kalpana to dress too smartly because street rowdies will be waiting like hungry wolves. But the irony of ironies is that it is Kalpana's uncle who rapes her, not a stray wolf. The case of Mira is similar to that of Kalpana, except that the man who rapes her is her own husband.
Why chastity is given undue importance in a patriarchal 
system of society has been explained in an earlier chapter. 
The exaggerated importance virginity is given in Indian 
society may be seen in Hindi films which are usually total 
male fantasies. (It is significant that no eligible bachelor 
is asked whether he is a celibate). The films have no touch 
of realism. A typical Hindi film story is discussed by Urmī, 
an integrated being, and Prīti, an assertive, aggressive 
feminist. There are the usual sophisticated hero, the 
beautiful rustic heroine and the indispensable leering 
villain. The hero and heroine discover that they are in love 
with each other, the villain catches the heroine when she is 
alone, she is raped, the hero is prepared to marry her despite 
her "spoiled" state, but the heroine refuses and dies at his 
feet, her purity restored by his forgiveness.

As a contrast to this tale of fantasy is life where the 
man who has raped a girl rarely offers to marry her.

If Kalpana's is a tragedy of a rape, so is Mira's except 
that it is within the bonds of legalised marriage. She has 
written in her diary how she suffered:

"Talk he says to me, why don't you say something, 
why don't you speak to me?... But I have my 
defences; I give him the facts, nothing more, 
ever my feelings. He knows what I'm doing and he 
gets angry with me. I don't mind his anger, it
makes him leave me to myself, it is bliss when he does that. But he comes back, he is remorseful, repentant, he holds me close, he begins to babble. And so it begins. “Please,” he says, “Please, I love you.” And over and over again until he has done. “I love you.” Love! How I hate the word. If this is love, it is a terrible thing. I have learnt to say “no” at last, but it makes no difference, no difference at all. What is it he wants from me? I look at myself in the mirror and wonder, what is there in me? Why does it have to be me? Why can’t he leave me alone? (pp.66-67)

Then how did Mira get married? The father who was just a school-teacher was probably relieved that he had discharged his duties as a father by getting her married; the mother was happy that Mira had been married into a family which was better off than their own; perhaps Mira, too, because she had been accepted by the first young man who came to “see” her. In India the only dream that parents have for their daughters is to marry them off into families better than their own. Urmi herself narrates the dreams her parents had for her:

Do we always turn our backs on our mother’s hopes? I have often had twinges of regret for thwarting Papa when I forswore ambition and turned away from anything that meant competing. But now I realise Inni had her dreams for me too. She saw me vaulting out of the middle-class with marriage, making the kind of marriage that would let me live the life that was her ideal, a “pearls and chiffons” sort of existence, Amrut and I called it. Instead, I married the boy-next-door, “whose father”, Inni sobbed out, “eats paan, and whose mother is a school-teacher.” I had laughed then at the pettiness of Inni’s objections. (p.124)
Shakutai was no different. She tells Urmi, "'I wanted her to have all that I never had -- education, a good life, a good marriage, respect from others.'" (p.112) "But Kalpana wanted none of her mother's dreams. She had her own." (p.124) Mira too:

To make myself in your image was never the goal I sought. (p.124)

Of all the female characters in the novel, Urmi is the one who has the integrity to act according to her feminist conscience. Feminism for M. Deshpande is more a humanitarian and sociological problem, while existential-humanism is her guiding philosophy. Existentialism is, as has been explained in an earlier chapter, a protest in the name of individuality against the concept of reason and nature. Its emphasis is on the emotional, intuitive and subjective rather than on the logical, intellectual and objective. It is concerned with the predicament of individual human beings, their separation from others and alienation of an individual from his inner self. It involves a search for self-identification, freedom of choice of action and full responsibility for the choice made. Though it has been described as a philosophy of despair and loneliness, it recognizes an individual's relation to others. As expressed in literature, it may be said to have two aspects
one, to describe man's existence, conflicts and predicament; two, a search for self-identification and emphasis on the inner experience of the individual. Existentialism is a basic response to a crisis in culture and existential literature a reflection of and reaction to that crisis. The crisis in our culture in the second half of the twentieth century has been mainly the result of political changes and industrial growth. The first generation of our political leaders had been idealists who had fought for freedom. The later leaders brought corruption into public life with the result that money alone counted. Many of the younger generation became cynical and with cynicism came indifference to all values in personal as well as in public life. And indifference has become a dominant element in the attitude and behaviour of people. It is not realised that it destroys others and ultimately oneself. Amrut tells Urmi that when people say "Mind your own business," he is reminded of snails which get crushed underfoot because they do not know where to go. Saying "It's none of my business," "That's no concern of mine" should be considered one of the cardinal sins. In Vine Sm. Deshpande makes indifference a cause of so much avoidable sorrow. Urmi is the writer's alter ego and it is through her that her existential-humanistic ideas are expressed.
The first sentence of the novel states the problem which Urmi is facing: "We all of us grow up with an idea of ourselves, an image rather, and spend the rest of our lives trying to live up to it. But for me, I suddenly realise as Vanaa talks to me, it's been a constant struggle against an image of myself imposed upon me by Vanaa." (p.7) That is, the protagonist has become aware that she has not been living up to her real image but instead struggling against the image Vanaa has built up of her. This image is an idealised one since Vanaa is immensely impressed by several things owned by Urmi's family -- the grand durbar hall, the huge Ford automobile, Urmi's bicycle and her courage in riding it and taking severe falls in her stride, the costly and fashionable frocks, skirts and jeans which Inni used to send her from Bombay. Urmi does not, however, wear them because she does not want to appear different from others. She feels she is a privileged person but does not want to appear so. The irony is her grand-parents are not well-off really. Once when Kishore, Vanaa and Urmi go for a ride by stealth in the car and it stops after some distance because there is no petrol left in the tank, Kishore calls Aju a real skinflint who puts in a cup of petrol at a time. He is probably right about the quantity
of petrol put in but wrong about the reason for it, for that is perhaps all that Aju can afford. When he dies, it is discovered that there is almost no money left in his account at the bank. Urmi’s insistence on wearing the clothes poorly stitched by Baiajji instead of the fine ones sent her by her mother is a desire to identify herself with others who are not as well-off as she is, or thinks she is. This innate desire to identify herself with others grows as time passes.

Papa had a high opinion of the intelligence of Urmi, but she refused to study for any examination which involved competition. She became a lecturer in a college instead. But her way to self-discovery lies in the direction of social service, the path which she was earlier unaware of. It did not become less intense in spite of an incident she was involved in. When she was a student staying in a hostel, she and some of her friends saw a man falling in a faint on the road. While the others watched indifferently, Urmi rushed to the road to help him. The man who had only pretended to faint tried to assault her. Urmi’s innate potentiality, unconscious preference is for social work and helping individuals in need. This is also seen indirectly in her procrastinating her studies for Ph.D. Formerly she had told Amrut that she would
start her work when Anu grew up so that she could have more time at her disposal. But Anu dies and Amrut reminds her of her earlier intention of doing research. She agrees but there is never a hint that she even thinks of it, for she soon gets involved in Shakutai’s misfortune. Once she casually goes to the hospital where Vanaa is a medical social worker and comes to know about the tragic case of Kalpana who has gone into coma as a result of the shock of being raped. The doctor suggests that Shakutai be sent home, but somebody has to accompany her since she is in no condition to go alone. The people there are too indifferent. "A white-coated doctor, glass in hand, walks swiftly past me out of the room." (p.56)

Vanaa whose duty it is probably to accompany her, since she is a medical social worker at the hospital, offers an excuse,

"I'd have gone with her, but that'll make me very late and I promised Mandira..."
"I'll go"
"Will you, Urmi?"
"No problem...." (p.60)

Urmi takes Shakutai to her one-room house in a taxi. She visits her at the hospital a number of times and listens patiently to her outpourings of pain and sorrow which are a source of relief. Urmi even takes her once to her house and later spends the night her younger sister Sulu burnt herself.
to death at Shakutai's house — all this against the protestations of Vanaa and Inni. Inni tells her it is none of her business to get involved in it. Even Amrut feels so. Urmi retorts, "'What is my business, Amrut?'" (p.182)

Urmī's interest in Kalpana and Shakutai gives us a warm feeling as against the cold-hearted indifference of some others in the novel. The junior doctor diagnoses carelessly the case to be one of an accident. When Dr. Bhaskar proves to the Police Inspector that it was a case of rape beyond any doubt, the Inspector suggests to the doctor not to take it up since it will only mean trouble without any corresponding benefit. The hospital authorities want to transfer Kalpana to a distant hospital because there are not enough beds for women in the present hospital. That the other hospital will be too far away for Shakutai to visit Kalpana everyday does not bother them. It is again Urmi who speaks to Malcolm, a journalist, who gives publicity to the case. The result is Kalpana is retained in the hospital and the government is forced to order reopening the case. Possibly part of the reason for her intense feeling for Kalpana is that both Kalpana and Mira are victims of rape. And by reading Mira's poems and notes, she has suffered as much as Mira had.
These are not the only instances of indifference in the novel. Baiajji is indifferent to the existence of the illegitimate children of her father to whom she refers as the "other" family. Papa makes up for this by persuading Aju to pass on the money they get by selling Baiajji's gardens to that family. But Papa himself was indifferent to the hurt feelings of Inni when he sends Urmi to Ranidurg to be brought up by his parents. As contrasted with these examples of indifference, the genuine sympathy Urmi has for the suffering warms our heart. Her relation to the world is one of direct, active participation. She has rapport with other individuals -- one of the characteristics of existentialism and in her feeling that there is nothing wrong in seeking happiness, she is a humanist.

As time passes, she gets greater insight into her own feelings, particularly about Kishore.

Theirs had been a love-marriage. "I believe in love, yes, I do. Those days in Ranidurg with Kishore when I remember them I can almost feel their velvety texture, the silky smoothness with which they glided by. Magical." (p.82) The first time Kishore left Urmi to go back to his ship, she felt like saying, "'Each time you leave me, the parting is like death,'" (p.138) but she does not utter them.
In the early days she used to cross out in the calendar the days to his return, but after she met Dr. Bhaskar, for the first time since her marriage, she did not cross out the days.

Vanaa and Inni do not like Urmi to accept Bhaskar's invitation to dinner.

I pooh-poohed their fears. "And don't pry into my sexual life," I said sternly. "Do I pry into yours?"
".... I'm quite safe. I have my blade of grass."
"Blade of grass?" She was puzzled.
"Like Sita," I added. (p.162)

The reference is to the blade of grass with which Sita had kept Ravana at a distance. Vanaa thinks that in Urmi's case it is her love for Kishore that will keep her safe from Bhaskar. Even Dr. Bhaskar thinks so. Urmi does not reveal the truth to Bhaskar -- Kishore's job requires him to be on duty for about nine months in the year. When they are together, they love each other passionately, but then he disappears from her mind. Besides, "since Anu's death, my body has been quiescent. Even Kishore ... I knew it the day before he left. He hold me close that night and I felt his body respond to that closeness, but my own recoiled; it was an instinctive recoil. He felt it and let me go. He did not touch me after
that. Yes, I was honest when I told Vanaa, "'I'm safe'"
(p.165) Yet she was close to being tempted by Bhaskar. "And
yet for a moment I was tempted, I was perilously close to
responding to Bhaskar." (p.165) But she concludes, "It's so
much easier, so much simpler to just think of virtue and
chastity and being a good wife. I see the point of it now."
(p.166)

This conclusion is typical of the Indian type of feminism
not of the Western type where freedom of sex is the main aim.

This aspect of feminism is less important than the
various disabilities women in India suffer from and which $m.$
Deshpande deals with in the novel -- rape, cruelty,
indifference to their feelings, exploitation, desertion. The
novel does not end with any platitudes but with two
psychological truths that Urmi, through her experience of
life, has arrived at. Most human beings are a complex
dichotomy of love and cruelty. Shakutai loved her daughter
but was also cruel to her. Papa loved Inni and was cruel to
her, too. There is thus a great divide in ourselves, a divide
which is impossible to bridge except for some great souls who
have the courage to find an answer. "Detachment, love,
brotherhood, non-violence -- they are just words." (p.202) for
the common humanity. The only way one can shed the burden of humanity is to die. But almost everybody avoids the path of death by resolutely engrossing himself in her daily chores. "I race through my chores in the next one hour -- cooking, getting ready for college, looking through my time-table, my notes, preparing Kartik's lunch-box. This is how life is for most of us, most of the time; we are absorbed in the daily routine of living. The main urge is always to survive." (p.203) In this process of survival, many cruel things are done.

But even if an individual commits cruel actions, he has deep down in his heart, perhaps unconscious of it himself, the saving grace of great kindness. There is something divine in him though there is no Divinity as such. Urmì gives several instances of such gracious behaviour. Ordinarily Akka should have been jealous of Mira. In fact, nobody would have blamed her if she had been. Mira was the first wife and when she died, Akka was brought to take care of Mira's son. Her husband's heart was so occupied with Kishore that he was almost unaware of the existence of Akka and her daughter Vanaa. Yet when she reads the diary and the poems of Mira she weeps as she had never wept before.
Another instance Urmi gives is that of Shakutai. Her younger sister Sulu sets herself on fire when she learns that it was her husband who had raped Kalpana with tragic results. Urmi goes to Shakutai's house to give her company. She spends the night there sitting and later sleeping in a wooden chair. Completely exhausted, Shakutai slumbers and Urmi dozes in the chair. When she gets up in the morning, Urmi finds that Shakutai has covered her with a soft, soap-smelling cotton sari sometime during the night. Just as man is capable sometimes of super-human acts of courage, he is also capable of extraordinary deeds of sympathy and kindness. "It is enough", wrote Lin Yutang, the Chinese philosopher, "that man's heart is still touched by beauty and goodness and justice and kindness." 4