The novels of Sm. Deshpande are autobiographical in form since the story is narrated by one of the characters, usually the protagonist. Though all existentialist novels are not, and need not be, in the autobiographical garb, it may be said that this form suits an existentialist work of art better than most others, since a sense of the human predicament, a spirit of revolt and inner individual experience are central to these works. Hence confessions, memoirs, reflections, diaries, journals are forms which suit representation of what human beings feel in the inner-most recesses of the heart. The autobiographical form gives an air of authenticity to the narration.

In Roots, the point of view is that of the first-person participant. Indu, the protagonist narrates the story. We get an insight into the working of her mind, her view of the members of her family, her reasons for her behaviour, including her adultery. In That Long Silence and The Binding Vine, the technique is the same.

But in If I Die, it is very slightly different, in the sense that the narrator is a minor, somewhat detached
character and not the protagonist, and for good reasons — the protagonist dies before the novel is barely one-third over. The narrator is Manju, an educated person and a lecturer in a Bombay college. She is good-natured, objective and basically good. Sh. Deshpande has been careful enough to see that the narrator has not slipped into being omniscient, for it is a detective novel and it is important that she suffer from the same kind of limitations as the other characters.

A more interesting novel from the narrative point of view is The Dark. Here the writer uses the double perspective by shifting from the past to the present and from the present to the past in alternate chapters. She has explained, "The present is in the third person and the past is in the first. But that's often a perspective I use in my short stories. I wanted to be more objective. So then I tried it in the third. But it wouldn't work at all. Yet I really needed to distance myself from the narrative in the present, otherwise it was going to be far too intense. And then I read an American novel by Lisa Alther where she uses this method. And the minute I came across her novel I thought -- let me admit it freely -- Oh God, this is how I am going to do my novel."¹

¹Holmstrom, pp.23ii-24i.
In *Come Up*, the writer has used a still slightly different technique - she narrates the story from more than one point of view. The prologue is narrated by the omniscient author; the first section, too. Section two is narrated by Devi. The next section is continued by the author, the fourth by Devi, the fifth by the author and the sixth by Devi, except for the last few pages where the author takes over since Devi has left the scene to go back home. Narrating the story from different points of view has the advantage for the reader of seeing things from more than one point of view, like seeing one’s reflection in two or three mirrors placed at different angles. This was a method used to perfection by William Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury*, where the same events are seen from four different points of view. And the style of speech of each one of them is distinctive of the speaker and different from those of the others. But in *Come Up*, the writer has failed to evolve different styles of narration to suit individual narrators. The only new mode of narration she has introduced is shifting from third person to first person whenever there is a soliloquy or a thought in the mind of the speaker, but without separating the first person part of the speech or thought from the third by the use of quotation marks:
She (Kshama) felt the slight beginning of a headache as she pushed away these thoughts... I did a good thing when I wrote to Devayani offering her a home with me and a job. (Come Up, p.30)

Or

(Kshama speaking), "What made you change your mind? Surely some one has told you something?"

She knows who it is. She wants me to admit it. (It is the Police Inspector who is reflecting.) (pp.188-189)

The novels of Smt. Deshpande begin at a point somewhere in the middle of the action and the earlier part is given to us through flash-backs, memories, diaries, etc., as the story moves forth and back until the end. *Roots* begins when Indu is more than thirty years old and her Ajji dies leaving a will in her favour. *The Dark* opens with Saru’s return to her parental home where she is going to take her final decision about whether she will go back to her husband. *Silence* begins with Jaya and Mohan returning to their Dadar flat, that is, for just twelve days in terms of time before the novel comes to a close. *Vine* starts when Urmi and Vanaa are married and in their thirties and moves back to the history of their childhood and the tragic life of Vanaa’s step-mother Mira. In *If I Die*, the story opens with the arrival of Guru as a patient and the rest of the novel is an explanation and discovery of two murders and the attempt at a third. *Come Up*
is the only one which may be said to begin at the beginning, that is, with Kshama’s becoming the head-mistress of a girl’s school and the two murders and their unravelling. The past history of the school or the earlier life of Kshama or that of Devi has nothing to do with the action, though we are told about them.

When asked about her finding the right technique for narrating a story, she told Lakshmi Holmstrom, “Technique is something which I have to worry a lot about. I have to work at it and think about it and it takes me a long time to hit upon it exactly.”

It may be said that M. Deshpande evolved into a novelist. Her first publication was a travelogue, then a number of short stories published in magazines, collections of short stories, four books for children and finally novels. To Stanley Carvalho’s question, “Are your characters autobiographical?”, her reply was, “Like most authors (sic), all my characters start off from something I have seen in life. But that is merely the take-off point. After that they evolve into their own, quite different from the original. My characters are all human beings one sees in the world.

Ibid., p.25, ii.
around." This may be borne out by looking at how *Roots* started to be written and how it ended. She confessed to M.D.Riti, "I began *Roots*, which was to be a detective story with an old woman being murdered for her money. Somehow, the character of Indu took control of the novel, pushed out all other elements and made the book what it was."\(^4\)

It would appear that for Shashi Deshpande a person or an event known to her is required as a starting point for the idea of a new novel. She has unhesitatingly admitted that *Silence* is based on her own marriage. She has explained to Lakshmi Holmstrom how she got the idea for the character of Kusum:

> I can still remember an incident from my childhood. We had gone to visit one of my father's friends, and one of the girls in the family pulled me aside and said, "There's a mad woman next door, do you want to see her?" That stayed in my mind. You know, when somebody says someone else is mad, you know you are sane. And also, there was a girl in my mother's family, a kind of hanger on. She was so cunning because she had to keep her place in the family, and at the same time, she was so humble. Some-how the two things came together in Kusum: the mad woman and this other girl. And she grew alongside Jaya, and became important. \(^5\)


\(^4\)"There's No Looking Back For Shashi Deshpande," interview give to M.D.Riti, in *Eve's Weekly*, June 18-24, 1988, p.27, ii.

\(^5\)Holmstrom, p.24, ii.
Then in the interview given to Dr. Vanamala Vishwanatha, she narrates how she got the idea for *The Dark*: "The *Dark Holds No Terrors* came to me when I saw a couple. The wife had a better job and there was a very obvious tension between them. He was aggressive and surly. That set it off." She first wrote a short story, "The Liberated Woman," but she was not satisfied. She waited a long time before she wrote the novel.

Ms. Deshpande also tells us how she got the idea for *Vine*:

The theme came to me very suddenly. I was actually working on another novel, and one day, suddenly I realized that this was what I had to write. It started with an incident that happened in a hospital when my husband was working there. We were staying next to the nurses quarters at the time. There was a particular nurse whom we used to see every day, coming and going. A very pretty attractive woman, a radiant kind of person. She was raped; she was found unconscious in the basement of one of the hospital buildings and she never recovered consciousness. It is seventeen years now, and she is still alive and still a vegetable.

At the time when this happened, I reported it for *Femina*. They had asked me to do so and I'd spoken to the matron and got all the facts. And it stayed in my mind. I thought it was one of the most terrible things that I had come across. But I had never expected to write a novel around it until it suddenly came back to me.

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6 Dr. Vanamala, p.9, i.
7 Holmstrom, p.26, ii.
It is perhaps nothing more than a coincidence that Indu (Roots), like Jm. Deshpande, begins as a journalist and develops into a novelist.

Jm. Deshpande takes her own time to ponder over the theme and write her novels, but there appear some inconsistencies or slips, particularly in Come Up. For example, is it a residential school or a day school? The writer appears to have meant it to be a residential school when she started writing. Otherwise, why the high wall and the narrow gate? Again, at the end of her visit to the school before she decides to accept the appointment, Kshama wonders, "To stay behind these walls for ten, eleven, twelve years... What does that do to the girls, she thought?" (p.5) But the only references in the novel to buildings are the high school building, the junior school building (where Sharmila was stabbed), the Head Mistress's quarters and the few quarters where some of the teachers, including Mrs. Raman, stay. There is no reference to any hostel. There are references to the students going home on bicycles and a few of them in cars, but none going to "the hostel" in the evening. If there was a hostel, why would Sonali stay with Kshama and Devi when Mrs. Raman goes out of station? She would have been accommodated in the hostel for
those few days. Besides, if there is a hostel with girls staying in it, the narrow gate would be locked at night and how could Sanjay and Dr. Girish get in in the early morning to kill Pratap? And how could Sanjay have got in to ransack Mrs. Raman's house at night? We can only surmise that the writer meant it to be a residential school but forgot it in the course of writing.

The second slip is, who gave the medicine to Mridula for the abortion but which caused her death? Dr. Girish tells Devi that Mridula had been sent to him by Gloria. (p.51) Apparently she came to him to get the medicine. But Sharmila, after her recovery from the stabbing, told the Inspector of Police, "'And then, she (Mridula) went and got into trouble. Just like her! She came whining to me. I told her it was none of my business. She went to Sanjay after that. I think he gave her... whatever she took.'" (p.261) Why had Mridula to go to the doctor if she was to take medicine from Sanjay? Possibly Sanjay gave her poison, not medicine for abortion. Dr. Girish's medicine would probably not have killed her.

The name of the Chairman of the Board of Governors, Mr. Matthews is spelt with two "t"s until page 110, but later (vide pages 213, 237 and 262) he loses one "t". Obviously an oversight.
Vine, too, suffers from an oversight. What is the difference between the ages of Vanaa and Urmi? As children going to school, they are depicted as great chums, as inseparables. In college, too, they are together -- which means that though they were not exactly of the same age, the difference in their ages could not probably be more than a couple of years. But years later they recapitulate an incident in their school life:

"Do you remember, Urmi, once in Ranidurg we were sitting in the college gardens and a chap began to sing...?"

"What day, what chap and what song? How do you expect me to remember such a vague thing?"

"We were still in school then, and the song... But what I was going to say is, the reason I remember that evening is because that was the first time I fell in love. With that boy... for days I used to dream about him."

"Vanaa, you never told me!"

"You were such a kid, I couldn't possibly talk to you of love!" (pp.103-104)

Now if one is old enough to fall in love and dream of the boy for days and the other so young that she could not even understand what love was, the difference in their ages must have been quite a few years.
Though all her work is in English, Sm. Deshpande rightly refuses to consider herself as an Indo-Anglian novelist. She says she is as much Indian as anybody who writes in Kannada, Marathi or Hindi, for English cannot be called a foreign language since it is so much used in India.

She learnt a little Kannada from her father, a little Marathi from her mother and English at the Convent school she attended at Dharwad. The only language she can use with felicity is English. When somebody asked her why she chose English as the medium of her writing, she replied that rather her choosing English, English chose her. When she writes narrative, she thinks in English; when she writes dialogue, she thinks in Kannada or Marathi. She does not try to appeal to an Indian audience by using too many Indian words, though in Roots she has used words like Kaka (uncle), Kaki (aunt) etc., and in Vine she has provided a glossary of Indian words she has used in that novel. Her language is on the whole racy, transparent and spontaneous.

One of the influences of her Convent training has been her knowledge of the Bible and consequently the presence of Biblical imagery in her novels. There are quotations from, as well as echoes of the Bible. "Am I my brother’s keeper?" (Old
Testament, Genesis IV, 9 in *Come Up*, p.85): "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings" (Old Testament, Psalms VIII, 2 in *Roots*, p.64): "The animals walked out two by two" (*If I die*, p.129) and "...when our guests had come in -- like the animals in Noah's Ark, I had thought -- two by two" (*Silence*, p.169) are obvious references to the story of Noah in the Old Testament, Genesis VI and VII.

"What is the truth?" (*Vine*, p.53) is almost a quotation from St. John, 18, 38, "What is truth?"

Manjula quips that Guru is the guest of honour at the party given by the Dean. Guru remarks, "'Nice of him, isn't it? Like a last treat.'" (p.26) "Like a last treat" carries an echo of "the last supper" of Jesus Christ, made famous by Leonardo da Vinci with his painting of that name.

Guru's statement to Vimala, "'Once it ceases to be a secret, you are free'" (p.85), reminds us of Christ's "Truth shall make you free." (St. John, 8,32)

"'Forgive the rapist for he knows not what he is doing'" (*Vine*, p.182) is almost a repetition of Christ's "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." (St. Luke, 23, 34)
Manju asks Goutam about who could have murdered Guru.

"Looking at him washing his hands, scrubbing them, rather, I felt he was literally washing his hands of the whole affair." (If I Die, p.69) does not but remind one of "...he [Pontius Pilate] took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying I am innocent of the blood of this just person." (St. Matthew, 27, 24)

Apart from the fact that two titles of her novels (If I Die Today and Come Up and Be Dead) are taken from Sir Thomas Moore and Charles Dickens' Our Mutual Friend, we find quotations from and echoes of several writers. "'Being only eyes, you see, my vision is limited'" (Come Up, p.25) is taken from Pickwick Papers: "They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me" (Come Up, p.120) is from Synge's Riders to the Sea: "'Sir, I beg you not to shout. This isn't a stable'" (Come Up, p.116) is a quotation from Chekov's The Bear; and "'...all the perfumes of Arabia" (The Dark, p.40) is from Macbeth.

Echoes of style are a more convincing proof of influence and admiration than quotations. "To sleep peacefully the night through. To wake up without pain. To go through
tomorrow without apprehension. Not to think, not to dream."

(The Dark, p.27) and "...death, a thing, he seemed to be
telling me, to be desired" (Come Up, p.248) carry echoes of
Hamlet’s

To die, to sleep,
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consumption
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep,
To sleep; perchance to dream.

Again, “It seemed idiotic, moronic, meaningless. Like
going on to a lighted stage, a smiling grimacing puppet” (The
Dark, p.192) and “It means you are not just a strutting,
grimacing puppet, standing futilely on the stage for a brief
while between areas of darkness...” (The Dark, p.220) sound
very much like an echo of Macbeth’s

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

The lines from Vine (p.9) : “There can be no vaulting
over time. We have to walk every step of the way, however
difficult or painful it is, we can avoid nothing. And I have
no desire to leap into the future” remind us of Macbeth’s

Vaulting ambition, which overleaps itself
And falls on the other.
The credit for references to nursery rhymes like "Mary had a little lamb" (Roots, p.89), "All the king's horse and all the king's men" (Vine, p.19), to English games like "Here we go round the mulberry bush" (Silence, p.33), "Simon says" (Silence, p.137) "Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor" (Silence, p.91) and to English folk tales like "Jack's beanstalk" (The Dark, p.94) goes to English medium Convent schools which teach Indian children as if they have been born in England and are going back to live there.

Sh. Deshpande's extensive reading may be seen in her reference to the story of Pygmalion and Galatea (The Dark, p.91), which is to be found in Ovid's Metamorphosis, 243. There is no ancient authority for the introduction of the name Galatea. It was introduced much later. A more interesting reference is to Julius Caesar's statements made on three different occasions. When he was returning to Rome after his conquest of Gaul, he had to face the Roman army led by Pompey, across the river Rubicon. He decides to fight the Roman army which was much bigger than his own and he declares, "The die is cast." He crosses the Rubicon and states, "I have crossed the Rubicon." Pompey fled without offering fight. Later, when Caesar conquered Egypt, the Roman army in Egypt rose in
revolt against him and he had to take shelter with his soldiers in a couple of buildings in Alexandria. He got his boats burnt lest they fall into the enemy's hands, and he told his soldiers that they could not escape because the boats had been burnt. The soldiers put up a desperate fight, since they could not escape, and won the battle. Shri Deshpande has combined these three sentences of Julius Ceasar to describe Saru's situation when she marries Manu but without a flat to live in and with no chance of going to her parental home. So she says, "The die was cast, the decision taken, my boats burnt." (p.37)

Shri Deshpande writes English as though to the manner born. In Vine, she describes how Priti talks: "She went on and on, ... a hundred words where ten would do, a hundred gestures where one would suffice." (p.39) It may be said that she follows her own advice in the use of the number of words. She told Lakshmi Holmstrom, "I am very careful about not using any extra words. I was also very conscious that I didn't want to make melodramatic or overt statements, ever. That's how I learnt a kind of subtlety of approach. Not that I wanted to be subtle for the sake of being subtle, but because I didn't
want to overplay anything." Again, "My English is as we use it. If I make any changes, it's because I think the novel needs it, not because the reader needs it."

Sh. Deshpande's descriptions and narration are so simple and direct that no word can be left out without affecting the passage. The opening paragraph of the novel Roots may be quoted here as an example:

It was the day before the wedding. When I awoke it was still dark, but there was, even at that hour, a subdued bustle inside the house. Most of the lights were on, and sleeping children the only occupants of the pallets spread on the floor. The pallet beside mine had been neatly rolled up. Mini would, of course, leave no duty undone, not even on her wedding day. I rolled up my pallet and went into the backyard to brush my teeth. Early as it was, there was a turmoil of activity here, with dim figures moving in the dusky, pearl-grey light of the morning. I could hear voices slurred with sleep coming from the courtyard... (p.1)

Or

"Akka, tired after her day's work, was sleeping, one arm thrown across her face to shield it from the light, Mandira burrowing like a little animal into the warmth of her grandmother's body." (Vine, p.76)

Or

"Kartik is vigorously stirring the red liquid, lips parted, tongue showing, forehead wrinkled in earnest concentration." (Vine, p.108)

8 Ibid., p.22, i.
9 Ibid., p.26, ii.
"Baiajji would rush out with the curds for the travellers, a thick sliver trembling on the flat of the palm." (Vine, p.135)

It is difficult to better these descriptions.

A.A. Mutalik-Desai has taken Shanti Deshpande to task for over-using and misusing the adjective "small", which he calls her "inexplicable obsession" and gives a dozen examples where some other adjectives could have been used more appropriately. It is true that she continues to use "small" even in her latest novel, Vine, e.g.

"Finally she gave herself a small shake" (p.174)
"But that was just a hurt, a small hurt" (p.8)
"a small silence" (p.148), "a small silence" (p.153)

He has also pointed out certain incorrect use of prepositions. Both the charges are true, but it seems to me carping criticism against the excellence of her best work.