CHAPTER - I
THE BACKDROP

Since this is a thesis evaluating the novels of Shashi Deshpande who published her first novel as recently as 1980, it is not necessary to begin at the beginnings the history of the novel written in English by Indians. Fiction written in English by Indians arrived almost three quarters of a century ago and critics abroad sat up and started taking notice. And it was not merely goody-goody, polite, condescending appreciation but serious critical consideration. Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayen, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Raja Rao gained international reputation. It is a matter of joy and pride that in the second half of the twentieth century fiction written in English by Indian women writers came of age. They built up a reputation to rival that of men. Kamala Markandaya published her first novel in 1954, Ruth Praver Jhabvala in 1956, Nayantara Sahgal in 1962 and Anita Desai a year later. Each one of them has written several novels of genuine merit, and a few others a novel or two each. Venu Chitale's In Transit (1950) is about the Indian struggle for Independence, but the material does not undergo a transmutation to become good literature. Shakuntala Nagesh's The Little Black
**Box** (1966) is a morbid story of a young woman full of resentment towards her relatives because they are more interested in sharing the treasure in the black box than in loving and understanding her. But she is saved by the love of the doctor and the nurse and of her brother's little daughter.

Vimala Raina's *Ambapali* (1962) is a historical romance which goes back to Buddha and his times. Ambapali falls in love with Ajat Shatru who in reality is the enemy of her country but has come there in disguise. He conquers her country and comes to claim his prize, but she has already become a sannyasin and shaved her head. She gives him those lovely long tresses and her ironical words open his eyes and he, too, becomes a Buddhist monk. If Ambapali had been made the centre of interest and if the story had not been interspersed with philosophical debates and discursions, the novel would have been a successful one. Buddha is the real hero of the novel.

Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) is cast in the autobiographical form. The heroine is nineteen when the novel opens, and is a widow with a daughter of nineteen when it ends. The man she loves and marries joins the army in 1942 and gets killed in the war. Simultaneous is the struggle for Independence when community is ranged against community,
family against family. There is valuable, social and historical documentation in the novel.

A more pertinent novel is Mrs. Muriel Wasi's *Too High for Rivalry* (1967). It is more significant in that the headmistress of a girl's school is due to retire and it is her duty to recommend the best person to succeed her. She carefully considers the personal qualities of her assistants without bias or prejudice and recommends the one she considers the best. For herself, it has been a triumph through love and so is it for her successor, too.

A new trend is to be found in the fiction of the nineteen-seventies and after. The changes are to be seen primarily in the writers' outlook and attitudes towards women and their traditional roles. They are on their way to drop social taboos, rebel against conventional morality and discard inhibitions. They discuss marital disharmony, sex, violence, divorce, and extra-marital love-affairs.

Novels dealing with these new attitudes to age-old problems are Nergis Dalal's *Minari* (1967) and *The Sisters* (1973), Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* (1973) and *Wife* (1976), Raji Narasimhan's *The Heart of Standing* Is that
You cannot Fly (1973) and Forever Free (1979), Mrinalini Sarabhai’s This Alone Is True (1977) and Veena Paintal’s Midnight Woman (1979). There are several more. Most of these novels are significant because of their topical interest, but the time is not too far when these books will be collecting dust on library shelves and will be of interest to literary historians only.

An arbitrary distinction has been made between themes and points of view of writers who wrote before and after 1970. No artist is born like Athene fully armed from the head of Zeus, but her art evolves at its own natural speed. The novelist does not change tracks with the ringing of church bells announcing the birth of a New Year. The year is just a matter of convenience, for there are writers who began writing in the fifties and continued to write after 1970. Kamala Markandaya published her first novel in 1954 and her latest in 1982; Ruth Praver Jhabvala in 1956 and 1975; Nayanatara Sahgal in 1957 and 1977; Anita Desai in 1963 and 1980. These four novelists presented social problems of the period soon after Independence. Shashi Deshpande, who started publishing her novels in 1980, has a new approach altogether. She is an existential-humanist more concerned with an individual’s
personal problem of self-identification than with social, economic and political problems. Not that other women novelists have not thought of this problem, but with nobody is it the central theme as it is with hers though there are several feminist elements in all her novels.

Kamala Markandaya is a significant figure among women novelists from the point of view of range of characterization, complexity of plot construction, variety of themes, the effectiveness of presentation, the fair way in which she presents both sides of a problem. The themes cover a wide range — rural economy, urban economy, industrialization, political events, history, East-West confrontation, etc.

Markanday's first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), is about a poor peasant family in a village in Tamil Nadu whose sufferings become worse because of a tannery established there. The family members are prejudiced against the tannery because they are high caste Hindus. The two eldest sons are forced to work in it. Rukmini, the mother, is furious because it is against their *dharma*, but they are all helpless. Then the two brothers go to Sri Lanka to work on rubber plantations and are never heard of again. The irony of ironies comes when the daughter of the house, who has been sent back by her
husband's family because she did not bear children within the first year, has to sell her body to the untouchables at the tannery to get some money for the treatment of her little brother who is sick. Then Nature strikes. First, there are very heavy rains and then famine. There is no end to their sorrows. They are driven out of the cottage and they go to another village to work as stone-breakers. Rukmini, who is the narrator of the story, is a stoic who bears everything. They somehow pull through, a paean to her indomitable spirit.

The second novel, *Some Inner Fury* (1967), is also a first-person narrative. The story is woven round the Quit India movement. All the characters are engulfed in the violence that ensues and are destroyed, except Mira who retires to her home to grieve for the dead.

Leaving rural economics and politics behind, the writer turns to spiritual realities in *A Silence of Desire* (1961). The Swamy in the novel has through his influence given faith and hope to hundreds of the poor and illiterate, but the educated do not believe him. They try to investigate but cannot come to any definite conclusion. The Swamy goes away and leaves the villagers unhappy. The writer is probably trying to suggest that one can have glimpses of truth but not the whole truth. This is Markandaya's most powerful novel.
Possession (1963) is, in a sense, a continuation of the previous novel, but the scene is shifted to England and back to India again. Caroline takes away Val who has been under the charge of Swamy and tries to possess him, but loses him in the end. The spiritual lesson of the novel is: Give, do not take; lose, do not possess — that is the only way to fulfilment. But this story of spiritual truth is not convincing as a human story. Few novels with such a theme are.

In her next novel, A Handful of Rice (1966), the theme is the degeneration of spiritual values due to the influence of city life and its materialistic ways. Markandaya emphasizes here again a woman's patience and power of endurance. Nalini is the kind of person who can redeem the life of everybody that comes into contact with her.

The Coffer Dam (1969) depicts the sufferings that are heaped upon the tribal people whose human values are destroyed in the technological process of constructing a dam. The wife of Clinton, one of the partners of the firm constructing the dam, falls in love with Bashiam, one of the tribesmen working a crane. The novel explores the conflicting attitudes of Clinton and his wife to Indian life. The rains come
unexpectedly, putting into danger the dam itself and heaping misfortunes on the tribesmen. Luckily the sky clears and everything is saved. But the tribal chief dies and with him the primordial wisdom. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar calls this novel “a deeply disturbing protest against the onslaught of modern technological ruthlessness against the simplicity and humanity of an earlier order of life.”

In The Nowhere Man (1973) Markandaya depicts the tragic life of Indian immigrants in old age in England. The protagonist suffers from loneliness, rootlessness and, worst of all, racial discrimination.

Two Virgins (1974), her next novel, is about two village sisters, one of whom tries to enter the films and comes to grief, while the younger one struggles through. But the novel is a slight one.

The next novel, however, is a more ambitious effort. The Golden Honeycomb (1977) is a historical novel, the concluding part of which shows the decline of British imperialism and the winds of change coming over the country.

\(^1\) Indian Writing in English, 5th ed. (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1985), p. 149; hereafter referred to as Indian Writing.
Pleasure City (1982), her latest novel, is another ambitious attempt about neo-colonialism, but the novel is not a success.

A novelist different from Kamala Markandaya is Ruth Praver Jhabvala. The former is an Indian who married an Englishman and who is now settled in England; the latter was born in Germany of Polish parents, was educated in England and is married to an Indian, and is now living in Delhi. She has defiantly declared, "My husband is Indian, and so are my children. I am not, and less so every year." Their background appears to have influenced their point of view. Markandaya's attitude is one of sympathy, understanding and tolerance, while that of Jhabvala is comic, ironic and sometimes satiric. The latter's main concern is with the lives of the middle class, Anglicised Indians in Delhi in post-Independent India. She apparently dislikes the snobbery, hypocrisy, money-mindedness (and dowry-mindedness even more) of the joint-family people belonging to the lower middle class. The more recently acquired is their wealth, the greater is the prudery that such families betray. Jhabvala's humour is enjoyable. In her novel Esmond in India is a scene which

reminds the reader of the first scene in *Pride and Prejudice* where Mrs. Bennet takes her husband to task for not doing enough to get Jane Bennet married. Here the occasion is slightly different. Har Dayal is an Anglicised Indian. His wife is Anglicised and comes from an Anglicised family. His son has been to Cambridge. The daughter is a graduate from a well-known college in Delhi. Har Dayal's former friend has made a suggestion that Har Dayal's daughter could be given in marriage to his son who is a doctor. Being an idealist, the son is practising in a village. When Mrs. Har Dayal hears of the proposal, she feels insulted and her reactions have to be read to be enjoyed. Mr. Bennet has the presence of mind to retort through giving a compliment, but Har Dayal is put off his balance through the rest of the conversation by his wife's fury.


Living in Delhi after Independence, she had the opportunity to observe the rapid changes that came over the city -- the influx of refugees fleeing Punjab after partition.
the increase in European population on account of the establishment of new embassies and the influence of Western culture, the opportunities politicians and their henchmen had to become rich overnight; for many of the middle class, increase in wealth meant increase in snobbery. Jhabvala observed these phenomena and put them into her novels. In To Whom She Will she describes how the Hindus and Sikhs from the Punjab trudged into Delhi carrying on their heads all their belongings, but how in a matter of three or four years they were better off than ever before. This was her first novel; the story is slight and the usual arranged-marriage business thrives as usual. The second novel The Nature of Passion describes delightfully how while people talk business apparently, below the surface the talk is really about arrangement of profitable marriages. In A Backward Place the butt of her irony and humour is the affected Anglicised culture of the middle class Indians. For most of them, culture means people should be well-dressed, they must speak good English and they must have been abroad. There are a number of cultural meetings where real culture is prominent by its absence. The foreigners are not spared either. When the Parsi lady goes into raptures over the music of Chopin and Bach, the European lady with whom she is talking, is more interested in
eating her cake. In this novel an English girl is married to a very handsome young man full of promise, but it comes to nothing. He is completely irresponsible; she tries her best to put him on the right lines but fails. Surprisingly, she submits to her fate like any Indian girl from a village.

In Get Ready for Battle, a couple has the courage to break loose from these conventions and lead separate lives. The husband, Gulzarilal, is too much of a materialist and the wife, Sarala, too much of an idealist. She suddenly determines to go to her mother's and she does not even bother, as she goes out, to shut the door, leave alone slam it like Nora, for the flat means nothings to her.

Jhabvala's characters look a little ludicrous, some even make us laugh, but her main interest is to expose sentimentality, snobbery, hypocrisy, vanity, pretensions and pseudo-culture.

If Jhabvala holds up to ridicule the snob culture of the new middle class, Nayantara Sahgal takes for her field the political arena of the time with the slow ignoring, if not repudiation, of Gandhian values. A daughter of Vijayalaxmi Pandit and a niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, she was born into a
family of Gandhian idealists. It helped her to comprehend the complexities of tradition, Western culture, political and human values. She "has the conscience of a liberal and the spirit of a non-conformist." Her marriage into a rich family which had only material values and her divorce a few years later explain her total attitude to life. She is against evil customs, traditions, injustice and anything that would trammel the personality of an individual.

Sahgal’s novels — *A Time to Be Happy* (1958), *This Time of Morning* (1965), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), *The Day in Shadow* (1971) and *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977) are together the most cogent fictional expression of Gandhian political morality. *A Time to Be Happy* is her first book and rather amateurish. It is the story of a zamindar’s son who works with a private firm, learns the sophistication of Western manners, marries happily and has the best of both worlds when Independence comes. There are references to the Bengal famine and Congress activities. There is no doubt a variety of character and incident, but there is no proper integration of the two.

This Time of Morning deals with the lives of politicians in Delhi of post-Independence India. It becomes a centre of interest where everybody jockeys for power. There are flashbacks which tell us about the struggle for Independence. The figure of Kailas Vinod is based on Jawaharlal Nehru and it is not difficult to recognize the originals of her characters, but it is more enjoyable to take the characters as fictional and not historical.

Storm in Chandigarh is about the partition of the Punjab into the Punjab and Haryana. Two politicians who had been friends and colleagues become rivals to claim the beautiful city of Chandigarh and violence is the natural result. In addition, there is the human background of a story of adultery rather than of love.

The Day in Shadow is a story of a divorce with harsh conditions laid down. Nayantara’s own divorce in 1987 has perhaps something to do with it. There is a political background, too, but the two are not convincingly integrated.

Her last novel, A Situation in New Delhi, also has politics for its background. The Prime Minister is dead and the wrangles between petty politicians follow. The Prime
Minister's sister is inducted into the cabinet and her heart is undecided between an Indian and the Englishman who has been engaged to write a biography of the late Prime Minister. The sinister wrangles suggest the end of the Nehru era, as the earlier novels had suggested the end of the Gandhi era.

Anita Desai blazes a new trail in the fictional writings by modern women writers in English. Kamala Markandaya saw her women characters against economic, political, social and cultural backgrounds; Jhabvala saw her characters as slightly ludicrous with their prudery against their middle class background; Sahgal saw her characters slowly losing their integrity against the political background of Gandhian ideology. Anita Desai examines the spiritual yearning of unusually sensitive characters from affluent, orthodox Hindu background. Her novels are explorations of the human mind. And she has created a style suitable to convey the stream of consciousness of her protagonists. She reveals the influence of Virginia Woolf.

Maya, the heroine of her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* recounts the story of her married life. The opening pages tell us of her dead dog being carried away and the last few pages of what happens after the death of her husband. The central part consists of Maya’s telling her story to herself. There is an atmosphere of fatality. Gautam, her husband, is a slightly elderly lawyer who is too busy to meet the demands of her spiritual and temperamental demands. The solitude and silence in the house are too much for her. Some astrologer had told her that either she or her husband would die in the fourth year of their marriage. This is that year. They are on the roof the house. She is watching the moon and he comes inadvertently between her and the moon. She pushes him and he falls down and dies.

Later, Maya falls from the roof herself with her mother-in-law and both die. Maya gives an intensity to the book which is irresistible.

The title of the novel is taken from the idea that the peacocks fight before they mate, “living they are aware of death. Dying, they are in love with life.” The conflict is between love of life and love of withdrawal.

In her next novel, *Voices in the City*, the scene is shifted to Calcutta. Maya and Gautam become Monishe-Jiban and the tragedy is re-enacted.

There is a complete change of subject in her third novel, *Bye-bye Blackbird*. It deals with the lives of Indians in England, often complicated by inter-racial marriages.

The fourth novel, *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* harks back to the earlier theme, but here Sita neither kills nor dies, but endures.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, all the important characters are lonely and Nanda, with all her children, grand-children and great-grand-children and the unmarried Ila equally feel utterly lonely. Srinivas Iyengar thinks that this loneliness is meant to show up the futility of living, married or single.5

In *Clear Light of Day*, Tara successfully married to a diplomat and with two children feels a sense of failure, while Bim, her sister, unmarried and a lecturer in a college, has to take care of a mad aunt. She only wants the college to

5 Ibid., p.744.
re-open so that she can lose herself in the routine of her work. Glitter is superficial; life is as we live it.

The Village by the Sea is a surprise, coming is it does from the pen of Anita Desai. A novel about the evils of drink and the dowry system is rather unexpected. She manages to end it on a happy note. For "Desai's world is an ambivalent one -- a world where harmony is aspired for, not arrived at and the desire to love and live clashes violently sometimes with the desire to withdraw". 6

Most of the novels published by other women writers in India at this time are ordinary, but we need not be pessimistic about the ordinary kind of novels, for there is as much, if not more, rubbish miscalled fiction published in England as in India.

By the time the glorious creative careers of Kamala Markandaya, Jhabvala and Sahgal were drawing to a close by about 1980, a new star as bright as any was seen rising in the Indian literary skies. This was Shashi Deshpande. She was

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without some of the advantages that the other three had —
Markandaya lived in England and was married to an Englishman so that she understood East-West confrontation better than most; Jhabvala was a Westerner married to an Indian so that she could look with a quizzical eye at the prudery of the Indians; Sahgal was a close relative of an internationally famous person known for his idealism and integrity so that she could observe from close quarters the decadence of moral values in politics. Shashi Deshpande, too, was in England but for only one year when her doctor-husband went there on a Commonwealth Scholarship. Interestingly, it is a record of her experiences in England that became her first publication.

Shashi Deshpande is a daughter of the late Shri R.V. Jahagirdar alias Adya Rangacharya, who for some years taught Sanskrit at the Karnatak College, Dharwad when she was young. She attended St. Joseph's High School at that place, which was and is an English Medium School. Her education in English probably explains her mastery and fluency in that language. It is marked by echoes from the Bible and Shakespeare and use of words common to children whose mother-tongue is not English but are compelled to speak it in school under threat of penalty. Using Kannada words was taboo
and, naturally, before they developed their vocabulary, a few adjectives had to do service for many. This weakness may also be seen in Ms. Deshpande, for example, in the use of the adjective "small" which does duty for several adjectives. The medium of instruction also explains why she writes in English, though her father wrote radical plays in Kannada and her mother a biography of her husband in Marathi. She did not study Kannada or Marathi, though she knows both languages. That explains what Deshpande meant when she once said that she did not choose English as the medium of her writing; English chose her.

It has become fashionable to discover feminist elements in novels written by women in particular, and even more so if the critic happens to be a lady. Even faint references and indirect echoes of problems, domestic, personal and professional, are stressed and the novelist dragged into the feminist fold even against her protesting voice. The case of Ms. Deshpande is quite an interesting one. In the early years of her writing novels, she used to deny strongly that she was a feminist. The most that she admitted was that she could be called a "humanist feminist".7 By 1987 she admitted that she

7 In "Interview with Shashi Deshpande," given to R. Mala. Quoted
had read some feminist thinkers, and by 1992 she declared that she was a feminist. This aspect of her personality and writing will be considered in the next chapter.

To call Shashi Deshpande's novels feministic and consider it a compliment is to damn her with faint praise, for her novels have something more fundamental than a social motif. They depict attempts on the part of the protagonists to break out of the shell of circumstance to find the way to self-discovery. They are existential-humanists, but unlike the typical heroes of existential writers like Marcel Proust, Dostoevsky, Franz Kafka and Jean Paul Sartre, they achieve a note of hope, seeing light at the end of the tunnel. They come to actualise their potentialities to lead an authentic life as writers (Indu, Jaya), lecturers (Urmila, Manjula) or doctors (Saru).

The feminist movement has been gaining momentum, power and popularity all over the world and in India, too, particularly during the last two decades or so. Interpreting

an excellent novelist like Deshpande as a feminist writer to bring her within the feminist fold is a temptation understandably difficult to resist. Besides, let it be said in defence of the feminist critics who claim her as their own that there are several elements in her novels which provide some justification for feminist interpretations.

 Probably an apparent reason for considering her a feminist lies in that she has heroines and no heroes, except in *If I Die Today*. The protagonists reveal themselves as intelligent, sensitive beings whose interests do not extend beyond a personal philosophy of life which is existential-humanistic. The honesty and integrity with which her characters examine themselves and their relationship with others, usually family members, bring them into the existential fold. But with a difference. Existential artists wrote novels, plays and stories depicting the frustration, despair and angst of their characters. However, "Much of this bleakness has been excised or played down in some of the American off-shoots of existential psychology". 8 Deshpande's

characters reach the moment of resolution of their problems, arriving at their self-identity after a period of despair.

Existentialism is a point of view about life. The fundamental tenet of this philosophy is the insistence on the existence of any individual as the basic fact. There is no reliance on ideas, theories, obstructions, but an individual’s own experience. "Only subjectivity, not objectivity and reason can count in a world in which objects may well be meaningless and reason absurd. Within this frame of reference, the individual -- stripped of tradition, custom or belief -- must make his own decisions, find his own truths...that reveal the anguished journey of the spirit through the dark night of nothingness". 9 In other words, how is the individual to come to terms with existence in a technological world? It is only man and consciousness that matter. Man is what he makes of himself. He is a lonely individual and he has to make the decisions himself, for which he alone is responsible. There will be no outward support, in word as well as in deed. There is no god or fate or pre-destination. He is free to make himself as he wants and

he alone is responsible for what he makes of himself. Since he has the free will to act, action -- including choice of the right action -- becomes the determining thing. Freedom of will means freedom of choice between good and evil. If he allows outside forces to predetermine for him, he is a contemptible being. His hopes of salvation lie in himself.

Man cannot live under illusions, traditional beliefs and meaningless customs. Superstitions, theories and abstractions have no place. Man has to examine himself and his motives honestly and realistically. Honesty with oneself is more difficult than honesty with others. A man who is honest with himself cannot be dishonest with others, while he who is honest with others can be dishonest with himself. Since honesty with oneself or self-identity is its first principle, it is evident it is a philosophy of loneliness. To overcome psychological and moral conflicts in order to attain harmony with himself, he has to become not only more responsible, but more heroic, for besides refusing to submit to social pressures and traditional forces, he must have the courage "to become one with oneself".

There would outwardly appear to be little in common between existentialism and humanistic naturalism, for one seems to be extremely individualistic and the other concerned
with the welfare of humanity as a whole. In the first, "there is implicit antagonism between the individual and the collective world";\textsuperscript{10} in the second, "the values of life they [humanists] hold are the products of human relationships."\textsuperscript{11} But below the surface, the similarity in the two schools may be seen in: "It [existentialism] is a form of individualism which recognizes the crucial importance of the individual man, but does not ignore the individual's relation to others; the individual, through his self-transcendence, communes with other individual..."\textsuperscript{12}

The two schools are considered in greater detail in a later chapter.

However, we have to remember that Shashi Deshpande has not written novels to illustrate any school or schools of philosophy, any more than books of sociological purpose to put across to the reader feministic ideas. They are not thesis novels, What she has written are genuine works of art and she

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid., p.13.
\textsuperscript{12}Frank Thilly, \textit{A History of Philosophy} (revised by Ledger Wood) (Allahabad: Central Book Depot, 1965), p.585; hereafter referred to as \textit{A History}. 
has created human beings with certain attitudes or points of view which happen to be essentially existential-humanistic. It is surprising that of the numerous number of research papers and reviews that have been published in journals or in the form of books, only two critics have until now, to the best of my knowledge, used the word "existential" to describe Deshpande's point of view: A.K. Awasthi and Madhu Singh. On the contrary, the critics who consider her novels to be feminist are umpteen. Mine is an attempt to analyse her six novels — (1) _The Dark Helds No Terrors_ (written in 1979 and published in 1980), (2) _Roots and Shadows_ (written in 1978 but published in 1981), (3) _If I Die Today_ (1982), (4) _Come up and Be Dead_ (1983), (5) _That Long Silence_ (1988), and (6) _The Binding Vine_ (1992) and arrive at the kind of philosophy she and her protagonists advocate and the values they posit.

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