Chapter V

WOMEN IN THE NOVELS

(I)

The Binding Vine

"What were the use of my creation, if I were entirely contained here?"

Emily Bronte, Wuthering Heights

The novel The Binding Vine is prefaced by a notable quote from Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights: "What were the use of my creation if I were entirely contained here?" This, in fact, encapsulates the dilemma encountered by the urban woman. The modern Indian woman is educated, intelligent, rational and conscious. But the inequalities of the female sex that lie beneath the facade of independence and self-confidence belie her attempts in creating an individual identity of her own. The woman writers in English have now find new ways to counter the various forms of oppression that is meted out by the woman in a male-dominated society. The protagonists of Shashi Deshpande are no revolutionaries, but in attempt to find an individual identity, they successfully create a nitch for themselves. Their suffering is mental, emotional and psychological. The contradictions that exist within one lead to a divide within oneself. Perhaps this is the greatest divide that is "the hardest to bridge, the hardest to accept, to live wish." (201)
As Shashi Deshpande is pre-occupied with women's predicament in the male-oriented society, her novel *The Binding Vine* discusses the conventional story of woman's biography, beginning with childhood, marriage and motherhood. It also discusses the trauma of rape. The novelist weaves the plot of the novel by employing a large panorama of women characters, but the prominent of them are Urmila, Mira and Shakuntala. Deshpande's characters find their shape in the light of male-dominance.

*The Binding Vine* is a curious intermingling of three lives and is narrated by the sharp-tongued, rebellious, Urmila (referred to as Urmi in the novel). Urmila is a character of almost the same vein as the protagonists of Shashi Deshpande's other novels. The weaving of three different tales into a single narrative is mainly due to the bereavement suffered by the narrator. Urmi is lecturer in a college and her husband Kishore is working in merchant navy. Urmi is presented as a frustrated mother who is grieving over the death of her one year old daughter, Anu and in this condition; she is highly sensitive to the sufferings of others. It is this sensitivity, which leads her to befriend Shankutala, the mother of rape-victim. Urmila would never have associated herself with Shakuntala in the normal course of her life as she belongs to the lower strata of society. Due to her sensitive nature, she delves into the poems of her long dead mother-in-law, Mira frantically tries to understand the mind of the young Mira.

The novel is centred on the life of Urmila. Urmila is self-willed and is leading a contented married life. But the happiness of her life is marred by the death of her baby Anu. She remembers the child time
and again and laments over it. She bangs her head against the wall. Her sister-in-law Vanna, her brother Amrut, and her mother Inni, all of them try to appease her and bring her back to normalcy. She is obsessed by the memory of her dead daughter time and again. She feels that she cannot betray her daughter just by obliterating her memory from her mind. Therefore, Urmi clings on to the memory of dead Anu. She has completely lost her mental equilibrium. Commenting on her mental status, S. Indira writes:

Instead of fighting her pain and sorrow, she holds on to it as she believes that to let go of that pain, to let it become a thing of past would be a betrayal and would make her lose Anu completely.... She clings to her pain and allows her memory of Anu, every small incident to flood her with longing and great sense of loss.²

She is deeply affected by the loss of her daughter; her despair is evident from her confession, "this emptiness, this blankness frightens me." (20). She often goes in the state of hallucination and feels the presence of her dead daughter: "I can smell her sweet baby flesh...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, scrubbing at my midriff. (21)

Her psychic problem is aggravated further by her physical ailment of asthma. Though her relatives try to console her, but she mentally isolates herself from them. But the irony is that this alienation leads her to come closer to life. Although, she has another child Kartik,
but she cannot forget the dead baby Anu. The emotional vine that binds her to her daughter cannot be severed even after the death of the baby. In fact it becomes stronger and stronger as days go by. The novel unfolds itself into a psychological description of complex female character who finally accepts life on her own terms.

Another character Shakuntala is depicted as a traditional woman. She is also a frustrated mother because her daughter Kalpana is a rape-victim. Urmi meets Shakuntala (Shakutai) on her visit to a hospital where Vanna works as a medical social worker. Kalpana is lying unconsciously and Shakutai thinks that she has been injured in a car accident. But after examination, the doctor informs that she has been raped, in the process of which she is so badly injured. Here Urmi develops a concern for Shakutai and her daughter Kalpana, because of the binding vine of humanitarianism. The mother reacts hysterically to the news. She tells Vanna: "It's not true, you people are trying to blacken my daughter's name." (58) Later on, catching a word 'report' from the conversation between Vandana and Dr. Bhaskar, she cries:

No, no, no, tell him, tai, it's not true, don't tell anyone. I'll never be able to hold up my head again, who'll marry the girl, we're decent people, doctor.' She turns to him, "don't tell the police." (58)

Here, the novelist has created the character of Shakutai, who believes in customs and traditions and is aware of self-respect. Her immediate concern is that the rape should remain a secret. The novelist has very realistically depicted the rape incident. The characters spring to life and the anger, frustration, helplessness and a despair of the victim's family
are brought out evocatively. The narrator Urmi, escorts Shakutai to her house on Vandana's request. Urmi visits regularly to inquire after her daughter and through their conversation; we get a clear picture of Kalpana's character.

Kalpana is a self-willed, obstinate, educated, good-looking and a modern girl who does not care for other. While talking with Urmi about Kalpana, Shakutai seems to be full of contradictions. She says:

She is very smart, that's how she got the job in the shop. Kalpana even learnt how to speak English. People in our chawl used to laugh at her, but she didn't care. When she wants something, she goes after it, nothing can stop her. She is stubborn, you can't imagine how stubborn she is. (92)

A little later she talks of her self-centeredness and pride which cause resentment in others. Shakutai wryly says:

She's secretive. She never tells me anything. She did not even tell me how much her pay was, can you imagine that? Me, her own mother. As if I was going to take her money away from her. I don't want anything. All I ask is that she help me out. (92)

On another occasion, Shakutai praises her physical beauty:

She's very pretty, my Kalpana. She's not like me at all when she was born, she was delicate and fair, just like a
doll, I wondered how a woman like me could have a daughter like that. (93)

However, Shakutai, keeping everything aside, blames her for the stupration she has undergone:

And I have to listen to such words because of this girl. She's shamed us, we can never wipe off this blot. And Prakash blames me—what could I do? She was so self-willed. Cover yourself decently, I kept telling her men are like animals. But she went her way. You should have seen her walking out, head in the air caring for nobody. It’s all her fault, Urmila, all her fault. (147)

However, Urmila does not see any point in blaming Kalpana. She insists on Shakutai to get the case registered as a rape, otherwise, the rapist will move freely and may commit another crime like rape. Urmila tries to reason with Shakutai: “She was hurt, she was injured, wronged by a man; she didn’t do anything wrong, why can’t you see that? Are you blind? It’s not her fault, no not her fault at all.” (147) She is unable to convince Shakutai, who keeps saying, “But sometimes, I think the only thing that can help Kalpana now is death.” (147) Shakutai who keeps meandering between commendation and criticism of her daughter because Kalpana had established her own values in contrast to patriarchal values. She is the victim of her own values. As Vikas Malik observes:

Kalpana is a victim of her own values. Yet she wasn’t born with these values embedded within her mother’s
womb. Someone had to shape these values, make her believe that they were her own. Who? Her mother, her mother's mother, her mother's mother's mother? Not at all. It was her father, her father's father, her father's father's father, ad nauseam.\textsuperscript{3}

The mother's reaction is a reflection of the society governed by the patriarchal norms. There is a strict code of conduct to be followed by girls regarding their dress, speech, and behaviour in order not to attract the attention of men. A girl is advised at every step to avoid behaving like a male and to establish her feminine identity. It is considered sacrilege for a girl to dress or move in such a way so as to bring the contours of her body into prominence and attract the attention of men.

If a girl is raped, then, according to the rules laid down by society, she is considered to be as much at fault as the rapist. Actually, it is the greatest injustice heaped on women. More worse is that the police instead of tracing out the culprit, prefers to record it as a car accident. Dr. Bhaskar protests against it. He points out the obvious signs of rape on Kalpana's body. He tells Urmi:

You could see the marks of his fingers on her arms where he had held her down. And there were huge contusions on her thighs – he must have pinned her down with his knees. And her lips bitten and chewed. Surely, I asked no vehicle could have passed over lips leaving teeth marks? (88)
It is not the police officer needs to be convinced, but it is the question of victim's family whose name will be smeared. Police officer wants to register the case as a car accident so that the victim and the family of victim could escape to confront the disgrace of society.

The police officer's argument nurtures the Indian psyche, which depicts women as sensuous and licentious. Indian male psyche considers woman equally at fault when any crime like rape is committed. The ancient Hindu law given Manu is of the opinion that God has "implanted in them carnal passions, love for ornament, impure desires, wrath, dishonesty, malice and bad conduct."\(^4\) Kalpana's mother Shakutai seems to be more worried about the scandal which would certainly destroy the marriage prospect of not only Kalpana but also of her second daughter Sandhya.

Through the character of Shakutai the novelist has peeped into the lower strata of society. Shakutai's husband leaves in her father's house after their marriage so that he could find a job in Bombay. Later on, Shakuti also joins him in Bombay. Very soon, she comes to face the reality that her husband is lazy and good for nothing. After the birth of these children one after the other, Shakutai takes it upon herself and support her family. She begins to work in a grocer's shop, even than her husband deserts her for another woman.

Shakutai is bold enough to describe her husband as a useless fellow. She has a practical view in her life. Talking to Urmila of her unfulfilled desire to have a mangalsutra made in gold, she says: "Then one day I thought - the man himself is so worthless, why should I bother to have this thing made in precious gold? That's been the
greatest misfortune in my life, Urmila, marrying that man”. (110) It is indeed tragic that in spite of bearing with a worthless husband and struggling alone to fend for her children, people blame on her if anything goes wrong in the family, as in the case of Kalpana. She tells Urmil bitterly: “What can you expect, they say of a girl whose mother has left her husband? Imagine! He left me for another woman, left me with these children to bring up.” (147)

Shakutai has bitter experience of marriage. She got nothing out of marriage except children, but she still lives in fear of their children remaining unmarried. She hankers for the marriage of her children. As Dr. Bhaskar tells Urmi: “Women are astonishing, I think it takes a hell of a lot of courage for woman like that to even think of marriage”. (87) Urmi replies women marry because it provides security. She emphasis on the vulnerability of single women in a male set-up, where men and women are expected to follow a rigid code of conduct and keep our biological feelings under control. But Mulk Raj Anand observes:

No woman in our land is beyond the threat of rape, because of the suppressed energies of the male, through the taboos of patriarchy which deny sex before marriage and make male young into wanton animals who assault any possible victim when possessed by lust.5

Indeed, it is the irony that to avoid the brutalisation of one kind, women willingly submit themselves to a brutality of another kind in the institution of marriage.
Sulu is another character who belongs to the lower strata of society. She is the younger sister of Shakutai, and her condition is not better than Shakutai as she also lives in chawl with her husband Prabhakar. She is very affectionate and sweet natured person. She is fond of keeping her house neat and clean. She decorates her house beautifully at different occasions. For instance, at Handi-Kunkum ceremony she decorated Shakutai’s house marvellously. Shakutai tells that after marriage she completely changed herself. All her actions are regulated with the fear that if her husband got annoyed, what will happen? She always tries to please her husband. Shakutai tells: “She was frightened, always frightened. What if he does not like me, what if he throws me out? Nobody should like that, Urmila so full of fears, what kind of life is it?” (195)

Sulu is very fond of children. As she is a childless, she looks after the children of Shakutai. She tries to take the responsibility of Kalpana but it is thwarted by Kalpana because as it is evident from the story that Kalpana is always lusted after by Prabhakar, Sulu’s husband.

As the case of Kalpana’s rape is re-opened after the persuasion of Urmi, so that Kalpana may get justice. Eventually, the identity of the rapist is revealed as Sulu’s husband Prabhakar. However, the justice is granted but the trauma of rape cannot be avoided. Sulu felt so much ashamed of her husband’s black deed that she immolates herself in guilty and despair. Urmila feels the vine of sympathy with Shakutai, Kalpana and Sulu.

Mira is another character who belongs to the older generation, but is educated and modern and has a prolific brain with poetic
sensibility. She was married at eighteen and died at twenty-two. She has an intense dislike for physical intimacy with her husband, which finds voice in a series of poetry discovered by Urmi several years after her death. Urmi is given an old trunk full of books and other articles by her husband's stepmother, who is referred to as Akka. Urmi while perusing the voluminous pile of Mira's writings finds her cryptic poems and entries in her diary. Urmi reconstruct the tragic image of young Mira who was subjected to suffer forced sexual activity by her husband. She was condemned to suffer an incompatible marriage. Having gone through her poetry, Urmi deciphers the essence of the thought which Mira had poured down. Through Mira's photographs and her writings Urmi resurrect the image of a vivacious and intelligent girl. Her desire to be a poet and; her inhibition about her expression; her fear of being laughed at, show her shy and simple nature. Her shyness is explicit in one of her poems:

Huddled in my cocoon, a somnolent silkworm will I emerge a beauteous being? Or will I, suffocating, cease to exist? (65)

Her innermost feelings find expression in her poems written in the vernacular, Kannad.

Mira symbolizes the plight of those women who are the mute sufferers; those who are unable to voice their sufferings. The invasion of one's body even though sanctified by marriage can be as traumatic as rape. A husband imposing himself on his wife is surely a humiliating experience for the wife, but the Indian males do not care for it because Purana dictates that it is a wife's duty to please her husband in bed.
Tradition also demands that a perfect wife should serve her husband like a slave; give him proper advice; look as beautiful as the goddess Laxmi; forgive all his sins however terrible they may be; feed him like a mother; and serve him like a prostitute in bed. Therefore, these traditional norms clearly show the injustice meted out to women who are expected to give priority to their husband's pleasure.

As Mira is a woman of subdued and effusive personality, she silently bears the violation of her body. Perhaps she had learnt to be silent from her mother. Urmi records the thoughts of Mira for the posterity. Urmi's careful translation of the Kannada poems into English reveals the predicament of Mira. One poem exclusively reveals her tragic despair:

But tell me, friend, did Laxmi too twist brocade tassels round her fingers and tremble, fearing the coming of the dark-clouded engulfing night. (66)

Mira abhors sexual intimacy with her husband, which is clear from her personal diaries. She does not want to be loved if love is included with sexual activities. She says:

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. (67)

Mira, as she has enough patience, endures male-domination silently. She undergoes her marriage against her choice. Every moment she feels the effacement of her personality. She tolerates everything.
silently but refuses to accept a new name 'Nilima' which is thrust on her. The fashion of changing bride's name, actually, transforms the entire psyche as well as identity of a girl. Mira is not ready to give up her name. She assertively proclaims:

Nilima, they call, I stand statue still,

Do you build the new without razing the old.

A tablet of rice, a pensil of gold

Can they make me Nirmala? I am Mira. (101)

Mira faces a loveless marital life. It had been taken for granted since beginning that marriage provides security to woman but at the same time, although sanctified by marriage, woman is considered as a tool towards the end of a procreation and also to satisfy the sexual urge of man. The western feminists shatter this Indian myth and proclaims that woman has equal right to find fulfilment in the act of sex. In India husband and wife are bound in an institution which can hardly be called marriage. Indian marriages are obscene. They consider caste, creed, community, social and financial status but not the feelings of bride. Countless generations have been the victims of loveless marriage. Simone De Beauvoir observes

Marriage is obscene in principle insofar as it transforms into rights and duties those mutual relations which should be founded on spontaneous urge; it gives an instrumental and therefore degrading characters to the two bodies...know each other as bodies, not as persons.⁶
The character of Akka is no different from Urmi, Mira, Shakutai, Sulu and Kalpana. She is also made to subjugate before tradition and endures male injustice. She is made to marry a widower and the father of a child. Akka is so much suppressed by the patriarchy that she cannot reject being married to a widower. Akka is warned that her prospective husband had been obsessed with his wife and her death; he is interested only in his son. In fact, he marries only so that his son can have a mother. After listening to Akka's past, Urmila reacts: "The cruelty, the enormous cruelty of that silenced us." (47)

Akka has the enormous capacity of adjustment with the prevailing circumstances, as many women accept marriage under any condition because marriage is the only goal in life for a girl in our society, and finding a groom is the most difficult task on the earth. Therefore, Akka willy-nilly agrees to marry Kishore's father in spite of the risk of living under the shadow of a dead woman.

The next character is Vandana (Vanna) who is friend as well as sister-in-law of Urmi. She practices submission in the interest of safeguard of her marriage with Harish. Vanna works as a medical social worker. Though, she is educated but up to some extent follows traditional norms. She constantly strives to please her husband Harish. Her constant refrain "Harish says" irritates Urmi. Urmi tells her: "Assert yourself, you don't have to crawl before him, do you?" (80) Vanna have two daughters and has a secret longing to have a son. When Urmi comes to know of Vanna's desire, she is surprised that Vanna is among those women who crave for sons. Urmi furiously burst out, "You let him bulldoze you. You crawl before him." (81) Urmi
admonishes Vanna not to try to become a ‘superwoman’ because Vanna does not take any help from Harish in household duties. Urmi tells Vanna that Harish is not a ‘superman’ but ‘a superbrat’. Overall, Vanna is not an idealist, but a practical woman who does not let her peaceful, smooth conjugal life to be disturbed.

Vanna's daughter Mandira is a perfect example of how in general people grow up with preconceived notions of the role of a woman as a mother and wife. Mandira apparently thinks that a woman’s first duty is to look after her home and children. She is resentful of the fact that her mother Vandana leaves her and her sister in the care of an ayah Hirabai. This is evident from the way she declares to Urmi: “You know Urmi auntie, when I grow up, I’m never going to leave my children to go to work.” (72) She continues that she would “stay at home and look after them” (72) One may take notice of recurring sagas of mothers over generations, enduring almost identical lifestyles. It is evident that the idea of the mother being solely responsible for taking care of the children has remained unchanged.

In portraying the various women characters, Shashi Deshpande tries to show that they can seek fulfilment only within the orbit of family and relationships. The Binding Vine explores women characters in the light of important problems of our time faced by them. Shashi Deshpande does not offer any facile solution. Her characters may be independent to some extent but have firm confinement of tradition. Urmila, perhaps, is the most rebellious of Deshpande’s women characters. Unlike the protagonists in the other novels, who are aware of the inequalities in society but do not attempt to set right anything,
Urmila takes up cudgels on behalf of the rape victim Kalpana. She publicises the case and get the police to investigate the matter and find the culprit. She also encourages her friend, Vanna, to assert herself and stop behaving like a doormat. She also sets herself to the task of translating the poems written by her mother-in-law, Mira in Kannad to English and intends publishing them. Keeping in mind the assertive and the overbearing character of Urmila, Indira Nityanandam writes:

*The Binding Vine* is a refreshing change from the first three novels of Deshpande. Protest comes easily to her protagonist here and there is less agony in attempting to change societal roles and attitudes. The hope for Indian women lies in the happy fact that though there are Miras and Kalpanas and Shakutais, we also have our Urmila.7

Urmila does not display any radical attitude towards the institution of marriage. She argues with Dr. Bhaskar that marriage is a necessity and that for woman like Shakutai marriage means security as it provides them safety from other men. Urmi herself remains very faithful to her husband, Kishore, in spite of his long absence from home as he works for the merchant Navy. Their marriage to some extent is incompatible because of Kishore’s withdrawn attitude. Vanna advises her to be more cautious in her relationship with Dr. Bhaskar. Urmi thinks:

But how can Vanna, secure in the fortress of her marriage to Harish, understand what it is like—marriage with a man who flits into my life a few months in a year and flits out again, leaving nothing of himself behind? Often, after he
had gone, I find in myself a frantic grappling for his image, as if he has taken that away as well. (164)

Urmi confesses that during the long absence of her husband, there are moments when she is overcome with a longing for some physical gratification. Her friendship with Dr. Bhaskar provides several opportunities to satisfy this urge as he declares that he has fallen in love with her. Urmi comes close to respond to Bhaskar but holds herself back and thinks: “It’s so much easier, so much simpler, to just think of virtue and chastity and being a good wife.” (166) It is clear from the statement that she will never overstep the boundaries chalked out in marriage. However, whether this virtue will ever be acknowledge by her husband. Although it is considered that men take their wives’ loyalty for granted. Simone de Beauvoir rightly observes:

A husband regards none of his wife’s good qualities as particularly meritorious; they are implied by the institution of marriage itself; he fails to realise that his wife is no character from pious and conventional treatise, but a real individual of flesh and blood; he takes for granted her fidelity to the strict regimen she assumes, not taking into account that she has temptations to vanquish, that she may yield to them, that in any case her patience, her chastity, her propriety, are difficult conquests; he is still more profoundly ignorant of her dreams, her fancies, her nostalgic yearnings, of the emotional climate in which she spends her days.8
The protagonist, Urmi, throughout the novel, is fully aware of the unequal treatment meted out to women. She sympathises with Shakutai, encourages Vanna to be more assertive and is completely absorbed by the writing left behind by her dead mother-in-law. In spite of this, she does not consider marriage to be an outdated institution. She is educated and exposed to western ideas but she does not agree with Simone de Beauvoir’s famous statement: “It has been said that marriage diminishes man, which is often true; but almost always it annihilates women.”

The novelist has also created a pseudo-feminist character Priti to contrast her own brand of feminism. Priti is over-enthusiastic to fight for equal rights for women, but she often ends up with impractical ideas. Priti while conversation with Urmi, talks of the judgement in a case filed by a husband against his wife for restitution of conjugal rights. Priti is excited that the judge had ruled that the wife could not be forced into a physical relationship with her husband against her will. Urmi reminds her that a single judgement cannot change women’s life. It can be subverted by the next court. Moreover, there are not many women who can go to court on such a matter. Although, through the character of Priti, the novelist tries to create satire, but her style is too straightforward for satire.

The Binding Vine is a refreshing from the earlier novels of Deshpande. Indira Nityanandam observes:

The step forward, achieved in this novel, is the introduction of female bonding, the desire of one woman to help another less fortunate one. Urmila draws society’s
attention to the plight of the rape victim and is determined to get Mira’s poems published. This is a positive development in the protagonist, for Sarita, Jaya and Indu were involved in fighting only their own battles.¹⁰

Through various characters, Shashi Deshpande has boldly projected a woman’s biological needs and has also raised the question of woman’s right over her body which cannot be violated even in marriage. Keeping the character in mind, it can be summed up in the words of Subhash K. Jha: *The Binding Vine* is one of the few contemporary Indian novels to discuss its heroine’s sexuality, her ‘passion’ with a measure of unrepentant concern. In this novel Deshpande travels much further down the road in exploring women’s needs of the head, heart and further down the anatomy, than her earlier novels.”¹¹
Shashi Deshpande, who is incomparable for articulating the bitterness and desolation of women characters in the novels, makes use of ‘alienation’ as a dominating factor of her novel, *A Matter of Time* (1996). Also, for the first time in her career, Deshpande makes a man the protagonist of her novel. But it does not mean that the novelist has completely shifted her focus. A close study of the novel reveals that Shashi Deshpande is deeply concerned with the traumas suffered by women in the middle-class family in India. The novel begins in a similar manner to her earlier novels and follows almost the same pattern, but the theme of alienation discriminate it from her other novels.

In *A Matter of Time*, the novelist gives an honest account of the sudden disintegration of Gopal’s happy family and the diverse reactions of all the people concerned. The passage from the *Upanishad* which forms the epigraph of novel, exactly suits the theme of the novel, which deals with a man’s mid-life crisis leading to his desire for renunciation. Without any warning, Gopal one day announces to his wife that he is leaving the house for good. Sumi, his wife, married to him twenty years ago, and their teenaged daughters Aru, Charu and
Seema are caught totally unawares. Sumi does not know what to say. This shock engulfs Sumi completely into silence while eighteen year old Aru tries bitterly to find out the reasons for this calamity.

Sumi and Gopals is not the ordinary arranged marriage. Their’s is the love marriage. Gopal frequently recapitulates the discovery of Sumi and marriage with her. Their joyous intimacy creates the impression of their compatibility—physical as well as mental. Recounting the ecstasy of their first physical union, Gopal thinks: “And losing yourself in another human being, that men give up their dreams of freedom. And women, too?” Their separation, therefore, is all the more poignant. Sumi’s sister Premi is filled with anger “at their carelessness in throwing away what they had uncaring, it seems to her, of the value of what they have discarded.” (136)

It is evident in the novel that there is no obvious reasons for Gopal walking out of his family. Sumi’s mother Kalyani pathetically probes and pleads her son-in-law Gopal to return home. Gopal assures her that Sumi is not to be blamed for his decision. Later on Premi discovers from Aru and Charu that their father had been humiliated by his students in the college and had later resigned from his job. However, all these reasons does not provide with a concrete reason for his resolution.

The novelist has given a vague reference of Gopal’s past. Gopal reveals that his childhood has been abnormal. His father had married his brother’s widow, and he was born of that union which proves quite perturbing for Gopal. His adolescent mind draws up several reasons for this marriage. And at time, he struggles with an internal conflict,
and even draws a parallel from Hamlet's predicament. He is never able to relate to his father, always thinking of him as his mother's guilty partner. Later, his parents' death leaves a void in his life. But more than that, it is the realization that his sister Sudha, and he did not share the same father, that shatters the equilibrium of his life. It had destroyed the foundation of his life and emptiness was always there in his life. So, it is evident that Gopal has long been nurturing a sense of loneliness in his life.

Realizing a sense of isolation and loneliness throughout his life, Gopal, in the later stage of his life proceeds towards the Indian concept of renunciation. This line of thinking concedes with the concept of Sartean existentialism. The Hindu tradition identifies four stages in man's life: Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanprastha and Sanyasa. Having experienced Brahmacharya and Grihastha (bachelorhood and the duties of a householder) Gopal moves forward to experience Vanprastha (relinquishing the duties of a householder), which is only a step away from Sanyasa (total renunciation).

Gopal's renunciation of the family duties brings about the catastrophe in the life of his wife Sumi and daughters—Aru, Charu and Seema. The novelist, in association to these woman characters, incorporates the life of Sumi's mother Kalyani. Thus, the novelist in her novel A Matter of Time weaves the story of three strong women representing three generations. This is the story of their pain, endurance, suffering and love extended to one another. In the light of these factors Shashi Deshpande gives particular shape to her characters.
Sumi is a significant character in the novel. She had a love marriage with Gopal and now have three young daughters—Aru, Charu and Seema. At the opening of the novel, Gopal enters his house and tells Sumi that he is leaving the house for good. Sumi does not know what to say and “he goes out as quietly as he had come in.” (9). Sumi, next morning, tells her daughters about it, “almost exactly repeating Gopal’s words, leaving out nothing.” (9) Sumi, though immensely hurt by Gopal’s action, endures the pain within herself and tries to keep the things normal for her daughters. And yet “Sumi, despite her facade of normality, has a quality about her—a kind of blankness—that makes them uneasy.” (10-11)

Sumi’s father, Shripati, takes them to “Big House” her parental home. Kalyani, her mother is shattered to know about it. “Gopal desertion is not just a tragedy, it is both a shame and a disgrace.” (13) Sumi is trying to endure the pain and humiliation of deserted wife silently. She does not rave and rant but surrounds herself with a death-like silence. Her silence conveys her pain more effectively than words can. Her silence, in a manner, is quite similar to that of her counterparts Indu, Jaya, Saru and Urmi in earlier novels. In the entire atmosphere, “There is an awkwardness about the whole thing, and discomfort and uneasiness pervade more than grief and anger.” (20). The reason for this is: “Sumi, the person they come to comfort, is an enigma. She accepts Goda’s dumb sympathy, Devaki’s fierce loyalty and Ramesh’s stupefied bewilderment, as if they are all the same to her.” (20) They don’t find “the right way to dealing with her apparent stoicism.” (20) They are all puzzled by her self-control. Even her daughters are puzzled by her stoic character. They all want to share the pain, loss and
hurt which seems to be impossible with Sumi. When Devi cries and
tells Sumi, "may be I'm crying because you don't. You don't even talk
about it," for the first time Sumi puts her pain in words, "I've never
been able to cry easily, you know that. And what do I say, Devi? That
my husband has left me and I don't know why and may be he doesn't
really know, either. And that I'm angry and humiliated and confused."
(107)

Sumi, as she is a woman of self-pride and firm determination,
refuses to take any financial help from her well-to-do parents, her
doctor sister or Gopal's ever-helpful doctor nephew, Ramesh. She
insists on taking up a temporary teaching post at once and is actively in
the search for a permanent job. With great determination, she learns to
ride a two-wheeler, but this idea proves to be impractical, and is also
laughed away by her daughters and kins. She frantically searches for a
house to move into. She does not want to stay any longer in her
parental house. But she is also convinced of the impracticality of
moving out of the "big house" which has an ample space for her family.

Sumi is completely engulfed with the feeling of alienation. She
feels hurt at the thought of her daughters blaming her for Gopal's
action: "Do my daughters blame me for what Gopal has done? Do they
think it is my fault? Why can't I open my heart to them?" (23) Sumi, in
fact, is trying to cope up with the reality, trying to come to terms with
the hard, painful, reality and wants her daughters to do the same.
When her daughters are worried about Gopal being dead or alive,"Sumi has no fear of his death, on the contrary, there is the certainty of
being alive, of the steadily pursuing his own purposes. While the
others are trying to find reasons for what he has done. She knows that the reason lie inside him, the reason is him.” (24) And yet Sumi is curious to know, how he has taken the decision to disown things and people in this age of acquisition and possession:

If I meet Gopal I will ask him one question, just one, the question no one has thought of. What is it, Gopal ... that makes a man in this age of acquisition and possession walk out on his family, and all that he owns? Because... it was you who said that we are shaped by the age we live in, by the society we are part of. How then can you, in this age, a part of this society, turn your back on everything in your life? Will you be able to give me an answer to this?” (27)

Sumi undergoes a deep melancholic state of mind. She has become quiet and dull. She is trying hard to survive without Gopal, the change in her is visible. Shashi Deshpande writes:

With Gopal’s going, it was as if the swift-flowing stream of her being had grown thick and viscous – her movements, her thoughts, her very pulse and heartbeats seemed to have slowed down. It had worried her family, but it had been a necessary physical reaction to her emotional state, as if this slowing down was necessary for her survival. (28)

Sumi’s daughters give the impression of having taken up the threads of life in the ‘Big House’ but “Sumi is the one who has the air of being lost, of having no place in her childhood home”. (23) Gopal’s desertion has created a vast void in her life. Sumi herself says:
His absence has left such a vast emptiness that I can’t find my bearings, there are no markers any more to show me which way I should go. (36)

Sumi’s elder daughter Aru is angry and upset with his father that she wants Sumi to lodge a case against him, but Sumi tells Aru, “I just want to get on with my life. Let him go, Aru, just let him go. This is not good for you”. (61) With these words Sumi allows Gopal to have his own space, to implement on his decision. Sumi understands her daughters desperate need of the warmth and togetherness of family and yet she sets Gopal free without any grudge or complaint. This speaks volumes of her courage and understanding. This understanding between Gopal and Sumi makes their relationship a unique one in Deshpande’s fictional world. All the man-woman relationships in her novels are oppressive, strange, uncomfortable and silent. Sumi and Gopal stand out uniquely in spite of the fact that Gopal deserted them for something unattainable.

When Sumi and Gopal meet for the first time after their separation, there are no tears, no abuses, and no complaints. When Sumi enters his room, Gopal is having his lunch and reding a book of poems. Asking Sumi to wait, he goes out to wash his hands. Out of the room, she hears his voice, responding a woman servant who is offering to wash up for him. The children call out to him and she hears him laugh. And, as if his voice knits everything together, she can suddenly see the substance, the reality of his life apart from her and their children. All these lives, adjoining to him, spell out the actuality of their separation. It occurs to Sumi with its finality that “We can never be
together again. All those days I have been thinking of him as if he has been suspended in space, in nothingness, since he left us. But he has gone on living, his life has moved on, it will go on without me. So has mine. Our lives have diverged, they now move separately". (85)

The reality discloses upon Sumi without any exchange of words. She understands and accepts it. Shashi Deshpande herself comments:

Sumi’s acceptance is not passive. She blocks out the unpleasantness. She has good opinion of herself, she is more concerned with getting on with life. She does not want pity, she would do anything for pride. She distances ever her husband. The point is, they are both unusual.13

Sumi has a self-pride and does not request Gopal to return home. But at the same time she does not reproach Gopal either for shirking from his responsibilities as a husband and father. On the other hand, Sumi is made to suffer the disapproving comments of women like Shankar’s mother:

When are you going back to your husband? You should be with him. Look at his state! It’s all right to stay with your parents for a while, but that’s not your home. When my daughters come home, I don’t let stay long. Go back to your husband, he’s a good man. If you’ve done wrong, he’ll forgive you. And if he has – women shouldn’t have pride. (161)
It can be said that centuries may separate us from the mythical figures of ancient times, but even today a woman’s worth is measured only through her marital status.

Another important figure is Sumi’s mother Kalyani. Kalyani is married to Shripati, her maternal uncle. She was an intelligent girl and was often playfully told by her father that she would become the country’s first engineer. However, she was not allowed to even complete her education and married off to her maternal uncle according to the wishes of her mother Manorama. Manorama is obsessed with the fear of her husband taking up another wife, as she could not produce a male heir to their property. So she does not think of marrying Kalyani into a new family as the property would then belong to them. Hence, she wishes Kalyani to marry with her brother Shripati. Such type of consanguineous marriages is common in South India. Medical science negates such type of marriages because there is a risk of the birth of an abnormal child. Kalyani has three children – two daughters, Sumi and Premi and one boy Madhav, who is mentally retarded.

Tragedy strikes Kalyani when their four-year-old son gets lost in boarding the train to Bangalore. Shripati does not forgive her for her negligence and sends her to her parent’s home with her two daughters. Shripati maintains a storm silence to punish Kalyani. Kalyani also endures this punishment silently. Later, Kalyani becomes the anchor of “Big House’ and is the invisible support for Sumi; a keen observer and close friend to Aru, Charu and Seema. She is unable to comprehend the meaning of such an existence. She thinks:
It is enough to have a husband, and never mind the fact that he has not looked at your face for years, never mind the fact that he has not spoken to you for decades? Does this wifehood make up for everything, for the deprivation of man's love, for the feel of his body against yours, the warmth of his breath on your face, the touch of his lips on yours, his hands on your breasts? Kalyani lost all this. But her *kumkum* is intact and she can move in the company of women with a pride of a wife. (167)

The novelist, once again touches the aspect of female sexuality. She gives reference of the mythical figure Surpankha, who does not hesitate to express her sexuality before Rama and Lakshman. All it makes Sumi reflect:

Female sexuality. We are ashamed of owing it, we cannot speak of it, not even to our own selves. But Surpankha... she spoke her desires, ...and therefore, were the men, unused to such women, frightened? Did they feel threatened of her? I think so. Surpankha, neither ugly, nor hideous, but a woman charged with sexuality, not frightened of displaying it. (191)

Kalyani is considered as the greatest disappointment in her mother's life. She was not an unloved child, but for Manorama, "she became the visible symbol of their failure to have a son" (151). Kalyani wins her mother's favour only once when she gave birth to a son. But his proves to be short-lived as she returns home in disgrace after the disappearance of her son, Madhav, from the railway platform.
Through the novel, Shashi deshpande presents the deep-rooted desire of every Indian—male or female—to have a son. Her quote from the *Upanishad* aptly sums up the Indian psyche:

Whatever wrong has been done by him his son frees him from it all; therefore he is called a son. By his son a father stands firm in this world.

[Brahad-Aranyaka *Upanishad* (1.5.17)]

Though Kalyani and her mother Manorama are traditional women but they do not find a place in the family tree. There is no mention of such women who had contributed seriously in shaping the family.

Another group of significant characters belong to the younger generation. It is a group of three sisters—Aru, Charu and Seema. They are all modern, educated, frank and awakened. Aru is the eldest and Seema is the youngest of all. Aru holds a prominent place among her sisters. She is thoughtful, serious, responsive, sympathetic and loving. She acts as a care-taking sister of Seema. Being the eldest sister she looks after her, she makes her bed and iron her clothes. Actually, she cannot give up the habit of babying Seema because it began when their mother Sumi had been ill and unable to look after her newly born baby. The sense of responsibility came to Aru when she was only six years old. Aru looks after her mother also. Once she takes her mother to the dentist. In this way she wants to fill up the gap left by Gopal.
Charu is reproaching and protesting against the coddling of Seema. She alleges her sister Aru that “why do you make her bed, why do you iron her clothes? You’re spoiling her” (35) But later she accepts the fact that “Seema is special, isolated not only by the five year gap between them but something else that none of them can spell out”. (35)

Seema is the youngest and most beautiful of the three sisters. She is loving and affectionate to everybody. She is also fashionable, her hair, clothes, and shoes, everything have the gloss of care and reject the possibility of any association with rags and cinders. She is always ‘tip-top’ and Kalyani says.

These three sisters are assertive and at the same time actively perform their indoor chores and outdoor duties. They are all practical and down to earth. Aru in comparison to her mother does not have that patience and stoicism. She asks her mother to lodge a case against her father Gopal, but Sumi reject this idea. Sumi thinks: “Marriage is not for everyone. The demand it makes – a lifetime of commitment – is not possible for all of us”.

The novel, however, ends on a tragic note with the sudden death of Sumi and father Shripati in a road accident. This perhaps, serves to justify the philosophical strain, which runs through the novel. Gopal’s answers Premi’s persistent probing in a philosophical manner:

Death is the greatest wonder in the world ... yet we go on living as if we are going to live forever.... In fact, it’s the secret of life itself.... the day we face the truth that we are mortal, that is our fate as well, it will become difficult,
almost impossible to go on. And if that happens to all of us, the human race will become extinct. (133-134)

No doubt, the views of Gopal are metaphysical probings into the world of the spirit. But apart from it the novel contains a lot else. As Subhas K. Jha comments that the author tries to convey something more through “the idea of three women from three generations from the same family and how they respond to the tragedy that suddenly overpowers their lives”.14
SMALL REMEDIES

Fathers of the earth,
    Protect us;
Fathers of the sky,
    Protect us;
Fathers of the great and shining waters
    Protect us,
--To which God shall we offer our worship

_Rig Veda, Mandala X, Song 121_

Shashi Deshpande, in her latest novel _Small Remedies_ (2000) seems to have chiselled her skill to perfection. Her protagonist Madhu is urban, middle aged and educated woman like her other counterparts Indu, Sarita, Jaya, Urmi and Sumi. But she has broadened the canvas of this novel and encompasses a cross-section of people who belong to different communities, different professions and different levels of society. Like her other counterparts Madhu Saptarishi also faces the same upheavals, to some extent, in her marriage. These upheavals are inevitable when a woman refuses to conform to her established and accepted myriad roles as wife, mother and sister.

Shashi Deshpande in the novel writes about a Goan Christian family and also mentions a Muslim _table_ player and briefly touches upon her life and people around him.

Meenakshi Mukherjee, in comparison to other novels of Shashi Deshpande observes some noticeable change in this novel and sums up:
In *Small Remedies*, Deshpande is attempting much more than she did in her earlier novels—all five of them different from each other—but smaller than this in scope.... But none of them gathered up, as this new novel does, in one large sweep, the plurality, diversity and contradictions of our composite culture where an Anthony Gonsalves (the reference to “Amar Akbar Anthony” is deliberate), a Hamidbhai and Joe can all be part of Madhu’s extended family, and the daughter of Ghulaam Saab can opt, though not very easily to get accepted as Shailja Joshi.15

Shashi Deshpande, in this novel, makes another but a successful attempt of portraying the characters from the world of classical music. Madhu, the protagonist, is writing a biography of a famous classical singer, “Savitribai Indorekar, doyenne of Hindustani Music, Belonging to the Gwalior Gharana.”(28) Shashi Deshpande never falters and uses jargons and idioms of music quite effortlessly in her impeccable English. As Meenakshi Mukherjee observes:

Of the four remarkable novels I have read in recent times that deal with music—Vikram Seth’s *An Equal Music*, Salman Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath her Feet*, Bani Babu’s *Gandharvi* and now *Small Remedies*, Shashi Deshpande, I think, faces the toughest challenge. This has to do incompatibility between the discourse of Hindustani music and the English language.16

*The Telegraph* writes: “*Small Remedies* is a novel of quiet strength.”17 *The Hindustan Times* declares: “*Small Remedies* is a book that should be
bought, read and savoured...it is as much of a page-turner as tautly written thriller."\(^{18}\)

However, the novel is less about the music and more about the exploration of the lives of two women, one obsessed with music and the other a passionate believer in communism, who break away from their families to seek fulfilment in public life. Savitribai Indorekar, born into an orthodox Hindu family elopes with her Muslim lover and *table* accompanist, Ghulaam Saab, to pursue a career in music. Gentle, strong-willed, Leela, on the other hand gives her life to the party and to working with the factory workers of Bombay.

Fifty years after these events have been set in motion, Madhu, Leela's niece, travels to Bhavanipur, Savitribai's home in her last years, to write a biography of Bai. Caught in her own despair over the loss of her only son Aditya, Madhu tries to make sense of the lives of Bai and those around her, and in doing so, seeks to find a way out of her own grief. In her retrospection, she gives reference of Munni also, the daughter of Savitribai.

The title of the novel *Small Remedies* has been borrowed from the book which was presented to Madhu by one of her friends. It was full of tips, as it claims, about dealing with a baby's minor problems.

In spite of Deshpande's repeated denials of being a feminist writer, she creates characters who often contradicts such statements. Savitribai is one such character, vividly portrayed and brought to life by the author. Savitribai is a significant and assertive character in the
novel, who physically appears to be a frail woman. Looking back, Madhu remembers her as:

a small sized woman. Even from my child’s perspective she had seemed petite. Age and illness have so shrunk her that she’s a doll-sized woman now. She was also, in my eyes, a very beautiful woman, ...the skin is fine and delicate, even if it is crinkled like tissue paper. Her arms are slim and firm, but the hands, with their branching veins, seems incongruously large for those delicate arms. (14)

Savirtribai is, however, domineering in her attitude to her servants, students and even to her biographer, often giving her instructions on how to conduct the interview. She is a woman of extreme courage and firm determination that being born in a traditional, orthodox Brahmin family, she elopes with her table accompanist Ghulaam Saab to earn a name in the field of classical music. Madhu observes the unspoken resentment in Savitribai’s voice when she recalls how she was scolded by her grandmother while performing as a child during a family gathering. Madhu herself recollects how “in Neemgaon she was ‘singer-woman’ and there was something derogatory about the word, yes, I can see that now, about the way they said them.” (29)

Madhu is a magazine reporter. She refuses the publisher’s wishes to write a trendy feminist biography. They feel that “victim stories are out of fashion, heroines are in.” (167) However, Meenakshi Mukherjee observes: “Madhu cannot impose her new concept of heroism on an old
fashioned woman who whitewashes her life through selective amnesia.”

Savitri as a young woman had lived a sheltered life as a daughter-in-law of an affluent Brahmin family. As a child she had been part of a large family. For a woman with such a background to elope with a Muslim tabla player and live in a strange town among strangers must have required immense courage.

Savitribai had been rejected by the conservative society because there are different measures for men and women in our society. Madhu recalls that in her childhood, she witnessed the rejection of Savitribai by the conventional society. She remembers how in Neemgaon “each family had its place marked out for it according to religion, caste, money, family background etc.” (138)

While writing the biography of Savitribai, Madhu becomes conscious of her own upbringing by an unorthodox widower father and a male servant Babu. He observed no rituals and religious customs and openly indulges in a drink every night. Although, people overlooked her father’s eccentricities and foibles, but they were not at all generous towards Savitribai. They rejected her. Here it is a matter of male-dominance and female oppression. Madhy says: “Being a man he oculd get a way with much. He oculd live the way he wanted without open censure or disapproval.” (139) When a woman dares to defy conventions, people are shocked. Madhu observes: “In a sense, neither of us belonged. Munni’s family, with her singer mother, absent father and another man—a Muslim—sharing the home, was of course radically, shockingly different.” (138)
Madhu also cites the example of Savitribai's father-in-law, who had a mistress, a singer famous for her *Thumri* singing. It was known to all that he visited her regularly. The women looked on in amusement. They wondered at his choice of a mistress, but there was never any outrage over the fact. Madhu thinks: "He had a mistress was accepted, a wife from one's own class, a mistress from another—this was normal." (220)

Savitribai faced the vehement disapproval of the society of her learning music. Although she had the support and encouragement of her father-in-law, she had to face the taunts and hostility of women. They treated her as if she belonged to the class of untouchables. Madhu could imagine the anger and ridicule Bai had to face from the other women. She says:

To be set apart from your own kind, not to be able to conform, to flout the rules laid down, is to lay yourself open to cruelty. Animals know this, they do it more openly, their cruelty towards the deviant is never concealed. But the subtle cruelty of persistent hostility leaves deeper wounds. There's always the temptation to succumb, to go back to the normal path and be accepted. To resist the temptation speaks of great courage (221)

Savitribai is a woman of strong-will, self-pride and believes in existentialism. In Neemgaon she confronted a rumour which was against her prestige. It is said that there was a Station Director who frequently visited Bai's house and got her many contracts with the radio, and was generally believed to be her lover. Madhu remembers
the children teasing Bai's daughter Munni him her *mama*, a kind of euphuism for a mother's lover. Bai denies the existence of any lover, while recounting her strong to Madhu. But in Neemgaon it was easily accepted that why would a man go out of his way to do so many favours for a woman, why would he visit her so often? All such assumptions ending finally in the conclusion: "A woman who'd left her husband's home—what morals would she have, anyway." (222)

Savitribai, undoubtedly led the most unconventional life. Oblivious of gender discrimination, she did everything for the search of an identity of her own. But, behind all the acts of bravado, there was always a common woman who wanted to conform, to be accepted by society.

Savitribai is not the stereotypical feminist with careless and cheerful attitude towards life. This is evident in her blanking out Ghulaam Saab's name while narrating the story of her life to Madhu, her biographer. This reveals her anxiety to cover up her youthful indiscretions in order to present a picture of responsibility. She even goes to the extent of creating the details of her daughter born through her association with Ghulaam Saab. Madhu, who is aware of Savitribai's past and her daughter Munni, is unable to bear with her indifference with her daughter because Madhu herself is a doting mother and grieving over the death of her son Aditya.

Savitribai is neither a doting mother nor a faithful wife. She successfully obliterates the existence of her daughter Munni and her husband Ghulaam Saab from her life. Madhu feels that she can give Bai the immortality if she reveals the existence of her daughter to the world.
Madhu thinks that when she had the courage to walk out on her marriage and family, why she is so frightened to reveal the existence of her daughter. She wonders how "she gave that child the name 'Indorekar'—the name she adopted as a singer (from her mother's hometown Indore)—not comprising either her maiden name or her married one. Meenakshi Indorekar marks herself out as her child alone, not the child of her marriage, not the child of her lover. This surely is a statement I cannot ignore?" (169)

Munni, though less in age but has a bitter experience of life. She is an unloved child. Her identity is dismissed by her own mother. Madhu wonders: "What kind of woman are you denying your own child? Only the lowest, the meanest kind of creature could do such a thing." (78) However, Munni desperately hankered after the name her mother had left behind and went to great lengths to dissociate herself from her father and, after a while, her mother Bai had found conventional life stultifying, but Munni yearned for it all her life.

As a child, Madhu recollects how Munni had been left uncaring by her irresponsible mother; her activities were not monitored; she was free to do anything. Only a male voice called her in the evening if she happened to get late. Munni refused to accept Ghulaam Saab as her father and instead concocted stories about a lawyer father Sadashiv Rao, who lived in Pune. She also remembered how the girls in their neighbourhood tormented her with questions:

What's your name?
What's your father's name?
Where is your father?
Who's the man who lives with your mother. (77)
Years after when Mahdhu met Munni in a bus and recognised her, the latter refused to answer to the name of Munni or even acknowledge her childhood friend. She declared that her name was 'Shailja Joshi', trying to wipe out any connection with her past.

Shashi Deshpande while writing about person like Savitribai, has also created characters like Munni was desperately seek the approval of society. A reviewer, Malathi Mathur writes: "At the other end of spectrum is Munni, Savitribai's daughter who turns her back on her mother and all that she stands for, in a desperate desire to conform, having encountered early in life the poisoned barbs that society levels against those who dare to be different."20

Apart from Savitribai and Munni, Madhu's task of biography writing remains incomplete if she does not include the saga of perhaps equally remarkable woman, her aunt Leela who was "ahead not only of her generation, but the next one as well." (94) She was an independent woman and was strongly committed to the communist ideology. She had participated in the Quit India Movement, but was critical of Gandhiji's principles of *Ahimsa* and *Satyagraha* and thought that it was ridiculous to allow oneself to be beaten up. As she grew older she mellowed down and regretted some of her actions. It was evident that she was not a special activist, but a woman who had the courage of her convictions. She resigned from her party when she felt that the party's reaction to a political situation was not proper.

Though Leela was a generation older than Madhu, she was financially independent and supported herself. When her first husband, Vasanth, died she took up a job and educated her brothers-in-
law. She lived in the crowded chawls among the cotton mill workers and worked for the welfare of the women afflicted with TB. It was here when she came in contact with Dr. Joe and later on married with him, Dr. Joe had established a clinic specially for T.B. patients.

Leela and Joe were two poles, but Joe was mad in love with her. He was a widower with two children, spoke impeccable English, and was widely read, often quoting from his favourite writers. Literature and music were the two great forces of his life in addition to medicine. On the whole Dr. Joe was a well-read fashionable man. Leela on the other hand wore the saries of Joe's housekeeper. She spoke no English and knew nothing of literature and music. She had no sense of humour, but there was a wonderful companionship and a beautiful relationship between them.

Leela was a person who rejects such a life which did not look beyond one's own self. Madhu recollects her reaction to the film 'Devdas'. When she remained silent for a long time after watching the film, Madhu thought that the film had evoked the memories of her dead husband, who like the hero of the film had died of TB. But Madhu, Joe, and Tony were surprised to hear Leela's views:

Now I know why that poor man drank so much. He had nothing to do, he didn't have any work at all.... If an intelligent man like him remains idle, what else can he do but take to drink. (96)

Leela did not believe in the caste system and was the only one among Madhu's relatives who accepted Madhu’s parents’ marriage and
invited them to stay with her when they had no place of their own. She was a down-to-earth woman having a lot of commonsense. She also disliked the aristocratic status of people and in real sense she believed in egalitarianism.

As Leela was a passionate believer in the communist ideology, she did not hesitate to speak up against the party when it required. After putting up several years of hard work, she was marginalized by the party bosses and never reached the top of the hierarchy, while men who worked under her attained the superior rank easily. Once, a widow of the member, who was killed, was given a ticket to contest for election. This provoked Leela to comment, "it seems you’ve got to become a widow for them to remember that you exist." (224) This is a telling statement on the chauvinism that rules all political parties.

Savitribai also understood how much more difficult it was for women to rise to the top when compared to men. Madhu wondered if she had ever heard the phrase ‘gender discrimination’ but she had certainly experienced and accepted it in the normal course of her life.

All the foreground of the novel is the character of Madhu. She is subjected to write the biography of Savitribai. She had always been thinking since her childhood about the Bai’s relationship with Ghulaam Saab and Munni. The novel covers that period of life when she is mourning over the death of her only son, Aditya. In exposing the characters of Leela, Savitribai and Munni, she presents the inequalities in gender in society. The irony of it is that some of the victims are not even aware of the injustice heaped on them.
Shashi Deshpande has revealed the character of Madhu, who herself has been the victim of gender inequality. She had been brought up as a child by two men—her father and Babu, a male servant, but she had no complaints. On the other hand, she felt pity for the children who seemed to be harassed by their mothers. She says:

Motherless child that I am, motherhood is an unknown world to me. The mothers I see in my childhood are drab creatures, forever working, forever scolding their children, certainly they are not the women to arouse a sense of deprivation in me. (182)

Deshpande portrays the picture of motherhood though her different characters. She seldom puts the glorified picture of motherhood. Madhu says:

I got some image of motherhood in the movies.... But real life shows me something entirely different. Munni's mother who ignored her daughter; Ketaki's mother, stern, dictatorial and so partial to her sons; Sunanda, sweetly devious and manipulating. Som's mother, so demanding—none of them conform to the white-clad, sacrificing, sobbing mother of the movies. (183)

But Madhu herself turned out to be doting mother and always perceptive of her son's every need. Therefore, it was more tragic when Aditya died in a bomb blast.

Madhu's estrangement with her husband, Som, began when Madhu, waking up after a nightmare, revealed to him a secret which
she had locked up in the innermost recesses of her mind. She had slept with a man when she was only fifteen. Som is unable to accept this fact of his wife. As he had been a good husband and shared wonderful relationship with his wife, now he is unable to bear this news. He is totally devastated. Madhu is unable to comprehend this:

But it’s the single act of sex that Som holds on to, it’s this fact the he can’t let go of, as if it’s been welded into his palm. Purity, chastity, an intact hymen—these are the things Som is thinking of, these are the truths that matter. (262)

It does not the matter that Som himself had a full-fledged relationship with another woman before his marriage. It is a typical situation where a man may have several affairs but expects his wife to be a virgin. It is all the more unbearable to Som that his wife had been willingly partner.

Our society has been so conditioned as to categorize women as immoral on the slightest deviation from their normal course of behaviour. She thinks: “Men and women can never be friends. Men can be brothers, fathers, lovers, husbands, but never friends.” (254)

Shashi Deshpande has always been expressing her resentment at being categorised as the champion of oppressed women. It is, indeed, a tribute to her that some of the reviewers recognize her for what she is. Malathi Mathur writes: In portraying struggles of these women for identity, Shashi Deshpande waves no feminist banners, launches into no rabid diatribes. She drives her point home with great subtlety and delicacy.”21

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Notes and References:


9 Ibid, p. 496.


16 Ibid.
17 Quoted on the cover page of Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000). All subsequent references to this novel are from this edition.


