Chapter-V

Middle Novels
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*The Binding Vine* deals with the multi-faceted ness of its protagonist Urmi. Her one-year-old daughter has died and she is unable to forget her because her memories haunt Urmi. She fights with the memories but also realizes that forgetting is betrayal: “I must reject these memories, I have to conquer them. This is one battle I have to win if I am to go on living. And yet my victory will carry with it the taint of betrayal. To forget is be betray.” She also realizes her responsibility to her living son Kartika who needs her love and watches her anxiously. It is not that she talks every death of her kith and kin in this way. When her father died, she could bear the shock easily. She says: “Papa is only a memory, a gentle memory.” But Anu is different. When Inni wants to have a framed photograph of
Anu on the wall, she reacts bitterly: "I don't need a picture to remember her, I can re-member every bit of her, every moment of her life. How can you imagine I need a picture?" But when her friend Lalita asks how many kids she has, she replies, "Only one. A son." And soon she realizes that she has done injustice to Anu: "Only one, a son ... the words keep hammering in my mind. How could I, oh God, how could I? That was betrayal, treachery, how could I deny my Anu? ... only one son ... how could I?"

Obsessed with the memories of her daughter, she comes across a photograph of her mother-in-law Mira which is introduced as "Kishore's mother. Kartika's grandmother." She sees a group photograph of Mira and from the formality of the picture, she conjectures that it was taken to mark "an occasion Mira's wedding perhaps-a parting of ways for a group of friends, the end of a chapter." The trunk from which she gets the photograph contains many books and diaries of Mira. The poems of Mira
are in Kannada and the diaries in English. Eager to know more about her, she asks Akka about her. Akka tells her that her brother saw Mira at a wedding and fell in love with her. Since then he had “single-minded pursuit of an object: marrying Mira.”¹² He was suggested as a good match for Mira and in this way the marriage was arranged. She died while giving birth to Kishore.

Urmi notices the difference in handing over of Mira’s property to her. When Akka hands over little bits of Mira’s jewellery, she says, “They are Kishore’s mother’s .... I kept them for his wife.” But when she hands over the books and diaries of Mira, she says, ‘Take this, it’s Mira’s.” “She did not mention Kishore at all, as if she was now directly linking me with Mira.”¹³ This shows that a woman loses her identity after her marriage. She is seen either as a wife or mother which in a way erases her real self and imposes another alien self on her. The difference made by Akka symbolizes that the poem and diaries are “self-actualizing, whose identities are not dependent on men.”

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After reading the poems, Urmi realizes the suffering of Mira, the woman who wrote those poems in the solitude of an unhappy marriage, who died giving birth to her son at twenty-two. In the eyes of Urmi, Mira’s diary “is not a daily account of her routine life but a communion with herself.” For the time-being she forgets her own suffering and tries to probe into Mira’s poetry to visualize the kind of troubled life she has lived.

Taken together, the poems and the diary entries show molestation in marriage. Take for example the following lines: “But tell me, friend, did Laxmi too twist brocade tassels round her fingers and tremble, fearing the coming of the dark-clouded, engulfing night?” This is further noted by the diary entries like the following:

But I have my defences; I give him the facts, nothing more,
never my feelings .... And so it begins. “Please,” he says,
“Please, I love you.” And over and over again until he has
done "I love you." Love! How I hate the word. If this is love it is a terrible thing."

Such passages embody the psychological fears and physical suffering of Mira. Urmi wants to share this suffering with Vanna, her friend from childhood and now her sister-in-law, but she cannot, because "I cannot speak of Mira, of Mira's writing, to her. That is another pocket of silence between us. One can never see one's parent as a sexual being; he or she is merely a cardboard figure labeled 'parent.'" Urmi remembers the poem behind which lies the man "who tries to possess another human being against her will."

Don't tread paths barred to you

Obey, never utter a 'no';

Submit and your life will be a paradise, she said and blessed me.10
The same kind of experience is conveyed by Saru, the protagonist of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*: "A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband .... That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage. Don't ever try to reverse the doctor-nurse, executive-secretary, principal-teacher role."

Urmi decodes Mira's loneliness from the fact that the latter rarely mentions her family in her poems. This loneliness was a part of her being. When she came to her in-law's house, she was christened Nirmala the first estrangement from her identity her known self. One of her poems is written in reaction to this horrible incident:

A glittering ring gliding on the rice

Carefully traced a name 'Nirmala.'

Who is this? None but I,

my name hence, bestowed upon me.
Nirmala, they call, I stand statue-still,

Do you build without erasing the old?

A tablet of rice, a pencil of gold

Can they make me Nirmala? I am Mira.¹¹

But this strong assertion remains a private experience; it never becomes public in her lifetime.

Urmi feels the burden of the dead on her. She had taken several things of the dead—Bai Ajji’s silver pins, her saris, and Mira’s bangles—but none of these meant much to her. Contrasted with these, Mira’s poetry is “like a message being tapped on the wall by the prisoner in the next cell.”¹²

Urmi visualizes the moments when and where Mira could have written the poems. Certainly, she did not possess a room of her own. Urmi says: “I can see her stealthily, soundlessly getting out of bed, sitting down on the floor by the window perhaps, forgetting everything while she wrote.”¹³
Mira’s diary also mentions her meeting with the rising poet Venu who later became a grand old man of Indian literature. When Mira gave him some of her poems to read, he said, “Why do you need to write poetry? It is enough for a young woman like you to give birth to children. That is your poetry. Leave the other poetry to us men.” This is also a kind of brutality because “even to force your will upon another is to be brutal.” This reflects the agony of a creative woman. It indicates “the handicaps of women writers in a male chauvinist society.” This is subordination by domestication.

The silent effort of Mira to use language as a means of her redemption may be treated as “a demand for access to and parity within the law and myth-making groups in society.” She uses her pen as a weapon to save herself from abuse, in the prison house of her husband.

It is ironical that Urmi reads Mira’s poems as a hunter to find out the real self of Mira. While reading the poems, she is filled with the
excitement of a hunter. But soon this relationship changes. "It is Mira who is now taking me by the hand and leading me." 17

The poems of Mira haunt so much that she decides to resurrect her by publishing them. But when Vanna comes to know about this plan, she is enraged. She feels that Urmi is a traitor who will destroy the honour of the family by publishing the poems. "It is as if the knowledge of what her father did, of what he was, has threatened something, disturbed the inner rhythm of her being, so that there is a sense of disharmony about her." In fact, male-oriented societies nourish women in such a way that they start looking at the world and interpreting it from the male point of view.

Urmi shares the anguish of not only her mother-in-law but also of Kalpana—a girl who becomes a prey to her own relative who molests her. When her mother Shakutai approaches Urmi, and Vanna who is a medical social worker, the latter tells her that Kalpana has been wronged by someone. She has also under-gone severe head injury and is on the verge
of death. Her mother requests the doctor not to inform the police: “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.”18 She further requests Urmi “to tell him [the doctor] not to make the report.”19

Urmi is surprised to see Shakutai, whose husband has already deserted her for some other younger woman, worried about the marriage of Kalpana who is, in the words of the doctor, “neither dead nor alive.”20 But she soon realizes that women like Kalpana’s mother find security in marriage. At least they are “safe from other men.”21

As mother, Shakutai was afraid of the boys of her choice because they behaved “like dogs panting after bitches.”22 She had even thought of marrying Kalpana to Sulu’s husband Prabhakar who was “mad” after her. Kalpana out rightly rejected the offer and ridiculed Sulu. When she decided to marry a boy of her own liking she was raped by Prabhakar. It is significant to note that Sulu was compelled by her husband to make such a proposal.
When Sulu knows that her own husband has molested Kalpana, she finishes her cooking, gives breakfast to her husband and then commits suicide because she wants to avoid telling a lie to save her husband from the police. Her suicide symbolizes the anguish of the weakened soul of the typical traditional Indian woman.

Though Urmi is accused of being a “traitor” to Mira and Kalpana, she is resolute to break the silence of women which come in different forms—sometimes in the name of the social taboos, sometimes in the name of the family honour. She justifies her stand because she sees these mishaps from the female point of view.

Shashi Deshpande’s protagonists are women struggling to find their own voice and continuously in search to define themselves. The main concern is the urge to find oneself, to create space for oneself to grow on one’s own. Deshpande’s women characters have a strength of their own and in spite of challenges and hostilities, they remain uncrushed.
A Matter of Time is a novel woven around human predicament. This is a fascinating story of three strong women representing three generations in a family. This is a story of their pain, endurance, suffering and love, understanding and support extended to one another. Sumi and Gopal had a love marriage and now have three young daughters-Aru, Charu, Seema. At the opening of the novel, Gopal enters house and tells Sumi that he is leaving the house. Sumi doesn’t know what to say and “he goes out as quietly as she had come in.”\textsuperscript{23} The next morning, Sumi tells her daughters about it, “almost exactly repeating Gopal’s words, leaving out nothing.” 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 nonnality, has a quality about her-a kind a blankness-that makes them uneasy.”\textsuperscript{24}

Shripati, Sumi’s father, takes them to ‘Big House,’ her parental home. Kalyani, her mother is shattered to know about it. “Gopal’s desertion is
not just a tragedy, it is both a shame and a disgrace.”25 Sumi is trying to
endure the pain and humiliation ‘wordlessly.’ For family and friends,
“There is an awkwardness about the whole thing, and discomfort and
uneasiness pervade more than grief and anger.”26 The reason for this
is: “Sumi the person they come to comfort, is an enigma. She accepts
Gopal’s dumb sympathy, Devaki’s fierce loyalty and Ramesh’s stupefied
bewilderment, as if they are all the Sarue to her.”27 They don’t find, “the
right way to dealing with her apparent stoicism.”28 They are puzzled by
her self-control. Even her daughters are puzzled and intrigued and in a
way, angered and hurt by her ‘stoicism.’ They want to share the pain, loss
and hurt which seems to be impossible with Sumi. When Devi cries and
tells Sumi, “maybe 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 maybe he doesn’t really know,
either. And that I’m angry and humiliated and confused?”29
Sumi feels a sense 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?" 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 his being dead or alive, "Sumi has no fears of his death, on the contrary, there is the certainty of his being alive, of his steadily pursuing his own purposes. While the others are trying to find reasons for what he has done, she knows that the reason lies inside him, the reason is him." And yet Sumi has her own question to ask Gopal. Without blaming Gopal, she 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 every-thing in your life? Will you be able to give me an answer to this?’”

Gopal’s desertion has affected Sumi’s body and soul. She is trying hard to survive through it, but the change in her is visible: “With Gopal’s going, it was as if the swift-flowing stream of her being had grown thick and viscous—her movement, 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 essential for her survival.”

Sumi’s daughters, “Am, Cham, Seema give the impression of having taken up the threads of their life” in the Big House. Still, Sumi is the one who has the air of being lost, of having no place in her childhood home. Gopal’s leaving has created a vast void in her. In her own words, “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.”

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Aru, Sumi’s elder daughter, is so upset and angry with her father that she wants Sumi to file a case against Gopal. Sumi disagrees and tells Am, “I just want to get on with my life.” She puts an arm around Am’s shoulder: “Let him go, Am, just let him go. This is not good for you.” With these words, she allows Gopal to have his own space, to implement on his own decisions, to free himself from the bondage of love as he needs this freedom.

Sumi understands her young daughter’s desperate need of the warmth and togetherness of family and yet she sets Gopal free without any grudge or complaint 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 or silent. Sumi and Gopal stand out unique in spite of the fact that Gopal leaves them for something unattainable.
When Sumi and Gopal, for the first time, meet after their separation, there are no tears, no abuses, no questions or explanations. When Sumi enters his room, Gopal is having his lunch and reading a book of poems. Asking Sumi to wait, he goes out to wash his hands. When she is looking out of the window into the courtyard, “She hears his voice. He is responding to some-one, perhaps a servant woman, 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 sub-stance, the reality of his life apart from her and their children. All these lives, contiguous to his, spell out the actuality of their separation.”37 It occurs to her 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.”38

This ‘reality’ dawns upon her without even any exchange of words. And Sumi understands and accepts it. Shashi Deshpande comments:
“Sumi’s acceptance is not passive. She blocks out the unpleasantness. She has a 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 even her husband. The point is, they are both unusual.”

A thirty-odd-years of silence in marriage of Kalyani and Shripati, Sumi’s parents, is at the centre of this novel. Since the day, their only mentally-retarded son, Madhav, was lost from the railway platform, Shripati has inflicted this silence as ‘a weapon and a punishment’ on Kalyani, and she has endured it silently. Yet she is able to surround others by love, caring, joy, warmth and happiness. Kalyani is the anchor of ‘Big House’ and is the invisible support for Sumi, a keen observer and a close friend to Am, a kind grandma to Seema and an ally to Cham.

Sumi who initially ignores or rejects her past, with ‘that oppressive silence’ gradually comes to terms with it. “How can you disclaim the past? It is never possible,” Gopal had said once. Now Sumi accepts the
truth: “No, that's not possible, it's never possible. Gopal was right. Kalyani’s past, which she has contained within herself, careful never to let it spill out, has nevertheless entered into us, into Premi and me, it has stained out bones.”40 Am, though disturbed by the ‘queer’ relationship between her grandparents, not only accepts them but relates herself to Kalyani and her past. As Sumi understands at a later stage: “we have a very complex relationship with the past. Whether we are resisting it, reliving it, ignoring it, or trying to recreate it—all these things often at the Sarue time—we are always, in some way, trying to reshape it to our desires.”41 And “The truth perhaps, is that whatever we do, we are always giving the past a place in our lives.”42

In *A Matter of Time*, the author “subtly debates the whole issue of individual freedom. The novel has three parts-The House, The Family, The River—and each title carries within it a meaning. ‘The House’ is the body; it is also memory and lineage, the coming together of all different elements .... ‘The Family’ consists of three generations .... The Third part
‘The River’ is about immersion in the river waters which clean and purify. It is also about the stream of life which flows.” Deshpande’s “novels are not about women but social institutions and the nature of freedom . . . . Freedom, when it comes, brings with it its own burden. Gopal is aware that Sumi by not bringing in any legal action against him is giving him his freedom while at the Sarue time, learning to build a sense of freedom for herself.”

Madhu herself is a victim’ of sorts of which the reader is aware only towards the end of the novel. 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 constantly 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.*

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Deshpande spares no effort to present the picture of life it is without conforming to stereotypes. This is all the more obvious in her portrayal of motherhood, which she seldom glorifies. Her protagonist, Madhu, says:

_I get some images of motherhood in the movies I see myself through the songs that speak of 'ma ka pyar.' But real life shows me something entirely different. Munni's mother who ignored her daughter; Ketaki's mother, stem, 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._45

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

Madhu's estrangement with her husband, Som, began earlier than this tragedy, when Madhu, waking up after a nightmare, one night, revealed to him a secret which she had locked up in the innermost recesses of her

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mind. She had slept with a man when she was only fifteen, a man who later committed suicide. Som is unable to accept this of his wife. As one who had been a good husband by any standards and shared a wonderful relationship with his wife, he is now unable to come to terms with 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 that 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.46

It does not 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 any number of affairs but expects his wife to be a virgin. It's all the more undigestible to Som that his wife had been a willing partner. Madhu thinks 'that he could, perhaps, have borne: that I had been raped, forced into the act, that I was a victim, not a participant.'47
Our society has been so conditioned as to label women as immoral on the minor deviation on their part from the normal course of behaviour. Madhu observed how Hari and Lata looked at her when she returned after inadvertently spending a night in a hotel room with Chandru. She thinks:

*It does not matter that Chandru is Som's friend and Chandru and I had been friends as well for nearly 25 years. I remember the waiter's look last night, when he brought us our dinner, the gleam in his eyes when they rested on me. Men and women can never be friends. Men can be brothers, fathers, lovers, husbands, but never friends—is that how it is?*

In Shashi Deshpande's novels we find inversion of the usual plot because the problems begin with marriage—the problems of self-definition and self-identity. The ending is also ambiguous and we do not know whether the resolution that the protagonists make will really be carried out in practice.
Another aspect of the inversion of plot may also be noted: the plots, as in men's fiction, are not full of dramatic happenings and episodes; the stress is not on episodes and happenings as much as on thinking, analysis, observation, and other such aspects. If there is any moment of crisis that aims to shock the protagonists and shake them out of their beliefs, it appears mostly at the beginning. But otherwise the novels remain a quiet search of self.

In Shashi Deshpande's novels, Mira (BV) and Akka (RS) experience love as violence. When Mohan (LS) is accused of corruption, Jaya is reminded of a family that entered a suicide pact. Jaya (LS) feels lonelier during and after the sexual act. Jays, Indu, Saru, Madhu and Sumi isolate themselves from their daily life and understand themselves and others better in their isolation. But, as in Anita Desai, we do not find adolescent females who resist social norms by retreating into a green world of nature.

An evolutionary and a very comprehensive picture of the Indian
women belonging to different educational and economic levels emerges on the large canvas that Deshpande chooses for her novels. In *The Binding Vine* Akka, Mira and Inni represent the older generation while Urmi and Vanna represent the younger one. Akka’s husband is indifferent to her. Mira’s husband is a pervert and Inni is separated from her child. Urmi is even more liberated than Vanna. In *A Matter of Time*, Kalyani, who represents the older generation, is never forgiven for being responsible for the loss of her male child. She is so scared of Shripati that she trembles at his sight. Her daughter Sumi takes Gopal’s walking out on her with resignation and tries to evolve her own independent identity. Sumi’s daughter Aru seeks legal aid to punish her irresponsible father. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya’s mother, Mohan’s mother and both the Ajjis represent the older generation. But among these, Jaya’s mother and the Saptagiri Ajji are selfish and dominating. Mohan’s mother is completely crushed by mental torture and repeated childbirths. In *Roots and Shadows* too, the women of the older generation have to suffer because of sexual
violence, widowhood, drudgery etc. Sunanda, who belongs to the next
generation, becomes devious while adapting herself to the circumstances.
Sumitra becomes a social snob. Padmini belongs to the younger generation
and is aware of her mismatched marriage but is helpless due to the
circumstances.

The same range of characters is seen at the level of class. The
problems of Shakutai, Sulu, Kalpana (BV), Jeeja, Nayana, Tara (LS) are
different from those of the middle class women.

Lack of educational and economic opportunities, especially for
women, has made patriarchy even stronger among the working class. Men
have mistresses and neglect the family. Women have to look after the
children and be breadwinners too. Physical violence, sexual abuse and
mental torture are a part of daily life. In spite of poverty, childlessness
and not having a male child are treated as calamities; women have to
suffer for it. Women, having internalized patriarchal values, blame

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themselves for their barrenness. Unable to retaliate, their aggressiveness turns inward or is directed at children. Shakutai becomes a dominating figure as soon as she enters the home. Sulu sets herself afire and dies. Kusum too becomes loony and commits suicide.

But here, the younger generation is bolder. Tara does not suffer as resignedly as her mother-in-law Jeeja. She openly prays for the death of her drunkard husband.

However, the writer and her protagonists seem to believe that both in the middle class and the working class, the necessary changes will come only through education. The younger girls, even from the working class, go to school and develop the strength to fight against injustice.

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