Transcending Tradition:

The Struggle of the Indian Female Protagonist

In

Selected Indian Novels

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Mohana Rani Suppiah

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of selected novels by Indian female writers and their portrayal of Indian women and the conflicts of identity that they face as a result of tension between the traditional and modern aspects of their lives. The novels have been chosen partly because of their focus on this identity crisis faced by the female protagonists. The novels that have been selected for this study are Anita Desai's *Voices in the City* and *Clear Light of Day,* Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror, That Long Silence* and *The Binding Vine,* Anita Rau Badami's *Tamarind Mem,* Indira Ganesan's *Inheritance*, Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things.*

The female protagonists in all the novels that are to be explored are educated and come from the middle class. The problems of these protagonists that interest the authors are not so much concerned with bread-and-butter issues but their protagonists' search for an identity in the face of changes that are taking place all around them in society. Part of the social change that takes place is a change in the status of women as education opportunities increase and more women enter the workforce. While trying to incorporate these changes into their lives, the women are depicted as facing tension balancing these changes with society's traditional expectations of the roles they are to play.

Some aspects of tradition that are that are explored in this study and which are portrayed as being repressive of the women include traditional sexual stereotyping of women, sexual politics in the traditional marital relationship and traditional institutions like the extended family and the purdah system as well as forms of repression arising from religious orthodoxy. These facets of tradition are continued to be practiced and maintained by groups of people to whose advantage it is to do so and these are usually the men, especially those belonging to the higher strata of the caste system.

Another aspect of this study is the strategies that the female characters are portrayed as resorting to in coping with the identity crisis that they face. The strategies that are depicted in the novels range from withdrawal to accommodation to rejection and rebellion. The novels that are first explored in this study and which were written earlier portray milder reactions by the protagonists to the crisis they face, as compared to the bolder moves of rebellion portrayed in the novels that are looked at later in this study. This points perhaps to a trend by Indian women to be bolder in rejecting aspects of tradition in their attempt to forge an identity for themselves and to convert a barren inheritance to a more promising future.

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Rani

Dedicated

to my mom...

Chapter One Introduction: Defying a Barren Inheritance

"Better be mud than a barren woman" is an Indian proverb that psychologist Sudhir Kakar quotes in his psychoanalytic study of childhood and society in India to describe an important aspect in the life of women in Indian culture (73). This proverb also coincidentally describes the focus of this study, which is the portrayal of the struggle of the Indian woman as represented by the female protagonists in selected Indian novels, to remove themselves from positions where they are rendered barren or impotent by various aspects of Indian tradition which repress them, and prevent them from forging their true identities in concordance with the social changes that are taking place around them. The development from previously mild efforts to increasingly bolder later attempts that the protagonists are portrayed as making, to extract themselves from these debilitating aspects of tradition, point towards a rising determination on their part to confront issues that were previously assumed to be inevitable, to formulate their self-identity, and to attain a sense of self-esteem and freedom for themselves. These protagonists would rather "be mud" than be rendered barren and unfulfilled by tradition.

The portrayal of the agonies and struggles of these female protagonists in all the novels only illustrates, however, how far they are from being mud or from being barren. There is a kind of subtle potency in their long suffering attempts to defy the shackles of tradition that mock their vulnerable position. Yet, it seems to signal the virility of their female consciousness and the inception of a new life for future generations of unwitting Indian women. This embryonic stage reflected in the novels seems to pave the way for defying mud and barrenness -- an inheritance the Indian woman struggles to overcome.

The Trend towards Modernisation

It is the rich tradition of India that is partly responsible for earning it its reputation for being an exotic and fascinating country amongst foreigners and natives alike, but behind this front of exoticism is a country that has more than its fair share of problems in its push towards modernisation in an attempt to keep up with the rest of the world. One of the possible reasons for its reputation for being exotic is perhaps the attempt by the Indians to retain parts of the culture and tradition that they have grown up with and that form part of their identity. This, however, at times brings about clashes with the country's drive towards modernisation, and has partly resulted in tension in the lives of Indians who are trying to adjust to modern ways of living while simultaneously hanging on to aspects of tradition that they hold dear. A group of people who have been portrayed as having problems marrying the old and the new in many studies that have been done are the women. This could perhaps be because women are looked upon as the "custodians of tradition," and so deemed irrelevant in the move towards modernisation by a patriarchal society, while the women themselves, having been exposed to modern ideas, feel the urge to partake in this move (Mukherjee 14). Various aspects of this conflict, such as the clash that some of the women experience between fulfilling traditional roles and finding their own selves, have become the subject matter of many literary works, especially by Indian female writers.

This thesis is a brief study of selected novels by some of these Indian female writers, especially of their depiction of conflicts of identity faced by their Indian female characters brought about by the tension between the traditional and the modern aspects of their lives, and of the moves that these characters make in an attempt to resolve these

conflicts. Apart from the fourth chapter, where the works of three relatively new authors will be studied, the focus in the following chapters is on selected works of individual authors and their portrayal of aspects of tradition which they have identified as repressive of the Indian female and her attempts to evolve a new identity to fit into a changing society. Some of these aspects of tradition include the stereotype that society has of a good woman and the roles that she is expected to fulfill, the concept of the extended family and the practice of the *purdah* system. This study will also explore the strategies taken by the female characters in order to break away from the repression they face. Although the repressive aspects of tradition identified by the different authors are quite similar in all the novels, the strategies depicted develop from relatively mild reactions of withdrawal and accommodation, as seen in the earlier novels to be studied, to bolder moves of rejection depicted in the later novels in the selection.

The female protagonist Monisha in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City* (1965) withdraws into herself especially after she moves into her husband's home where she feels imprisoned and finds herself unable to relate to anyone in her husband's family. Unable to cope with the oppression, she eventually commits suicide. Although self-alienation is a strategy that is also resorted to by the protagonists in Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and in Shashi Deshpande's novels, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988) and *The Binding Vine* (1993), these protagonists are eventually able to arrive at a compromise between what society expects of them and what they want for themselves. The protagonists in the next three novels to be studied push a little harder, albeit quietly, against the boundaries of tradition, in the process breaking certain rules in pursuit of what they want for themselves. The selection of novels are

Tamarind Mem (1996) by Anita Rau Badami, *Inheritance* (1997) by Indira Ganesan and Manju Kapur's first novel, *Difficult Daughters* (1998). The last novel to be explored is Arundahti Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) which depicts the boldest rejection of tradition.

It is enlightening to study the possible reasons behind the differences, where they exist, in strategies adopted by the various female protagonists despite their sharing a similar background. The female protagonists are all depicted as coming from middle-class backgrounds, educated, and already having, or possessing the potential to have, successful careers. Although they do not face problems connected with bread-and-butter issues, they do face those that have to do with self-identity and self-esteem. These are issues that have been swept under the carpet in the traditionally patriarchal Indian culture.

A New Consciousness

One of the underlying factors for the internal tension of the female characters in the novels is the education that they have received. All the female protagonists in the novels are well-educated characters who have had a whole new vista opened to them as a result of their education. It is through their education that the protagonists are made aware of the rights and privileges fought for or already enjoyed by other women around the world, and of the lack in their own situations. It is also education that enables the women to start careers which provide them with a sense of independence and satisfaction, but which sometimes clash with their traditional roles of wives and home-makers that society expects them to play. It is this tension between fulfilling the roles that society has always expected of women and pursuing what is important to themselves that has resulted in discontentment among these women.

Although such discontentment might have existed among the females in India for a long time, it is perhaps because of the increase in the number of educated women over the past few decades that this sense of dissatisfaction has moved to the foreground. The extremely slow, but nevertheless noticeable, improvement in the lives of women all over the world has probably played a part in encouraging the women of India to pursue the challenging task of realising their aspirations in a society where male dominance is strongly entrenched. As a reflection of this pursuit by Indian women, the female protagonists in the novels to be discussed are depicted as making efforts to rise above the barren situation that they have been placed in traditionally, insofar as they are not encouraged to fulfill their own aspirations but to subjugate their ambitions to the expectations that Indian society traditionally has of its females.

Repression

The struggle of the female characters in the chosen novels is often depicted as personal and ideological. It is not an easy struggle as the women have to contend with a social system that has been engineered centuries earlier by men in order to establish their domination of women, and which is now firmly entrenched even in the psyche of the women themselves. The women have therefore to work not only at dismantling their own mindsets, but also have to struggle against what Anuradha Roy has described in her book *Patterns of Feminist Consciousness in Indian Women Writers* as "an over-arching patriarchal repressive force" that marginalises them (19). Some of the manifestations of this repressive force that Roy has identified include forms of repression, sometimes benevolent, which are perpetuated through the sexual politics in marital relationships, through sexual stereotyping and through traditional institutions like the *purdah*. All these

manifestations of the repressive force on women are depicted in the novels that will be studied, together with other forms of repression arising from religious orthodoxy.

"Benevolent" Repression

Practices which are linked to the suppression of women in Indian society are often masqueraded as being for the good of the women. Despite such blatantly oppressive practices as child marriages, sati and the giving of dowry being outlawed, they persist in some communities. Also, other aspects of tradition, such as the institutions of the arranged marriage and the extended family system, continue to be in practice. They appear to have been set up to protect the females in society, but in fact only serve to bind them to tradition and suppress them. The traditional beliefs behind these practices are so entrenched in the minds of the people that some of the men are portrayed in the novels as being oblivious of their oppression of women, conscious only that they are playing the authoritarian and protective roles that society expects of men. Even the victims of this patriarchal repression, the women, particularly those who are uneducated, are trapped by the traditional beliefs. In some cases, some of them are so blinded by their beliefs that they become the guardians of these repressive values and institutions, doing their best to ensure their perpetuation. As seen in novels like Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and the more recent novel, *Difficult Daughters* by Kapur, Indian mothers and mothers-in-law often take on the responsibility of making sure that their daughters or daughters-in-law abide by tradition. Hence, in trying to break free of certain aspects of tradition, the daughters and daughters-in-law find themselves having to oppose the wishes of their mothers, sometimes reluctantly. Often depicted as particularly sensitive,

these females of the younger generation are aware of the shackles that certain seemingly benevolent aspects of tradition put on them, but face all sorts of obstructions in their attempt to break away from firmly-entrenched practices.

Sexual Stereotypes

In his book *The Inner World: A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India,* Sudhir Kakar maintains that there is "formidable consensus on the ideal of womanhood which, in spite of many changes in individual circumstances in the course of modernisation, urbanisation and education, still governs the inner imagery of individual men and women as well as the social relations between them in both the traditional and modern sectors of the Indian community" (68). The perpetuation of this ideal benefits the men as it allows for the continued subjugation of women that tradition has always propagated. As pointed out by Rehana Ghadially in the introduction to *Women in Indian Society: A Reader*, "the roles women play in society and the images we have of them have developed not simply from the exigencies of biology and social situations but are rather deeply rooted in the myths and legends and the religion of the culture. This is especially true of the Indian culture" (21). The epitome of womanhood in Indian culture is Sita, the virtuous and self-sacrificial heroine of the epic *Ramayana.* Just as Sita is always depicted in her role as wife and mother, an Indian woman's identity is also traditionally defined in terms of her relationship to others. The *Laws of Manu* state that "in childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent..." (Muller 195). As such, in traditional Indian culture, females would have the basic pattern of their lives already

mapped out for them in the roles of daughters, wives, and mothers. Attached to these roles are certain rules of behaviour that the females have to observe.

As daughters and wives, the females are expected to observe complete and, at times, blind obedience, first to their parents and then to their husbands. Not much else is said about a female's role as a daughter, perhaps because the focus in Indian culture is on the son, since it is the parent-son relationship that addresses the "unconscious wishes and fears of men" and are therefore "charged with symbolic significance" (Karve quoted in Kakar 57). A filial daughter is merely expected to live her life according to her parents' wishes until it is time for her to fulfill her prospective husband's every wish and desire as well.

A woman's roles as wife and mother are indisputably more important than her role as daughter, as is evident in the focus that is placed on the former in legends and myths. Hence, in some of the novels, female characters who are either unable or choose not to include these roles in their lives are perceived by the other characters as leading incomplete lives. In her role as a wife, an Indian woman is expected to emulate Sita, the heroine of the *Ramayana*, who is "the quintessence of wifely devotion", personifying the ideal of womanhood, as "one of chastity, purity, gentle tenderness and a singular faithfulness which cannot be destroyed or even disturbed by her husband's rejections, slights or thoughtlessness" (Kakar 63, 66). A wife's devotion to her husband is supposed to be so complete that, according to the *Laws of Manu*, "though destitute of virtue or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife" (Muller 196). A wife must obey not

only her husband, but also the elders in his family. As explained by Kakar, the status of a bride within her husband's family is not that of a wife but a daughter-in-law. He states,

> In the social hierarchy of her new family, the bride usually occupies one of the lowest rungs. Obedience and compliance with the wishes of the elder women of the family, especially those of her mother-in-law, are expected as a matter of course....For it must be noted...that the new bride constitutes a very real threat to the unity of the extended family....custom, tradition and the interests of the extended family demand that in the realignment of roles and relationships initiated by marriage, the roles of the husband and wife, at least in the beginning, be relegated to relative inconsequence and utter inconspicuousness....Intimacy [only] develops later in married life, as both partners slowly mature into adult 'householders'. Ideally, parenthood and the shared responsibility for offspring provide the basis for intimacy.... (73, 74)

When a woman marries, she must adapt not only to her husband's expectations, but also to those of his family. A woman's status in her husband's family is usually raised only when she becomes a mother.

Bearing children, particularly sons, for her husband is one of the duties of an Indian wife, an idea that is succinctly underscored by the proverb "better be mud than a barren woman" which introduces this chapter (Kakar 73). Despite the reverence accorded to motherhood, or perhaps precisely because of it, motherhood is an imperative for Indian women. A wife, particularly a new wife, who does not produce children loses status in her husband's household. This emphasis on motherhood is questioned by some of the writers, especially Anita Desai. They show that the biological mother need not necessarily be the one who is able to provide the best care for her children. Some of the

women who are depicted in the novels as being most able to nurture children are the ones who do not or cannot have children of their own.

Although traditionally in Indian culture, the focus has been on the mother-son relationship, the focus in most of the novels surveyed here is upon the mother-daughter relationships. The preferential treatment traditionally shown towards sons and the effect of this bias on the mother-daughter relationship is a theme explored in *The Dark Holds No Terrors, That Long Silence* and *The God of Small Things.* In *The Binding Vine, Tamarind Mem, Inheritance* and *Difficult Daughters,* the female protagonists are portrayed as having, at best, a relationship with their mothers where both parties are tolerant of each other and at worst, one in which the mothers and daughters are not on speaking terms at some stage or other. In either case, these protagonists, as well as the ones in Desai's novels, deliberately set out not to follow in their mothers' footsteps.

Mother-Daughter Relationships

The relationships, or in certain cases the absence of relationships, between mothers and daughters are significant in the novels that are discussed in this study. It is the mothers who take charge of the household and who, through their presence or absence, play a large influence in the lives of their children. They are usually the ones who draw the boundaries of tradition within which they expect their daughters to act. This is especially so in the matter of marriage. For instance, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors, The Binding Vine, Tamarind Mem* and *Difficult Daughters*, the mothers try to take an upper hand in the marriage of their daughters, deciding at which age their

daughters should get married and to whom. When the daughters decide to act outside of these boundaries, it is frequently their mothers whom they have to contend with.

The mothers are depicted as having dual roles in some of the novels -- as the benevolent life-giver, as well as the life-taker. They are portrayed as being particularly repressive towards their daughters, but indulgent towards their sons. In contrast to the tight control exerted over their daughters, the mothers accept that their sons will enjoy considerable latitude in many areas of their lives. The daughters may not only feel restricted by their mothers' tight rein on them, but may also be made to feel inferior because of the preferential treatment that some mothers show towards their sons. The mothers, on the other hand, may feel they are acting in the best interests of their daughters. Kakar suggests that "a mother's unconscious identification with her daughter is normally stronger than with her son" since "in her daughter, the mother can re-experience herself as a cared-for girl" (61). This would imply that although a son may be preferred for practical reasons, as well as for reasons of esteem, it is through her daughter that a mother may be able to live her life again vicariously.

Perhaps it is for this reason that a mother would want to bring her daughter up in what she may consider to be a strict, but promising, way in order to ensure that her daughter has the best future she possibly can. The strict treatment of the daughters may be perceived by the mothers as the best way to prepare the daughter for the all-important search for a suitable husband. Even if an Indian girl feels repressed by her traditional upbringing, she may nevertheless, as Kakar suggests, internalise "the specific ideals of womanhood" and conform to them "in order to maintain her family's love and approval -- the 'narcissistic supplies' necessary for self-esteem" (63, 62). It is perhaps when she

finds that the affirmation of love from her family is lacking that the inclination for her to break free from traditional expectations surfaces. However, even when this happens, as with some of the female characters in the novels, they are still portrayed as feeling a heavy sense of guilt. As Kakar puts it, "the irony of an Indian girl's coming-of-age is that to be a good woman and a felicitous bride she must be more than ever the perfect daughter," and when she is unable to fulfill any of these roles, she is burdened by feelings of unworthiness (63).

Guilt

Many of the protagonists in the novels to be discussed suffer a heavy sense of guilt. This propensity to feel guilt could stem from a sense of inferiority that females are commonly made to feel in their childhood. For instance, Saru, the protagonist in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* recalls the celebration that was thrown when her brother was born and on all his subsequent birthdays, in contrast to her birthdays that were merely marked by a special prayer said by her mother. The feeling of subordination that she is made to feel right through her childhood is compounded by a sense of guilt when her mother blames and never forgives her for her brother's accidental drowning. Saru internalises this sense of unworthiness and guilt that haunts her through her entire life. Her mother's voice that she is portrayed as constantly hearing in her head could actually be a manifestation of her own guilt and sense of unworthiness. This feeling of guilt oppresses Saru and the only hope of her being freed from it comes at the end of the novel when she confronts reality and her own fears.

The guilt felt by some of the other protagonists such as Saroja in *Tamarind Mem* and Sonil in *Inheritance* is a result of their doing something that they have been conditioned to believe is wrong. Both Saroja and Sonil feel guilty when they engage in extra-marital relationships. Both these protagonists, however, are able to rationalise their feelings of guilt and transfer part of that guilt onto someone else so that they are not as overwhelmed by it as Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors.* Although the sense of guilt felt by the protagonists can be paralysing, displacing that guilt onto someone or something other than themselves makes it easier for them to overcome the guilt, break out of the boundaries of tradition and engage in activities that have been traditionally frowned upon.

Marriage

As has already been mentioned, in a traditional Indian marriage, the wife is expected to submit herself totally to her husband. This would be the expectation of the husband and his family in arranged marriages, which are still quite prevalent in Indian society today. This might also be the expectation of educated men and women who decide to choose their own spouses.

Even in marriages where the husband is supposed to be educated and believed to be more liberal than the traditional Indian husband, domination of the wife by the husband is still common although it may be expressed in more subtle ways. As seen in the scenarios painted in the novels, where the wife is more successful than her husband in her professional life, the husband may feel the need to assert himself in other ways in their marriage to compensate for his loss of dominance. When Saru, the protagonist in

The Dark Holds No Terrors, gains growing recognition as a doctor, her husband begins to feel inferior and resorts to expressing his dominance by raping her every night. In *That Long Silence*, the writer Jaya is prevented by her husband from writing on certain subjects which he feels reflect on their marital relationship, and reveal any problems they may have.

One reason for unfulfilling marriages is the incompatible expectations that the wife and husband may have of their relationship. Many of the men seem to enter into marriage for practical reasons whilst the wife, being exposed to ideas and literature from other cultures, may have more romantic notions of marriage. Often, the husband expects the wife to be merely a competent home-maker, whilst the wife expects a companion in her husband, only to be sorely disappointed. A problem that has been depicted in more than one of the novels is that of sexual incompatibility and also of rape within marriage. Perhaps when husbands find themselves subordinate to their wives in some ways, the most common being in economic success, they reassert their superiority in the relationship through sexual force. It is a common view, communicated through myths and legends, that sexual virility is a sign of strength. Perhaps from the men's point of view, one of the ways of expressing their virility is through sexual force. In her article "Women and the Hindu Tradition," Susan Wadley points out that "a central theme of the norms and guidelines for proper female behaviour, especially in the male-dominated classical literature, is that men must control women and their [sexual] power" (29). A woman is therefore expected to lose "control of her sexuality by transferring it to a man" when she gets married (Wadley 28).

Her sexuality is only one aspect of herself that an Indian woman is expected to give up when she gets married. As she is expected to be totally devoted to her husband, she practically has to give up any other aspirations and ambitions, and subjugate her identity to her role as a wife.

Religion

Religion is another institution that is used frequently by men in Indian culture to repress women. Where the Hindu religion is concerned, the caste system is also used to suppress those of the lower caste, both men and women. According to research on Hindu cosmology conducted by Susan Wadley, the belief is that if a woman is in control of her own sexuality, she can be both malevolent as well as benevolent. It is only after transferring her sexuality to men that she is portrayed as fertile and benevolent (28). This therefore allows men to give themselves the license to subjugate women. In all the myths and legends that are part of the Hindu religion, the ideal woman is portrayed as the one who is willing to sacrifice herself for the sake of her husband, as exemplified by Sita in the *Ramayana.* Therefore, the Hindu woman who aspires to be the ideal woman and thereby obtain religious merit must be ready to submit herself completely to her husband.

This Hindu belief is widely prevalent to the present day all over India, especially amongst those of the older generation, even in areas where the people have converted to other religions. As suggested in *The God of Small Things,* aspects of the Hindu religion seem to have been incorporated in other religions, like Christianity, so that in the new-found amalgam of values, a wife's submission to her husband is still strongly emphasised. This would partly explain the tolerance of Mammachi, the matriarch in the

novel, of her husband's frequent beatings until she is rescued by her son, after which she is totally ignored by her husband. Among the younger and more educated women in the same novel, there is a rejection of such suppression of women in the name of religion. Although Ammu marries a Hindu Bengali, she does not subjugate herself totally to her husband, but instead leaves him when he plans to barter her to his boss in return for a promotion. Ammu, however, is greeted with derision when she returns home because in the eyes of society she has failed in her role to be a good wife. There seems to be a tendency for those among the younger generation who are subjugated to reject aspects of tradition which are used to discriminate them even if this arouses social contempt for them.

Purdah

Purdah, which is practised in many parts of the world even in present times, refers to the "seclusion, exclusion or segregation" of certain groups of people, as explained by Jasbir Jain and Amina Amin in the introduction to their study on its portrayal in subcontinental novels in English (viii). As they have noted, purdah is observed in "almost all aspects of human existence: man-woman, woman-woman, inter-family relationships, social bonds and conventions and economic and educational freedoms" (x). They also describe the purdah system as representing "in India, in some measure...the dividing line between tradition and modernity". The practice of purdah is portrayed in all the novels that are studied in this thesis. In some of the novels, we see marriage being portrayed as a form of purdah. Rani Dharkar has argued in her paper that "that marriage works in a woman's life more insidiously than an actual purdah since it

allows only an outward semblance of freedom" (50). Although the physical practice of purdah may be getting more rare, the repression of women in a metaphorical sense, is still widely prevalent. It is a practice designed to function not just as a marker of segregation between the genders, but also between the several hierarchies that exist "within the family (of age, sex, ordinal position, affinal and consanguinal kinship relationships) or within the community (particularly [those of] caste, but also [of] lineage, learning, wealth, occupation and relationship with the ruling power)...." (Chitnis 83). We will see some of these manifestations of the purdah system in the novels that will be analysed in this thesis.

Resolutions

Just as there are different factors that are depicted as hindering the female characters from discovering and expressing their true selves, the female characters are shown trying to deal with these hindrances in a number of ways. The main coping strategies that have been identified in Anuradha Roy's book *Patterns of Feminist Consciousness in Indian Women Writers* are "withdrawal into a world of fantasy and psychotic alienation", "accommodation and compromise" or "rejection of the repressive relationship" (110). Withdrawal and compromise are popular strategies resorted to, at least in the early stages of tension by the female protagonists in the earlier novels of Desai and Deshpande that will be discussed and in the novels of Badami and Kapur. This could be because, as Suma Chitnis explains in her article on feminism in the Indian context, the "overwhelming majority of the Indian women [seem] to consider compromise positively to view it as the most acceptable accommodation of conflicting

obligations, of pressures satisfactorily resolved" (94). Although the strategy of accommodation, as Chitnis points out, may be seen by some women in western culture as "a denial of autonomy and freedom", it may not be seen in the same light in Indian culture (94). As Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi suggest in their analysis of inter-related forms of repression in contemporary India, "...we have to look for defiance in different forms and places...not only in overt rejection of patriarchal controls but also in negotiated compromises and calculations and even in sacrifice" (229). There seems to be a trend, however, for the depiction of these expressions of defiance to get bolder in the novels that are written later, climaxing in *The God of Small Things*. Where the female characters in Desai's novels and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *The Binding Vine* by Deshpande are depicted as initially trying to accommodate to the situations they find themselves in, the characters in the novels that are discussed later are shown to resort more daringly to the strategy of rejection when attempts made at compromise fail to bring them satisfaction.

As art is often seen as a reflection of life, perhaps the depiction of such bolder moves of rejection in the more recent novels is an indication that Indian women are becoming more daring in their repudiation of the repressive forces in society. More than just reflecting life, the voice of the novelists can even be interpreted as pushing for change to secure a more promising future for Indian women. However, although we may be able to predict a trend of Indian women becoming more daring in defying their barren inheritance, only time will reveal the whole picture.

Chapter Two Conformity and Compromise: A Study of the Female Protagonists in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City* and *Clear Light of Day*

Anita Desai has often been described by critics as one of the first Indian female writers to move away from writing about the socio-cultural life in India to focus instead on the portrayal of individual characters. She is "hailed as one who ushered in the psychological novel" and to have "firmly established [it] in the annals of Indo-Anglian fiction"(Bai 22; Jamkhandi 35). According to R.K.Dhawan, a common feature that links most of Anita Desai's novels is her focus on the "exploration of the human psyche" and the "exploration of sensibility, the inner workings of the mind" of her characters (11). One of the ways she portrays the working of the human psyche is by placing her characters, who are often attributed "with a higher level of sensibility, which distinguishes them from the ordinary folk", in situations of change where their identities are brought into question, as they struggle "to define [them] in an environment that is either hostile to, or at least not in harmony with, their sensibility" (Shrivastava 48). As R.S.Pathak points out in his study of Desai's writing, "she excels particularly in highlighting the miserable position of highly sensitive and emotional women, tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness and of desperation" (49). Shantha Krishnaswamy has used the term "abnormal consciousness" to specify the mental state of heightened awareness and consciousness displayed by Desai's female protagonists (240). Shrivastava believes that it is this sharpened sensitivity of the protagonists that enables them to see beyond the routine of their lives, to reflect on and try to grapple with the inconsistencies in the "social, moral, emotional and spiritual aspects of life", making them examples of what he has termed "the new woman", the woman who has "a value

system and a commitment to these values" (52, 1). The focus of this chapter will be on this struggle within Desai's characters, especially within her female protagonists, and on the outcome of the struggle.

The female protagonists in two of Desai's novels that we will be studying are not only educated and familiar with foreign ideas, they are also more interested in books as compared to the other females around them. Monisha in *Voices in the City* enjoys the works of Kafka, Hopkins, and Dostoyevsky, and surprises the women in her husband's family with her wardrobe that is full of books instead of saris. Bim in *Clear Light of Day* enjoys reading, particularly about history, to attending the social functions which her sister, Tara, prefers. The education and intellectual inclination of the protagonists partly explain their heightened awareness of their own position as well as the position of the women around them, which leads them to question what other women might accept as natural. The protagonists are portrayed as trying to find their place within a society that is slowly and sometimes reluctantly making way for changes in the traditional norms. Desai makes quite a close study of the tension and sense of alienation that her protagonists commonly feel in their attempts to reach a comfortable compromise between what society expects of them and what they expect of themselves. In this chapter, I will take a look at the portrayal of the attempts of the protagonists in *Voices in the City* and *Clear Light of Day* to forge an identity for themselves, both within and outside the terms of tradition. In their quest for self-identity, both the main protagonists initially withdraw into themselves, but the final resolution they arrive at is different.

Voices in the City (1965) traces the journey of two sisters, Monisha and Amla and their brother, Nirode, as they try to find themselves and their place in the city of Calcutta

after having left their home in Kalimpong for various reasons. *Clear Light of Day* (1980) tells the story of two sisters, Bim and Tara, and their brothers Raja and Babu, as they try to come to terms with changes that take place in their lives and in their relationship with each other, which is mirrored and complicated by the changes that take place in the society around them.

Tradition and Change

Both *Voices in the City* and *Clear Light of Day* reflect the traditional, patriarchal society in India where the social views and norms are very much dictated by men, even if as portrayed in these novels, the men may be relatively weak characters. It has to be conceded, however, that the male characters do receive less exposure than the female characters, and this is partly responsible for their weak image. Tradition within the society is shown to be challenged by the rise in feminist consciousness around the world. Along with the trend towards modernisation in general, there is an emphasis upon the improvement of the position of women in society. In a brief account of the history of women's reform in India, Suma Chitnis recounts Raja Ram Mohan Roy's struggle to abolish sati as marking the beginning of the movement for reform on behalf of women in the third decade of the nineteenth century. The later part of the movement saw an attempt being made to abolish "other evil practices that affected women," such as "the custom of child marriage, the custom of disfiguring widows..." (84). As part of this movement, efforts were also made to promote the education of women. This, together with a change in economic conditions, which opened the way for more women in paid jobs in society, contributed to a change in the official status of women and the roles that they could play

in society. Theoretically the path had been opened for women to move from the domestic sphere of households into the working world. In reality, however, women still faced many obstacles that hindered them from moving away from their traditional roles of wives and mothers, and fulfilling their identities, partly due to the traditional views held by most men and women. The resulting unrest and sense of frustration within some women, as reflected by the protagonists in the novels, point towards dissatisfaction with their traditional roles, resulting in efforts to change the status quo and modify the imperatives of tradition and custom. Though such attempts to modify tradition are portrayed as bolder in *Clear Light of Day* than in *Voices in the City*, the female characters in both novels are along various stages of a continuum of change and compromise in their search for a new identity.

The Male Gaze and Influence

The male gaze, whether externally positioned or internalised by the women concerned, regulates the behaviour and opinions of women in these novels, as much as it does in society. As Meenakshi Mukherjee points out, "even in prosperous and enlightened households where men define their self-images in terms of individual enterprise and achievement, women are seen only in terms of their familial roles; [they] are not individuals, they are wives and widows, mothers, daughters and sisters" (17). In describing the aspirations of women in a traditional society, Mukherjee quotes V.S.Naipaul, who, in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, depicts the conventional aims of women as "a series of negatives: not to be unmarried, not to be childless, not to be undutiful daughter, sister, wife, mother, widow" (160). Clearly, Naipaul not only paints the female

as an adjunct of the male, but also as having internalised male expectations. In general, the male view of females, as presented in Desai's novels, is negative, not because this is an accurate picture of the females themselves, but because they are perceived through jaundiced eyes. As explained by Mukherjee, "the woman was seen as the custodian of tradition, provider of stability in society, and unorthodox behaviour on her part would not be condoned", and would be seen in a poor light (14). Most women in society resign themselves to leading their lives according to these views that prevail in society, whilst the more interesting ones, as represented by the protagonists in the novels, are those who feel so uncomfortable with these social norms that they are forced to search within themselves to arrive at a self-identity that they themselves are at ease with, and which does not merely satisfy society's expectations.

The first perspective of women we are presented with in *Voices in the City* emerges through the point of view of Nirode, one of the siblings who is on a journey to find meaning in life. Apart from his sisters, he seems to detest all other women, especially his mother, as he resents the relationship she has with a Major from the army after her husband's death. Where he used to be devoted to his mother in his childhood, Nirode now refers to her as an "old she-cannibal" (103). He also rants against women like his friend Sonny's mother, who he imagines as "having nothing in her head but a reckoning of the stores in her pantry, and nothing in her heart but a stupid sense of injury and affront." He speaks disparagingly, in general, of the women of that generation, whom he describes as indulging in "their old beauty sleep of neglect and delay and corruption" (81).

Other perspectives of women that the readers get from some of Nirode's male friends are a little less harsh, but still rather demeaning. Instances of these are when women are treated as objects of sensual pleasure or as aesthetic objects meant to be appreciated by men. Sonny, Nirode's friend, is a little embarrassed when his father shares with Nirode and David, another of Nirode's friends who is a ceramics sculptor, his sensual experiences with female singers and dancers in his younger days. He recalls "the excitement that grew while [he and the other young men of his time] watched a great and beautiful dancer perform, knowing she was doing it purely for [their] enjoyment," and anticipating the "true reward" that "comes later, in private" (79). In a more artistic vein, Dharma, another of Nirodes's artist friends, looks at Amla, Nirode's vivacious younger sister, "as though she were a map of human life stirring, moving, growing and assuming various forms and vivid colours, the kind whose inexhaustible riches several painters would have been willing to paint over and over again" (92). Although Dharma's appreciation of Amla, his model who revives in him an interest in portraiture, is more innocent and aesthetic than Sonny's father's interest in women, he nevertheless treats her as a mere object to be appreciated, and thus is oblivious of the emotions he stirs up within her. Amla, on the other hand, has to deal with the whirlwind of emotions that Dharma's attention whips up within her.

In *Clear Light of Day*, Tara, the younger of the two sisters, allows herself to be moulded to become the efficient wife that her diplomat husband Bakul wants. When she acts and speaks as her husband has trained her to, she is portrayed as a good wife through his eyes. However, when she gets up enough courage to tell him one day, during a visit back to her family home, that she would rather stay at home than go out with him, she

suffers a reprimand from him, "So, I only have to bring you home for a day, Tara and you go back to being the hopeless person you were before I married you" (17). He bemoans that despite his training, his teaching her "a different life, a different way of living", how to "be strong", "face challenges" and "be decisive", she is, according to him "as weak-willed and helpless and defeatist as ever" (17). Sadly, she allows this judgement of his to bruise her. Even Bim, the stronger of the sisters is very much influenced by Raja, her elder brother, both in their youth and adult life. She looks up to him, and just as he wants to be a hero, she too wants to become a heroine. Later in the novel, when their fortunes in life are altered, and Raja marries into the family of Hyder Ali and inherits his wealth, he distances himself from Bim, by taking on the position and authority of a landlord and treating her and Baba, their intellectually handicapped younger brother, as mere tenants. Apart from his distancing himself from his siblings, Raja's assumption of superiority also upsets Bim and makes her break off all ties with him.

When we are later let directly into the world of the women like Amla, and, later, Nirode's mother, the impression that one gets is that there is more to these women than is seen through the eyes of the male characters. Desai partly conveys this impression by undermining to a certain extent the male characters through whose eyes the female characters are presented. In *Voices in the City*, for instance, Nirode is presented as a soulful, but somewhat unstable, character whose version of his mother's lusty affair with the Major could perhaps be interpreted as his concoction. Hence, when he rants and raves about her affair to Amla, the latter's reaction is to question his judgement. She cries out, "Nirode, you are mad!...What do you know of mother? Of her relationship with father? What do you know of Major Chadha?" (191). When the reader finally meets the mother

at the end of the novel, the picture of her that is presented is arguably more dignified than the one that was given through Nirode's eyes. In *Clear Light of Day,* Bakul's judgement of Tara as being "helpless" and "hopeless" is to be discounted as he is portrayed as an efficient machine, only concerned with Tara in her role as a diplomat's wife.

We are made to realise that when the female characters do not conform to what the patriarchal society expects of them, they are derided and alienated by society. When Dharma's daughter runs off with her cousin at a young age, she is disowned and taken for dead, as she is seen as bringing disgrace upon her parents. Even when the women are not able to conform to society's expectations of them, not because they choose not to, but simply because they are unable to, as in Monisha's inability to have children, they still face social alienation. Such social pressure would perhaps be one of the reasons women are persuaded to stick to tradition and standards set by society. Perhaps this is why, as Amla's Aunt Lila puts it, "women place themselves in bondage to men, whether in marriage or out" so that "all their joy and ambition is channelled that way, while they go parched themselves" (221). Indeed, the female protagonists in Desai's novels are uncomfortable and feel some degree of self-alienation when trying to live by society's standards, and therefore set out to seek some sort of change. They feel the need to express their individualities rather than just live out the roles assigned to them by society.

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The Woman as Wife

One of the roles that a woman is expected to fulfill in Indian society is that of a wife. In Desai's novels, this role seems very much to be in crisis and in need of some form of transformation. The wives we encounter in Desai's novels all seem to lack a

sense of self-fulfillment within the confines of their marriages, and resort to devising their own distractions to relieve some of the frustration.

We see what is expected of the traditional wife as we follow Monisha to her marital home. As soon as she steps into the marital home, she is literally pushed around to fall at the feet of the members of her husband's extended family to receive their blessings. We also read of how she resigns herself to the mundane tasks that she has been assigned, "cutting vegetables, serving food, brushing small children's hair", accepting the throes of married life and putting up with the troubles of living with her husband's extended family (115). Having to stay with her husband's joint family compounds Monisha's loss of identity as she is reduced to mere role-playing within the household. As described by Seema Jena, the joint family "represents a deeply entrenched form of orthodoxy against which the individual may find [herself] helpless", especially if the individual is a young female, new to the family (5). When Amla sees Monisha and her husband together, she wonders why they married and why "Monisha, with that powerful silent stubbornness of hers, never rebelled" (198). Although Monisha obediently performs the tasks of a dutiful wife, her emotions and feelings about the life that she is forced to lead is ambivalent. She confesses that she feels "a little ashamed of [herself]--of her defiance towards...Jiban's mother" when she thinks of "generations of Bengali women hidden behind the barred windows of half-dark rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring aloud verses from the *Bhagvad-Gita* and the *Ramayana* in the dim light of sooty lamps" (120).

Yet her dilemma is apparent when she questions if it is right "to pretend to have forgotten, to pretend to believe in these trivialities, these pettiness of [their] mean

existence... To sort the husk from the rice, to wash and iron and to talk and sleep, when this is not what one believes at all" (121). She obviously does not feel she is being true to herself; there is a deep chasm between her beliefs and the life that she is made to live. She laments for the women whose lives are "spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centred and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind bars, those terrifying black bars that shut [them] in, in the old houses, in the old city" (120). Tragically these thoughts of hers foreshadow her own anguishing suicide later in the novel.

Monisha is unable to seek comfort in her relationship with her husband. Having been match-made with her husband, her relationship with Jiban is "filled only by loneliness and a desperate urge to succeed", which "once plunged [her] into the most calamitous pleasures and pains, fears and regrets," and which she is determined never to be possessed by again (135). She is reduced to being what Greer refers to as a female eunuch, with restrictions imposed on her emotions and sexual instincts (68). Despite her misery, Monisha remains faithful to her husband. It is only when he abandons her to take the side of his family in accusing her of being a thief that Monisha is totally disillusioned. It is the last straw that makes her choose death over the "mean existence" she is living.

Another character who dutifully submits herself to playing the role of the wife is Gita Devi, Dharma's wife. She is seen as a mere shadow in their house, moving around quietly performing her chores. The reader gets the impression that she is looked upon with some respect, yet with a sense of comic pathos when she is described as being "for all her bulk... the least obtrusive of women", appearing "slow and dignified as a great duck" as she serves her husband and his guest (46, 50).

There is an interesting contrast to this picture of the submissive wife in the other kinds of wives we encounter in *Voices in the City.* There is Sarla, an extravagant and "voluptuous porpoise of ebony flesh", who indulges in cocktail parties and who is an unusual wife in that her husband is afraid of her (34). The reader also encounters Nirode's mother, who despite having been faithful to her husband while he was alive, was also passionate in the "contempt and resentment" that she felt for him (27). We also hear of Rita, Amla's cousin, who was only married for a few weeks before she ended her marriage because of her husband's involvement with another woman.

All the wives whom we meet in *Voices in the City* are discontented in some way or another, and they deal with their frustration in different ways. They face the choice of being the traditional suffering wife or leaving the marriage, between being faithful to their husbands or being involved in extra-marital relationships. Some are forced to stay within their traditional roles until they are liberated, for instance, by the death of their husband. After the death of her husband, Nirode's mother finds the attention that she has been deprived of, in a relationship with a Major Chadha. Similarly, Sarla finds pleasure in her many admirers and eventually runs off with one of them. Rita, with the help of her mother, in an unusually liberated move, leaves her husband. The wives who choose to remain in their marriages find their own oases of peace to escape into. Gita Devi adopts a silent and seemingly austere life of serving her husband and praying for her "dead" daughter, although one suspects that this could be her way of showing silent protest against her husband's banishment of their only daughter. Monisha feels trapped within her matrimonial home and also within her marriage, wishing she were assigned some tasks that she could "do alone, in privacy, away from the aunts and uncles, the cousins

and nieces and nephews" (115). She hides herself behind a wall of darkness, which Jiban's family will "never reach through...to [her]"; "[her] heart stays perfectly quiet, enclosed in a sheath of such darkness as none of them would ever dare to touch" (139). She turns to her books and her diary where she puts down her secret thoughts for comfort, though she does not like being "turned into a woman who keeps a diary" (140). When eventually she is totally disillusioned, in what might be considered the most radical yet not uncommon move in Indian society, she commits suicide. Thus the women find ways to cope with their frustration, albeit sometimes in clandestine ways. Nonetheless, most of the women still play their games within the confines of marriage, and those who step outside the boundaries, such as Sarla, are derided and condemned.

In *Clear Light of Day,* the reader is presented with the figure of the traditional wife in the children's mother who forms the perfect partner for her husband in a game of cards as well as in life. Despite being quite sick, the mother still accompanies her husband to the club to play cards, in an effort to try and "lead a normal life" for her husband's sake, as Aunt Mira tries to explain to her wards (115). On the other hand, the reader sees the role of the traditional wife in transition in the figure of Tara. Although Tara loves Bakul passionately, hanging onto his every word, allowing herself to be moulded to become the diplomat's wife that her husband wants, living in his shadow, there are still occasions when she insists on her own ways. Even if she has to suffer Bakul's insult of being "hopeless", she still chooses to remain at home to going out with Bakul (17). Although Bakul would presumably prefer to have her tour the country with him after the wedding of Raja's daughter, Tara looks forward to spending that time with Bim and Babu in her childhood home. Hence, while Bakul is proud of the well-organised

wife that he has trained Tara to become, he is unaware that she has "fooled Bakul into believing that she had acquired [sophistication], that he had shown her how to acquire it", that it was " all just dust thrown into his eyes" (12). We see in Tara the wife who still tries to fulfill the traditional role of a wife but who at times musters enough courage to stand up for what she wants, such as spending time with her sister and brother, even if it means going against the wishes of her husband. Although one would question if her marriage with Bakul can be considered a successful marriage given the dissimulations that Tara has to practise, in the context of this novel and *Voices in the City*, it would be one of the most successful relationships portrayed. At the other extreme, we read about the wives of the Misra brothers who prefer to lead a more cosmopolitan life and hence only spend a couple of months in their husbands' home. In contrast, we are told that the Misra sisters are divorced, but their situation is kept a secret as it is a disgrace for them. Even widowhood is considered a disgrace, as in the case of Aunt Mira who had been widowed at the tender age of fifteen, and is blamed and shamed for bringing bad fortune upon her husband, though she had no part to play in his death.

By focusing on the pervasive unhappiness which surrounds the married women in her novels, Desai seems to be throwing question marks on the traditional notions of marriage and the roles that wives are expected to play. The traditional role of the wife seems to be in crisis. Perhaps Desai is suggesting a way of easing that crisis by the example of Tara's relationship with Bakul, by suggesting that the best option for an Indian wife might be to learn how to compromise, so as to survive with some dignity within the confines of tradition.

The Woman as Mother

If the women in Desai's novels are portrayed as unhappy wives, they do not come across as being much happier mothers. Although Indian women are generally expected to get married, it is not until they become mothers that they seem to attain some kind of status within society. Meena Shirwadkhar attests to the notion that "in the traditional Indian family and society, a wife gains full acceptance only when she becomes the mother of a son" (64). So much emphasis is placed on the task of procreation that a woman who is unable to fulfill this role has her status as a woman degraded. Desai, however, questions the importance society places on the role of a biological mother, by showing that women who are not biological mothers can still fulfill the nurturing roles of mothers.

One of the most obvious illustrations of this is the case of Monisha in *Voices in the City*, who is looked down upon and alienated when she is found to be barren. She feels naked and vulnerable, as if "[her] ovaries, [her] tubes, all [her] recesses moist with blood, washed in blood" were "laid open, laid bare to...scrutiny", when her husband's relatives indiscriminately discuss her inability to bear children, in her presence without any regard for her feelings (113). The sexual aspect of the marital relationship seems solely for the purposes of procreation. After she is found to be barren, Monisha's room, which was "regarded at first as still bridal" and private is converted into the common room where her sisters-in-law congregate to discuss their ovaries (116). It is almost as if Monisha is downgraded from being a member of Jiban's family to being a mere servant when it is discovered that she is unable to produce any children. Similarly when

Dharma's wife, Gita Devi, loses their daughter, it seems almost as if a part of her is lost and what remains is the shadow of her existence, pining and praying for her child.

Although a mother is held in high esteem in Indian society, we also get a contrasting picture of motherhood in *Voices in the City*. Nirode condemns his mother, drawing a parallel between her and Kali, the goddess of death and destruction. Nirode also seems unable to handle the sexuality of his own mother whom he sees flirting with and wooing her admirer, Major Chadha. The Freudian psyche seems to come into play in his jealousy of the attention that Major Chadha gets from his mother that he almost pictures her as a prostitute tempting the Major, "leaning across to give him a good look into her blouse" (191). This Freudian jealousy also extends to his relationship with his own father whom he had despised; he seems to harbour a general feeling of hatred against all the men who have had relationships with his mother (64). However, it is not only Nirode who is estranged from the mother, but also Monisha who refuses to approach her mother when she feels troubled. Though the mother pampered her children with attention that eventually became suffocating, and continues to try to maintain contact with her children, and play a large part in their adult lives, in the end it is she whom we see pushing her children away. Amla rushes to her to be consoled at Monisha's death, but is brusquely pushed aside, as is Nirode, so that the mother might stand alone and free. Monisha was right when she had diagnosed her mother as being "too whole and complete in herself to need [her children's] little offerings--actually need them, not merely their symbols and exercises which she demanded and collected with such touching ardour" (136).

Metaphorically speaking, Calcutta is likened to a mother-city, which however fails to nurture those who come there, only crushing and suffocating whoever comes under her influence, just like the Goddess of Death, Kali, whom Nirode's mother is likened to. When the mother joins them in Calcutta after Monisha's death, Nirode cries out to Amla, "She is Kali,... Amla, I know her now. She is Kali, the goddess and the demon are one" (255). Hence in *Voices in the City,* the mother is not only seen in her traditional role as life-giver, but also quite ominously as the one who takes away the life she brings into the world -- a departure from the traditional benevolent view held of mothers in Indian society.

Generally, the picture painted of the mothers is not a favourable one. Nirode's mother is depicted as one who suffocates her children with her overbearing attention and love. The mother of Nikhil, Monisha's nephew, turns her son into a verse-repeating machine, chiding him when he breaks the cycle of his daily monotonous recitation for a few minutes just to answer Monisha's questions. Fulfilling the traditional image of a nasty mother-in-law, we see Monisha's mother-in-law treating her more as a servant with duties to fulfill than as a beloved member of the family. For instance, when Amla visits Monisha, the latter is not even allowed to have a private conversation with her own sister.

Ironically, it is the barren women who are unable to conceive and give birth or who have no children of their own, who seem to play the nurturing role of mothers better. Monisha is portrayed as a loving aunt to her nieces and nephews whom she takes on outings. On a visit to see Amla, Monisha reassures the dismayed niece that she has brought with her that she will change the frock that the niece has dirtied before anyone sees it. Monisha's nephew, Nikhil, tells Amla that he enjoys talking to Monisha, showing

her his drawings and borrowing her books. Although Monisha is unable to have children of her own, she seems to enjoy her role as a surrogate mother.

In *Clear Light of Day,* Aunt Mira makes a much-needed surrogate mother to Bim and her siblings in their childhood. She is an excellent replacement to the children's natural mother who does not seem to have any sort of motherly love for her children. When the mother finds looking after Babu a burden because of his mental retardation, she brings in Aunt Mira and transfers all responsibility for her children to the latter. The aunt showers her wards with much love and attention, and the children are thrilled with "this new season in their lives, a season of presents...and companionship" (105). Aunt Mira was the "tree that [could] be counted on not to pull up its roots and shift in the night. She was the tree that grew in the centre of their lives and in whose shade they lived... She fed them with her own nutrients, she reared them with her own shade, she was the support on which they leaned as they grew" (111). As they grew, "they wrapped themselves around her, smothering her in leaves and flowers.... If they choked her, if they sucked her dry of substance, she [gave] in without any sacrifice of will" (111). She gave of herself completely, "suffered through the parents' death, through Raja's illness, Tara's going away and the perpetual sorrow over Baba", suffered in silence, drowning her sorrows, and eventually herself, in alcohol (89). Later, the role of surrogate mother is taken over by Bim, who gives away Tara in marriage, nurses Raja and Aunt Mira in their illness, and looks after Baba. Bim is also forced to take on the role of the father when she is made to take charge of the family business. Despite shunning marriage, Bim still ends up performing the nurturing role expected of a married woman. By drawing a sharp contrast between Aunt Mira and Bim, on the one hand, and the mothers who only fulfill the

biological role as mothers, and discount the nurturing role, on the other hand, Desai raises the question as to whether the traditional view of mothers as nurturers is realistic, and illustrates that being a mother and performing the nurturing role do not necessarily have to go hand in hand. She makes the mother figure an ambiguous one, most clearly illustrated through the example of Nirode's mother, who is shown, on the one hand, as pressing unwanted attention on her children, even as they are trying to break free from her, but, on the other, as pushing them away at a time when they most need her. Desai thus seems to be questioning the social definition of mothers and the concept of mothering as depicted in the novels.

Marginalised Women

It becomes obvious how entrenched society's views of women and the roles that they assign are when we see in Anita Desai's novels the marginalisation of women who cannot or choose not to fulfill some of the roles traditionally expected of them. The marginalisation could be an outcome of either choice or circumstances, as in Monisha's case in *Voices in the City*.

Critics like Usha Bande see Monisha's death in *Voices in the City* as a "cowardly rejection of life". On the other hand, Monisha's suicide is depicted as showing Nirode the meaning of life; to Nirode, "Monisha had died from an excess of caring, in a fire of care and conscience" (248). Monisha's death helps elevate him "to an unimaginably high vantage point from where he could see the whole fantastic design of life and death" (249). Monisha's death could also be seen as a positive choice that she makes in preference to what she sees as a life of meaningless existence. She has chosen to make a

change, whether it be looked upon as for the better or worse. Perhaps the tragedy lies in her decision to limit that change to the boundaries that tradition afford her. One is inclined to think that her death is certainly accepted with more equanimity than another course of action she might have taken such as leaving her husband.

Another character who is marginalised as a result of circumstances is Aunt Mira in *Clear Light of Day*. A widow at fifteen, she is blamed for her husband's death although she had no part to play in it. Her husband's family makes her pay for her "guilt" by turning her into their maid, and when they become bored with her, they decide to turn her out of the house (108). When she arrives at the home of the children she is to look after, their mother treats her like a poor relation. Being used to having been treated like that, Aunt Mira returns the reception with gratitude. Even the children are "not beyond...feeling the superiority of their position" although the only emotion they can show her is one of gratitude for showering them with the motherly love they had never had (105). Marginalised in society for no fault of her own, Aunt Mira at least finds a niche in the lives of the children.

An example of a female character who is marginalised as a result of the choice she makes is Dharma's daughter. Choosing to go off with her cousin at a young age, she brings about her own alienation from her family and her social situation. Though we are not allowed to see her banishment from her point of view, Desai shows us some other female characters, such as Aunt Lila and her daughter Rita, who willingly choose to go against tradition even if it means risking alienation from society. Aunt Lila supports her daughter's choice to get a divorce when the latter discovers that her husband is having an affair. Being self-supportive and economically independent, and having the backing of

her mother, Rita is able to take an option that would traditionally not have been available to women in her situation.

The Modernisation of Women

Aunt Lila in *Voices in the City* is an example of Desai's female characters who are a little bolder in departing from tradition -- she strongly supports the emancipation of women, advises her daughter Rita to leave her newly-wed husband when he becomes involved with another woman, and also advises Amla to forget whatever feelings she has for Dharma, the artist who is painting a portrait of her. Amla herself is an example of a modern woman. She has been educated in Bombay and comes to Calcutta to start a career as a commercial artist rather than settle down and start a family. The questions that Amla asks of Monisha's marriage with Jiban -- why they got married and why Monisha never raised any objections to the match -- seem to suggest that Amla is one who does not have much faith in arranged marriages, and who seems more likely to look for a husband on her own. The implication that Desai is making could be that an unconventional move like that could go both ways, either threatening to carry with it its own complications, as experienced by Amla, or bringing about release and new-found freedom, as in the case of Rita. In Amla's case, though she attends parties in the hope of finding interesting men, she eventually falls in love with Dharma, a married man and an artist. Although Dharma finds her as attractive as she does him, his interest in her seems only to be in the context of her being a subject for his painting.

The epitome of the modernised female character, in the context of the two novels that have been discussed, is Bimla. Rejecting some traditional beliefs and practices, she is

still able to hold her own and be true to herself, whilst remaining within the broader framework of tradition, perhaps more out of necessity than choice. In searching for her own identity, she has managed to arrive at a somewhat happy compromise by combining aspects "from her dual cultural heritage, the oriental and the occidental" (Sheth, 43). Moving away from the traditional path taken by most Indian women of her time, she chooses career over marriage, as she feels that marriage cannot keep one happy for life and that it would be a waste to devote one's life to marriage. On the other hand, she plays the role of the nurturer that has customarily been assigned to the Indian female, when the situation demands that she take on the responsibility of looking after her brothers and her aunt. Her life has been looked upon as acquiring a "heroic dimension" because of the "symbolic motherhood" that she takes on, in nursing her ailing elder brother, her Aunt Mira when she turns alcoholic, and also in looking after her younger brother who is intellectually handicapped (Jena 55). As far as challenging the boundaries of tradition is concerned, not only does she personally reject some inhibiting aspects of tradition, she also teaches her students, trains them to be different from what she and Tara were at their age, "to be a new kind of woman" (155). Staying in the old house that she had been brought up in, she leads the life that she wants, and after a period of self-searching eventually emerges as the heroine that she has always wanted to be, achieving "transcendence over inner division and social restrictions through celebration of her nurturing feminine self, through acceptance and accommodation rather than withdrawal and rejection" (Juneja 77). Perhaps through her, Desai is pointing at compromise between the old ways and new as a way to go for the Indian female.

Conclusion

Both of the novels discussed above portray Desai's female characters attempting to try to remove themselves from traditional beliefs and practices that hold them back. In general, the influx of foreign ideas as a result of colonialism shook the *status quo* of the position of women within traditional Indian society. The spread of the education of Indian women also led to dissatisfaction with their traditional lot. The circumstances surrounding each of the females also play a part, whether for instance they are living in joint households, where as new brides they are usually subordinate to all the other adults in the household or if they enjoy the relatively greater freedom of nuclear households and their natal home. Monisha, for example, reminisces with fondness about the past that she spent in Kalimpong, as well as in Jiban's "last posting, out in a district, away from the city and the family" (116). She had to give up the relative autonomy available in this remote setting to live with Jiban's joint family, in "a system which denies freedom and privacy, and encourages invasion", which eventually "traps and then destroys" her (Jain 74). Yet another important factor that determines how far the female character is able to move out of the boundaries of tradition is the choice that the female characters make on the path of action to take and the risks they are willing to face.

Many of Desai's female protagonists are disgruntled with the roles they are expected to play in their lives, and set out in search of their suppressed inner identities. However, because this wave of social change is quite nascent, most of them are still not confident or bold enough to break the boundaries of tradition and the "courage and determination required...to outgrow the social divisions and definitions...is not forthcoming" (Jain 134) Yet their very realisation that they are not achieving self-

fulfillment might point towards a social change. The beginning of this change can be seen to be taking place in the compromises made by characters like Bim, between what tradition demands of them and what they want of themselves. Perhaps this beginning will pave the way for bigger compromises being made towards the self-actualisation of the Indian female. Even within Desai's novels, there is indication of the hope of "a steady progress in [her protagonists'] march from self-alienation to self-discovery, from there to self-actualisation," with her later protagonists like Bim depicting the realisation that "acceptance of existence will lead to fulfillment through affirmative self-abandonment, not through destructive self-abnegation" (Bande 69) As Bande describes it, "a scrutiny of Anita Desai's art shows that the novelist is growth-oriented" as " the development from her first heroine ...to her latest creation...is the story of a steady ascent towards self-realisation" (169).

Indeed, Desai's protagonists, marginalised though they are, spell hope and promise. Even if they do not outrightly reject aspects of tradition that trap them, and leave them barren, their acute psyche makes them aware of their position, and propels them to make choices that in their mind work best for them. Through conformity, compromise, or permutations of both, these protagonists have taken the nascent steps towards transcending their barren inheritance, pointing the way towards a more promising future for later generations of Indian women.

Chapter Three Individuation and Integration in Shashi Deshpande's novels

Shashi Deshpande's novels are mostly about educated women with a career. Their professional progress, however, is seemingly not matched by a rise in their status within their households. Although the women are shown to be quite established in their careers, earning as much if not more than their husbands, they still seem to have to assume subordinate status to their husbands in the domestic scene. Despite the strides the women have made in certain areas such as education, they are expected still to play by the rules of tradition in their roles as wives. In the three novels of Deshpande that will be studied in this chapter, marriage emerges as a repressive institution for the female protagonists. The complex sexual politics that ensues demands from the women a variety of strategies in order to cope with their predicaments.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1983), Deshpande tells the story of Saru, a doctor who earns more than her husband. Although she can be considered to be more successful than her husband in professional terms, she still has to submit to an inferior position in her own home as well as in her marriage. The novel traces her efforts at establishing an identity for herself, negotiating in the process various aspects of her self that have been formed in response to her society and her family. The one aspect of self that the reader sees her struggling with right through the novel is that of guilty daughter and sister, guilty because she is blamed by her mother for her young brother's death. The novel starts with her returning to her childhood home after her mother's death, amongst other reasons, to assuage herself of the guilt that she has been made to feel. By the end of the novel, with the help of her father, she relieves herself of the burden of guilt, divests herself of the

"spurious and superfluous fictions she had lived by", and confronts the crisis of identity within her as well the problems she faces in her marriage. (D'Cruz 458, 460).

That Long Silence (1988) is about a writer who has to leave the home she shares with her husband when the latter gets into trouble in his job. Again, it is away from her own home that she is able to take time to reflect on her life and her marriage, and is made to confront the selves that she has hidden behind masks of silence. She resolves at the end to strip off her various masks and to "erase the silence" between herself and her husband (192).

In *The Binding Vine* (1993), the protagonist, Urmila, is also put in a position where she assesses her life, after the death of her infant daughter and her subsequent discovery of two rape cases which affect her personally. While the other two novels centre on the main protagonists, *The Binding Vine* contains a sub-plot, which is intricately tied up with the main plot of the protagonist and which has a deep impact on her. Urmila, a teacher by profession, tries to help women who are less educated than her and economically less well-off. When she finds out about the situation of other women in society, more specifically about their marital problems as well as sexual abuse amounting to rape both within and outside of marriage, she is moved to look beyond her own problems and to help them.

No Gain Without Pain

Deshpande seems to paint quite a positive scenario of post-colonial India, and the legacy it inherited from its colonial masters. While Desai seems to focus more on the confused state that India is left in after the colonial period, Deshpande's focus seems to

be more on the benefits that have come out of that period. The female protagonists in Deshpande's novels are more assertive than women of the previous generation. They expose the offences committed against women, choose their own husbands, and pursue careers that were previously the domain of the men. The increase in their rights widen the choice of action available to the women, enabling them to go beyond the domestic domain, and even beyond the boundaries of tradition.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors,* Saru sees it as a personal triumph, "a kind of miracle" that she was able to study in a medical college despite the vehement objections raised by her mother that there would not be enough money for medical college as well as to get her married (125, 131). Though Saru does prove herself suitable for medical college by attaining first class in Inter Science, her ability to pursue her ambition also depended on the fact that society had come to accept female doctors. The objections raised by Saru's mother to her becoming a doctor was, however, an indication of the persistence of localised resistance to women having careers. Not only does Saru defy her mother, and the tradition that her mother represents, in her choice of career but she also challenges and upsets her mother's authority by choosing to marry a man who is not of the same caste. It is partly her choice of career that gives her the independence and confidence to choose whom she wants to marry, although she is later made to realise that with choice comes responsibility for the decisions she makes. She comes to a conclusion that once "the die was cast, the decision taken, [her] boats burnt, [there] could be no turning back" (31). Her independence and accomplishments eventually become burdens.

When Saru realises that her husband's sadism towards her is partly due to his being jealous of her superior professional status and income, she wants to give up

working. However, it becomes economically impractical to do so, as is acknowledged even by her husband Manu. The family depends more on her salary than on Manu's. Even her choice of her own husband turns out to be for the worse as she has to suffer for his personal insecurities and his consequent raping of her. There seems to be a slight moralistic tone to the novel, since it could be interpreted as suggesting that Saru is being punished for defying her mother. Saru herself believes that "it's because [she] wronged [her mother] that [she's] suffering" (185). Although Saru's ability to choose her own career and partner in life can be considered progress so far as her rights as a woman are concerned, in her case her freedom turns out to be a bane for her.

A similarly paradoxical situation is presented in *That Long Silence*. One of the main things that attracted Mohan to Jaya was her ability to "speak good English" as to him that was a mark of an "educated, cultured wife" (90). After their marriage, however, Jaya's ability to speak good English loses all significance as she is forced into a silence that extends to her writing. Jaya learned quite early on in her marriage that Mohan expected silence to be one of the attributes of a good wife, to be put into practice not only in the domestic scene, but also to be applied to her writing. This silence pervaded all aspects of their life so that even their lovemaking was "silent, wordless" happening (85). It does not take Jaya long to decide that "[it] was much simpler to say nothing. So much less complicated." (99). At the end of the novel, Jaya however realises that the silence she's been observing for so long will not work, and after much self-introspection, she decides to "erase the silence" between Mohan and herself (192).

Silence is also an issue that is linked to the rights of women in *The Binding Vine*. One of the stories told in this novel is that of Shakutai, an uneducated woman who has to

work hard to support her family, as her husband had left her to marry another woman. When Shakutai's daughter, Kalpana, is lying in hospital as a result of having been raped, she has to decide if she should agree to publicise her daughter's situation and try to win a case for her to continue receiving medical attention at the same hospital or if she should try to maintain the family's honour by keeping quiet about the case. She decides on the first option, gets the attention of the feminist voice in society, and manages to keep her daughter from being shifted to another hospital, but she also gets the neighbours talking about her daughter. Urmila too has to weigh carefully the case before she decides whether she should try to publish her deceased mother-in-law's poems that are about the latter's disappointment in her own arranged marriage. She finally decides that it would be worthwhile to do it even if others might disapprove, and look upon it as washing dirty linen in public. Both Shakutai and Urmila choose to go against tradition in publicising these two cases, with sacrifices made, albeit some unwittingly, so that some progress in the position of women can be achieved. Although legal avenues are already open for women to claim certain rights, there are many repercussions they need to consider. For these women, it seems as is there can be no gain without an inevitable degree of loss and pain.

The Quest for Identity

The scenario presented in each of the above-mentioned novels involves a stripping of the personae that the female characters project in their everyday lives. The three stories "locate their protagonists at a critical juncture when the fictions and roles by which they have lived no longer suffice" (D'Cruz 453). J. Bhavani borrows the ideas of

Jung on the 'middle life crisis' to explain the experience of these protagonists, whom she describes as going through the process of rebelling against "their socially imposed roles [personae] in order to gain an independent identity of their own" (20). Divested of the roles they are so comfortable in, the protagonists are portrayed as having to confront their secret innermost selves. Often these selves have been made secret because they would not be condoned by the Indian society. For example the wife who accuses her husband of rape or the wife who is believed to expose stories of her family to the public through her writings would be seen as engaging in improprieties. Conditioned by society, it is difficult for the protagonists to accept comfortably these secret aspects of themselves. At the end of their rather painful, but nevertheless cathartic searches, the protagonists seem to be relieved of a multitude of burdensome emotions. This comes about, according to Bhavani, as a result of their identification of their unique individualities and an integration of "this uniqueness within the norm so as to be whole persons" (20).

The protagonists' search for their individual identities brings them back to the past, even in a physical sense. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors,* the protagonist, Sarita, returns to her childhood home after her mother's death, leaving her children with her husband for an indefinite period. "Sarita's sojourn... is in effect a journey into a particular darkness of her childhood to recover a lost self" that had been given up for another self constructed primarily to defy her mother (D'Cruz 458). Upon her mother's death, she loses "the major rationale for the persona she has devised for herself" and is forced "to confront its underlying falsity" (D'Cruz 453). She finally has to confess that her success as a doctor and her seemingly stable marriage are veneers, beneath which lies the "sordid and degrading actuality of recurrent rape by her husband" (D'Cruz 453). Until her

confession to her father, she had merely allowed herself to be subjected to rape, even to the extent of denying it, trying to make herself believe that "so long as she did not speak, the thing that happened... remained unreal. That by speaking she would be making it real" (184). She also allowed herself to be subjected to intense guilt, trying to rationalise her suffering at the hands of her husband by blaming herself, looking upon it as retribution for the wrongs she had done her mother and her brother. Sarita looks to her father for advice and when that advice is initially not forthcoming, she decides to run away again. It is only with her father's later advice to stay and talk things through with her husband that she decides to meet him. It is only then that she arrives at a better understanding of herself:

> They came to her then, all those selves she had rejected so resolutely at first, and so passionately embraced later. The guilty sister, the undutiful daughter, the unloving wife ... all persons spiked with guilts. Yes, she was all of them, she could not deny that now. She had to accept these selves to become whole again. But if she was all of them, they were not all of her. She was all these and so much more.... (201)

With this door of discovery open, Sarita is free to drop her previous inhibitions and explore her identity further.

In *That Long Silence,* the protagonist's search for her true self also involves a change in physical locale. Jaya and her husband, Mohan, move to a poorer part of Bombay in an effort to keep out of the way of investigations taking place on some fraudulent activities that Mohan got involved in. With her children away and her husband taking off suddenly, Jaya is divested of her roles as mother and wife. Left alone in the frightening silence of the Dadar flat where they are taking shelter, she is visited by the ghosts of her other selves whom she has been trying to avoid. The confrontation with the ghost of her uncle,

Makarand, suggests perhaps a struggle within Jaya to want to continue writing her own stories without the censorship of Mohan on what to write and what not to. The meeting with the ghost of Makarand, who himself had been determined to be an actor, could represent for Jaya a challenge to herself to persevere and be true to herself in her writing career. The meeting with the ghost of Kamat, her neighbour to whom she was very close, could in turn be a prompting for her to review her relationship with her husband, particularly with regard to their lack of unreserved and candid communication with each other. Although the function of the ghosts may not be as simple as has been suggested, they definitely are there to aid Jaya in searching out her true self. After the period of introspection, amongst other things, Jaya decides that she can no longer be the Suhashini, the persona of the submissive wife, that her husband expects her to be, and that the silence between herself and Mohan has to be erased.

In *The Binding Vine*, the protagonist, Urmila is helped in her exploration of her self-identity by events that take place around her: the death of her infant daughter, her encounter with an uneducated woman, Shakutai, whose daughter is raped, and her discovery of personal poems written by her long-dead mother-in-law. With what she learns from these women, especially with regards to their self-perception and their views on their roles as wives and mothers, Urmila reflects on her own role as a mother and as a wife to a husband who is frequently away. Her reflection takes on broader implications when she decides to act as a voice for the oppressed women she meets, by persuading Shakutai to publicise the rape of her daughter, and by deciding to publish her mother-in-law's poems, that tell of the latter's experience of rape in her unfulfilling marriage.

Urmila seems to have gained strength from these women and by the end of the novel seems to be more ready to cope with the loss of her daughter.

In their search to discover themselves, many of the women have first to get rid of strong feelings of guilt. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors,* before Sarita can confront her problems and move on with life, she first has to rid herself of the immense guilt that she has been made to feel, amongst other things for her brother's death and her mother's hurt and shame. In *The Binding Vine,* Urmila has a difficult time trying to convince Shakutai that Kalpana should not be blamed for the rape that is committed against her, even if the latter had made herself attractive to men with her dressing and make-up. One of the biggest obstacles for the women seem to be the guilt they are made to feel if they should move out of the confines of tradition.

The journeys of self-discovery that Deshpande's protagonists undertake are not easy and require much courage on their part. As Awasthi points out in his article "The Quest for Identity in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande", it requires tremendous moral courage to face one's self (99). The protagonists however all come out the better for their efforts. As observed by D'Cruz, the technique employed by Deshpande in her novels support her "fundamental belief in the...right of each to her story. Each narration is an introspection in the stream of consciousness mode which, relentlessly and by stages, uncovers the fictions by which each resists the knowledge of her aloneness and allows herself to be subsumed into the prevailing master narratives" (454). At the end of the unveiling process, the protagonists have no choice but to throw off their roles in these master narratives and live by the selves that have emerged.

The Generation Gap

The protagonists' search for and formulation of their self-identities are largely influenced by their perception of and relationship to the women of the generation before, particularly their mothers and mothers-in-law. Some of these older women have played a part in moulding the protagonists to be what they are, and either serve as an inspiration for the protagonists or are an example for them not to follow.

The protagonist in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita, has had a hostile relationship with her mother from childhood. Her mother tried to control her with an iron fist, and it was quite obvious to Sarita that in her mother's eyes she was inferior to her younger brother. The nadir of the relationship came with the accidental drowning of Sarita's brother, for which the mother blamed her daughter. With the relationship deteriorating even further, Sarita took on a rebellious attitude and did certain things to defy her mother because she hated her mother and "wanted to hurt her, wound her, make her suffer" (128). Against her mother's wishes, she enrolled for medical college and later on in life married a man of a different caste. It was after the latter event that Sarita's mother completely disowned her. Her mother simply said, "Daughter? I don't have any daughter. I had a son and he died. Now I am childless" (178). Evidently, Sarita's mother played a large, but negative role in Sarita's life since Sarita set out to be everything that her mother was not and to do everything her mother would not. Even while trying to prove herself and maintain her integrity by doing this, Sarita feels at the same time an enormous burden of guilt. When she faces serious problems later on in her marriage, she thinks it is the retribution that she deserves for having wronged her mother. It is only

after she returns to her childhood home and talks things through with her father, who advises her to leave the dead alone, that Sarita makes up her mind to leave the past and get on with the future. Whilst for Sarita's mother, her existence revolved around her roles as mother and wife, motherhood is only one of the numerous roles that Sarita takes on in her life. As a mother, she is determined to provide her children with all the care and love that was denied her by her own mother. At one point, when her status as a doctor creates too much tension, she even contemplates giving up her career, which means so much to her, so as to stay at home to look after the children, but circumstances do not facilitate this.

The preferential treatment of sons by mothers is also depicted in *That Long Silence*. "Smarming" seems to be an appropriate coinage for such behaviour, and Jaya, the female protagonist, recognises that her mother's "smarming" had never been for her, only her brothers (106). Jaya is quite resentful that when she was younger, her mother never bothered much about her activities, that when she left home after getting married, there had been not even a pretence of tears, that when she had passionately wanted her mother's love, her mother had ignored her and concentrated on her sons. However, in her mother's old age, Jaya has been left to take care of her mother, who now clung to Jaya and behaved as if her world centred round her daughter. In Jaya's case, her mother does not seem to have a played a major influence in her life, since she took no active interest in her.

In *The Binding Vine*, although the protagonist has never met her mother-in-law, the latter's poems and notes provide her with an insight not only to the life and thoughts of the one who wrote them, but also to her own life. Mira's poetry, amongst other things,

deals with her relationship with her own mother. Mira had realised that her mother knew how unhappy she was in her marriage, but that she could not or would not do anything to help her. The one question that she wanted to ask her mother but never did was, "Why do you want me to repeat your history when you so despair of your own?" (126). The irony Deshpande pinpoints is that, despite mothers giving preferential treatment to their sons over their daughters, they nevertheless "dream so much for [their] daughters than [they] do for their sons, [they] want to give them the world [they] dreamt of for [themselves]", but daughters always seem to "turn [their] backs on [their] mother's hopes" (124). This is perhaps because the dreams are not historically relevant. Shakutai, the woman whose daughter Kalpana was raped wanted Kalpana to have all that she didn't have but "Kalpana wanted none of her mother's dreams" (124). Mira too had her own dreams as she told her mother in her poem, "To make myself in your image was never the goal I sought" (124). For one thing, Mira had made up her mind that, unlike her mother, she was not going to let her life revolve only around her family and become totally indifferent to her own life as to think it nothing (101). Urmila herself had denied the dreams her mother had for her of "vaulting out of the middle-class with marriage" (124). She chose instead to marry the ordinary boy-next-door. Urmila seems to identify so closely with Mira's poetry that one could almost interpret the poems as bringing to surface an aspect of her self that so far has remained hidden. She acknowledges that her deceased mother-in-law Mira's poetry has helped her clear her "emotional life, swept away the confusing tangle of cobwebs" (137). Perhaps Mira's poetry helps Urmila not only to understand herself better, but also to better comprehend other women around her.

Perhaps that is why she feels such an urge eventually to have them published even though it would rouse the ire of some members of her family.

Another mother-daughter relationship that is focused on in the novel is Urmila's struggle to come to terms with the loss of her infant daughter. A parallel story is that of Shakutai, and her daughter, Kalpana, who has been raped and is lying in hospital, fighting for her life. Urmila's mother and her sister-in-law Vanaa, cannot understand why Urmila is so caught up in Shakutai's grief and is intent on helping her. Perhaps it is the case that Urmila, having recently lost a daughter, knows how painful it can be, and therefore feels inclined to help Shakutai. It could even be that Urmila is trying to compensate for her own grief, and for her own loss by helping another mother to keep her daughter alive. Whatever the case may be, Urmila's loss and her sharing in Shakutai's grief turns her into a person who is more sensitive to women's issues and needs. In these three novels, the mother-daughter relationships play an important part in shaping the lives of the female protagonists.

Marriage

Marriage is another major issue in Deshpande's three novels. Deshpande seems to share Desai's rather bleak view on marriage. Although all the marriages featured in her novels are a result of the couples' choice, as opposed to the traditional arrangement of marriage by the parents of the couples, the marriages still turn out to be disappointing, especially for the women. Although the couples may have initially been attracted to each other, the marriages in the long run turn out to be either totally loveless traps or, at the very most, ambiguous as far as love between the couples is concerned. The couples,

however, choose to maintain fidelity to their spouses, although in each of the novels, the female protagonists are portrayed as being attracted to or sharing a special relationship with men other than their husbands. When there is a hint of these relationships moving away from being platonic, the female protagonists all choose to end them. Even when the female protagonists are unhappy in their marriages, they would still continue with them and remain faithful to their spouses. Apart from Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* who leaves her husband in what seems like a temporary move, the option of leaving their husbands does not seem to be considered by the female protagonists.

A major reason for Sarita marrying Manohar in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is to defy her mother, as her mother objected to her marrying someone of an inferior caste. For Sarita, however, the marriage would have been considered a victory of sorts as she would be marrying the hearthrob of her peers, the good-looking suave Manohar. It would also mean much to Sarita that someone considered so eligible is attracted to her, in contrast to the hostility she faces from her mother. Sarita is devastated, however, when instead of blessing her, her mother puts a curse on her marriage with Manohar. It almost seems as if the curse takes effect when the marriage soon turns sour at the core while maintaining a veneer of stability. Being aware that she has a more prestigious and better-paying job than her husband, Sarita tries deliberately to maintain a subordinate position to her husband. Having seen how her mother had dominated her father, Sarita had sworn when she got married that she would "never dominate. [She] would never make her husband nothing as [her mother] did" hers (77). She had come to the conclusion that "perhaps there is something in the male…that is whittled down and ultimately destroyed by female domination", unlike with the female who "can be dominated…can submit and yet hold

something of herself in reserve, [as] if there is something in her that prevents erosion and self-destruction" (77). Perhaps it is because of this observation that Sarita allows herself to be dominated by her husband in the only way he can and that is sexually, even to the extent of being sadistically raped by him. Sarita herself would almost have been on the brink of self-destruction if she had not physically and emotionally moved away from her husband and returned to her childhood home. Her solution to the problem would have been to continue running away from her husband, if her father had not told her to stop escaping and to confront the problem instead.

Jaya in *That Long Silence* also has no choice but to face all the ghosts and skeletons that she had locked up in her closet when she is left all alone for a few days in the Dadar flat. Surrounded by a pregnant and frightful silence, Jaya tries to break the silence by pottering around the flat, noisily performing household chores. However, she soon realises that this is no substitute and that she will not get any peace until she confronts the problems that she has had with her husband Mohan, which she has hitherto shrouded behind a veil of silence. She is helped in this task by the ghost of Kamat, a neighbour to whom she was much closer than she was to her husband. It is to Kamat that she had shown her writing which she had kept hidden from Mohan. After a period of introspective silence, Jaya comes to the decision to erase the silence between Mohan and herself when he returns to her.

Silence also seems to be the name of the game of some of the marriages in *The Binding Vine*. The marital distress that Urmila's mother-in-law, Mira, experiences is not known to anyone until the discovery of her poems long after her death. The torture that she went through "runs through all her writing—a strong, clear thread of an intense

dislike of the sexual act with her husband, a physical repulsion from the man she married" (63). Upon reading Mira's writing, Urmila wonders what it must be like for one to have sex with a man that one does not know on the night of the wedding. Ironically Urmila herself walks out on her husband Kishore on the first night of their wedding even though she had known Kishore for ages before they got married. One of her reasons for walking out was the look of fear and entrapment that she caught on Kishore's face. Marriage seems to be portrayed as a trap not only for the women but also for the men. The marriage between Urmila and Kishore is a little unusual as the latter is away most of the time, and Urmila is left on her own to run the household. Thus trained to be independent, Urmila resents women being submissive to their husbands. Urmila's sister-in-law Vanaa's "submissiveness, her willingness to go along with [her husband] in whatever he wants, makes Urmila angry", and she advises Vanaa to assert herself, not to crawl before her husband and let him bulldozer her (81). Urmila even stood up for her mother whenever her father was angry with her mother and gave her the silent treatment. Perhaps it is easy for Urmila to have her own way since Kishore is away so often, but she too is enslaved by her feelings for her husband and the fear that he will leave her and not come back to her. She too feels the urge to submit to Kishore but fights the urge as she knows that "if [she] walks the way of submission once, [she] will walk that way forever" (82). Perhaps Urmila is very willing to help Shakutai so that the latter can retain such independence as she has achieved. The unfortunate Shakutai tells Urmila that marrying her "worthless" husband has been "the greatest misfortune of [her] life" (110). She is, however, able to rise above her misfortune, unlike her sister Sulu who is subjected to the degradation of her husband lusting after other women, including her niece Kalpana,

because Sulu herself has not borne him any children. Finally when Sulu learns that it is her husband who had raped Kalpana, she commits suicide in shame.

In general, the marriages portrayed in the three novels seem unsatisfactory in at least one if not more aspects. Deshpande seems to reject the notion that "modern" marriages where the couples select each other would work any better or be any more fulfilling than the traditional arranged marriages. Nevertheless, as Urmila points out to her admirer Bhaskar, the trend is that "[girls] aren't going to meekly accept any man their parents choose for them", even if the man holds a prestigious position as a doctor (160). As far as the female protagonists are concerned, however, they seem to hold on to the traditional belief that once a woman is married, she should remain with her husband even if she is not completely happy with him. Perhaps they believe marriage offers protection from the sexual attention of other men.

The Issue of Silence

Silence looms large in all the three novels of Deshpande that are studied here. Many of the female protagonists are portrayed as living behind a cloak of silence, which is also used as a metaphor for suppression.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru is unable to speak to anyone of her husband Manu's sadism towards her in bed; to speak of it would not only bring shame upon her, it would also be an admission on her part that she had been mistaken in choosing him as her husband against her mother's wishes. To cope with the situation, she made herself believe that "so long as she did not speak, the thing that happened between them remained unreal" and "[that] by speaking she would be making it real" (184). This belief

became so powerful that Saru began to doubt if the attacks by her husband had taken place, and to wonder if she had not been merely having a nightmare. She was afraid to confront her husband about the attacks, because he behaved as if nothing had happened, and she was afraid that she would be labelled as being insane. After her mother's death, however, Saru, unable to contain it any longer, finally reveals everything to her father upon returning to her own home. She pleads with her father, "I must tell you and you've got to listen. Who else is there? There's no one else. No one at all. You've got to listen" (182). As D'Cruz points out, "[the] father confirms the daughter's right to speak when he consents to listen to the story of her degradation through rape. For the daughter, this means that she is permitted to write and speak lines of her devising, instead of being the page on which the texts of desire or violence may be written" (461). Her confession to her father finally makes Saru herself confront and think about the problem and how she should handle it. The verbalisation of her predicament finally helps Saru to face reality.

It is also silence, the all-pervading silence that she experiences when she is left almost completely on her own in the Dadar flat, that forces Jaya, the female protagonist in *That Long Silence*, to remove the mask that she has been hiding behind and take stock of reality. She is forced to confront all the ghosts in the closet because, as D'Cruz puts it, the "Dadar flat... is the repository of all the ghosts... which Jaya's public constructions as wife and mother deny" (463). Amongst the ghosts that are brought up from the past is the ghost of her cousin Kusum, a former occupant of the Dadar flat, who became mad and committed suicide. She was the yardstick against whom Jaya measured and assured herself of her own sanity. Another ghost is her uncle Makarand who was to Jaya an example of perseverance in the way he pursued his goal of becoming an actor in the face

of obstacles. Then there is Kamat, who used to be a neighbour when Jaya was living at the Dadar flat, and with whom she shared a very close relationship. Left on her own and made to abandon her carefully constructed roles as wife and mother, Jaya is made to go through what to her is a frightening experience of facing these ghosts and assessing the significance they hold in her life. The silence and the reality that they represent are so vexing that Jaya attempts to cancel these by doing household chores, washing the cups and plates, making a loud clatter, seeking comfort in the "great clanger of pots and pans" (145). Eventually, however, when the chores are all done, with the returning silence, the truth comes back to her.

It is not only Jaya who resorts to banging pots and pans, this noisy silence also accompanies Jaya's aunt Vanitamami's cooking. As explained by D'Cruz, this "permissible noise is a code for the repression, self-imposed or otherwise, which cannot be breached" (453). As D'Cruz also points out, silence also pervades the lives of the many other "women of Jaya's circle whose stories are never told or, if they are, have too limited a currency to make any impact on the symbolic field" (462).

In *The Binding Vine,* the stories of Shakutai and her daughter Kalpana, who was raped, and of the protagonist Urmila's long-dead mother-in-law, who was also subjected to rape in her marriage, would have also remained untold, if Urmila had not played her part in publicising them. After carefully weighing the pros and cons, Shakutai and Urmila decide that the stories had to be told, although the traditionally right thing to do would have been to keep the stories under wraps. An example of the way in which silence would have been traditionally maintained can be found in the shocking muteness of Shakutai's sister Sulu, who keeps veiled the secret of her husband lusting after Kalpana,

and who brings to her grave her awful discovery that it was her husband who had raped her niece.

The silence that we encounter in Deshpande's novels is a loaded, ugly veil behind which, women especially, used to hide. But Deshpande also presents to us a picture of the rupturing of that silence by women who demand that their stories be told.

Conclusion

Deshpande's novels seem to portray communities that are slightly more liberal with regards to the freedom enjoyed by women, especially in employment, and in the choice of marriage partners. This can partly be explained as a legacy of colonialism, a result of the influence of the culture of the colonialists, in which the women generally enjoyed more privileges than the Indian women. However, although seemingly more liberal on the surface, on closer examination into the various levels that make up society, one might find that the women still have to contend with husbands who feel threatened if they prove to be more successful than them, where careers are concerned for instance. Perhaps this impression comes through in the novels because the female characters seem to be stronger than the men who are featured in the novels. Moreover, the female point of view is privileged. However, within the marital sphere, the women are generally expected to take on subordinate positions to their husbands. The women therefore have to struggle with the inconsistency of striding ahead in certain aspects of their lives, whilst having to hold back in other areas. Eventually, the ideal solution suggested for this discrepancy is a compromise between the women's roles in various aspects of their lives, especially between the roles assumed in and out of the marital sphere. The possibility of a

compromise seems to be more hopeful in Deshpande's works than in the novels of Anita Desai that were studied in the previous chapter. In Desai's works, the pursuit of a career seems to preclude marriage as in the case of Bim.

By confronting their pasts, Deshpande's protagonists manage to come to terms with their own positions, and with the men in their lives, ending the deafening silence that used to leave them bereft of feelings and a sense of their own identities. In their quest, they have managed to be heard and have even become a voice for other women around them so that they too are heard, thus enhancing their personal growth while at the same time strengthening, and making more visible the community of women in Indian society. Even though the process and progress appear slow, their efforts at transcending their barren inheritance are worthy of praise.

Chapter Four Quiet Protest in Fiction by Badami, Ganesan and Kapur

The three novels that will be studied in this chapter tell the stories of Indian women who go beyond the boundaries of tradition in exploring their sexuality through relationships which are considered taboo for one reason or another. These women are seeking emotional satisfaction which they do not receive from their traditionally-arranged marriages. Unlike the female protagonists studied in the previous chapter, the women protagonists portrayed in these novels are bolder in their pursuit of emotional satisfaction in relationships, often going beyond the boundaries of custom. Whereas in Deshpande's novels the female protagonists limit their sexual relationships to their marital partners, the protagonists in the novels considered in this chapter are more liberal in their relationships, often engaging in extramarital affairs with men. The writers of these novels are bold in breaking the silence surrounding the topic of female sexuality. Whilst in Deshpande's novels, the solution suggested for relationship problems seems to be in a re-negotiation of relationships between the protagonists and their spouses, the writers of these novels seem to suggest that where such re-negotiation is difficult or not desired, it might be acceptable for women to have relationships with compatible partners outside of marriage.

The story of the *Tamarind Mem* (1996) by Anita Rau Badami has two narrators, a mother and a daughter. The first part of the novel is recounted by Kamini, the daughter, who is pursuing her further education in Canada. All alone and homesick, she reminisces about her past in India, especially about her family members and their relationship with each other. It is from her that we first learn about Paul, the Anglo-Indian mechanic with

whom her mother has an affair during her husband's frequent absences from home. We learn more about the mother Saroja's unfulfilling relationship with her husband, and her clandestine relationship with Paul, when she becomes the narrator of her own story in the second half of the novel.

Inheritance (1997) by Indira Ganesan begins with the narration by fifteen year-old Sonil about her relationship with an older American, a visitor to the island where she stays. She partly attributes her decision to have this pre-marital relationship to the robust sexuality she thinks has been passed on to her by her mother Lakshmi, who herself had quite a reputation for having had children with three men. Again, towards the end of the novel the reader gets to know the story from Lakshmi's perspective, when she breaks her silence to share her past with her daughter.

Difficult Daughters (1998) by Manju Kapur differs from the other two novels in that the lover of the protagonist Virmati is not someone of another race or religion, but is a married man with an infant daughter. Eventually she marries her lover and becomes his second wife. Virmati encounters nothing but hostility from both her family and her husband's family, perhaps because she is seen as being the temptress. Just as in the other two novels, the story in this novel is initially told by the daughter Ida.

The focus in all three novels is on the sexual relationships of the protagonists. These clandestine relationships provide the protagonists with the companionship they are looking for. A factor that works in favour of the protagonists is the freedom they have in pursuing these relationships because of the absence of the constraints posed by life within an extended family.

Relationships

In these novels, there seems to be a slight shift in the expectations of some of the younger generation of men and women with respect to relationships and marriage. Marriage is seen not only as providing the context for fulfilling social roles, but also as offering opportunities for companionship. Whereas in the novels that were studied in the previous chapter, the men generally expected their wives to play the roles of wives and mothers, and even to give less emphasis to their careers in order to do so, we read in these novels of foreign-educated lawyers who send their wives back to their families, demanding that they be educated as they have "no use for a wife who cannot make conversation" (Badami 173). In *Difficult Daughters,* it is the protagonist Virmati's desire for learning that first attracts her professor, Harish, to her. Virmati is a contrast to his wife whose illiteracy makes her unattractive to him, even though she is excellent at household chores. However, this modern view of relationships and marriage does seem to be held only by some, and is not portrayed as being widely prevalent in society. There exists the fear among the older generation in *Tamarind Mem* and *Difficult Daughters* that further education may make it difficult for young women to find husbands. The educated young women expect companionable husbands. When they are disappointed or think they will be disappointed in these expectations, they turn to other men for emotional and sexual gratification even at the cost of social castigation as these novels indicate.

In *Tamarind Mem,* the protagonist, Saroja is attracted to Paul, an Anglo-Indian car mechanic, who takes the time to talk to her "about the latest films, about his cousins in Australia, about everything and everything" (209). He fills for her the gaping void arising from the neglect by her husband, whom she describes as a "dried-out lemon peel"

who "has no feelings to spare for a wife" (216). From the day of their marriage, Saroja's husband, whom she only addresses by the term 'Dadda', imposes a silence on their relationship which he only breaks to tell her what to pack for his frequent working trips away. When Saroja is chided for the relationship she has with Paul by her maid Linda, who behaves more like a friend than a servant, she wonders how to explain to Linda about the "yawning monotony" of her life with a husband who has a regular timetable for sleeping with his wife (213). The husband whom she has married turns out to be nothing like the husband she had imagined she would marry, someone who would discuss his work with her and talk to her often. Instead she marries a man who is already old, only about six years younger than her father, whom she sees as having acquired a wife merely to fulfill "his obligation to society" (228). He expects his wife only to perform her duties of looking after the children and running the household, and scolds her when he finds out that she had on occasions left the children at home and gone out. He cannot appreciate Saroja's attempts to make herself attractive and prefers that she "screw up her hair in a bun like an old Anglo aunty because he cannot stand its loose abundance" (212). Perhaps he wants her to fit into the image he has of how a wife should look. He tells her that she looks "like a slut" when she wears the long emerald earrings that her grandmother gave her as a wedding gift (212). It is the attempt to escape the monotony of a loveless marriage that propels Saroja towards Paul and the attention that he pays towards her. There are also other factors such as the absence of an extended family and the rationalisation of the guilt felt by the protagonist that facilitate the relationship. Without the members of an extended family to keep a close scrutiny on her, and with her husband

frequently away on business trips, Saroja has only to avoid discovery by the prying maid and her own curious daughter. She is otherwise free to do as she pleases.

In *Inheritance,* the main illicit relationship that is focussed on is that between the fifteen year-old protagonist Sonil and an American visitor to the island where she stays. The relationship proceeds quickly from being platonic to being a physical one that has to be kept secret, partly because of the differences in race and age between the couple, but largely because it is not the custom in Indian culture for a couple to have a pre-marital physical relationship. This does not deter Sonil from enjoying her relationship with Richard while it lasts. The relationship, however, ends suddenly when Richard decides to leave for Ethiopia. Perhaps it is her experience of this relationship that makes Sonil become quite sympathetic towards her mother, who finally breaks a silence that has lasted many years to share her past with her daughter. Lakshmi herself had been involved in a number of relationships in her younger days. Widowed at a young age, she did not observe the behaviour that is traditionally expected of a widow. Instead of leading the reclusive life expected of a widow, Lakshmi had relationships with two other men, the second of whom is Sonil's father. At the time of this story, Lakshmi, who is forty-six, still dresses up and disappears mysteriously in the nights, her behaviour sparking off rumours that she is out seeing men.

Another sort of relationship that does not usually feature in Indian literature, but which is explored in this novel, is that of lesbianism. Sonil's cousin, Jani, is distressed, when she is pressured into marriage, and decides to enter a convent to escape the fate that is being forced onto her. It is only later that Sonil learns that one of the reasons for Jani's reluctance to marry is the grief that she still feels for her lover Asha who had recently

died. The other lesbian relationship that is thematised in the novel is that between Lakshmi's poet friend and her female lovers, one of whom might be Lakshmi herself. It is interesting that the lesbian relationships in this novel are treated without judgement, and are explored in quite sensual terms. For example, even though Sonil rejects the idea of her mother being one of the poet's lovers, she still imagines their relationship to be of a romantic nature, that on her mother's visits to this poet friend, the two of them would be sitting "on deeply pillowed couches...sipping tea...[trading] romantic anecdotes, [revealing] secret conquests...[braiding] each other's hair and [massaging] one another's backs...[reading] poetry to each other" (108). Even Sonil herself gets curious about what it would be like for a woman to love another woman, and shivers with excitement as she imagines what it would be like to kiss the poet, as she opens her mouth and kisses her own hand "slowly and sensually, imagining the poet's mouth on [hers]" (111). Lesbianism is not the only unusual kind of relationship that is featured in the novel.

At the end of the novel, we learn from Sonil that her cousin Jani, who previously had a lesbian relationship, has given birth to a child that she has with an eccentric preacher and that the two of them are living together and raising their child, while at the same time having relationships with their own lovers. It seems to be that relationships of this more liberal sort, even among women, seem to be quite accepted within this novel, and even described in rather positive tones, as even Sonil acknowledges that Jani and the preacher "were happier than most" (147). The unusual suggestion that the author seems to be making is that when traditional arranged marriages contracted between families fail, other more fulfilling relationships may be countenanced as alternatives.

In *Difficult Daughters* the protagonist Virmati musters up enough courage to reject her family's choice of a husband in favour of having a relationship with Harish, the married man with whom she falls in love, in the hope that the latter will take her as his second wife. Her family cannot understand why she would prefer to continue her education rather than marry Inderjit, a respected canal engineer whom they have chosen as a prospective husband for her. Because of her decision, she is made to suffer physical confinement and other modes of emotional pain inflicted on her by her family. Virmati suffers all the pain in silence. However, her silence is "not one of acquiescence, but refusal... [she] would not marry" the man that she did not love (87). She continues her relationship with Harish, in secret, away from her family. Eventually, she does marry Harish only to realise that marriage does not bring her the happiness or fulfillment that she was hoping for, especially because of the ostracism that she faces from Harish's family. Virmati, however, refuses to become docile and submissive as would be expected of a new bride, and instead uses Harish's love for her to try and assert her position within the household. Virmati's behaviour differs from that of the traditional Indian female in that she gives her own feelings equal, if not more, consideration than she does her family's wishes or reputation.

On the whole, the female protagonists in all the three novels, contrary to tradition, seem to follow their hearts as far as relationships are concerned. They are willing to engage in forbidden relationships even though they know that they would be socially decried if found out. However, although secrecy is maintained over the relationships, the silence has nevertheless been broken since the protagonists tell their stories, either to the readers directly or through their daughters.

The Family Structure

In *Tamarind Mem* and *Difficult Daughters,* the protagonists have to negotiate a skilful balance between their desires and the wishes of their families. Saroja in *Tamarind Mem* allows family wishes to influence her future, whereas Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* follows her own wishes rather than those of her parents. Although they are restricted in their choices within their families of origin, they attain greater freedom when they move away from them. It is in the context of this freedom that the protagonists perhaps find the courage to lift the veil of silence, that they have always had to live under with regards to their sexuality.

Saroja, the protagonist of *Tamarind Mem* gives up her ambition to be a doctor, because she is "the first daughter and it is time for [her parents] to discuss her marriage", and it is common knowledge if she contracts a good marriage, "the offers will come rushing in for [her] sisters" (218). She tries to persuade her parents to allow her to continue her education, but is unsuccessful, and ends up dutifully marrying the man that her parents choose for her, with whom she does not share any genuine intimacy. Instead she finds the intimacy and companionship she is searching for with her husband's Anglo-Indian car mechanic, Paul. Saroja engages in an illicit relationship with Paul, leaving the home on mysterious "unknown errands" which she tries to keep secret from her husband (78). Apart from her maid Linda Ayah, who takes on the role of Saroja's moral advisor, and her own daughter Kamini, who has the habit of innocently reporting the happenings at home to her father, Saroja does not have to worry about anyone else knowing about her illicit relationship. The fulfillment she attains from the relationship with Paul is obvious from the way she gets into an almost ecstatic mood, "[sweeping] through the house

smiling and smiling", whenever her husband is away and she feels free to engage in her relationship with Paul (45). Her emotional attachment to Paul is also equally obvious from the foul mood she gets into whenever her husband is at home and she has to curtail her contact with Paul. If Saroja had to live with her extended family, or if her husband's work did not take him away so much from home, it would obviously have been more difficult for her to have a relationship with Paul. In this case, Saroja's physical isolation has provided her with the freedom to engage in this relationship.

Although Lakshmi, in *Inheritance*, does not live alone, but stays with her mother and some other relatives, the emotional isolation that she puts herself under blocks off others' disapproval of whatever she may do, and gives her the space and freedom to do as she pleases. The price she pays for this liberty to do what she wants is to be labelled insane. She is known as "the strange one, the daughter gone wrong, the bad woman who...would not wear widow-white" (1). After her husband's death, not only does Lakshmi refuse to wear the traditional colour assigned to widows, arguing that she has many more years of her life to live, she also runs away with another man, with whom she has her second child. Not finding the love that she was looking for with this man either, Lakshmi subsequently has a relationship with yet another man, this time a foreigner, who becomes the father of her third child, Sonil. Paradoxically, by going against tradition, Lakshmi lifts the veil of silence that has traditionally surrounded women's sexuality in Indian culture, but she does this by imposing a veil of silence around her own activities in order to safeguard her privacy. She isolates herself to such an extent, even from those she lives with, that she is labelled as being mad. Not only is Lakshmi bold in her pursuit of

relationships that would traditionally have been frowned upon, she also audaciously disregards the disapproval of the people around her.

Virmati, the female protagonist in *Difficult Daughters*, is also considered deranged by her family members for rejecting marriage with a respectable engineer and falling in love instead with her married professor, Harish. She is locked up in the godown and treated like a mad person when the liaison is discovered. Under the pressure of her family's disapproval, Virmati decides to end her relationship with Harish. It is only after she moves away from the watchful eyes of her family, to pursue her studies in another city, that Harish pursues her persistently and creates a situation for the resumption of their romance. Eventually he gathers enough courage to marry Virmati a long time after they started their relationship when both of them are at a safe distance from their families and homes. However, when Harish brings Virmati home as his wife, they encounter the palpable disapproval of his family. Virmati realises that, contrary to her expectations, marriage to Harish does not bring her the happiness she had hoped for. Although Virmati marries Harish for love, she also wants public endorsement as his wife through the performance of the duties attached to that role. However, she finds Ganga, Harish's first wife very jealously guarding her right to performing these duties. In frustration, Virmati asks Harish, "...As your wife, am I to do nothing for you? Just be in your bed?" (217). Virmati realises that, according to the distinction so astutely made by her mother-in-law, she is a showpiece, not a wife in Harish's eyes (209). She is only able to take on the socially-defined role of Harish's wife at the end of the novel, in the absence of her husband's family who leave the city to take refuge in another part of India. The absence

or presence of the extended family in the life of the individual seems to have an influence on their behaviour, the choices they make, and the paths that they choose to walk in life.

Physical or emotional isolation from their extended families provide the protagonists with relatively greater freedom to do as they please, and not as others in society expect them to. The distancing from their families also seems to weaken the sense of guilt felt by the protagonists. This is a contrast to the heavy guilt that weighs down the protagonists in Deshpande's novels.

The Issue of Guilt

The departure from traditional ideas and practices is made easier when one is able to justify one's deviation, and thus ease the guilt that one is made to feel either by one's own conscience or by society. The foreign ideas that the female protagonists in the three novels may have picked up through their education, as well as through the influence of some of the more liberal-minded women they know, may be some of the factors that prompt the protagonists in their rationalisation of their break away from tradition, especially in their exploration of their sexuality.

In *Tamarind Mem,* the joy that Saroja feels in her relationship with her lover Paul overrides any sense of guilt that she may have. This is evident from her mood swings, from being ecstatic in her husband's absence, when she has relatively more freedom to engage in a relationship with Paul, to being abjectly depressed when her husband returns home from his work assignments in other parts of the country, and she has to curb her liaison with Paul. Saroja has no qualms about lying to her husband about her illicit activities. She also bribes her daughter Kamini not to report to her husband about her frequent activities outside the home. Even her maid, Linda Ayah, is told off when she

tries to advise Saroja against having the illicit relationship with Paul. Although Saroja does seem to feel a twinge of guilt about the relationship, she seems to be able to rationalise her feeling of guilt and push the blame largely onto her parents for forcing her into an unhappy marriage with a much older man when she would have preferred to continue with her studies and become a doctor.

Before she gets married, Saroja questions her mother as to whether the latter is happy as a wife and mother, and when her mother is unable to give a forthright answer, Saroja wonders why her mother would want to push her into the same "jungle of sorrow" that marriage seems to be, if she herself were so unhappy (162). Being well-educated, Saroja considers it a better option to find a job and support herself, but her parents do not consider this an option at all. Subsequently, Saroja does end up in a loveless marriage in which her husband becomes for her "far on the other side, a dim figure, the father of [her] children, but that is all" (224). The blame that she puts on her parents for her mismatched marriage and her own subsequent extra-marital affair is then partly shifted onto her husband. She refuses to beg him "for the affection that is due to [her]" as his wife and instead justifies her attraction to Paul by arguing that "even a cat demands a caress, a gentle word...Deprive it of attention and it will wander to another home" (216). Perhaps Saroja's streak of defiance is inherited from her grandmother, Putti Ajji, whom she admires. Like her grandmother who held on not only to her pride but also her husband's property when he found himself a mistress, Saroja also refuses to be demeaned by her husband who merely treats her as a "symbol" of his obligation to society (228).

Although Saroja's resentment of her husband's icy-cold attitude towards her partly drives her to have a relationship with Paul, she is still careful, however, to keep her

extra-marital relationship under wraps. There is no doubt that with her upbringing and her constantly being told that her husband is her god, she would feel the prick of her conscience as she engages in this illicit relationship. The notion that "a woman is her husband's shadow" is ingrained in her, and she only begins to question it when she gets involved with Paul, when she then pulls the notion apart, examining it for its faults, if only to give herself an excuse to disregard it (214). The guilt that she feels is so great that she even blames Paul for interfering with her "placid life", for her straying into the relationship with him (214). As she hides behind a window to admire Paul secretly, her hands tremble with the knowledge that she is doing something that would be censured, and she feels her mother's disapproving glare in the middle of her back, and hears her mother's warning that "the gods will fix [her]"(222). As can be observed in Saroja's case, although the silence is being lifted in the sense that the Indian female at least acknowledges her sexuality, and is beginning to give expression to her feelings, her exploration of her emotions is still nevertheless bound by the tradition and culture that she has been brought up in. However, although she feels guilt when she transgresses that boundary, unlike the protagonists in the novels studied in the previous chapters, Saroja and the other female protagonists in the novels by Ganesan and Kapur do not seem to be overwhelmed by their sense of guilt, but instead try to rationalise their behaviour in an attempt to repress their guilt.

Both in *Inheritance* and *Difficult Daughters*, the protagonists are portrayed as having quite comfortably rationalised their deviation from tradition, so that they too do not seem to be overly burdened by feelings of guilt. In *Inheritance*, Lakshmi, who has relationships with two other men after the death of her first husband, argues that she has

fifty years more of her life to live and so should not have to wear white as a symbol of widowhood nor to restrict her behaviour to that expected of a widow. Her subsequent relationship with a foreigner sets a precedent for her daughter. It is not surprising that her youngest daughter, Sonil, should be curious about and attracted to an American when she herself is part American. Sonil, however, keeps her relationship a secret from her family, her concern being not so much that her lover is of a different race or is twice her age, but rather that they are not married and that she herself is too young for a sexual relationship. She has been brought up in a culture that frowns upon a female having sex before marriage. As long as she is in the relationship with Richard, however, these concerns are dismissed to the back of her mind and she is happy. It is only after Richard leaves her to go off to Ethiopia that Sonil feels the pangs of guilt that are manifested in the questions that run through her mind, but she transfers part of the responsibility for her behaviour to her mother. Starting off by wondering "why didn't [she] abstain" from seemingly improper behaviour, Sonil's train of thought blames her mother or departing from the customary behaviour of a widow, and the question she asks is "Why could she not follow the proper path of widowhood" (105). She concludes that it is her mother's fault, "for it was [her mother] from whom [she'd] inherited this passion", thus denying full responsibility for what she herself considers as a misdemeanour (100).

The physical presence or absence of the family seems to have an influence on the level of guilt that Virmati, the female protagonist in *Difficult Daughters,* feels about her relationship with the married Harish. When her family finds out about the relationship, and she is punished by being locked up as a prisoner, Virmati does suffer pangs of guilt, not so much for the disruption she causes to Harish's family as that caused to her own.

She then decides to break off ties with Harish, in an attempt "to live within a moral code" which she thinks that her mother will not be able to understand anyway (113). These pangs of guilt do, however, seem to subside when she is away from the jurisdiction of her family and they become more distant in her mind. There is no doubt that the encouragement that she then receives from the professor himself, as well as the influence of the liberal ideas of some of the women she comes into contact with, such as her cousin Shakuntala and feminist room-mate Swarna, also help to ease any sense of guilt that Virmati might feel. Perhaps in her opinion, Virmati too thinks she is not doing anything wrong as it is quite a common practice in Indian culture for a man to have more than one wife. In her mind, she has worked out that "she was meant to be" Harish's, and that there is no point in "foolishly denying it on the basis of an outmoded morality" (125). What seems more wrong for her is to marry one man when she is in love with another.

The influence of foreign ideas, the exposure to rational thinking through education, the relative influence of significant others in their lives, and their acquaintance with other women who are quite liberated in their ideas, all affect the extent to which the female protagonists are able to depart from tradition without being weighed down by guilt.

Mother-Daughter Relationships

A common feature of all three novels is that they begin with narrations by the daughters who are all trying to share and understand their mothers' experiences, whilst at the same time attempting to free themselves from the hold that their mothers have over them. The narrations are subsequently taken over by the mothers, who, having rebelled against social norms, seem to advise caution to their daughters, who, however, prefer to

establish and assert their own identities. It is not only the daughters who want to be different from their mothers. It seems to be a phenomenon, at least in these novels, for the women in each generation to seek some sort of change from the generation before.

In T*amarind Mem*, Saroja decides that she will not be as acquiescent as her mother in marriage, but instead looks up to her grandmother, who "fought for all that she could get" from her "hollow marriage" (215). Saroja herself does end up using her "grandmother's strategy of words to ward off the pain of rejection" by her husband, despite her mother's constant advice to treat her husband as her God (216). Although Saroja comes across as being an educated, modern woman who realises the importance of education for girls, her daughter Kamini finds the need to get away from her mother. It even becomes Kamini's sole ambition, at one point in her life to "finish school and get out of the house, away from [her mother]"(122).

This need to break away from their mothers, either physically or emotionally, is shared by Sonil in *Inheritance* and Ida in *Difficult Daughters.* In the first novel, in a rare instance when the mother Lakshmi is shown talking to her daughter, commenting on how similar both their palms are, Sonil's reaction is to shout out that she does not want to be like her mother. She resolves not to "live on the edge of things as [her mother] did, ...a strange and bizarre fabrication of life, a scornful observer" (10). Instead she makes up her mind to be different from her mother, even in outwardly aspect, "to dress in sober clothes, wear [her] hair tight behind [her] ears, and grow old and dignified in spite of [her] mother" (10). When in spite of her resolve to be different, Sonil, like her mother, falls in love with a foreigner, she blames her mother for what she believes she inherited from the latter, in this case her passion.

Difficult Daughters begins with Ida's declaration that the "one thing [she] had wanted was not to be like [her] mother" (1). Like the daughters in the other two novels, she too ends up "constantly looking for escape routes" from her mother (279). It is only after her mother's death that she goes in search for her mother's history, in an attempt to "weave a connection" between her self and her mother, to lay to rest any guilt that she feels and to start living her own life again (280).

It is interesting that the mothers choose to keep their experiences at exploring their own sexuality under wraps, only breaking their silence to share their stories with their daughters and through their daughters with the readers, when the daughters come of age, almost as if to try and gain their daughters' understanding for their behaviour, if no one else's, and also to educate their daughters and pass on their legacy.

Conclusion

The protagonists in the novels studied in the earlier chapters sought a compromise between playing the roles that society expected of them and being themselves. The protagonists in the novels explored in this chapter are depicted as being more ready to reject aspects of tradition that stifle them, and to transcend tradition as far as relationships with men are concerned.

All the three novels that have been studied in this chapter portray the female protagonists exploring their sexual identities, in moves bolder than those of the protagonists in the novels discussed earlier, breaking to some extent the veil of silence that has traditionally been kept over this issue. The protagonists in these novels believe in having relationships with men whom they love, not just with men that their families have chosen to be their husbands. Nonetheless, the protagonists are still careful to keep secret

these explorations of their sexuality for as long as they are married, after which their stories are told to and also by their daughters. Still their break with aspects of tradition may be considered relatively mild when compared to the next novel to be discussed.

Chapter Five Breaking All Boundaries: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy's prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) is essentially about the encounter between tradition and change as experienced by a community in Ayemenem, Kerala. Changes creep into the life of the inhabitants of Ayemenem, just as in the way "Christianity...seeped" into its predominantly Hindu community "like tea from a teabag" many centuries earlier (33). It speaks of two sets of laws, the laws that were constructed by men for the running of patriarchal society, laws that "lay down who should be loved and how. And how much", as opposed to the laws set down by nature (31). The story traces how these laws rule the lives or alternatively wreck havoc in the lives of the members of the community that lives in Ayemenem, Kerala. As in the earlier novels that have been studied, the boundaries of tradition are challenged by the protagonists in this novel and the very essence of tradition, as reflected in the man-made laws, is placed under scrutiny.

Tradition and Change

The social situation in Ayemenem is a combination of the older generation guarding quite fiercely some of the laws that have been laid down and of the younger generation, especially the women, rebelling just as strongly, for the freedom to do as their hearts dictate, even if this entails going against some of the traditional laws. In general, however, there seems to be greater tolerance for some kinds of changes to tradition, especially where these changes involve incorporating some aspects of the culture of the colonial masters into the native lifestyle. There is a certain degree of paradox which

emerges in the vehement desire of some characters to protect the tradition that ensures their social positions while at the same time accepting sycophantically the values of their colonial masters.

Pappachi, the father of one of the female protagonists, Ammu, is an example of such a character. Sweating inside his immaculately tailored woollen suits, he maintains a respectable front as he drives his Plymouth, which he bought off an Englishman. Beneath the external apprearances, Pappachi is a male chauvinist who has to be stopped from beating his wife every night. Another character who seems to have a penchant for things Occidental is Baby Kochamma, Ammu's aunt. In her much younger days, Baby Kochamma fell in love with a handsome Irish monk, Father Mulligan. Baby Kochamma's attraction to Father Mulligan could perhaps have been augmented by his being unattainable and the fact that he was a Westerner. Her desire for him was strong enough to lead to her conversion to Catholicism, and her entry into a convent in the hope of continuing to see Father Mulligan. However, she is sorely disappointed and soon leaves the convent, but for years to come continues to register faithfully her love for Father Mulligan in her diaries. Having gone against the boundaries of tradition, Baby Kochamma develops a 'reputation' for herself and puts herself in a position where she is unlikely to find a husband. The angst that she develops from this failed love affair never leaves her, instead festering in her to develop into an ugly jealousy that lashes out at Ammu when the latter has a relationship with her new-found lover many years later. She finds it damaging to the family honour that this lover, Velutha, is from the untouchable caste. Even in her old age, Baby Kochamma is described by Rahel, Ammu's daughter, in a clever and amusing metaphor as sitting at the dining table, "rubbing the thick frothy

bitterness out of an old cucumber" (20). The novelist hints that Baby Kochamma's experience is similar to and foreshadows Ammu's deadly transgression to come. The narrator notes that Baby Kochamma herself "preferred an Irish-Jesuit smell to a particular Paravan smell", Paravan referring to the untouchable caste, to which Velutha belongs (78).

The deference shown towards Westerners is also evident in the different reactions towards news of Ammu's and Rahel's marriages. Although both of them go against tradition by marrying men outside their community, Ammu's marriage to a Hindu-Bengali is treated with disdain, whilst Rahel's marriage to an American is not. Rahel's status on the contrary seems to have risen somewhat by her marriage and her stay in America. When she returns to Ayemenem, Comrade Pillai, who recognises her, calls out to her, frequently repeating with "sheer admiration" the fact that she has just returned from America (129). Although Rahel goes against tradition by marrying someone outside her community, her choice is still socially acceptable, as interpreted by Urbashi Barat in her essay on the novel, because "it conforms to the rules of patriarchy: Larry is an American and Americans rule the world", or at least were thought to in the 1970s (93). The excitement with which Sophie Mol, Chacko's half-English daughter, is welcomed into Ayemenem house is also an indication of the respect that is accorded to a Westerner. Added to this is the fact that in Ayemenem's patriarchal society, Sophie Mol becomes Mammachi's favourite as she is the daughter of Mammachi's son.

As Chacko, Ammu's brother, admits, they are a "family of Anglophiles", who "adore [their] conquerors and despise [themselves]"(52, 53). All except Ammu, who teases Chacko by correcting him, saying that some of them not only adore their

conquerors, they even marry them. When Ammu herself goes against tradition, she is severely punished and asked to leave the house, because she has brought disgrace to the household by falling in love with an untouchable. The community is willing to relax the Laws in the case of marriages with Westerners. Otherwise the Laws are upheld rigidly.

The introduction of Christianity and later on Communism also bring about changes to the traditional way of life in Ayemenem, but these changes are only accepted to the extent that they do not threaten the removal of the privileges enjoyed by those who are in power in society. The advent of Christianity raises the hopes of the untouchables, of an eradication of the caste system. Some of them "converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape the scourge of Untouchability", but "it didn't take them long to realise that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire" (74). The caste system is incorporated into Christianity, and instead of being accepted as equals, the untouchables

> were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests. As a special favour they were even given their own separate Pariah Bishop. After Independence they found they were not entitled to any Government benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates, because officially on paper, they were Christians, and therefore casteless (74).

Those who belong to the older generation, such as Mammachi, seem to prefer the past, when customs were admittedly more vulgar but also more transparent, "when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint" (74). With the Paravans later becoming Christians and losing their positions as untouchables as well as the welfare benefits that come with it, it became for

them "a little like having to sweep away [their] footprints without a broom. Or worse, not being *allowed* to leave footprints at all" (74). The hierarchy of power, manifested in institutions such as the caste system, is strongly guarded by those who are privileged by it, despite the obvious injustices it perpetuates.

The introduction of Communism into Kerala also threatens to dislodge the social hierarchy of power. With the spread of Communism, there is an avenue for untouchables like Velutha to become card-holding members of the Marxist Party and join with other workers, even those who belonged to a higher caste, to demand for equal rights for all and better working conditions for the workers. Communism, however, also degenerates into a struggle for power in Ayemenem. When Comrade K.N.M Pillai, the owner of the printing press in Ayemenem who is hoping for a future career in the Legislative Assembly, begins to look upon Velutha as a competitor, he waits for an opportunity to "iron out" what he sees as the only snag in his career plans. The opportunity comes when Velutha gets into serious trouble when his relationship with Ammu is discovered. Velutha goes to Comrade Pillai for help, only to be turned away with slogans like "It is not in the Party's interest to take up such matters. Individuals' interest is subordinate to the organisation's interest" (287). This incident is again an example of new ideas and the change that they augur being subordinated to tradition and the status quo. As the omniscient narrator comments, here again is an example of "Another religion turned against itself. Another edifice constructed by the human mind, decimated by human nature" (287). *The God of Small Things* depicts most of society tolerating change so long as it does not disrupt the social hierarchy that has been established and consolidated by tradition.

Relationship between the sexes

Laws vs Love

The conduct of relationships between men and women in Ayemenem is portrayed as being very much governed by the Love Laws. Even the young children seem to be imbued with the idea that love should be controlled and can be measured; Rahel even had a list of those she loved in "an attempt to order chaos" (151). However, being children, they naturally gave in to their instincts, so that Rahel found that her list was "by no means a true gauge of her feelings", and that she had to revise her list constantly, "torn forever between love and duty" (151). Even among the adults, relationships were sometimes mere facades put up to comply with the demands of tradition. Tradition dictates for example that a couple should stay together whether or not the marriage is a successful one. Hence Mammachi, the matriarch in the novel, is shown to endure secretly the beatings of her husband, until her son intervenes to stop him.

The younger generation of characters in the novel has a different attitude towards marriage. Apart from Chacko being the only one who marries for love, Ammu, as well as her daughter, Rahel, both marry for convenience. Ammu marries to get away from her parents in Ayemenem, while for Rahel, it is a case of drifting "into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge" (18). All of them go against tradition by marrying someone outside their community, someone of a different race or religion. Unfortunately they all seem to be punished for this as their marriages all fail and end in either divorce or separation. Although as Barat puts it, "marriage is the one interpersonal relationship that society sanctions unreservedly" in the novel, the

failure of the marriages is perhaps a suggestion by Roy that the "Love Laws" can only work if those involved in the relationships make the laws work (91). In the case of *The God of Small Things,* as Barat observes in her essay, "the higher the level of social acceptance, the less the love" (96). Perhaps what is being suggested in the novel is that when one "loves", not according to one's heart but according to society's expectations, one may have to pay the price of not being true to oneself and suffer because one does not find the love one's heart yearns for. In contrast, when one is brave enough to follow one's heart, like Ammu, in her relationship with Velutha, one finds fulfillment in love, but may be punished by social ostracism or a worse fate. As Barat sums it up, "in a world in which socially accepted forms of love remain only forms without substance, true love can find expression only in unacceptable relationships" (93).

The women of the younger generation in this novel are portrayed as being less concerned about making their marriages work than the older women in this novel, or the other young female protagonists in the novels studied in the earlier chapters. While leaving their husbands was not an option for many of the other female characters, who have been discussed earlier, Ammu and Rahel, and less surprisingly Margaret Kochamma, do not hesitate to leave their husbands when they feel that their marriages have failed. In the novel, Rahel's divorce is dismissed in a few words, and Rahel is depicted as carrying on with her life without much ado thereafter. This could perhaps be, amongst other reasons, because Ammu and Rahel did not marry their husbands out of love to begin with, unlike the other female protagonists discussed earlier. It could also be that this novel is set in a slightly later period than the other novels, and so perhaps the women's liberation movement can be assumed to be more established, and to have a

greater impact. Although Ammu and Rahel may not be representative of all or even most of the women in Ayemenem, they are nevertheless evidence of the presence of women who, in their quest for their identity and in order to stand up for their beliefs, are willing to put themselves first and rebel against the tradition that has itself become corrupt and outdated. They risk facing punishment and social derision since society, at least in Ayemenem, still looks down on divorced women. Both Ammu and Rahel are portrayed as rebellious characters who are not afraid to express their selfhood even if it means having to rebel against social norms, whether through their smoking, the practice of reading backwards, the mischief that got Rahel expelled from school thrice or through the most grave form of rebellion that they were both deemed guilty of, that of loving men whom they "weren't supposed to love" (55). The reference here is to Ammu's affair with Velutha, an untouchable, and Rahel's implied incest with her brother.

The women in the novel are generally more defined and portrayed as stronger characters than most of the men. As Madhumalati Adhikari points out, Estha in his adult years is portrayed as someone who has lost his self and has to have Rahel bring him back to life, as it were. Even Velutha is portrayed as someone with physical power but who is rendered powerless in other ways because of class and caste discrimination. Chacko, the Oxford-educated Rhodes scholar, is abandoned by his wife for a "better man", unacknowledged by his daughter as her father, and fails even to manage the pickle factory that is more profitably run by his mother (151). Roy, as Adhikari observes, "has dislodged the idea of power as being totally gender based" (46). The struggle for power, rather than being between the men and the women, seems to take place between the women themselves. Those who are forced into subordinate positions, like Ammu, find

that in rebelling against the laws of tradition, they are not just fighting against the men who set up these laws, but also against the women who have become accustomed followers of the laws. For instance, Mammachi, jealous of the love that her son Chacko has for his wife, not only puts the latter down as a mere "shopkeeper's daughter", but also manages her "otherwise unmanageable feelings" by treating her ex-daughter-in-law as a prostitute (167, 169). Baby Kochamma, jealous and ashamed of the relationship that Ammu shares with her lover, a relationship that she herself was unable to have with the man she fell in love with, seeks revenge by not only destroying Ammu's relationship, but also her life.

When their marriages fail, Chacko, Ammu and Rahel seem to live their lives in an emotional limbo. In the case of Chacko, Margaret Kochamma is "the only woman he had ever loved", and so even after his divorce, he continues to keep in touch with her, and does not seem interested in finding anyone else with whom he can share emotional closeness (250). Unlike the women, he is able to separate sex from love, and with the help of his own mother, is able to satisfy his "Men's Needs" with the women who work in his factory (258). Ammu is not so lucky. When she falls in love with an untouchable with whom she can finally share both sex and love, both she and her lover are severely punished for it. Roy describes in passionate and graphic detail in the last chapter of her novel, Ammu's physical and emotional communion with Velutha, her lover "who brings back to her whatever she thought she had lost, a lover who is socially unacceptable but who symbolises ...the agent of rebirth and transformation" who helps her finally to express and release all the love that she has held back for most of her life (Barat, 92). Similarly, Rahel, when she reunites with Estha, rediscovers part of her that she had lost

and thus finds completion again. The sense of fulfillment is mutual; Estha is not only reunited with Rahel but also finds in her his lost mother. Estha and Rahel are like "Quietness and Emptiness fitted together like empty spoons" (328). As pointed out by Barat, the repetition of this metaphor in different parts of the story underscores "the naturalness of a union stigmatised as unnatural by society" (94). As Barat explains, their union which seems "so natural, so inevitable" is nevertheless seen in society's eyes as incestuous, "indeed in Estha's case, doubly incestuous, for Rahel to him is now both mother and sister" (93). As she points out further, the union of the twins is presented as "so natural, so desirable, so fulfilling, that it could have functioned like lesbianism in the African American women novels, as an agent of emotional healing and growth" (94). Essential as the union seems to have been for the twins, the reader is left with a sense of doom, when we are told "that what they shared that night was not happiness but hideous grief", and that "once again they broke the Love Laws" and will presumably have to pay for that (328).

Punishment

Punishment is an issue that looms large in this novel. Anyone who goes against the norm and in particular breaks the Love Laws will have to face dire consequences. As children, Estha and Rahel learn about punishment early in their lives. An example is when Rahel has to pay for arousing Ammu's ire at the Abilash Talkies in Kottayam, where they had gone to watch *The Sound of Music.* Rahel sensing that the Orangedrink Lemondrink man had done something to make Estha sick, unthinkingly vents her frustration by remarking that if her mother thought the man to be a sweet chap she should

marry him. Immediately, Rahel gets a lesson on punishment when her mother tells her calmly and coldly that when one hurts people, one begins to be loved less. Rahel is thereafter constantly haunted by the thought of being loved less, and tries eagerly, but in vain, to exchange her punishment for something else. This is when Baby Kochamma self-righteously tells her niece that "some things come with their own punishments" (115). They, as well as the readers, are soon to learn the truth of the statement, that indeed

> Some things come with their own punishments. Like bedrooms with built-in cupboards. They would all learn more about punishments soon. That they come in different sizes. That some were so big that they were like cupboards with built-in bedrooms. You could spend your whole life in them, wandering through dark shelving (115).

Soon after this incident, Ammu finds herself walking into one of these mazes of punishment when she transgresses the divisions of caste and boundaries of tradition by falling in love with an untouchable, Velutha. Rahel, and Estha are in the maze with their mother as it is because of them, because they first loved Velutha, that she too starts her relationship with him. The executioner of the punishments is none other than Baby Kochamma. In the self-righteous mode so typical of her,

> she saw it as God's way of punishing Ammu for her sins and simultaneously avenging her (Baby Kochamma's) humiliation at the hands of Velutha and the men in the [Marxist] march -- the *Modali Mariakutty* taunts, the forced flag-waving. She set sail at once. A ship of goodness ploughing through a sea of sin (257).

It seems quite strange that, in a patriarchal society, it is the women who are depicted as the self-appointed custodians of tradition. At times, however, this also translates into their being the preservers of their own positions of self-advantage. Mammachi breaks into a fury when she finds out about Ammu's relationship with Velutha, picturing them to be

"like a dog with a bitch on heat" (258). She does not feel an iota of sympathy for her daughter, only "cold contempt for her daughter and what she had done" (257):

> Her tolerance of 'Men's Needs' so far as her son was concerned, became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter. She had defiled generations of breeding (The Little Blessed One, blessed personally by the Patriarch of Antioch, an Imperial Entomologist, a Rhodes Scholar from Oxford) and brought the family to its knees. For generations to come, *for ever* now, people would point at them at weddings and funerals. At baptisms and birthday parties. They'd nudge and whisper. It was all finished now.
>
> Mammachi lost control.
>
> They did what they had to do, the two old ladies. Mammachi provided the Passion. Baby Kochamma the Plan. Kochu Maria was their midget lieutenant (258).

Chacko banishes Ammu from the house, but it is more out of anger and sorrow at his daughter's death, when he loses perspective of things, rather than out of concern for the family's honour. It is Baby Kochamma who is chiefly to be blamed for the web of punishment that she spins in order to seek revenge and which goes out of control, choking in the process others like the twins as well.

Irrespective of who is responsible for the punishment, those involved in what has been termed "The Terror" pay heavily for breaking the laws on who is to be loved and how much. The main transgressors Ammu and Velutha lose their lives and the twins their childhood and a part of themselves when they are separated. "While other children of their age learned other things, Estha and Rahel learned how history negotiates its terms and collects its dues from those who break its laws" (55).

Punishment is also executed in a high-handed and arbitrary manner by the police, the supposed enforcers of law and order in society. When Inspector Thomas Matthew

realises that he may get into trouble because of the wrongful arrest and abuse of Velutha for the death of Sophie Mol, he simply arranges for the facts of the case to be twisted around, so as to protect himself. When Ammu arrives at the police station in an attempt to make the truth be known, Inspector Matthew again abuses his power to sexually harass Ammu and threatens her to keep quiet. It is obvious that "Inspector Thomas Matthew seemed to know whom he could pick on and whom he couldn't" (8). Punishment in *The God of Small Things* is meted out not according to what one does but according to whom society decides deserves it.

The Terror

Roy has a teasing narrative style in *The God of Small Things*, where, as Ghosh describes in his article, "the narrative grips the reader's attention, entices him, constantly withholding what actually happened but all the time hinting at it, until the incident unlocks itself with all its horror and pain" (181). According to yet another critic David Myers, "it is almost necessary to re-read *The God of Small Things* in order to understand how skilfully Roy has constructed her tale of partial revelations that go straight to the heart of guilt or grief or love, but deliberately neglects to give the factual information of exterior reality until much later in the story" (363). The reader is made to feel as if he knows what is happening while at the same time a sense of mystery is evoked. This sense of mystery, together with a feeling of doom, is created partly through reference to "The Terror", which the readers learn much later is the term used for the love affair between Ammu and Velutha. The sense of mystery evoked around "The Terror" is linked to a sense of foreboding that something unpleasant is to unfold. The reader feels that the characters are mere pawns in this drama and will also be taken by surprise.

"The Terror" in this novel is linked to "The Horror" in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. "The Terror" not only refers to the relationship between Ammu and Velutha, but at another level, it also alludes the existence of basic emotions within all of us that run contrary to those acknowledged by tradition, and to the chaos that is unleashed when these secret feelings are expressed. These feelings are buried deep within our "heart of darkness", which, in the novel, is also the metaphorical name given to the secluded forested area where the lovers meet to share their passion. "The Terror" seems to be even greater because it threatens to disrupt traditional beliefs and practices that were put in place a long time back in history, partly to assert the supremacy of the men of higher castes and to ensure the subordination of women. Although Ammu and Velutha are portrayed as the perpetrators of "The Terror", they are actually the victims. As Roy points out, they are targets of

> Feelings of contempt born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear -- civilisation's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness.
>
> Mans' subliminal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue nor deify.
>
> Men's Needs (308).

Because they dared to test the laws of history, Ammu and Velutha are made the scapegoats of "human history, masquerading as God's purpose, revealing herself to an under-age audience" (309). As the "Dark of Heartness tiptoed into the Heart of Darkness", and as the policemen torture Velutha, they were not involved in the act of "arresting a man, they were exorcising fear" (309, 306).

Boundaries and Borders

A thin line is drawn between polarities in *The God of Small Things*, between love and hate, between victims and perpetrators for instance, underlining the fact that many of these definitions were drawn up by men and are manipulated by them in the novel. It is this ambiguity of definitions that is responsible, according to Rahel, for the "difficulty that their family had with classification"(31). As Rahel reflects,

> Perhaps, Ammu, Estha and she were the worst transgressors. But it wasn't just them. It was the others too. They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much.... (31)

These laws, however, are not enforced equitably. Different punishments are levied for the same transgressions. For instance, when Chacko is found to be having "libertine relationships" with the women in his factory, his mother excuses it as being natural for him to have a "Man's Needs" and even has a separate entrance built in the house to service her son's needs (168). However, when his sister Ammu gives expressions to her feelings by falling in love with and having a clandestine relationship with a man of a lower caste, they are both severely punished for their transgression.

The paradoxically long-existing, yet changeable and temporary, nature of these man-made laws and boundaries is reflected in the treatment of time in the novel. The story is placed in a wider time-frame with the reference that is made to the kathakali performances of *The Mahabharata*, which also tell tales of boundaries and transgressions. As the narrator informs the reader, "it could be argued that [the story]

actually began thousands of years ago... That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much" (33). In contrast, the reader is constantly reminded that "things can change in a day" as in fact they do (192, 202). In fact, it sometimes only takes a mere moment, as in the relationship between Ammu and Velutha. In the moment that Velutha glanced up and caught Ammu's gaze,

> Centuries telescoped into one evanescent moment. History was wrong-footed, caught off-guard....In that brief moment, Velutha looked up and saw things that he hadn't seen before. Things that had been out of bounds so far, obscured by history's blinkers (176).

"Madness slunk in through a chink in History", and "[it] only took a moment" for a multitude of lives to be totally changed (214). Just as things can be changed in a moment, borders and boundaries delineating acceptable behaviour can also be easily changed. When they are enforced, however, society expects that these borders and boundaries to be strictly observed.

When they were children, Rahel and Estha were blissfully unbothered by boundaries as can be seen in their intimate friendship with Velutha, despite occasional observances by critics like Baby Kochamma who warned Rahel to "stop being over-familiar with that man" (184). However in their adult lives, "Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits...appeared like a team of trolls on their separate horizons. Short creatures with long shadows, patrolling the Blurry End" that the twins would soon fall over (3). The idea that Roy seems to be putting across at the end of her novel is that these borders and boundaries will have to be constantly updated and redrawn if society is to survive, that society cannot keep on making scapegoats of people like Ammu and Velutha.

Sumanyu Satupathy discusses in her article, about *Chappu Thamburan,* a "character" that Roy introduces at the end of her novel. Lord Rubbish, the spider who uses garbage as his camouflage, rejects the garbage that Ammu and Velutha "contributed to his wardrobe", which he leaves "standing, like an out-moded world view" that crumbles and he subsequently goes on to acquire "a new ensemble" (339). Satupathy's argument is that "if civil society, a result of social contract, created for universal good, results in whatever ill/evil the protagonists had to contend with and become victims of, that social contract ought no longer to be binding, and ought to be discarded like the shibboleth that *Chappu Thamburan* discards to outlive Velutha" (141). Perhaps it is with this hope that Roy ends her novel, for a better and more equitable tomorrow.

The History House

There is a conflict in the novel between history and instincts. History is personified in the novel as a monster that makes some of the characters its victims and others its henchmen, who are made to collect the dues from those who break its laws. Ammu and Velutha pay with their lives when they give in to their natural feelings, defy the laws, and go beyond the boundaries that have been set down by History.

As Seema Bhaduri points out, "several times in the narrative, Arundhati Roy refers to the fact that the dynamics of power that constitute human society remains the same through all the changes of history. History merely reorders the nomenclatures of the powerheads. The great stories that are eternal -- changeless despite change -- the stories of Kunti and Karna, Bhima and Dushana--are, Rahel realises, also their own stories though not altogether theirs (236)" (205). In contrast to history is human instinct. In an interview that Roy gives, she herself says that *The God of Small Things* is "more about

human biology than human history" (Butalia 73). What is important therefore is not so much the struggle for power and status, but rather the struggle to be true to oneself, to one's natural inclinations, which incidentally in Ammu's case, also turns out to be a challenge of the demarcations of the boundaries of behaviour that the powerheads have decided is right and proper. In Ammu's physical union with Velutha, "Biology designed the dance. Terror timed it" (335). Their physical attraction to each other and the ensuing love that develops "defied all the forces that had disempowered the two --caste, class, patriarchy, politics and even the history that had upheld Margaret's, or rather, the English way of love-making" (Bhaduri 206). The "unthinkable became thinkable and the impossible really happened" (31).

Although Ammu and Velutha pay with their lives for choosing to give in to human biology instead of human history, they nevertheless can be seen as having celebrated their personal victories in standing up for what they believe in, right to the end. Although the way in which both of them die is pathetic and tragic, in the reader's eyes they can be considered to have died heroic deaths.

The Language and Style of the Novel

As much as Roy seems to have broken new ground through her portrayal of female characters who transgress the boundaries of tradition, she has also experimented with language.

Apart from her architectural background, which she puts to good use in designing the multi-layered narrative, Arundhati Roy's language is described as "charged with spontaneity of thought and images"(Meitei 264). Mani Meitei notes in her article how Roy "retains the speech rhythm, redoes the syntax and sentence patterns by a violation of

the traditional rules of grammar and punctuation" (264). Meitei goes on to observe that "[she] begins with the upsetting of the ordinary prose style, and goes far to invent her own metaphors, similes, phrases and reset words into compound words corresponding to the mental state of the writer" (265). The metaphors and similes used by Roy reflect to her reader, with amazing precision that is also amusing in its originality, what is exactly on her mind. Many would probably agree with Meitei that "by the use of these and a number of the rhetorical and stylistic devises, Arundhati Roy's prose style speaks for itself" (265).

Another interesting and unusual feature of Roy's novel is the use of "humour as a mode of feminist protest" (Jacob 71). In his critique of the novel, George Jacob notes how although "[i]n Indian women's writing in English, the attempts to explore the possibilities of humour is a rarity", Roy "turns to this mode with the ease of an experienced practitioner and exploits its malleability to register the protest against patriarchal systems of oppression and exploitation" (71, 72). Apart from the conventional devices such as irony, exaggeration, sarcasm and wit, another comic feature of Roy's novel that goes against male-imposed taboos is, according to Jacob, her mocking of the male anatomy, particularly the genitals. He cites how,

> In a hilariously comical scene, she punctures the male vanity by lampooning comrade K.N.M. Pillai for his indecorous dress habit which makes him prefer "a greying Aertex vest, his balls silhouetted against his soft white mundu" (14). What ultimately gets mocked here is not male anatomy—as men have mocked the female body. Rather Arundhati Roy mocks the norm: the belief that viewing the genitals of the opposite sex is an instant turn-on for the woman as it is for the man (75).

The treatment of serious themes with a tragic ending in a non-sentimental and even humorous way sets Arundhati Roy's novel apart as an original.

Conclusion

Indeed, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* stands out from the rest of the novels discussed in this thesis. Not only does she treat the universal theme of forbidden love with unconventional boldness, she goes one step further by including taboo themes such as the deep-seated infatuation of one of her characters for a Catholic priest and the incestuous relationship between a pair of twins.

Roy's younger female protagonists seem to enjoy greater freedom than the protagonists of her predecessors. While the earlier authors dealt with issues such as the struggle for independence by women and their quest for self-identity, Roy deals with the very same issues but makes her protagonists more blatantly defiant of the aspects of tradition they find incompatible with their true identities, even if this means they have to face the unforgiving wrath of society. Yet again, like the other protagonists of the earlier authors who were studied, for Roy's main characters, there can be no gain without loss and pain. For being true to themselves, Ammu, and her lover Velutha pay with their lives, but what emerges from their deaths in not so much pity, but rather a sense of triumph. Ammu's death is not a lost cause as she dies for what she believes in. In death, she has transcended her barren inheritance, paving the way for others to be bold and to believe in themselves.

Just as innovative as the boldness with which Roy treats well-drawn themes, is her clever use of language, which conveys her thoughts in an amusingly original and precise manner. She weaves in humour into her writing that serves to highlight the

poignancy of the women's situation and at the same time to mock the entrapments of the patriarchal systems that operate so perniciously in society. Just as her female protagonists have transgressed the boundaries of tradition, Roy, in experimenting with language, has gone beyond the boundaries that have so far characterised Indian novels written in English by female Indian writers. Like the voice of her female characters, Roy's voice too is recognisable in a novel that is succinctly described, in a blurb that appears in the first Flamingo paperback edition, as "a remarkably assured novel, ambitious in scope, innovative in style filled with moments of quiet beauty" that is well-deserving of the Booker Prize.

Chapter Six Conclusion: Transcending Tradition

All the novels that have been studied reflect attempts made by the female protagonists to pull away from inhibiting aspects of Indian tradition to arrive at their true identities. The female protagonists are all portrayed as being of a higher sensibility than the average Indian female. With the advantage of education, they become aware of a conflict between the traditional roles that society expects them to play and their own aspirations. It is not easy, however, for the women to resolve this conflict because the forces of tradition are strongly allied with the centres of power.

There are many ways in which tradition is used to repress the women in society, some masqueraded as benevolent measures to protect and help the "fairer sex", whilst others are blatantly oppressive. Some of the traditional institutions in society which have been apparently set up to protect the women in society include the practice of arranged marriages and the extended family structure. Customary practices such as the dowry system and sati are now recognised as more blatant manifestations of the oppression of women, and they have been declared illegal. Because these repressive practices have existed for so long and are so entrenched within tradition and religious practices, they are often accepted without question, even by the women who are disadvantaged by these practices. Sometimes it is the women themselves who actually believe that these customs are for their benefit and encourage their perpetuation. Faced with such strong social support for these traditional practices, the women experience social disapproval when they try to break away from these traditional practices. The extent to which they are able to break away from tradition obviously depends partly on the degree of repression they face. Another factor would perhaps be the strength of the urge to be true to themselves.

The female protagonists in the novels that have been studied are shown resorting to various strategies to deal with the conflict that they feel within themselves. Monisha, in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*, withdraws from society and in her delusory state, in what she considers as a victorious move in so far as she is being true to herself, she commits suicide. It is only at the point where she sets fire to herself that she realises her mistake, and realises that the solution to the conflict she experiences within herself does not lie in self-destruction, but it is too late. The other females portrayed in this novel and in *Clear Light of Day* attempt to seek a compromise between what society expects of them and what they want for themselves. The solution they finally arrive at reflects more a conformity on their part to society's expectations than a compromise.

The compromise that is portrayed in the selection of Shashi Deshpande's novels seems a little more hopeful. The protagonists in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *That Long Silence* are also portrayed as initially alienating themselves from society when confronted with the conflict within themselves. In their case, however, they emerge from a period of reflection with the decision to reach a compromise between their desires and the roles that society expects them to play. The protagonists in Deshpande's novels also decide to make use of their experiences to help other women in society, primarily by encouraging them to speak up and make society aware of the particular plight faced by women.

The female protagonists in the selection of novels by Badami, Ganesan and Kapur are portrayed as being bolder in their rejection of certain aspects of tradition. They are nonetheless aware of the social sanctions they and their families would have to face if found out, and therefore choose to rebel quietly.

This silence is radically ruptured in Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* where the conflict experienced by the protagonists Ammu and Rahel are played out not just within themselves, but in the social arena. They eventually pay a heavy price, but it is necessary if the voice of women is to be heard.

The novels show a progression from quiet withdrawal to perceptible protest by the female protagonists when they face aspects of tradition which repress them from forging their self-identities, and render them barren and unfulfilled. Whatever manoeuvre they make, no matter how small, it is a positive and promising step towards transcending aspects of tradition that cripple them.

As the novels show, it may be a long time yet before Indian women can overcome their barren inheritance and choose to be arbiters of their own destiny, but these works demonstrate the need for society to look beyond the cosmetic improvements to the positions of women in Indian society. What may ultimately be required, and will take a long time to realise, is that the entire society analyse and reassess the role that tradition plays in their lives, with a view to relinquishing certain insidious aspects of tradition, whilst retaining the beneficial practices. It is only then that women can hope to be truly themselves.

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