

Block

2

THE BINDING VINE

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EXPERTS COMMITTEE

Prof. Satyakam
PVC, IGNOU

Prof. Yasmin Lukmani
Formerly University of Mumbai

Dr. Hema Raghavan
Formerly at Gargi College
University of Delhi

Dr. Anand Prakash
Formerly at Hans Raj College
University of Delhi

Dr. Rajnish K. Mishra
Special Centre for Sanskrit Studies
JNU, New Delhi

Dr. Romika Batra
Indira Gandhi University
Meerpur, Rewari

Dr. Richa Bajaj
Hindu College
University of Delhi

Dr. Tasneem Shahnaaz
Sri Aurobindo College
University of Delhi

School of Humanities IGNOU

Prof. Malati Mathur
Director (SOH)

English Faculty, IGNOU

Prof. Neera Singh
Prof. Nandini Sahu
Prof. Parmod Kumar
Dr. Pema Eden Samdup
Ms. Mridula Rashmi Kindo
Dr. Malathy A

Course Coordination and Editing

Prof. Neera Singh
Faculty of English
IGNOU

Course Preparation

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This Block has been adapted from existing IGNOU course material.

Secretarial Assistance

Ms. Monika Syal
AE, DP (SOH)

PRINT PRODUCTION

Mr. Y.N. Sharma
Assistant Registrar (Publication)
MPDD, IGNOU, New Delhi

Mr. Sudhir Kumar
Section Officer (Publication)
MPDD, IGNOU, New Delhi

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Block 2 of your course entitled **Indian Writing in English**. This block is devoted to a novel called *The Binding Vine* by Shashi Deshpande.

In **Unit 1** we give you a general introduction to the novel as a genre. We've discussed the various aspects that constitute a novel like the theme, plot, characterization, point of view and style. We have also discussed the various types of novels like the picaresque, Gothic, psychological, historical and regional novel. We've talked about the rise of the English novel with particular reference to women's writing. And then we've introduced the novelist Shashi Deshpande to you.

In **Unit 2** we've given you a detailed summary of the novel *The Binding Vine*. This is a very comprehensive summary but it should not stop you from reading the actual novel. It can in no way be a substitute for reading the actual text. We have also provided you with an analysis of the novel by discussing the plot, technique, structure and all the other aspects which go into making a novel.

In **Unit 3** we have discussed the various themes that are present in the novel and how they all combine into a unified whole. Rape, marriage, love, human relations are the different strands which make up this novel. But all these strands join together like the tributaries joining a river and the river joining the sea.

The last Unit of this Block, **Unit 4** is devoted to characterization and we have discussed Shashi Deshpande's acumen in developing extremely life-like characters like Uri, Kishore, Mira Shakutai and Kalpana.

All the Units have self-check exercises built into the Units with answers provided at the end.

We hope you enjoy studying this Block.

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UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 What is a Novel?
- 1.3 Aspects of the Novel
 - 1.3.1 Theme
 - 1.3.2 Plot
 - 1.3.3 Characterization
 - 1.3.4 Point of View
 - 1.3.5 Style
- 1.4 Types of Novels
 - 1.4.1 Picaresque Novels
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 - 1.4.3 Epistolary Novel
 - 1.4.4 Psychological Novel
 - 1.4.5 Historical Novel
 - 1.4.6 Regional Novel
- 1.5 The Rise of the Indian Novel in English
 - 1.5.1 The Novel in the Early 20th Century
 - 1.5.2 Women's Writing
- 1.6 Shashi Deshpande: A Biographical Sketch
 - 1.6.1 Shashi Deshpande as a Novelist
- 1.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is to introduce you to the genre of the novel in general, discuss its aspects and trace the rise of the Indian novel in English. After studying this unit carefully and completing the exercises, you will be able to:

- define the novel and its types;
- recognize its different aspects;
- know the history and development of the Indian novel in English; and
- learn about the life and works of Shashi Deshpande.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we intend to introduce you to the genre of the novel, with special reference to Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*, prescribed in your course.

This is an introductory Unit and we will lead you step by step. We shall tell you briefly about the novel, its forms and aspects and provide you with a background of the Indian novel in English. The next three units of this Block will prepare you

to analyse Shashi Deshpande’s *The Binding Vine* after a thorough discussion of the topics related to it.

Studying a novel is different from reading a novel. When we read we are interested in the story; we are curious to know “what happens next” and sometimes we even jump to the end. Once we finish, our interest in the work ends and we pick up another book. So we can say that the novel has entertainment value. Not so when we “study” the novel. Of course, we still like to know “what happens next”, but we also think about what the author is saying and why; how the men and women in the novel are behaving; are they life-like; what does the author want to convey; and how is he/she doing that? These questions lead us to read carefully and think deeply. Very soon we are able to combine entertainment with literary analysis and the joy of reading a good work becomes a source of knowledge also.

As we proceed with this Unit, we give you suggestions, ask questions to check your progress and provide answers wherever required. This way, the Unit opens up before you a new vista of a literary text. We suggest that as you read you make notes, mark important paragraphs and select important stages in the story. These will come handy at the time of revision.

So, here we go! Let us start with the first thing first and ask, “What is a novel”?

1.2 WHAT IS A NOVEL?

A novel can be defined in broad terms as a piece of prose fiction, which dramatizes life with the help of characters and situations. It presents some aspect of human experiences and creates a real-life atmosphere that is often gripping. The test of a great novel lies in its universal appeal. Although it is imaginary or fictitious, it is life-like.

As regards the length, although a novel is a “long” story or an extended narrative, it is difficult to determine its length. The accepted length is usually more than 50,000 words. Anything shorter than that is called a “novella”. Again, a novel may run into a thousand or so pages and some may be in several volumes. But, these are exceptions. We must also know how the novel is distinct from the short story. The **short story** is more concentrated and does not have much scope to develop characters and situations, but a novel has this scope because of its length. A “**novelle**” or a “**novella**” is a narrative between the short story and the novel.

Check Your Progress I

Here are a few questions meant not to test you, but to help you check your understanding of the lesson. Try and answer these in your own words in the space provided:

- 1) What is a novel? Define it briefly. (10-15 words)

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.....
.....

- 2) How would you differentiate between the short story, the novel, and the novella? (About 50 words)

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.....
.....

1.3 ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL

Now that we have defined the novel, let us consider its aspects. We know that the novel is a story about some event or person set in a particular place and time, advanced by the narrative mode. That means the novel must be having some important elements to keep the interest of the readers, to make the story appealing and real. What are they? How can we find them? What is their significance?

If we have to enjoy a work as a whole, then why should we separate its various components? This we do for the purpose of analysis. If we like a novel, we appreciate it either for its theme or character or may be narrative technique. That's why, it is necessary for us to familiarize ourselves with: theme, plot, characterization, point of view, and style.

1.3.1 Theme

Theme is the central idea of a novel. Every novel is based on a theme or themes. Theme is an argument or an issue on which the story revolves. It is not plot, nor is it the story. A novelist does not, however, say, "This is my theme and I am going to write a story." Instead, an idea comes to the mind, it germinates like a seed and a story with plot and characters is woven around it.

1.3.2 Plot

Plot is the framework of the story. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. It advances with the help of characters, events and actions. A novel may have a plot and sub-plot. But these two do not run separately. At some point, they are inter-linked with the main theme. Let us take an example from the novel *The Binding Vine*. The main plot is about Urmi's grief at the death of her little daughter but the sub-plots are about Mira and Kalpana and these are linked by the themes of rape and death.

Let us remember, plot is not the summary of a work. When we summarize a work, we give the story in a sequence but in a plot, the story is arranged and re-arranged according to the mode of the narrative.

1.3.3 Characterization

Let us first understand that characters are the persons in a novel or a story who are given some qualities by the writer, which they reveal through their actions. How these persons act, react, learn from their life-situations and how they change constitute the art of characterization. If a character moves us and remains in our memory, we say that the characterization is powerful. Oliver Twist in Charles Dicken's novel *Oliver Twist*, or Hardy's Tess in *Tess of the D'urberville* are memorable characters. A character grows slowly with the story and as we read on we start understanding him or her. We even become one with them and participate at an emotional level with the ups and downs of their fortunes. Herein lies the success of the art of characterization.

1.3.4 Point-of-View

It means the way a story is told. It is the perspective through which the author presents his/her characters, controls their action and the events. There are many different ways of narrating the story. A character may tell his tale in the first person mode. This is called **first person narration**. We must keep in mind here that he/she is the fictional persona through whom the story is told. It is not the author who is speaking; he is believed to be speaking. The first person narrator

recounts his experiences placing himself as “I”. He is the main witness to the events of his life. On the other hand, the **third person narrator** provides an omniscient point of view. He knows everything that is to take place in the story and he is the agent who describes and controls actions, motives and thoughts.

The third person point of view can be **omniscient** or **limited**. In an omniscient point of view, the narrator knows everything; in limited point of view, the narrator tells the story in the third person but limits himself to what is experienced or felt by a single character.

1.3.5 Style

A popular saying is “style is the man”. It means, each writer has his/her own style. What do we mean by style and how do we analyse the style of a particular author? Style means the manner in which the author tells his/her story in terms of language and expression. Thus, style is determined by diction, or choice of words, sentence structure, syntax and the use of figurative language. The characters, situations and events are revealed through the use of language. An author has to be careful in his/her choice of language because it must suit the character. For example, in *Nectar in a Sieve*, Kamala Markandaya sometimes gives high sounding philosophical language to Rukmani, the simple, semi-literate farmer woman, which critics find unrealistic. The problem of style is more acute for the Indian writer in English. While depicting the rural people, the workers and the farmers, they have to use Indian expressions to give the characters a realistic touch. This sometimes changes the English expression to particularly “native” expression. Mulk Raj Anand used it freely and he called it “pigeon” English.

Check Your Progress II

Answer the following questions in your own words:

- 1) What do you understand by plot? (50 words)

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.....
.....

- 2) Discuss briefly the different methods of narrating a story.

.....
.....
.....

1.4 TYPES OF NOVELS

We now know what a novel is and also its various aspects. Let us understand that the novel has many forms or types. The novel in England from which we trace the beginning of the Indian novel has many types. We shall discuss these in brief because we might require this knowledge at some stage in our discussion

1.4.1 Picaresque Novel

The word “Picaresque” is derived from the Spanish word *picaro*, which means ‘a rogue’. The Picaresque novel presents the story of the adventures of some man or woman who keeps on moving from place to place. Since the novel records the different episodes in his or her journey, the plot remains loose and episodic. Some good examples of the early Picaresque novel are: *Don Quixote* by a

Spanish writer Cervantes, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders* by Daniel Defoe, and *Tom Jones* by Henry Fielding.

1.4.2 Gothic Novel

The term Gothic came from the word *Goths* used for a Germanic tribe. The Gothic novel is a type of fiction, which has supernatural elements like ghosts, haunted houses etc. It evokes fear, suspense and uncertainty. The setting is medieval. This novel became popular with Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto, a Gothic Story* written in 1764.

1.4.3 Epistolary Novel

“Epistle” means a letter. In the Epistolary novel the story advances through the exchange of letters between the main character and other people. This type became particularly popular in the 18th century with Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), and *Clarissa* (1748) and Fanny Burney's *Evelina* (1778).

1.4.4 Psychological Novel

The Psychological novel, as the name suggests, has interest in the innermost motives and desires of a character. In it, the individual is important and the events in his or her life are seen through his/her feelings, reactions and experiences. The stream-of-consciousness technique is best suited to this type. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and many of the 20th century novels are psychological novels. In Indian writing in English, Anita Desai, Arun Joshi, and Shashi Deshpande probe the psyche of the characters

1.4.5 Historical Novel

A Historical novel takes its setting and some of its characters and events from history. Sir Walter Scott brought this type into prominence with his *Ivanhoe*. In Indian English fiction Manohar Malgonkar's *The Princes*, *The Devil's Wind*, are good examples of fiction based on Indian history. But, the historical novel need not be set wholly in a particular setting. A historical event of great magnitude can be taken up to show its aftermath as in *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie.

1.4.6 Regional Novel

A Regional novel is set in a particular geographical region and deals with the life and society of that particular area. A regional novelist usually sets his novel in a specific area like Thomas Hardy's Wessex or R.K. Narayan's Malgudi (an imaginary town in South India).

Check Your Progress III

- 1) What do you understand by the Gothic novel? Outline some of its major elements (15 to 20 words)

.....

- 2) Write a brief note on the Epistolary Novel. (20 words)

.....

3) Match the words/terms given under 'A' with 'B'

A	B
i) Virginia Woolf	a) R.K. Narayan
ii) Picaresque novel	b) Stream-of-Consciousness Technique
iii) Ann Radcliffe	c) Historical novel
iv) Malgudi	d) <i>Don Quixote</i>
v) <i>The Devil's Wind</i>	e) <i>The Mysteries of Udolpho</i>

1.5 THE RISE OF THE INDIAN NOVEL IN ENGLISH

The novel in India came at a much later stage. In fact, it emerged only after the introduction of English in the Indian educational pattern. Inspired by the English novel, Indians too, experimented with this genre in the regional languages. Some of these Indian novels were translated into English but later some authors took to writing originally in English. The first among them was Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Raj Mohan's Wife* that appeared in 1864. His other works were originally written in Bengali and translated by the author himself.

1.5.1 The Novel in the 20th Century

In the early decades of the 20th century, the number of those writing in English increased rapidly. In 1919 Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* were published, followed by *The Wreck* in 1921 and *Gora* in 1923. These were written originally in Bengali and translated into English. Slowly, the Indian English novel started taking roots. It was only after the emergence of the Big Three that the Indian novel drew the attention of critics and scholars. The big three were – Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan.

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* published in 1935 and *Coolie*, (1936) were acclaimed for portraying the searing reality of the life of the downtrodden and the deprived sections of society. Anand came to be known as a committed writer. Raja Rao's inclination was towards Indian metaphysics and the philosophical strain in his works became the hallmark of his novels. R.K. Narayan created his now-famous Malgudi as a setting to his novels, which he gave us consistently from *Swami and Friends*, (1935) to *The World of Nagaraj* (1990). He was loved for his ironic vision of life. It is, indeed, not possible to think of the Indian English novel without these three novelists who can be called the principal "trail blazing Indian novelists in English".

The development of the Indian novel in English was initially weak and hesitant. It was not technically strong, nor was it innovative. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee "Traces of both, the prescribed novels and the Victorian pulp can be found in a curious amalgam in the early novels in the Indian languages." H.M. Williams, another critic felt that the history of the Indian English novel was a "development from poetry to prose and from romantic idealization to various kinds of realism and symbolism." In the 1920s through 1940s India was passing through a turbulent period in her history. The novelists found different themes for their stories like the freedom struggle, Gandhian ideology and its impact on society, need for social reforms, eradication of social evils, India's modern destiny, the partition, the emergence of the new urban India, the problems of rural India and

so on. When we look at the novel from this angle, we find rich material having socio-cultural relevance.

By the late 1950's and early 1960's the second-generation writers came up. Writers like Nayantara Sahgal, Manohar Malgonkar and Bhabani Bhattacharya gave new directions to fiction. They started dealing with new subject matter. Nayantara Sahgal took up political themes, while Malgonkar gave historical perspectives in his novels. Arun Joshi and Anita Desai ushered in the era of psychological fiction. By the 1980s the novel had matured sufficiently in themes, use of language and style and technique. Now we have writers like Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Khushwant Singh, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Seth, Shashi Deshpande and many others who have earned name and fame and have further enhanced the image of the novel in English.

1.5.2 Women's Writing

Before we study Shashi Deshpande, let us give some thought to women's writing in English. We shall concentrate only on the novelists. Though, as we said earlier, many women wrote fiction in the late 19th century, it was with Kamala Markandaya that women's writing came into the limelight. Critics hailed her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* published in 1954 as an "epic of Indian Village." Markandaya was a social-realist and she depicted the realities of life of south Indian villages. Nayantara Sahgal took up political themes and Ruth Jhabvala looked at India from the angle of a Westerner. Then came Anita Desai whose works probed the psychological problems of women characters. Rama Mehta, Shobha De, Gita Mehta, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri and many others have written powerful fiction. Of these Rama Mehta wrote only one book *Inside the Haveli*. Gita Mehta, Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri, live in the USA and are diasporic writers. Shobha De is writing consistently and her novels depict the high society women of the modern Indian metropolis. Shashi Deshpande writes about the educated urban middle-class woman in search of her identity.

Let us make it clear that women writers object to being slotted under "women's writing". They feel that they should be considered as mainstream writers. Another point that needs clarification is that, all women are not feminist writers. They write about women's issues because being women they understand the problems of women which they project in their works. Shashi Deshpande also says in her interviews that she does not see herself as a "feminist". Writing is spontaneous and should not be segregated on a male-female basis.

1.6. SHASHI DESHPANDE: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Shashi Deshpande was born in 1938. She grew-up in Dharwar (Karnataka). For some years she was in Mumbai (Bombay) and now lives in Bangalore with her doctor husband and son. Her father Adya Rangachar, better known as Sriranga was a famous Kannada writer and Sanskrit scholar. From him Shashi Deshpande acquired her love for reading and writing. She got her degrees in Economics, Law and English literature, and a diploma in Journalism. Her writing career began quite late. According to her, she did not consider writing as a career as she was busy looking after her family. In her interview with Vanamala Vishwanath she recounts how her career as a full-fledged writer was launched. It started in England where

her husband was a Commonwealth scholar for one year. “I thought it would be a pity if I forgot all our experiences there. So I started writing them down and gave them to my father. My father gave them to *Deccan Herald*, and they published it.” Later when she was working for the *Onlooker*, she wrote a short story, which was published and was highly appreciated by the readers. Encouraged by this success, Shashi Deshpande took to writing stories. She says, “and then I wrote on and on as though I was crazed.” She put together her stories and at the behest of her father got them published. Her first collection of stories entitled *The Legacy* came out in 1978. After this, many collections were published. Her first novel was actually *Roots and Shadows*, which she completed in 1978 but it was published in 1983. Prior to that *The Dark Holds No Terrors* was published in 1980 and so it is often called her first novel. In 1982 *If I Die Today* was published. It is a crime novella. It was followed by three collections of short stories, *It Was the Nightingale*, *It Was Dark* and *The Miracle*, all published in 1986. Shashi Deshpande shot to fame with *That Long Silence*, in 1988 for which she was awarded the Sahitya Akademy Award in 1993. *Come Up and Be Dead* is a crime novel set in a girls’ school and is like Agatha Christie’s detective novels. *The Binding Vine* appeared in 1992, *A Matter of Time* in 1996, *Small Remedies* in 2000, *Moving On* in 2003 and *In the Country of Deceit* in 2008. In 2012 she wrote *Ships that Pass*. And *Shadow Play* in 2013. Deshpande has frankly discussed her views on the art and craft of her fiction in her essays, interviews and lectures. She is a prolific writer and highly respected by readers.

1.6.1 Shashi Deshpande as a Novelist

Shashi Deshpande started writing when she was almost in her forties. Her short novels *If I Die Today* and *Come up and Be Dead* are crime novels and can be called fiction for teenagers. But, these two are not her representative works. She is a serious writer. She selects her themes carefully, weaves her plot around them and creates convincing characters. All her novels have women protagonists. The male characters stand on the periphery though they are significant for the story. Generally, she creates a family atmosphere to show her characters’ conflicts, anger and frustrations. A time comes when they seem to be too unhappy to cope with life. And then somehow, they understand the deeper meaning of existence, they learn from life’s experience, and finally they reconcile. This reconciliation gives optimism to her novels. Her characters do not break away from the family, they maintain family ties and feel secure. As readers we also realize how important it is to live in relationships. One cannot just break these ties that bind us to life. Shashi Deshpande portrays people from the educated, middle class of modern urban areas. The novels are set in big towns. Sometimes the town is mentioned; sometimes it is left to our imagination. Her works probe the innermost workings of the human psyche; they also provide commentary on the changing social norms and show the meaning of life.

Deshpande is by far a serious writer. Her concerns are many but her main concern is the human being—man or woman. That is why she says in one of her interviews, “When you deal with just my work, then take me as an individual writer and deal accordingly. Don’t call it women’s writing or feminist writing”. Deshpande writes about the region and the regional culture she knows the best. Her characters belong to the Maharashtrian middle-class Brahmin culture and some belong to the Kannada culture as in *A Matter of Time*. Without commenting on the strength and weakness of any particular value-system, Deshpande opens it thread-bare before us. It is for us, as readers, to see how the individual man

or woman suffers, falls and stands again, despite the problems.

Check Your Progress IV

Answer the following questions in your own words:

1) Who were the Big three? Write one line each on their specific style.

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2) Give the names of some of the contemporary women novelists.

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.....

3) What is the name of the first novel written by Kamala Markandaya? How do critics rate it?

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1.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have looked at:

- The definition of the novel
- The aspects of the novel, which we require while analyzing a novel. These are: plot, characterization, theme, point of view, place and time, narration, style.
- Types of novels—Picaresque, Gothic, Historical etc.
- The beginning of the Indian novel in English
- Indian women writers writing in English.
- Shashi Deshpande’s place in Indian English literature.

1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

1. A novel is a prose fiction, which dramatizes life situations with the help of characters and events.
2. The short story is more concentrated and compact and it does not have much scope to develop characters and situations. A novel, on the other hand, is an extended narrative, and has scope to develop characters and situations. A novella is a narrative between the short story and the novel.

Check Your Progress II

1. You can look up 1.3.2 discussing Plot, and you can base your answer on the points given there.
2. A story can be told in first person narration or in third person narration. The first person narrator tells the story as 'I'. This 'I' is not the author. He/she is a distinct character and is called the "Persona". The third person narrator can be "omniscient" or "limited".

Check Your Progress III

1. The Gothic novel takes its name from Goths, a Germanic tribe. This style of novel has supernatural elements in it, with ghosts and haunted houses and spirits. They evoke fear and horror.
2. Epistolary novel derives its name from "epistle" meaning a letter. This type of novel is written in the form of letters. The story advances through the exchange of letters between the main character and the others. This type became popular with Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa*.
3. Key (i)=b; (ii)=d; (iii)=e; (iv)=a; (v)=c

Check Your Progress IV

1. The Big three were
 - i) Mulk Raj Anand Socialist-Marxist/committed write
 - ii) R.K. Narayan Ironic vision
 - iii) Raja Rao Metaphysical approach
2. Contemporary women writers are:
Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, Manju Kapur, Kiran Desai.
3. *Nectar in a Sieve*. Its protagonist is Rukmani, a farmer woman. The novel is hailed as an "Epic of Indian Village".

UNIT 2 *THE BINDING VINE* – SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Detailed Summary
 - 2.2.1 Part One
 - 2.2.2 Part Two
 - 2.2.3 Part Three
 - 2.2.4 Part Four
- 2.3 Analysis of the Novel
 - 2.3.1 Plot
 - 2.3.2 Technique
 - 2.3.3 Structure
 - 2.3.4 Point of View
 - 2.3.5 Stream of Consciousness Novel
- 2.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.5 Answers to Check Your Progress

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall introduce you to Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Binding Vine*. After you have read the unit carefully you will be able to:

- know the story;
- analyse the novel in terms of its plot, technique, structure and point of view; and
- discuss the novel as a stream of consciousness novel.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit our aim is to concentrate on Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* and to get to know the novel in its minute details.

The Binding Vine was published in 1992. It is Shashi Deshpande's sixth novel if we take into consideration the two novellas—*If I Die Today* and *Come Up and Be Dead*—that are generally categorized as crime/detective fiction. *The Binding Vine* has a broad base in that it merges three stories into one to achieve an integrated pattern. This novel is based on a real rape incident but it transcends the limit imposed by the living incident and becomes a multi-dimensional narrative about family bonds, human relationships, women's right to their bodies and the need to speak out to set right the wrong. Despite its grim environ of pain and loss you will find an undercurrent of love, understanding and hope in the story.

2.2 DETAILED SUMMARY

The Binding Vine is divided into four parts of almost equal length. The past and the present so overlap in each part that it is not possible to ascertain whose story is told in a particular section. Roughly, part one focuses on Urmi's grief, part two is partly about Kalpana and partly about Mira, part three reverts again to Urmi, and part four offers some sort of respite as slowly the knots open up. In each part, paragraph spacing indicates the change of time and characters.

2.2.1 Part One

Part One of *The Binding Vine* starts with a four-line verse from Mira's poetry and focuses primarily on Urmi's grief and her discovery of Mira's writings. Urmi has lost her one-year-old daughter Anusha and is inconsolable. Nothing can cheer her or divert her attention from her daughter. She is flippant, angry, irritated and even hysterical. This state of mind is revealed not only through Urmi's assessment of her situation but also through her words, actions and reactions.

The novel opens with Vanaa trying to soothe Urmi's ruffled nerves. She reminds Urmi of the time when she (Urmi) was learning cycling in Ranidurg and fell off her bike and got hurt. To this Urmi's rejoinder is "Once? I must have fallen at least a dozen times." Vanaa feels hurt at Urmi's deliberate attempts to belittle her but she continues the conversation. Urmi is sharp enough to know that Vanaa is trying to evoke Urmi's childhood memory of her heroic attempts to get over pain and suffering and to tell her indirectly that after all, she has been a brave girl and now she should live up to that "image". As Urmi tells us in the first few lines, she wants to break this "image" of being a heroic woman, she would rather be an ordinary woman and be able to express her feelings, than a superhuman figure and repress her grief.

Vanaa's remarks not only irritate Urmi, they make her petulant. She digs up old things, blames Vanaa for what she must have said during their girlhood days and indulges in self-pity. This is, indeed, unlike Urmi who has always been self-willed, strong and different from other girls. At this point we learn that during her childhood Urmi had deliberately rejected the expensive and beautiful dresses her mother got for her and preferred to wear the ill-fitted ones stitched for her by her Baiajji. (We wonder at Urmi's obstinacy and wish to know why she was staying with her grandparents and why not with her parents).

Reference to Baiajji takes Urmi back in time. She remembers her days at Ranidurg in the palatial house of her grandparents, and the happy days of girlhood abandon when life was smooth and Baiajji and Aju's love gave meaning to living. There were small pleasures like occasionally cleaning and airing the big house, sharing the joke about the "darbar hall", the everyday excitement when the train passed by, eating raw tamarind despite Baiajji's warning and rushing to Vanaa's house in the neighborhood to play. All these pleasures vanished slowly with time. Baiajji died and then Aju and Urmi's world changed.

But, the most painful is the change brought in by Anu's death. The moment when Anu died comes back to Urmi as she thinks of the time when Baiajji passed away. Death leaves emptiness and a silence that is impenetrable. Urmi is under so much nervous tension that she bangs her head against the wall and gets hurt. Amrut (her brother) and Inni (her mother) are worried about her state of mind but when they show concern, Urmi reacts sharply, making it clear that she does not like to be fussed over. Harish (Vanaa's husband) examines her and finds her

asthmatic. He offers to inform Kishore but Urmi stops him. She assures them that she would recover in a couple of days and when Amrut comes to ask her if he could now leave for Delhi, Urmi tells him categorically, “I’m trying to get back to normal. . . I know I have to go to living” (p. 22). With this resolution coming from Urmi, Amrut feels a little confident about his sister. The brother and sister slide back in time and remember Baiajji, her decoctions as a “miracle” cure for all childhood ailments and the taste of those decoctions. Amrut asks her why she was arguing with Inni in the morning and from their exchanges it is clear, once again, that Urmi is often impatient with their mother. Their conversation veers back to Papa’s death and how Inni was shattered. They tell each other that time is a great healer and Urmi will get over the pain.

The monsoons set in and Bombay has torrential rains. Vanaa, her two daughters (Mandira and Pallavi), Urmi and Kartik and Inni watch a movie when Priti, their relative and friend comes. They all discuss the movie, remember how Urmi’s Papa was often impatient with the children when they watched the “rubbish”, as he used to call it. Vanaa reveals how, as a child she was fascinated by Urmi-Amrut duo (sister and brother), and their sophisticated parents.

During one of these days, Akka brings Mira’s trunk containing her diaries, poems, papers and old photographs. They all get inquisitive about this far-off figure—Mira. Mira was Kishore’s mother. As Akka sings one of Mira’s poems, the atmosphere is charged with enthusiasm. That night after the children go to bed, Akka narrates Mira’s story and in the course of her narration reveals her wounds as an unloved wife who was brought only to “give” a mother to infant Kishore. Urmi gets involved in reading Mira’s verses and her diaries and she re-creates her long-dead mother-in-law as a plain looking girl with aspirations to do something in life. She was not happy in her marriage because her husband’s love was a “trap”, it did not give her individual freedom but suffocated her by over-riding passion. Part One ends with Urmi remembering an incident of their childhood and commenting on the nature of truth.

2.2.2 Part Two

This part takes up the story of Kalpana and opens with a hospital scene where a girl is lying in an unconscious state. The epigraph to this Part, from Mira’s poem, focuses on women’s innate fear of man—the male—and we surmise that despite all the talks of equality and emancipation, a woman is vulnerable. Kalpana is in the ward, unable to know or feel anything but the outside life moves round her story. Her mother swoons on learning about her daughter’s condition. Urmi reaches the hospital by chance as she comes to pick-up Vanaa who is a medical social worker there. She sees the panic, enquires and comes to know about Kalpana’s case. Kalpana’s mother is hysterical as she pleads with the doctors not to report the matter as a rape-case. She is afraid of the social stigma. Urmi’s heart goes out to the wailing mother and sensing that the woman is alone, she offers to escort her home in a taxi. This is how Urmi comes to know more about Shakutai, a peon in a girls’ school. She lives in a *chawl* along with her children—Kalpana, Sandhya and Prakash (son); her husband has deserted her for another woman and Shakutai has no male support except Prabhakar, her younger sister’s husband.

Kalpana’s rape case reminds Urmi of Mira’s case and she goes back to Mira’s verses to find some clue. From Mira’s aversion to her husband’s nightly attacks, his obsessive love and Mira’s fear, Urmi surmises that Mira too was raped. But hers was a rape in marriage and the law does not recognize a wife’s unwillingness as her non-consent. This gives a peculiar turn to Mira’s story. Legally, it is not

rape because her husband has a right to her body, but at an individual level, Mira wants her freedom to be able to say ‘no’.

Despite her mother’s displeasure and Vanaa’s advice, Urmi gets involved in Kalpana’s case. She often visits Shakutai, talks to Dr. Bhaskar Jain about Kalpana and derives facts from the police officer. She realizes how each one reacts to the question of rape—Shakutai is afraid of the social stigma and wants to believe that it was not rape; the Police officer is unwilling to register it as a rape case because such cases become complicated and harrowing for them; Dr. Bhaskar admits on the basis of medical examination that the girl was raped but his point is simple—the girl will not recover from her coma and so it does not matter whether it is reported as a rape or an accident.

Urmi gets to know many things about Kalpana from Shakutai: Kalpana was a good-looking child, and Sulu (Shakutai’s sister and Kalpana’s *mausi*) was attached to her. When Kalpana was growing up, Sulu offered to take her to her house and look after her and educate her. The offer was good from Shakutai’s angle also. She wanted her children to get an education and settle down well in life. But after a while, Kalpana had come back and had refused to go to Sulu Mausi. Shakutai cursed the obstinate girl, without ever looking into the cause of her refusal. Here we get an idea that there could have been something wrong at Sulu’s place.

Kalpana was smart and fond of dressing up well. She worked in a shop and often dressed herself in fancy clothes, nail polish and lipstick. Shakutai felt that she invited male glances and called for trouble. According to her, a girl must know fear, must stay within the social limits and should not aspire to fly high. Shakutai also felt that Kalpana was punished because she broke all these rules. Urmi refuses to agree with her views but Shakutai silences her on the plea that Urmi, belonged to the higher middle class, and, therefore, could not understand the constraints of people like Shakutai.

2.2.3 Part Three

Part Three moves between Mira and Kalpana and interweaves stories about Papa, Amrut, Shakutai and Dr. Bhaskar. The epigraph is about the perennial aspect of Nature. The weather changes but the pattern of rain and flowing waters and billowing clouds remains unchanged year after year. Mira had seen changes. She was now an expectant mother. She had not reconciled to her life but the stirring within her of a new life gave her happiness. Meanwhile, we learn about Mira’s relations with her mother. She did not like the self-effacing character of her mother. She did not want to be like her. She did not approve of her mother’s advice to her to “submit” and follow the rules. Instead Mira rebelled in her own ways, within her own limits—she said ‘no’ to her husband, she rejected her new name *Nirmala* after marriage, and she often revealed her discontent. For women of her time, Mira’s demands had no meaning. According to them, she was “mad”. The only thing that gave her joy was her approaching motherhood. Unfortunately, Mira died in childbirth, leaving behind her son *Kishore* and her writings.

The writer shows us how women harbor dreams and how the realities of life shatter them. One day Shakutai comes to Urmi’s house and as Urmi gets busy in making tea, Shakutai tells her the story of her marriage, her journey from the village to Bombay and her life with her husband. He was a good-for-nothing fellow and never gave Shakutai a home. They shared a room with his cousin

where she gave birth to her children, cooked, worked at a shop and in fact did everything to run the household. She was over-worked and it was only when Sulu came to stay that she got some help. As a young bride, Shakutai had two dreams—to have a gas connection for cooking and to get a *mangalsutra* in gold. The dreams were never realized—her husband left her for another woman, so she discarded the idea of having a gold *mangalsutra*, and she could never afford to get a cooking gas connection from her salary.

In this part, we are told more about Baiajji, Papa and Amrut. Amrut stays in Delhi and is married to a girl named Radha from Delhi. We learn from their conversation that his parents had initially objected to the marriage. Urmi remembers how she fell in love with Vanaa's brother Kishore when he quietly helped her after Aju committed suicide. Part three ends with Urmi remembering Mira's verse about her approaching motherhood.

2.2.4 Part Four

Part Four has a verse with an optimistic tinge. Whatever the troubles of life and assaults of existence, we are all attached to life. Mira had reconciled with life but life was snatched away by death. Kalpana loved life, but she was struggling between life and death. Despite all this, life must go on. The novel ends with this optimistic view.

But prior to that Urmi has a lot to tell us. Kalpana was raped by Prabhakar. Prabhakar liked the girl and wanted to marry her. Sulu was in favor of this marriage because it gave her security. Kalpana rejected it because she wanted to marry a boy of her choice. Prabhakar was enraged at this rejection. He waited for an opportunity, raped her and leaving her mutilated body in a dark street, ran away. Urmi gives the facts about the rape case to Malcolm, a journalist and it is published. The publicity given to the case comes as both a curse and a blessing. Blessing, because it generates public opinion; and curse, because Sulu commits suicide. Shakutai has problems as her children—Prakash and Sandhya—react sharply and turn defiant. Kalpana's condition is uncertain and Sulu is gone. Urmi feels deeply for Shakutai; she can empathize with her but cannot do anything further.

While Urmi is passing through these problems, she talks freely to Dr. Bhaskar, seeing in him a good listener. Somehow, Dr. Bhaskar imagines that Urmi is unhappy in her marriage and he indirectly proposes to her. Urmi is shocked at his boldness. Though she likes his companionship, she has no reason to deceive Kishore. Kishore is remote and reticent by nature but he is a loving husband and a doting father. Urmi realizes that she loves Kishore, despite her disillusionment with him and his long absences.

Another burden is lifted off Urmi's heart when Inni tells her that it was not Inni but Papa who sent Urmi to Ranidurg. Urmi understands the pain of her mother and empathizes with her. Urmi realizes the paradoxes of life—Baiajji was tender and loving but could also wield power and be cruel; Inni was sophisticated but submissive; Papa loved Inni but was harsh in his decisions; Urmi liked Dr. Bhaskar's warm companionship, but she loved Kishore. Life with all its vagaries and troubles has its tender moments that make it worth living, worth clinging to. It is the "spring of life" we all search for, always.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Fill in the blanks:
 - a) The novel is divided into parts
 - b) Kishore was the husband of
 - c) In the novel, the present is set in and the past in.....
(name the places)
- 2) Write a note on Urmi’s strained relations with her mother. (50 words)
.....
.....
.....
- 3) Why does Shakutai blame Kalpana for bringing trouble on her? Do you agree with Shakutai?
.....
.....
.....

2.3 ANALYSIS OF THE NOVEL

We shall now analyse the novel to bring out some of its salient features.

2.3.1 Plot

The plot of *The Binding Vine* is intricate. It has three strands running parallel. These are the stories of three women, different in age and time: Kalpana, who is comatose; Mira, who is dead; and Urmi, who discovers life’s meaning through the stories of Kalpana and Mira. Shashi Deshpande comments on these stories that, “the biggest problem was weaving them together, bringing out what is common to all the three”. For a reader, the problem comes while encoding the plot.

When an author plans a plot, he/she plans the characters’ journey. In this novel, the journey starts with Urmi and along her journey many people join her, the two most important of them being Mira and Kalpana.

The main plot revolves around Urmi and her grief at Anu’s death. The stories of Mira and Kalpana are the two sub-plots that join the main plot. The total effect is of a unified story—the story of women’s lives, their fears, problems and aspirations.

The plot of *The Binding Vine* does not follow the traditional pattern of unity of time and action. Since it is a stream of consciousness novel the action moves back and forth with the past and the present overlapping. It is set in the India of the 1980s. Urmi, Vanaa, Harish, Kishore, Inni, Dr. Bhaskar are all members of the Indian urban middle class, while Shakutai and her family are from the lower class. Mira, Baiajji and others belong to the time past. In order to bring them close to us the author uses memory. The time-shift is managed through the interweaving of the subplots. The two subplots—one of Mira and the other of Kalpana are intricately woven with the main plot of Urmi. Urmi and Mira are related but they are separated by death. Urmi and Kalpana are strangers but they are united by human concerns. In the case of Mira-Urmi, Mira’s writings provide the bridge; in the Kalpana-Urmi relations, Shakutai becomes the link. Although the plot does

not have a traditional beginning, middle and an end, the overall effect is of a unified whole. The opening is grim, the to and fro movement of the middle is sometimes happy, sometimes sad, but the end is optimistic.

The plot of *The Binding Vine* has progression; it is not a static plot. With memory, flashbacks, pre-conscious and subconscious reflexes, it advances convincingly and reaches its climax. The overall impact is of a satisfactory journey of the main character. It lends satisfaction to the reader also. Here, we note two points—first, despite her grim verses, Mira opts for life’s “spring”; second, the author leaves Kalpana’s subplot open to possibilities. Urmi’s acceptance of life and her reconciliation give strength to her as well as to the plot.

Check Your Progress II

- 1) What do you understand by the term ‘subplot’? Which are the two subplots in *The Binding Vine*? (50 words)

.....
.....
.....

- 2) How would you rate the ending of the novel (i.e. pessimistic, optimistic, sad, grim)? Justify your answer. (50 words)

.....
.....
.....

- 3) Fill in the blanks:

- i) The main plot revolves round
- ii) Both and have aspirations.
- iii) The plot of *The Binding Vine* has strands running .. side by side.

2.3.2 Technique

Technique is the means by which the novelist chooses to tell his/her story. The novel is a living thing. It grows, leaves its impact on us and inspires the readers to ponder over it. When the writer gets a plot, he/she has to determine how that plot is to be presented, how the scenes will be played out for the reader. The order in which the scenes have to come up determines which information is a first impression and which is a modifier. The first impressions usually carry more weight than anything that follows. So, a writer has to decide on a technique that will hold the interest of the reader, for which deciding the structure becomes important.

An analysis of *The Binding Vine* shows that the novel has many strands running side by side. It has two rape cases, reported after they have already happened. Rape is an important catastrophe but it is not the central event of the story. Death may be termed as the central motif because the novel starts with Urmi grieving over the death of her infant daughter Anusha. There are several deaths reported at short intervals—Baiajji, Aju, Urmi’s father, Mira, Sulu and Kalpana’s near-

dead condition. Women, desperate with grief occupy the novel. But that again is not the only theme. In fact, the novel is an amalgam of death, violence, fear, insecurity, rape and memory.

The unifying strand is provided by Urmi, her memory, her interaction with various characters and her comments. The novel is divided in four parts all joined by this common strand. Part One opens with Urmi's grief at her loss, but this major event leads to other revelations. The first few sentences reveal an important streak in her character.

It is also relevant to know that Urmi harbors a kind of grudge against her mother. The author does not tell us directly that Urmi has strained relations with her mother. She reveals it slowly to heighten the suspense. On page nine of the novel, Urmi and Vanaa discuss how Urmi, as a girl, used to wear the badly-stitched dresses made by Baiajji, quietly rejecting the beautiful, expensive dresses brought by Inni her mother. Her complaint was that her mother has never been a mother to her. Urmi remembers her Baiajji with deep affection but she is often rude to her mother. This sets the tone for mother-daughter tension.

We wish to know the reason. But we have to wait. The novelist chooses to solve the mystery only towards the end of the novel when Inni tells Urmi that the decision to send Urmi to Ranidurg was taken by her father without consulting her (Urmi's Mother). This fact reveals two aspects: one, in the patriarchal system a man's decision is final, and second, a woman suffers in silence as she has no voice. At this point, Urmi understands her mother's agony. She feels sorry for Inni. This revelation is important here because it leads to Urmi's growth. The pattern is thus progressive, not static.

The narrational technique is first person. Shashi Deshpande uses Urmi to tell her story and she does it dexterously. Events flow back and forth without any gap, and the various strands are linked smoothly through Urmi.

The narration begins with Urmi's shattered state of mind: the death of Anu reminds her of several deaths in the family, the fear of death and the human ability to get over it. This mourning period provides her with an opportunity to know Mira through her poems. She does not know much about her deceased mother-in-law. Now that the trunk containing Mira's writings comes into her possession, she is able to see a woman's life from yet another angle.

Urmi encounters another woman ready to march into the realm of the dead. She is Kalpana, the rape victim. Kalpana is in a coma, unable to tell her story. It is through her mother Shakutai that Kalpana comes alive. There are not many descriptive passages in the novel. The only elaborate descriptions are provided by Mira and Urmi's comments on them. The rest of the situations are evoked through comments, conversations and memory. The novel seems to be technically a successful one.

2.3.3 Structure

In order to understand the meaning of the structure with regard to the novel, let us take an everyday example. When you want to build a house, you need a plot of land, a map, raw material and workmen to raise the structure with the raw material. The walls are raised, doors and windows are fitted and then the inner decorations are done. The structure acquires a finished form and becomes a house, and when you shift in, it becomes a home.

Likewise, the writer has raw material, he/she chooses his/her tools (the use of language) raises the structure as an organized form, gives it all decorations with dialogue, characters and actions according to the subject matter.

The structure of the novel is the essential organizing principle. It is not simply a fixed container into which you pour in your contents i.e. the “subject matter”, but it is a combination of component parts put together according to the principle of decorum. That means, the characters, action, style of narration, and dialogue are all used in a befitting manner according to the literary genre. It is thus the arrangement of the constituent parts.

When we think of the structure, we think of the work in its totality. Shashi Deshpande is a serious novelist. She is very careful about her craftsmanship. She is aware that there are many choices to build up a story but she takes long to decide on the technique so that the structure holds fast and does not crumble.

The structure of *The Binding Vine* is based on the stories of three women but the responsibility to reveal the stories is given to one woman—Urmi. She is the medium who not only tells her own story of grief but in the process also discovers the lives of two other women. Together, these stories expose the entire patriarchal system and the novel comes close to a feminist novel. The plot revolves round the themes of death, rape, fear and violence. It is the death of Anu, Urmi’s infant daughter that makes Urmi hysterical. In the course of the narrative, Urmi realizes that she is not the only sufferer; there are other women who have greater sufferings. The stories of Kalpana and Mira assume significance and the two sub-plots get attached to the main plot.

2.3.4 Point of View

Point of view signifies the way a story gets told. A novelist may use ‘I’ to narrate his story, which is called the First person point of view, or he/she may use the third person point of view, as if someone else is telling the story of another person. In other words, point of view is the perspective through which the novelist presents his characters, events, episodes, actions and setting. This is the narrative mode or narrative technique adopted by the writer. *The Binding Vine* is told from the point of view of Urmi. She is in a pivotal position. Everything happens around her or within her purview. She is the judge, the commentator, and the prime mover. The reader knows the episodes through her. The characters too come to life, as Urmi wants them to. But Shashi Deshpande does not make her all powerful. Urmi’s comments are countered and balanced through situational facts.

The author “shows” Urmi through her words and actions, as also through her motives and interactions with people around her. The other characters gain personality through her. At the beginning of the novel Urmi gives a generalized statement about how we live as our image. She determines to fight that image and be her “self”. This is a big resolve and we have to see if Urmi succeeds in it or not. The path is not so easy. There are psychological problems too. Urmi is grief-stricken and she has to struggle to get over it. Urmi unfolds her life story through her memory, through flashbacks and through the present.

The first person point of view has limitations because one person can tell only what he/she sees, experiences and thinks. But, to get over this, Shashi Deshpande uses the diary technique. Mira is given a voice because she has written down her thoughts. These are Mira’s thoughts as interpreted by Urmi.

Kalpana's story comes to us primarily through Shakutai. Shakutai is not the narrator. She is given this duty by circumstances. Urmi does not know Kalpana at all. Then how would she narrate her story? The point of view is Urmi's but the narration is Shakutai's. As a mother, she tells Urmi, how her daughter behaved, how she looked and how smart she was. Urmi reacts to her description and generates a discussion, which further reveals some more facts.

Urmi is the bridge that links the stories and gives them meaning. Her comments are revealing. As Shashi Deshpande observes, "Urmi is more than a filter, a medium through which the other stories come through..."

2.3.5 *The Binding Vine* as a Stream of Consciousness Novel

In literature, "stream of consciousness" denotes a narrative technique by which a writer chooses to tell his/her story. This phrase was first used by William James to characterize the unbroken flow of thought and awareness in the waking mind. But James' reference was to psychology. In literature, when a story runs in the mind of the main character, his/her senses seem to work in the past. The character remembers his/her past and the flow of thought takes us back and forth. The thoughts, memories, feelings and past associations create the world of the novel. We see and feel everything in relation to the character.

To convey the scenes the novelist uses interior monologue, long introspective passages, flashbacks, dreams and fantasies. In interior monologue, the characters express their thoughts and feelings by talking to themselves. The time is not clock time; it is psychological time. Clock time is a measure to determine time in terms of duration—hours days, weeks, months and years. Psychological time has no relation to clock time; it is experienced by the individual and is subjective. Psychological time shifts constantly from past to present and to the future. In literature many writers have used the stream of consciousness technique but we cannot say that they all followed a similar pattern. They have perfected it from time to time by making minor changes, keeping the main pattern intact.

The Binding Vine is a stream of consciousness novel because it is told from the consciousness of the main character, Urmi. What happened to Urmi? Her daughter died and she is grief-stricken. Nobody tells us this fact. It is through Urmi's laments that we get to know it. Her consciousness works through associations. Anu's death reminds Urmi of Baiajji death, and Baiajji reminds her of her girlhood days in Ranidurg. We are not told that Urmi stayed with her grandparents. Urmi's thoughts going back and forth reveal this fact. Was Urmi happy in Ranidurg? From her conversation, interior monologue and her thoughts, we know her feelings. Her childhood was a happy one, but she missed her parents and held Inni her mother, responsible for sending her away.

Urmi often makes use of the interior monologue when she comments on life situations and Mira's philosophy of life. For example, we do not know that Mira was raped in marriage; we only know that she dreaded her husband's advances. Urmi comments, "what has happened to Kalpana happened to Mira too" (p. 63). This comment is not spoken out, it is nonverbal and yet, it is revealing. A powerful example of interior monologue is Urmi's summing up at the end of the novel. It gives us solid proof of Urmi's optimism, her philosophy of life, her strength and her success in getting over her grief. In the beginning of the novel she resolves, "I will not break" and by the end she shows that she is not broken.

The time used is psychological time but it is intermingled with clock-time in the Kalpana episode. Kalpana's rape takes place in the present; she is revealed to us through Shakutai. Now, it is Shakutai's memory that is at work. The present is revealed with the day-to-day happenings in Shakutai's life—Sulu's suicide, her husband's visit and Prakash's wayward behaviour. Shakutai reminiscences only when she is recounting some past experience. Otherwise it is her present that is more saddening and the future that is scary. During this period, Urmi also lives in the present and records her movements in clock-time, like her visit to Dr. Bhaskar, her stroll on the sea-shore and the second visit of Amrut. Past and present mingle here.

Urmi emerges as a dynamic personality. She is engrossed in the present, lives in the past through memory and association and her consciousness becomes the consciousness of the entire story. By repetition, dreams, recurrence in the structure, Shashi Deshpande has depicted inner time and created a world that is as real as life.

Check Your Progress III

- 1) What do you understand by the terms technique and structure of a novel? (20 words)

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.....
.....

- 2) Comment on *The Binding Vine* as a Stream of Consciousness novel. (200 words)

.....
.....
.....

2.4 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we looked at:

- the summary and plot of *The Binding Vine*.
- the structure of the novel.
- the significance of technique and the technique followed by Shashi Deshpande.
- *The Binding Vine* as a stream of consciousness novel.

We are sure, that you now have an in-depth knowledge of this novel.

2.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

1. (a) four; (b) Urmi; (c) Bombay, Ranidurg.
2. Urmi was unhappy because she was sent to Ranidurg while her brother stayed with the parents. She imagined that her mother did not care for her that was why she sent her away. She bore a secret grudge against her mother and showed scant respect for her. She was often flippant with Inni and even discourteous. She understood her mother's helplessness only after Inni tells her that her father was instrumental in sending Urmi away.

3. Kalpana was fond of dressing up stylishly, using lips-stick and painting her nails. This was not done in their society. Shakutai thought that because of her style she was unduly attracting attention. She warned Kalpana but the girl did not pay any heed. After the rape, Shakutai blames it on Kalpana's waywardness. We do not agree with Shakutai. In fact, Prabhakar raped her to punish her for her rejection of his offer. Shakutai failed to see Prabhakar's real character. Moreover, we agree with Urmi that Kalpana had every right to live life as she wanted to.

Check Your Progress II

- 1 Subplot is a second story that runs parallel to the main plot but becomes an integral part of the main story and enhances the overall effect. The two subplots are the stories of Mira and Kalpana
2. The ending is optimistic. Urmi gets over her grief. She appears more normal now as she takes charge of her daily life. She understands how the small incidents in our day-to-day life keep us bound to it. She exonerates Inni as she understands Inni's helplessness; she values Vanaa's concern for her; she becomes aware of Kartik's needs; she thinks positively of Kishore and his quiet strength and Shakutai's affectionate touch. Life acquires a meaning as Urmi accepts it on its own terms.
3. (i) Urmi;(ii) Mira and Kalpana;(iii);Three.

Check Your Progress III

1. Technique is the means by which the novelist chooses to tell the story. It is the sequence in which the scenes are placed to hold the interest of the reader. Therefore, it is the strategy used in the making of a narrative. Structure is the organizing principle—the arrangement of the constituent parts. It is the order and manner in which a narrative is presented to the reader.
2. Stream of Consciousness is a narrative technique in which a person's thoughts and conscious reaction to events are seen as a continuous flow. This method depicts the multitudinous thoughts and feelings that pass through the mind of a person. *The Binding Vine* is a stream of consciousness novel because it is told from the consciousness of the main character Urmi.

UNIT 3 *THE BINDING VINE*—THEMES

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
 - 3.1 Introduction
 - 3.2 Themes
 - 3.2.1 Rape
 - 3.2.2 Feminism
 - 3.2.3 Love, Marriage and Sex
 - 3.2.4 Human Relationships
 - 3.3 Let Us Sum Up
 - 3.4 Answers to Check Your Progress
-

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will be discussing the various themes present in the novel.

By the end of this unit you would be able to:

- discuss the various themes; and
 - analyze how the thematic structure gives many dimensions to the story.
-

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit we read the story of *The Binding Vine* in details. We know that no work can be written in a vacuum. Every novelist lives in a society; is conditioned by the social norms of that society; sees its strength and weakness; and out of the observations, the novelist culls out themes. The personal becomes impersonal as the thematic structure starts building up and in its final shape the novel achieves many dimensions as various themes combine into a unified work. Virginia Woolf once observed, “If there is one gift more essential to a novelist than any other it is the power of combination—the single vision.”

Theme is the central idea of a novel; it is an argument or an issue around which the story revolves. A theme may have different strands but ultimately all these strands join like the tributaries joining the river and the river joining the ocean.

3.2 THEMES

The Binding Vine has several themes that can be broadly separated for discussion such as the theme of rape, human relationships, women’s bonding, and death and fear. The theme of death and agony runs as a current all through the novel; the theme of rape gives rise to women’s issues and pushes the novel towards a feminist discussion, the theme of human relationships works on the social as well as metaphysical levels and makes the reader brood over man-woman relationships; and finally the theme of women’s bonding gives a psychological slant to the novel.

3.2.1 The Theme of Rape

In her interview with Lakshmi Holstrom, Shashi Deshpande narrates how she chanced upon the theme of rape for her new novel, *The Binding Vine*. She relates an incident that happened in a hospital where her husband was working. They were staying next to the nurses’ quarters at that time. There was a particular

nurse whom they used to see coming and going everyday. She was a very pretty, attractive woman, a radiant kind of person. She was raped and was found lying unconscious in the basement of one of the hospital buildings. She never recovered consciousness.

Shashi Deshpande incorporates the above incident in her thematic structure. But, she is an astute writer and she does not weave the story only on one theme. In order to give it depth she tackles the problem from two dimensions. Along with Kalpana's case, she takes up the case of Mira.

Let us now give some thought to the concept of rape. Rape has been defined variously as "violence" to one's body; as "violation" of one's right to the body; as "ravishment"; and as an insult to woman and womanhood. There are rape laws in all countries. The Indian Penal Code gives an elaborate definition of rape and the punishment accompanying it. Rape is forced sex with a woman without her consent. But the law does not include the question of "consent" in the case of a married woman. Shashi Deshpande looks at Mira and Kalpana from these two angles.

Kalpana's case runs all through the text from Part Two onwards and creates an atmosphere of anger and helplessness. Kalpana is brought to the hospital in a coma; she does not recover till the end of the novel and we can infer that she will never recover. How long will she be in this dead-alive, condition is the question that looms large.

Urmi comes to know of the case when she goes to the hospital to meet Vanaa, her sister-in-law who is a medical social worker there. Urmi feels sorry for the victim and tries to help Shakutai, Kalpana's mother. Since Kalpana is not in a position to tell us what exactly happened to her, we learn about it in bits and pieces from Shakutai. It can be summarized thus—Kalpana was coming from her work, it was dark and in one of the dark streets someone attacked her, raped her, and leaving the unconscious girl, ran away. Kalpana cannot tell us the name or description of the culprit. But slowly it becomes clear that it was Prabhakar, her Sulu *mausi's* husband.

Now, the question is: why did he attack her? After all, he was a close relative. Moreover, Kalpana had stayed with her aunt (Sulu *Mausi*) and Prabhakar almost like a younger sister staying with the brother. We learn that when Shakutai forced Kalpana to stay with Sulu and Prabhakar, she had Kalpana's welfare in mind but Kalpana was not happy there. Probably, she had sensed Prabhakar's evil intentions. Sulu and Prabhakar had no children and since Prabhakar liked Kalpana, Sulu wanted him to marry Kalpana. This would also ensure that Prabhakar did not marry some other women and drive Sulu out from his house. For Shakutai too the proposal was good, because that would settle Kalpana and Shakutai would not have to worry about her marriage.

Kalpana did not like this idea. She was young, full of life and had her own dreams. She wanted to marry a young man of her choice. When she rejected Prabhakar, he got furious. He waited for an opportunity to punish her for her refusal. The moment he got an opportunity, he took his revenge. Kalpana lay in a coma after that. Her condition can be summed up as "Neither dead, nor alive". Dr. Bhaskar sees "absolutely no chance" of her recovery and says, "I don't expect her to ever come back to normality after this" (p 87). Rape does not end with the act. It has its social, familial and legal implications. On the familial scene, we have Shakutai, her children and Sulu. The initial problem before Shakutai is, "what will I tell Sulu, what can I say to her? She loves Kalpana, she loves her

like her own daughter” (p. 60). Till this point in time, neither Shakutai, nor Sulu, nor we as readers know that the culprit is Sulu’s husband. Shakutai does not know how to tell her children about it. When Sulu, learns of her husband’s shameful act, she commits suicide.

Socially, rape is seen as a stigma for the victim as well as for the family. Unfortunately, the perpetrator of the act never suffers, he is never accused; the blame comes on the woman. Shakutai frantically requests the doctor not to report it as a rape case. “Who will marry my daughter after this”?, is her question. The police officer is cruel in his judgement. He thinks Kalpana could be a “professional” or a “fallen” woman.

Legally, the rape victim has every right to plead for justice but she has to prove that it was rape. In Kalpana’s case the possibility of legal action is forestalled because she cannot prove anything. It is for the society in such cases to go to the rescue of a raped woman, and get her justice by exposing the victim. In the novel there are three representatives of the society who try to get justice for Kalpana: Urmi, the media (through Malcolm, the journalist) and the enraged demonstrators.

Rape is psychologically shattering, and traumatic. It kills a woman’s self-confidence, and destroys her self-esteem. Shashi Deshpande puts across Mira’s story to show another dimension of the problem.

Mira’s case is strange. From one angle, it is rape in marriage; from another, it is not. For the society, Mira is a happy wife because she is intensely loved. For Mira, however, her husband’s love is suffocating. Urmi constructs Mira through the old diaries and poems. As Urmi reads each poem the personality of the writer “Mira” comes alive. Mira she realizes, was scared of her husband’s obsession.

Her verses show her resentment to her husband’s assault on her body every night. Sex is distasteful to her. She shows her unwillingness but her husband never understands her point of view. And he need not because, socially and legally also, Mira’s case cannot be called rape. Her husband has perfectly valid reasons to lay his claim on his wife. Urmi finds a clear current of anger and resentment in the writings of her mother-in-law.

Mira could not have told her feelings to anyone so she consigned her deepest thoughts to her diaries. When Urmi reads these writings many decades after the death of her mother-in-law she re-creates the personality of Mira and finds her to be a progressive person for her times. Urmi has plans to publish Mira’s poems but there are various social and family factors to think of before she takes this step.

Both these rape cases are reported and described after they happen but by bringing them to light Urmi, and by implication Shashi Deshpande, directs our attention to two significant issues—first, a woman’s right to her body and second, the need to speak out.

Check Your Progress I

1) What do you understand by theme?

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2) Discuss, briefly, the two rape cases in the novel. .

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3) Fill in the blanks—

- i) Kalpana cannot fight for justice because she lay in a
- ii) The name of the journalist who gave publicity to Kalpana’s case is
- iii) Shashi Deshpande based Kalpana’s story on a real rape case of a
- iv) committed suicide

3.2.2 Theme of Feminism

Before we find out the feminist theme in *The Binding Vine*, let us give some thought to feminism in general.

What is feminism? Feminism can be simply defined as a socio-economic political movement started in the West in the 18th and 19th centuries. It demanded right to property, right to vote and other legal rights. Later, women demanded equality and raised many more issues concerning women’s status in the family and society. Of late, many feminists are voicing their concern for women’s silence, their marginalization, and abuse of the female body.

When we study *The Binding Vine* in the light of these issues we discover that Shashi Deshpande subtly shows women’s submission, their lack of voice, the society’s attitude to their suffering and the abuse of a woman’s body, through the various women characters. But, she also shows the changes in social perception. For example, Urmi certainly has more choices than her predecessors like Mira, Akka or Inni. Here we pause for a while and ask, “Is Shashi Deshpande a feminist writer?”

Shashi Deshpande does not call herself a feminist writer. But she feels strongly for women and exposes the social norms that are detrimental to women’s development. In this sense, she is a feminist.

In *The Binding Vine* men are absent except Dr. Bhaskar and Kalpana’s father. Kalpana’s father comes and goes like a shadow and Dr. Bhaskar has a minor role to play. Despite these facts, men are powerfully depicted. The three main women characters around whom the novel revolves suffer indirectly because of their men. Other women like Akka, Inni, Shakutai and Sulu suffer directly. Thus, Shashi Deshpande creates a world in which men exert their influence and women have no voice. If they break their silence, they suffer like Kalpana.

Only a person like Urmi can speak out for her. Her speaking out may not help Kalpana directly but it generates public opinion and creates awareness. When Kalpana’s rape case appears in the media, there are demonstrations, Assembly questions and publicity is given to the suffering family.

Check Your Progress II

1) Define Feminism. (50 words)

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2) Why do you say the novel has a feminist theme?

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3.2.3 The Theme of Love, Marriage and Sex

Marriage is the oldest institution of human society, on which have hinged social discipline and a sense of security. But of late, this institution has come under scrutiny. Particularly in literature, the writers are questioning it. Shashi Deshpande does not repudiate it. She upholds it and at the same time she shows us its weak spots. There are several married couples whose lives come under her scanner. Urmi-Kishore, Vanaa-Harish, Mira, Akka and their husband, Inni and her husband i.e. Urmi's father, Shakutai and her husband and Sulu-Prabhakar. These marriages are not described in the novel but there are many probing questions and revelatory remarks to show how satisfying or dissatisfying they are or were.

Let us take Mira, first. Mira was married to a young man who loved her immensely. She was eighteen then, when the proposal came from the "boy's" side, and the family was jubilant because it was immensely elevating for the family honour, and nobody could think of rejecting it. For Mira, however, her husband's obsessive love was a torture. She could never accept him. She in fact, feared his advances. What could be called love was obsession and when love becomes too demanding, it loses its value. Shashi Deshpande subscribes to the view that love should be a source of happiness and strength in our life. When love becomes oppressive and too demanding, it turns sadistic. Mira's husband was not a bad man; he was compulsive. His love was a trap. It did not give her sufficient space of her own, a will of her own, and the freedom to say 'no'. This was what Mira resented. She remained an unhappy wife, despite all comforts.

Akka was his second wife. She was educated and was a teacher. She was twenty-two when the proposal to marry the widower (Mira's husband) came and the family accepted it without a second thought because from the social standard of her time Akka was past the marriageable age. Akka soon realized that she was brought in the family not as a "bride" but as a "mother". As a wife Akka remained unfulfilled. She gave birth to Vanna but she never received love from her husband, and even Vanna felt that her father did not love her. In her conversation with Urmi, she discloses her feelings.

Urmi and Kishore seem to make a good couple. Kishore gives her enough individual freedom, never questions her and when he is around, he is tender to

her. Their love relation is not a trap; it is egalitarian. Kishore is so quiet by disposition that he sometimes appears remote. Urmi resents his coldness and feels attracted toward the warmth and closeness, which Dr. Bhaskar exudes. However, that does not mean that she is unfaithful to Kishore.

The marriages of Inni and her husband (Urmi's father) and Vanna and Harish are based on the traditional concept of submissive wives and dominating husbands. Vanna is a caring wife and Harish is a loving husband but there is no sense of equality between them. Urmi does not like Vanaa's attitude and wants her to assert herself. Even Inni, Urmi's mother, never asserted herself. Her father was dominating and it was always his will that prevailed.

In the lower strata of society love, marriage and sex have yet another connotation. Shakutai and Sulu do not know what a husband's love is because it is their lust they encounter. Shakutai's husband leaves her with three children to stay with another woman. Sulu's husband Prabhakar has evil intentions and in his proposal to marry Kalpana, it is his lust not love.

3.2.4 The Theme of Human Relationships

Shashi Deshpande's novels generally centre on family relationships.

In *The Binding Vine* human relationships are explored with all their possible pros and cons—husband-wife, mother-daughter, male-female, mother-child, woman-woman bonding and human bonding. Thus, the central theme of the novel is the “binding vine” of relationships that ties us together. We cannot shrug it off because it is love that is the binding vine.

Urmi realizes how all relationships bind us at a human level. Urmi has no relation, so to speak, with Shakutai and her family, but on a human level she feels one with them all. Their concern becomes her concern; their grief becomes hers. She helps them as much as she can. Shakutai also reposes full faith in Urmi. When Urmi is around, Shakutai feels secure. She even seeks Urmi's advice and trusts her opinion. The unfortunate woman has no support in her hour of need. Her husband comes, sheds tears and goes away; Sulu offers no consolation; and Prabhakar on whom Shakutai depends, turns out to be a traitor. It is Urmi who stands as her anchor; she becomes a bridge between Shakutai and the doctors, Shakutai and Vanaa, Shakutai and the media.

Human relationship means building bridges between situations and across people. Man-woman relationship is based on the bridge of understanding and a common well being. There is an undercurrent of love and affection that gives meaning to it. When love becomes selfishly blind, the bond loosens and misery follows. The author explores the relationship between Mira and her husband. Mira was looking for love but all she got was its obsessive version. Akka and her husband also could not build up a sound and healthy relationship because her husband could not get out of his deceased wife's memory. The children are sufferers in both these cases—Kishore is undemonstrative and remote and Vanna is insecure. But fortunately, they do not fail to establish healthy relationships in life—Vanaa and Harish are happy, Urmi and Kishore are also happy.

The mother-daughter relationship is shown to be very fragile in this novel. Urmi and Inni are always arguing. Urmi is sharp-tongued and flippant with her mother. When her mother shows concern for her health, Urmi often gets irritated. Their conversation is never normal, it is always sharp. Probably, Urmi harbours a secret grudge against her mother for sending her away to Ranidurg. Urmi's perception

only clears when her mother tells her how her father took the decision single-handedly without even asking Inni. Urmi feels sorry for her mother. She knows how dominating her father could be.

The mother-daughter relation is also seen in its tender aspects through Urmi and Anu's relationship. Urmi is like a tree and her infant daughter is like a creeper around her. Her daughter is her world. Her passing away leaves Urmi empty. Shashi Deshpande explores the mother-daughter relationship at yet another level when she describes Shakutai and Kalpana's relationship. The daughter is not respectful towards her mother. She rejects her mother's advice and follows her own whims in dressing up, going out and in her decision to marry the boy of her choice. Similarly, Mira does not abide by her mother's rules set for a daughter. She fails to identify with her self-effacing and weak mother.

A very strong sense of woman-woman bonding is shown in the novel. Urmi feels a kind of bond between herself, Mira and Kalpana. Mira is dead and gone. But in her diaries and poems Urmi reads a message for all women. Urmi also empathises with Kalpana and Shakutai. She is tender and understanding towards them. Her heart goes out to Shakutai and she joins her to fight against injustice.

The ending of the novel sums up Urmi's understanding of the strong bonds of relationships that tie us at a human level: the act of living may be futile but we all struggle to survive because we thrive through relationships.

Check Your Progress III

- 1) Why was Mira unhappy when her husband loved her and she had all the comforts? (50 words)

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- 2) Discuss the concept of human relationships on the basis of your understanding of Shakutai and Urmi's relationship. (100 words)

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3.3 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have studied the themes in *The Binding Vine*. Now you can:

- define the term theme and know how themes are incorporated by an author.
- appreciate the different themes in the novel.
- appreciate Shashi Deshpande's use of different themes that give multiple dimensions to her novel.
- know how the author has successfully interlinked the theme to form a unified whole.

3.4 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

1. Theme is an argument or an issue around which the story revolves. It is the central idea of the novel.

2. The two rape cases in the novel are: Mira's rape in marriage and Kalpana's rape by her relative. Of these, Kalpana's rape is the saddest and most damaging. As for Mira, her problem is different because she is married to the man who lays claim to her body. Mira does not like the sexual act. She feels revolted and repulsed. She wants her freedom to say 'no'. But, though her demand can be justified and understood by us, it has no legal backing because the law does not recognize the unwillingness of a married woman as rape. Kalpana's rape is an act of vengeance. She did not agree to marry her elderly relative, her refusal angers him and he attacks her. Her body was mutilated and she lay in a coma. Her rape becomes a social issue.
3. Fill in the Blanks:
 - i) coma
 - ii) Malcolm
 - iii) nurse
 - iv) Sulu

Check Your Progress II

1. Basically a movement addressing the right of women to be treated equally to men.
2. Shashi Deshpande raises some important issues concerning women, their suffering, their subordinate status and their inability to speak out. She does not blame men, nor does she claim that women are good and men are bad. She shows the reality of women's lives. Although Urmi's father was tender to Inni, the major family decisions were his. Inni was tongue-tied and could never voice her feelings. Both Akka and Mira had no say in the matter of their desires. Akka could never get her husband's love, and Mira got a surfeit of it, which she did not want. Kalpana was raped because she raised her voice and had the courage to say 'no' to a man's proposal. Shakutai suffers untold miseries. Her husband is a worthless fellow, her daughter is nearly dead, she has to bear social stigma and her sister commits suicide. These women had no choices. Juxtaposing these women against the backdrop of Urmi's ideas, the author takes up the question of choice, freedom to have a right to their bodies and the necessity to speak out to make themselves heard.

Check Your Progress III

1. Mira was unhappy because she was married against her wishes. Her husband had an obsessive love for her. His love can be called lust because he was interested only in her body. Mira had revulsion for the sexual act and she dreaded her husband's nightly attacks. He did not pay heed to her when she said 'no'. Mira felt trapped and she was unhappy.
2. Shakutai and Urmi meet by chance in the hospital. Urmi's heart goes out to the suffering mother of Kalpana. Urmi can understand Shakutai's pain as a mother because Urmi has experienced the agony of loss recently. Urmi helps Shakutai and Shakutai reposes her faith in Urmi. She feels secure when Urmi is near her. They are not related, nor were they acquainted with each other before the meeting, but they develop a bond of affection, understanding and sympathy at a human level.

UNIT 4 *THE BINDING VINE*— CHARACTERIZATION

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Shashi Deshpande's Art of Characterization
- 4.3 Characters in the Novel
 - 43.1 Urmi
 - 43.2 Kishore
 - 43.3 Mira
 - 43.4 Shakutai
 - 43.5 Kalpana
- 4.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.5 Answers to Check Your Progress

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit introduces you to the various characters present in the novel. By the end of this unit you will be able to:

- know Shashi Deshpande's art of characterization;
- write character sketches on your own; and
- know the importance of characters for a work of fiction.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit we discussed the themes of the novel from various angles. In doing so we saw the peculiarities of some characters such as Vanaa's submissiveness, Urmi's self-assertion, Shakutai's helplessness and Kalpana's self-directed behaviour. We ask, "Are these the main traits of their character?" "How does their behavior affect them?" "Why do we rate a particular character from a particular angle?" These and many such questions can be answered when we study the characters closely. In this Unit we shall give you some guidelines about how the characters come alive and what makes us understand them as human beings. The art of a novelist lies in creating living characters out of a fictional situation. If we can identify with the character or feel happy with or sorry for him or her, the novelist can be called successful in portraying characters.

4.2 SHASHI DESHPANDE'S ART OF CHARACTERIZATION

Shashi Deshpande portrays characters from the urban middle class of modern India. Her focus is on women and the men come alive through her female characters. The overall effect is like real human beings interacting with us.

Before we study her art let us give some thought to the significance of characterization in a novel.

No work of fiction is written in a vacuum. It is set in a particular social environment and takes shape with the help of characters and situations. According to Henry Fielding, we understand the mind of the characters through their words and actions. The motives and the inward turns of the mind tell us more about the

character than actions themselves. A successful novelist intimately acquaints us with his or her characters' movement, speech, thought and actions so that they become real humans.

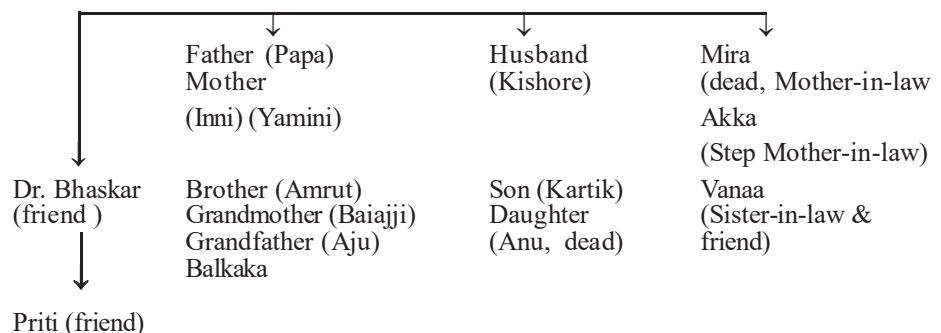
Shashi Deshpande creates life-like characters. We cannot claim that she creates unforgettable, superhuman female heroes. No. Her characters are ordinary women who face life's vagaries, get irritated, depressed and yet at a point in time they reconcile with life. The final reconciliation achieved after understanding life, gives them strength. We can see Urmi's strength when she says, "I am not going to break" (*The Binding Vine*, p. 19) and towards the end Urmi appears strong; she is not the wailing, grieving Urmi whom we meet in the beginning of the novel. Deshpande does not idealize her protagonist. Her women are from everyday life.

Shashi Deshpande's art lies in her method of "showing" the characters. Since she adopts the techniques of flashback and the stream of consciousness, we see the characters through the consciousness of the protagonist. She leaves her readers free to make their own assessment and to judge the main characters as per their actions, words and interactions with others. For example, Urmi is flippant, sharp-tongued and aggressive. How can we say this? First, the opening conversation with Vanaa provides us the clue. She is so impatient and abrupt that Vanaa is intimidated. But, won't you agree that Urmi is sympathetic? Yes, we do! How do we discover this? By her attitude towards Shakutai. Dr. Bhaskar's remark show us that Urmi is a "dark, sharp-tongued, married woman" (p. 161). Thus, we are able to sum up Urmi's appearance, her relationships, her psychology, social status and her optimism through Deshpande's art of "showing". Other characters also come alive through Urmi, Shakutai and Vanaa.

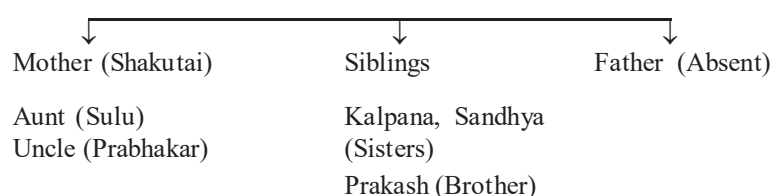
The main narrator is Urmi and she tells the story using first person narration as "I". She is the protagonist and Shashi Deshpande gives her the freedom to speak out her mind and to grow. The grief-stricken and distraught Urmi whom we meet in the opening pages of the novel, gains strength towards the end and achieves an optimistic vision of life. This is her mental growth. The other characters suffer and have no chance to grow, though they are not wooden. They advance the thematic structure of the novel.

The Binding Vine has a large number of characters who come, make their presence felt and go away. Since the novel is told through Urmi's consciousness, we shall see who they are in relation to her.

URMI



KALPANA'S FAMILY



Men are absent in Shashi Deshpande's novels. Where they are present, they have a negligible role to play. But, the men are not ineffective. They influence the thematic structure through the patriarchal system. They come alive when the women in their lives brood over their power. For example, in *The Binding Vine*, Kishore's father becomes a palpable presence through Mira's diaries and poems as well as through Vanaa's occasional remarks. We do not know his name but we know that he had a compulsive personality, he loved his first wife, Mira, obsessively; neglected his second wife, Akka; he was reserved towards his daughter Vanaa; but lived for his son Kishore. Another male character, Kishore is on the ship. He appears remote, though loving and understanding. Deshpande's deft touches create the men characters as real human beings, but she admits her inability to bring forth "rounded" male characters.

Check Your Progress I

- 1) Write a brief note on Shashi Deshpande's art of characterization (100 words).
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- 2) Discuss in brief "showing" and "telling" methods of characterization. Which method does Shashi Deshpande follow? (50 words)
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.....
- 3) How do men seem to exert their influence in this novel? (10 words)
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.....
- 4) Fill in the blanks:
 - i) Shashi Deshpande portrays characters from the urban Indian (working class/middle class).
 - ii) The art of a novelist lies in creating characters out of fictional situations (wooden/living).
 - iii) When a character reveals himself/herself it is called (telling/showing).
 - iv) 's remarks show Urmi's physical characteristics (Amrut/Dr. Bhaskar).

4.3 CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL

We shall now discuss the main characters in the novel. As we have already seen, there are more than a dozen characters who contribute to the plot. They all are important in one way or the other, but only a few are the real motivating factors. So, we shall discuss these: Urmi, Kishore, Mira, Akka, Shakutai and Kalpana.

4.3.1 Urmi

Urmi holds a pivotal position in the novel. The plot takes shape and comes alive through her consciousness and the reader has no choice but to judge others as

Urmi wants them to be judged. From her interaction with others and from her thoughts we get a fairly accurate picture.

Urmi is an urban, educated middle class woman of modern India. She is a lecturer. She appears to be active and smart. In physical appearance, she is dark, as Dr. Bhaskar points out. She is plain looking, wears glasses and blouses that don't match with her sarees, which shows that she is not very particular about her appearance. As a mother, Urmi is tender and has an all-engulfing love for her children. She looks after Kartik well and the boy seems to have no complaints as Vanaa's daughter Mandira has. Urmi is completely shattered by her daughter's death. When the novel opens we meet an angry, brooding and impatient Urmi. She is sensitive and keeps on thinking of her daughter. In fact, she does not want to forget the pain. "This pain is all that's left to me of Anu, without it, there will be nothing left to me of her; I will lose her entirely" (p. 9). Urmi knows that with time her grief and the associated pain will go, it will be a thing of the past. At present, her wound is too raw to be forgotten and her daughter's memory haunts her all the time. The memory that "haunts me most often is that of her angry face when I tried to wean her" (p. 21). Urmi is so shaken by her daughter's death that even simple, everyday questions irritate her. For example, when Shakutai asks "how many children do you have?" or when Dr. Bhaskar makes a normal query, she feels suffocated.

Urmi is sensitive from another angle also. Though she is grief-stricken, she does not want sympathy. It hurts her when Vanaa tries to make light conversation to take her out of her grief. Urmi understands Vanaa's motives but instead of appreciating Vanaa she blurts out, "Well, what are you trying to say? ... Why don't you say it straight off, Vanaa? I know what you're trying to tell me" (p. 25). This is because Urmi is independent by nature. She is strong-willed and she does not like people's sympathy. She would rather face her grief alone, stoically, than to present the "poor Urmi" image.

This does not mean that Urmi is insensitive and unsympathetic. She empathises with Shakutai. She is the only one to stand by Shakutai and her family when others keep away from them. She spends a lot of time with Shakutai, listens to her problems, helps her and visits her so often that her mother objects to her getting involved in this case. Urmi does not care for public opinion. As long as she is fighting for a just cause, it does not matter what people say. Contrary to her outward hardness, Urmi is tender and emotional. She has sympathy for the suffering women—Mira, Kalpana, Shakutai and Sulu. She even identifies with them. Shakutai's wailing reminds her of Mira's cry of despair: "How clear it comes to me across the years, her cry of rage and anguish, 'why does this have to happen to me?' Shakutai asked me. Why? My own question comes back to me—why?" (p. 67).

This shows her vulnerability. Urmi's nervous tension becomes clear to us when she recounts her nightmares:

I am running along the sea. There's someone else with me.... I can hear the footsteps, I can hear the heavy breathing, but I cannot see whoever it is I have to keep running Now it is becoming difficult; the sand, soft and squishy under my feet, keeps dragging me down .. I can't go on ... I can't go on ... (p16).

There are four more nightmares that express her trauma and reveal her shattered state of mind. But Urmi keeps these nightmares to herself and does not share them with others. She would rather show her image as a strong woman than to show her scars to others to get their sympathy.

Urmi is free, frank and without inhibitions. She has firm ideas about giving independence to others and she wants her own independence preserved. On the night of their marriage, when Kishore sings a line from a popular Hindi movie, which indicates “we are trapped,” she walks out of their bed-room. She means to tell him that their love would never be a trap. Urmi values love, not lust; she likes equality, not women’s submissiveness and men’s domination. It pains her to find that such claims are not honoured by society. On a personal level, however, she does what she wants. She is friendly with Dr. Bhaskar Jain. Vanaa, Inni and others object to her growing interest in him but she considers him just a friend, an equal and asserts that there could be nothing objectionable in their friendship. Bhaskar enables her to talk about her innermost feelings about the loss of Anu, about her Baiajji and her girlhood in Ranidurg. She looks at him as an ideal “companion”. The society, however, is evaluative. Urmi knows this, her mother’s “uneasiness is palpable”, she says, “She doesn’t like my going out with Bhaskar, nor does Vanaa. ‘Do you expect me to live like a cloistered nun just because I’m married?’ I asked Vanaa irritably” (p. 115). This shows Urmi’s self-confidence and speaks of her deep love for Kishore, which remains unshaken despite her momentary disillusionment.

Urmi has clear ideas about women’s rights. She does not flaunt her feminism but she asserts that Kalpana’s case should be made public; she gives the details to the press; and she also wants to publish Mira’s poems so that women get heard. Though theoretically she is right, socially such a resolution is neither viable nor appreciable.

She believes that women suffer because they do not express themselves. Expressing one’s resentment can be oral, through the media, or through writing. Urmi is determined to publish Mira’s poems but the author does not reveal whether Urmi is successful in her attempt or not. When one lives in a society and a family, one has to be considerate and Urmi cannot be inconsiderate to Kishore and Vanaa.

This shows her social and familial relationships. With her brother, Amrut, she has a tender relationship. They exchange pleasantries, argue, reminiscence their past and enjoy each other’s company. Of the two, Urmi is dominating, being the elder sister and Amrut good-naturally accepts her attitude. Urmi’s relations with her mother are strained and she is often disrespectful to Inni. There is no malice, only anger in Urmi’s heart that her mother had deliberately sent her to Ranidurg so as to be free from the responsibility of a girl-child. This misunderstanding clears towards the end when Urmi learns the actual facts. She feels sorry for Inni who could never utter a word against Papa’s decision. Urmi’s relations with Vanaa are tender and the two understand each other despite Urmi’s high-handedness in dealing with Vanaa. Urmi and Akka (daughter-in-law and mother-in-law) have no problems; rather, Urmi is tender to her. Thus Urmi, though sharp-tongued, is successful in maintaining relationships.

By the end of the novel, Urmi emerges as a strong character. She has come out of her grief, she can face life. Looking at the brighter side of life she resolves to get on with the daily business of living because despite the threat of death, life has to be lived.

4.3.2 Kishore

Kishore is Urmi’s husband. He is Mira’s son and Vanaa’s half-brother. He is a remote figure, very reticent, taciturn and not given to expressing much. But he is sentimental at the core of his heart. Urmi sees him shedding tears silently at night after Anu’s death. As a husband he is supportive. Somehow, his presence is strength-giving and Urmi feels secure when he is about. But being in the Merchant

Navy, Kishore is absent from the novel, and cannot provide much of his company to his wife who often craves for him.

From Urmi's account of him, we learn that Kishore is open-minded. He is earning a lot but he does not mind his wife working. Urmi does not need money but she is fiercely independent and spends only what she earns, not from what Kishore sends her. Kishore is aware of this trait of his wife but he does not interfere in her way of life, nor does he try to influence any of her decisions. This is the reason why Urmi considers herself "fortunate", having choices and the freedom to exercise those choices.

Kishore is of a quiet nature. He had been Urmi's neighbour at Ranidurg. Even as a young man, his approach to Urmi was respectful and considerate. The two families were close, i.e. Kishore's family comprising Vanaa (his sister), Akka (his mother) and their father; and Urmi's grandparents (Baiajji and Aju) and Urmi being Vanaa's friend was often in their home but Kishore never became unduly friendly to her. Urmi remembers two incidents from their childhood: one, when Kishore was in Ranidurg during his vacation and he drove Vanaa and Urmi in Aju's car; and second, during Aju's demise. Kishore's presence of mind and helpfulness impressed Urmi so much that she fell in love with taciturn Kishore. Kishore proved to be an ideal husband and Urmi is happy with him except that sometimes she resents his unapproachable attitude. She regrets, "Kishore will never remove his armour, there is something in him I will never reach" (p. 141). She craves for "companionship", which Kishore cannot give her. But Kishore is a loving and understanding husband and a doting father. Thus despite his absence through out the novel, Kishore emerges with life-like precision.

4.3.3 Mira

Mira was Kishore's mother who died in childbirth leaving her one-day old child. Her character comes out wholly through her diaries, poems and other writings and Urmi's comments on them. Mira comes up alive through this technique as an educated young woman who was very advanced for her times. From her photographs Urmi imagines her to be "dreamy-eyed", plain but attractive.

We cannot ascertain the exact time when Mira was growing up but from the various clues provided at random we can make out that it must have been when women's education was accepted but not their freedom of expression. And according to Shashi Deshpande's casual remark in an interview, Mira seems to have been married in the 1950s. She was an attractive young girl, vivacious and active to have attracted attention. A young man got so infatuated with her that he managed to propose to her family and marry her. The marriage could have been a happy one, had Mira accepted it on male terms. She did not. She had her own ideas about life and she felt miserable with her husband's obsessive love.

Mira was eighteen and talented. She probably did not have any aspirations to becoming a working woman but she did aspire to write poetry and to be accepted as a poet. This we can establish through the incident when she met the poet Venu. An entry in her diary read thus: "Written on my thirteenth birthday" and it recorded her meeting with Venu, the poet, and her secret desire to write like him. Reading this entry Urmi surmises that Mira was already a writer, "aspiring for eternity" (p. 65). Mira wrote but she was afraid of showing her poems to anybody lest they laugh at her. Mira's diary entry clearly shows her urge to write, her fear of ridicule and her questioning conscience. "Will I ever be able to write like this? Today, after hearing him, I know this is what I want—to be able to write like this. But I can't believe I ever can. And, thank God, I never say this aloud. They will laugh at me" (pp. 65-66).

Mira was fascinated by Venu's poetry. She aspired to write like him and wanted to show him her poems. She, therefore, met him again. At this second meeting she showed her poems to him. The poet's reaction was not encouraging. It was the stock male response saying that women do not need to write. Their poetry is to give "birth to children" (p. 127) Mira resents this male view of women as breeders. She even resented her mother's self-effacing attitude, and she had a clear vision that she would not like to be like her mother.

Her diary entries show her relationship with her parents. She was closer to her father than to her mother. She did not want to be like her mother—self-obliterating, mute and helpless. "Nothing. That was all she could do in her entire life—nothing. Don't ask me", she used to say to us. "Nothing is in my hand" (p. 126). Mira hated such self-effacement and she rejected her mother. She wrote: "To make myself in your image/was never the goal I sought" (p. 124).

What was her goal? It was probably to be innovative, to be a part of a new order. One of her earlier verses shows this:

Come my brothers, come, my sisters,
let us join our hands;
a new road, a new way
a new age to begin (p. 44)

Mira was rebellious, in a way. Of course in the patriarchal system she did not have any chance to speak out but she said 'no' whenever she could. She was also possessive of her identity and resented when they changed her first name after her marriage. They called her *Nirmala* but Mira would not respond to this name. She wondered how a stroke of a pen could change her identity.

Despite all her anger, despair and fears, Mira was not an unwomanly woman. She loved life and wanted to live. The constant fear lurking in her writing was that she may cease to be. It seems to be a kind of premonition. Mira loved life after she became pregnant. The "spring of life" stirring within her made her happy. It was the joy of approaching motherhood. Mira was never happy as a wife, but she could be a happy mother. The author, however, does not give us the chance to know this because Mira dies in childbirth, leaving her space for Akka.

4.3.4 Shakutai

The most unfortunate woman in *The Binding Vine* is Shakutai, Kalpana's mother. She has no social status, no monetary standing, no family life and very few choices. She is the representative of the vast lower class population of our cities who just pull on. Life is drudgery for them and without social backing and financial strength it is crippling.

Shakutai lives in a *chawl* in Bombay with her three children—Kalpana, Sandhya and Prakash. She is working in a school, probably as a peon, and hence is economically independent. Her husband has deserted her for another woman, leaving her insecure and that is why she turns to Sulu's husband Prabhakar for male support. However, this desperate need for support makes her vulnerable. It also makes her falter in her assessment of Prabhakar's motives. Usually, women are sensitive to male moves; they judge male advances quickly. Unfortunately, Shakutai makes a mistake in judging Prabhakar, which is because of her love for Sulu and her dependence on Prabhakar. She has faith in him and she cannot understand that Kalpana's earlier refusal to stay with her Sulu Mausi could have a deeper meaning. She thinks Kalpana is being whimsical. When Kalpana comes back stubbornly refusing to go to Sulu, Shakutai's reaction is predictable. "Die then", she cursed Kalpana, "What do I care? What can I give you but dry chappaties and one set of clothes?" (p. 111).

Shakutai's anger is understandable. She loves her children, is concerned for their safety and wants them to have a comfortable life. She understands the handicap of being uneducated and without support; she is put to hardships in the callous big city and she does not want history to be repeated in the case of her children. She wants them to be educated. The eldest being Kalpana, Shakutai sends her to Sulu. "I wanted her to have all that I never had—education, a good life, a good marriage, and respect from others. Look at me—what am I? I don't want my children to be like me" (p.112), Shakutai tells Urmi. This is normal—the dream of a mother for her children.

As a woman, Shakutai knows her limits and she is content to live within that boundary. There are pitfalls outside and she would rather be safe within. This is not acceptable to Kalpana. She is not mature enough to understand fear. She crosses her limits, dresses up well, flaunts her youth and gets trapped. This is how Shakutai looks at the entire episode. She repudiates Kalpana's love for good things. According to her the best option for Kalpana was to marry Prabhakar, be a co-wife with Sulu and be happy. She could not see beyond this.

Unfortunately, Kalpana cannot ever toe the line set for her by her mother. The mother-daughter relations are strained. Shakutai is unhappy with Kalpana because of her obstinacy and Kalpana is unhappy with her mother's do's and don'ts. Shakutai, calls her "self-willed" though she admires her secretly for her smartness. "She is very smart, that's how she got that job in the shop" (p. 92), Shakutai feels proud when she recounts this to Urmi. Shakutai, as a deprived and dispossessed mother herself, fails to understand her daughter's dreams.

Dreams are not alien to Shakutai though. As a woman, Shakutai too had her dreams: Dreams of a happy married life, of a good, understanding husband, and of owning things. She tells Urmi that one of her dreams had been to get a cooking gas connection and the second one was to have a "*mangalsutra* made in gold" (p. 110). The dreams withered in the face of life's realities. Her life with her husband was pathetic and she is filled with anger when she talks about him. The man was worthless and she decided not to have a *mangalsutra*.

The full pathos of Shakutai's life bursts upon us after Sulu's death. She is inconsolable. We shudder to think of her condition with Sulu gone, Kalpana struggling between life and death, her son going wayward and the entire fabric of life shattered.

4.3.5 Kalpana

Shashi Deshpande has modelled Kalpana on the nurse about whom she tells us in one of her interviews. The nurse was "a very pretty, attractive woman, a radiant kind of person" and so is Kalpana. The readers meet Kalpana only after her mutilated body has been brought to the hospital. There is no chance of meeting her in person. The author gives this responsibility to her mother Shakutai to portray her daughter. Kalpana's character takes shape slowly through Shakutai's outbursts. She is the only source through whom we learn that Kalpana was self-willed, obstinate, fond of dressing up and smart. People like the police officer and the doctors paint her as a tainted young woman. Urmi's comments are however, positive. It gives the picture of Kalpana as a young, vivacious girl who loved life. Thus, Kalpana becomes a palpable reality.

Our first encounter with Kalpana is not a happy one. The girl's honour is lost, she has been raped and her bruised body is lying in the hospital, in a state of coma. Later, the police officer conjectures that Kalpana must be a "professional". By implication it means that "such" a woman deserves what she got. The doctors

have a little milder version. They feel that she must have had a boy friend and when she was coming home after enjoying with him, she was knocked down by some vehicle. These are negative ideas. Kalpana in this case does not get our sympathy. But the author wants to create a good picture and the real Kalpana emerges through Shakutai's laments.

First of all, let us admit that Kalpana was not a girl of easy morals. We have to read between the lines to arrive at this conclusion. Kalpana refuses to stay with Sulu and her husband and nothing can induce her to go back. Shakutai gets irritated at her stubbornness. Her plan was to keep Kalpana with Sulu for her education. Shakutai fails to see anything fishy, as Kalpana does not tell her the real reason. It is only after the incident that we get a faint idea about Prabhakar's amorous advances and Kalpana's resentment. Shakutai grasps the meaning of Kalpana's stubborn refusal only when it is too late. And if Kalpana had a boy friend, it can be understood as normal. After all, having a boyfriend and dreaming of marrying him is not a crime. And we exonerate Kalpana from any charge of being a flirt.

From Shakutai's remarks we see that Kalpana was smart. She got a job in a shop because she could speak English. Shakutai is proud of her daughter's persistence and carefree attitude. "People in our chawl used to laugh at her, but she didn't care. When she wants something, she goes after it, nothing can stop her" (p. 92). This assessment gives us one side of the picture. The other side is that she was stubborn and secretive, as she did not share anything with her mother.

Shakutai blames Kalpana for having brought disaster on herself and on the family. According to her, Kalpana dressed gaudily, used nail-polish and lipstick and attracted the male-gaze. Whatever the mother may say, Urmī understands that Kalpana loved life. It is not a crime to enjoy life's joys and small pleasures.

Kalpana had her own plans for life, her own dreams. She had the courage to repel the advances of Prabhakar, to reject his offer of marriage and to make known her decision to marry a boy of her choice. She is punished for crossing the limits of a woman's existence, and for exercising her free will and harbouring dreams. Kalpana may not revive from her coma, but she presents two contradictory pictures: she may be a role model for some and a warning to other young girls.

Check Your Progress II

- 1) Write three sentences to describe Urmī's physical appearance.
.....
.....
.....
- 2) Describe briefly Mira's aspiration to be a poet. Who thwarts it? (50 words)
.....
.....
.....
- 3) Write a note on the two incidents at Ranidurg that drew Urmī to Kishore. (100 words)
.....
.....
.....

4) **One word answer:**

- i) Urmi called her grandmother
- ii) Shashi Deshpande uses the technique of to reveal her characters.
- iii) Anu's full name was
- iv) Urmi has nightmares.
- v) Amrut stayed in

4.4 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we discussed Shashi Deshpande's art of characterization and drew a few character sketches from *The Binding Vine*. We also spoke about the importance of characters for a work of fiction. We talked about Shashi Deshpande's art of characterization, and made you see the main characters in the novel as human beings with their peculiar motives, strengths and weaknesses.

4.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

1. Shashi Deshpande focuses on women characters who are very life-like. They are ordinary beings that face up to whatever life throws at them. This gives them a lot of strength. She acquaints the readers intimately with her characters' speech, thought and actions, so that they become real humans.
2. These are the methods a writer adopts to portray his/her characters. In "showing", the author lets the character reveal himself/herself through his/her actions and words. The author does not comment. In "telling" method, the author is involved in describing a character's actions, words, and motives. He/she also evaluates those actions. Shashi Deshpande uses the "showing" method.
3. They exert their influence through the patriarchal power structure.
- 4
 - i) middle class
 - ii) living
 - iii) showing
 - iv) Bhaskar's

Check Your Progress II

1. She is dark complexioned. She wears glasses. She is casual in dressing up.
2. Mira, as a college student, aspired to be a poet. She was very impressed by the poet Venu and she wanted to write like him. She wrote charming verses that were inspirational in the beginning but she hid them for fear of ridicule. Later in life, after her marriage her poems became grim, exuding fear and despair. When Mira met the poet Venu and she showed him her poems, he just thwarted her dreams, advising her to leave poetry to men.
3. The first is when Kishore drives Vaana and Urmi to their destination in Aju's car in Ranidurg. The second is during Aju's demise when he shows his helpfulness and presence of mind.
4. (i) Baiajji, (ii) Showing (iii) Anusha (iv) Five (v) Delhi.