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Fragmented Identities and Cultural Reflections in Indian Some Women's Writing

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the study of emerging, potent voices of selected women writers, Shashi Deshpande, Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Belonging to India gives these writers certain common ethical values and identity, while the differences between them result from the fact that living abroad widens the mental horizons of Indian women. These women are no doubt conditioned by the Indian upbringing but have risen above the traditional constraints. This paper attempts to describe the crisis and solution to ethical values and identity from India living in in the layers of selected works of Indian women writers. There is constant interplay of nostalgia and reality in their works. At a deeper level they show a conflict between tradition and modernity. The trials and tribulations and the struggle to maintain the modern values and to carve out an identity of their own in the new and ostensibly stifling environment of her protagonists makes them a feminist.

Keywords: Ethical Values; Hybridity; Self-discovery; Multiculturalism.

Introduction

The exploration of women's identities and their ethical dilemmas is a recurring theme in Indian English literature. These narratives often reflect the fragmented identities of women who grapple with societal expectations, cultural traditions, and personal aspirations. In a rapidly modernizing world, Indian women find themselves at the intersection of traditional values and contemporary challenges, striving to reconcile the two. Writers like Shashi Deshpande, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni delve into these complexities, portraying women who navigate crises of identity, cultural dislocation, and ethical self-discovery. Through characters such as Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Shobha in Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, and Sumita in Divakaruni's "Clothes," these authors offer a nuanced portrayal of the struggles and triumphs of women seeking to redefine themselves amidst fragmented cultural and social realities. This discussion examines how these literary works illuminate the journey of women as they confront ethical crises, rediscover their intrinsic values, and redefine their identities in a multifaceted cultural landscape.

Shashi Deshpande Jhumpa Laheri and Chitra Banerjee Divakarunu, are three renowned Indian English women short story authors who have been studied in this assignment. Each writer's brief information is discussed below. Shashi Deshpande has identified a number of ethical issues that middle-class women face. Her preoccupation has been with the loss of identity of women in patriarchal Indian society.

Sarita alias Saru, the heroine of the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, tries to break free from the routine of her life. Not only drudgery, but also physical, moral and psychological crisis. In this story of a



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troubled wife, Shashi Deshpande portrays a young smart woman who is a great doctor but has lost her ethical values and identity by her not-so-successful husband who is a teacher. Nilanjana Sudeshna Laheri, better known as Jhumpa Laheri, was born to an Indian family in England on July 11, 1967. In 1999, she published her debut collection of short stories, Interpreter of Maladies. Jhumpa Laheri depicts cultural diversity, ethical value crisis, a sense of fragile identities, and cultural tensions through the protagonists of her short story. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is another Indian women writer who brings out the character a new identity in her writings.

The basic aims and objectives for my study of Identity in the short stories of selected Indian English women writers are:

- 1. Assessment the contribution of select expatriate women short story writers.
- 2. To study the issues of ethical issues and identity in Indian diasporic writers in general and the works of selected women writers in particular.

Discussion

Women's issues are addressed in a number of Indian books. However, the treatment is frequently superficial, and the novels end up extolling stereotyped traits rather than deep ethical ideals of the Indian lady, such as prudence, courage, patience, devotion, and submissive acceptance of whatever is thrown at her. In the sense that it tackles the crises of a woman's ethical value and identity, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a very different work. In Indian English fiction, it's a refreshingly new phenomena In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* Saru uses her time.

Women's issues are addressed in a number of Indian books. However, the treatment is frequently superficial, and the novels end up extolling stereotyped traits rather than deep ethical ideals of the Indian lady, such as prudence, courage, patience, devotion, and at her father's house to reflect on her relationship with her husband, her deceased mother and brother, Dhruva, and her children Renu and Abhi. She has a deeper understanding of herself and others, despite the fact that she remains unchanged till the end. This gives her the confidence to face reality, and the darkness no longer terrifies her. Saru appears to be a befuddled, forlorn, uninteresting, nearly stupid recluse when she arrives at her father's house. She is promptly passed here. The traditional Hindu woman emerges only to vanish all too quickly. She comes here to find her feeling of belonging to the world as new identity after being estranged from her spouse, despite the fact that she had already lost herself unknowingly.

Saru's search progresses in two directions at the same time—as an individual and as a female—only to converge at a later stage, yet both are crucial to her. She fervently hopes that her father will not be uninterested in her. Her mental state is one of astonishment and bewilderment, despite the fact that she is part of an oddly almost happy family of four.

The narrative continues with the journey of Sarita (Saru), an anxious, eager, ambitious, self-assured, and self-righteous lady who, after much toil, succeeds in gaining her "self." Her journey leads her to discover the strength in people that allows them to live a happy life. Saru finally found a way to master ethical crisis and identity. She consequently attains a happy life. "I was an ugly girl At least my mother told me so. I am ugly. I stood in front of the mirror and mouthed the words to myself. And as I stood there, she came up to me, saying ... how many times must I tell you? Looking at yourself in the mirror! I'll give you a certificate to say that you're beautiful will that satisfy you? ... (Saru thinks infuriously) If you are a woman, I don't want to be one."(Shashi,p.61)



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Saru, a representative of middle-class working women in modern India, strives to settle with the prevailing reality in the novel *The Dark Holds No Terror*. When Saru, the doctor, is genuinely interested in her work and her patients. And her professional success casts a dark, negative shadow on her wedded life; she goes through a traumatic experience but bravely stands up to it. She discovers that fleeing is never a solution and that she is her own sanctuary after a long and difficult ordeal. Deshpande strives to develop woman as a person identity through Saru, and to refine one's ethical ideals in accordance with the changing social environment of the present era. Mirror becomes the tool to identify personal life. At the same time, she has considerable control over both her personal life and her professional life. Returning to their birthplace affords no womb-like protection, but it does allow them to ask questions they had never dared to ask themselves. Saru, a medical doctor, had married a low-cued Manohar and had moved out on her parents against their desires. But, using her mother's death as an excuse, she returns to her father's house in the hopes of finding solace away from her husband's terrifying and incomprehensible sadism. Unable to adjust to the social demands, Saru withdraws within; to probe into her inner ethical principles and attempts to understand her hidden ethical values and norms, in a way, she rediscovers her personality and digs up her hidden skills and learns not to suppress her talents. Here the crisis is personality in ethical values. However she finds it sooner.

She is keenly aware of her underlying ethical principles and uses them to overcome obstacles in her life. She's worried, excited, and has ambitions... confused, sad, uninteresting, and practically mindless, as well as a loner on the run. Saru requires this little period of seclusion in order to overcome her uncertainties about her life and relationships. She discovers her inherent ethical principles and informs her father to ask Manohar to wait. Her isolation is not escapist, but rather necessary for her reintegration back into identity. She is able to shatter the illusions she has made and bravely face life.

Saru seeks refuge in her marriage. As Indian woman a marriage becomes another identity for motherhood. In Shashi Deshpande's own words, "Marriage invariably takes you to the world of women, of trying to please, of the fear of not pleasing, of surrender, of self-abnegation. To love another and to retain yourself intact- is that possible? To assert yourself and not to be aggressive, to escape domination and not to dominate?" (*Indian Women Novelists*, p.35)

About Identity Jhumpa Lahiri stated in an interview: "The questions of identity is always difficult one, but especially so far for those who are currently displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children. The older I get, the more aware am I that I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways I am more American than they are. In facts it is still very hard for me to think as American. For immigrants the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing for their children." (Choube,p. 01)

Migrants' collective cultural assimilations develop identity consciousness among them by creating and encouraging a homely atmosphere in response to the demands of the occasion, ceremony, festivals, or other gathering occasions. In place of the one of the host country, they always follow all cultural and social customs according to their origin traditions and rites. Among the cultural discrepancy of a multicultural culture, these construct their origin identity and make them emotional integrate to their native root. Stuart Hall explains identity. According to Hall "Identities are never unified and in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, other intersections and antagonistic, discourse, practices and positions. "(Hall,p. 04)



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Through the protagonists of her short story, Jhumpa Laheri portrays cultural variety, a sense of fragile identities, and cultural confrontations. In the first story of the Interpreter of Maladies, Shobha feels as if she is in India, her native nation from which she is displaced, in her remembering retelling of India. Her unfulfilled longing to be linked with her ancestor's basic rituals is depicted through recalling memories of former celebrations of the "Rice Ceremony" in India. She shares her emotional feelings with Shukumar, her husband by recollecting her memory of one of the rice ceremony in the following lines: "It's like India," Shobha said, watching him tend his makeshift candelabra. "Sometimes the current disappears for hours at a stretch. I once had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark. The baby just cried and cried. It must have been so hot."(IM,p.11)

Their dreams of celebrating their child's rice ceremony in front of all of their relatives and friends have not come true. Rice ceremony is a part of the family's traditional rites for the new born infant. Also brings them together by instilling a sense of belonging, yet it distinguishes them by establishing identities from the host culture. When she talks about the Rice ceremony in India, which she visited once, it clarifies her inner emotional connection with her ancestral culture even more. Homi Bhabha rightly opines, "In the restless drive for cultural translation, hybridity opens up a cleavage in the language of culture which suggests that similitude of the symbol as it plays across cultural sites must not obscure the fact that repetition of the sign is, in each social practice, both different and differential." (Bhabha,p. 314) So there is always solution to crisis in ethical values and identity of self in cultural translation.

The identity of the Indian characters is essential to the story "The Blessed House." Sanjeev and Twinkle hold opposing religious ideas. Sanjeev prefers to be classified as Hindu-Indian, whereas Twinkle seems unconcerned with her adopted religion. She is enthralled by Christ's idols and things associated with Christianity. Sanjeev isn't fond of her wife's demeanour. He reminds her: "We are not Christian". Sanjeev said......She shrugged. "No we're not Christian. We're good little Hindus." She planted a kiss on top of Christ's head, then placed the statue on top of the fireplace mantel, which needed, Sanjeev observed, to be dusted. (IM,p. 137)

Even at the party, attendees inquire about Sanjeev's faith because Twinkle has decorated in this manner. But Sanjeev clarifies it by explaining his identity in the following words: "I hope you don't mind my asking," Douglas said, "but I noticed the statue outside, and are you guys Christian? I thought you were Indian." "There are Christian in India", Sanjeev replied, "but we're not." (IM,p.151)

In the last story, narrator has fear about his own son who was born and brought up in the America cannot speak Bengali. But he encourages his son about this in the following words: "if I can survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer," and "while the astronauts, heroes forever, spent more hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years." (IM,p.198)

The story includes descriptions of Indian cultural features. Because of her clothing, the narrator thinks he recognized his wife at the airport. His wife may have physically left her homeland, but her customs, behaviour, and attitude in the alien land identify her as an Indian. They decide to attend since she does not like that her son is unaware of their culture. The following narration emphasizes the significance of immigrants' cultural heritage from their home country: "......She weeps for our son. So we drive it to Cambridge to visit him or bring him home for a weekend so that he can eat rice with us with his hands and speak in Bengali."(IM, p.197)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is another Indian women writer who brings out the character a new identity: Sumita in the story "Clothes" accepts new culture and her new identity after wearing a T-shirt as she fee-



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ls: "The T-shirt is sunrise-orange-the color, I decide, of joy, of my new American life." (AM,p. 25) Sumita, a bold woman, wants to join the shop to support Somesh, but tragedy strikes when Somesh is shot at the store late at night. Sumita was in a very terrible circumstance. Because of the cultural hurdles in clothing and the challenges that widows experience, she decides not to return to India. Finally, she dresses in an almond-colored shirt and skirt. The movie follows the terrible journey of an Indian woman who becomes a widow after only a few months of marriage. She observes all rites, including the Bengal Broke, which is performed by a widow woman. As Sumita describes the tragic flaw: "Old Mrs. Ghosh performed the ritual, since she's a widow, too she took my hands in hers and brought them down hard on the bed post, so that the glass Bengals I was wearing shattered and multicolored shards flew out in every direction." (AM,p. 29)

At last, she decides not to return to India as she says: "That's when I know I can't go back; I don't know yet how I'II manage here in this new dangerous land. I only know I must, because all over India at this very moment. Widows in white Saris are bowing their veiled heads serving tea to in-laws. Doves with cut off wings." (AM,p. 33)

Fragmented Identities in Shashi Deshpande's Works

1. Conflict Between Tradition and Modernity

The protagonists of Shashi Deshpande's works frequently struggle with balancing their own ambitions with those of society. The protagonist of That Long Silence (1988), Jaya, is a middle-class housewife who stifles her creativity in order to conform to the expectations of the ideal wife. She expresses her dissatisfaction in an internal monologue: "What would happen if I were to leave the stillness that has engulfed me? Would it be freedom or insanity? (Page 143 of Deshpande, 1988). A recurrent theme is the disintegration of identity as women like Jaya try to balance the conflict between claiming their individuality and upholding tradition.

2. Gender Roles and Patriarchal Norms

One characteristic that distinguishes Deshpande's writings is the influence of patriarchy. In Sarita's marriage, she experiences both physical and emotional abuse in The Dark Holds No Terrors (1980). Being divided between her responsibilities as a caretaker and the trauma her spouse inflicted is the cause of her fractured identity. The gendered assumptions that deprive women of agency and compel them into subordinate roles are criticized in the book.

3. Personal Versus Social Identity

The protagonists' sense of self is broken in many of Deshpande's stories by the conflict between their individual identities and their social responsibilities. Women are schooled into silence and obedience, as Jaya considers in That Long Silence: "We've learned to fit ourselves so tightly into the space given to us, that we cannot move outside it." (Page 120 of Deshpande, 1988).

4. Psychological Fragmentation

Deshpande frequently uses her characters' internal monologues to illustrate their psychological difficulties. Through self-reflection, her protagonists reveal their uncertainties, anxieties, and attempts at self-reconstruction. These reflective periods bring to light the emotional upheaval brought on by their disjointed lifestyles.



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Fragmented Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri's Works

1. The Immigrant Experience and Fragmented Identity

Characters in Lahiri's works frequently struggle with a conflicting sense of identity between their Indian ancestry and the Western civilization they live in. "Being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 49) is how Ashima Ganguli's life in The Namesake (2003) exemplifies this fragmentation as she navigates her role as an immigrant mother.

Ashima tries to preserve her Bengali heritage while assimilating into a foreign culture for her family's sake, which causes her identity to become divided.

2. Gendered Expectations and Cultural Identity

Lahiri regularly examines how gender and culture interact, especially how women are responsible for maintaining traditional customs in diasporic communities. The tale "Hell-Heaven" in Unaccustomed Earth (2008) depicts the fractured identity of Aparna, a Bengali immigrant who feels cut off from her Americanized husband and kid. Her struggle illustrates the dual demands of upholding customs while negotiating contemporary independence.

3. Generational Tensions and Fragmentation

Lahiri illustrates how identity issues, particularly in immigrant households, are exacerbated by generational differences. While Gogol's wife, Moushumi, represents the shattered experience of second-generation immigrants, where the demands of assimilation conflict with the need to preserve cultural heritage, Gogol's mother, Ashima, represents the first-generation immigrant identity in The Namesake. Particularly for women who are torn between conflicting expectations, this generational conflict results in a fractured sense of self.

4. Loneliness and Isolation

In their cultural dualism, Lahiri's female protagonists frequently feel alone. Mrs. Das from "The Interpreter of Maladies" (1999) is a representation of a woman who is torn by her secrets and the gap between her inner self and her expected roles as a wife and mother. Similar to this, Shoba's grief over her stillborn kid in "A Temporary Matter" further shatters her identity as a wife and a woman.

Fragmented Identities in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Works

1. Displacement and Fragmentation

Tilo, the main character in The Mistress of Spices (1997), is a magical spice mistress who has to serve others while repressing her own identity and aspirations. As she battles between her mythical duty as a guardian of Indian customs and her own desire for love and independence, Tilo's fractured identity is clear. "I am not who you believe me to be. I am a Mistress of Spices, and my name is Tilo. (Divakaruni, 1997, p. 10). The conflict between obligation and individual goals, which appears frequently in Divakaruni's writing, is reflected in this dualism.

2. Cultural Expectations and Individual Freedom

Divakaruni frequently illustrates how women are torn between their own want for autonomy and the norms of Indian society. The lives of Anju and Sudha in Sister of My Heart (1999) are influenced by customs that specify their duties as moms, wives, and daughters. As they try to strike a balance between their urge for self-expression and cultural allegiance, both ladies struggle with divided identities.

"The role we play in each other's lives ultimately comes down to necessity rather than choice" (Divakaruni, 1999, p. 233).



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3. Generational Conflicts and Fragmentation

One of the main causes of identity fragmentation in Divakaruni's works is the conflict between generations. Rakhi, a second-generation American immigrant, finds it difficult to reconcile her American upbringing with her mother's Indian background in Queen of Dreams (2004). Her incapacity to completely identify with any culture is the root cause of her fractured sense of self.

4. Trauma and Emotional Fragmentation

In Divakaruni's works, emotional pain also breaks identities. Anju and Sudha, who are separated by distance and circumstances, experience emotional upheavals in The Vine of Desire (2002) that make them reevaluate their positions and relationships. The displacement that many immigrant women go through is reflected in this emotional disintegration.

Common Findings and Critical Responses Across Lahiri, Deshpande, and Divakaruni

When comparing the works of Jhumpa Lahiri, Shashi Deshpande, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, several common themes and literary techniques emerge. These authors, while distinct in style and focus, share significant overlaps in their exploration of fragmented identities and cultural reflections, particularly as they relate to Indian women.

Common Themes and Findings

1. Fragmented Identities and Diasporic Experiences

Although their settings differ, all three writers discuss the disintegration of identities. Lahiri depicts the struggle to strike a balance between Indian ancestry and Western assimilation, concentrating on the bicultural issues of immigrants and second-generation people. Similar ground is covered by Divakaruni, which highlights the emotional and cultural disarray experienced by immigrant women torn between contemporary Western ideals and Indian customs. While without specifically addressing diaspora, Deshpande addresses the internal division brought about by gender norms, patriarchal systems, and cultural expectations in India.

Although critics value their nuanced depictions of identity, they occasionally contend that their writings oversimplify the experiences of women and immigrants by simplifying their difficult situations.

2. The Role of Women as Cultural Custodians

Women are often portrayed by the writers as the main cultural keepers. Immigrant moms like Ashima (The Namesake) attempt to preserve cultural customs in Lahiri's novels, but they frequently encounter opposition from their offspring. As demonstrated in The Mistress of Spices and Arranged Marriage, Divakaruni presents women as the custodians of Indian culture, frequently through cuisine, stories, and rituals. Deshpande considers how women in Indian homes bear the burden of upholding social and familial standards, frequently at considerable personal expense. While critics have applauded their attempts to place women at the center of cultural narratives, they also point out that these representations occasionally run the risk of upholding rather than questioning traditional gender roles.

3. Marriage and Patriarchal Constraints

In their works, marriage is a crucial motif that emphasizes how marriage molds and occasionally shatters women's identities. In pieces like The Dark Holds No Terrors, Deshpande criticizes the oppressive features of marriage, where a woman's identity is stifled by her marital duty.

As in Sister of My Heart, Divakaruni portrays weddings in immigrant settings where cultural norms frequently conflict with individual preferences. Lahiri depicts the alienation and miscommunications that



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result from cultural differences in her examination of marital dynamics in bicultural contexts (Unaccustomed Earth). Critics praise them for highlighting the difficulties of marriage, but contend that certain stories may focus too much on women's pain without offering a remedy or a vision for empowerment.

4. Generational and Cultural Tensions

A common issue between Lahiri and Divakaruni is the conflict between generations, especially in immigrant families. In The Namesake and Unaccustomed Earth, Lahiri depicts this conflict as younger generations find it difficult to reconcile their American identities with their Indian heritage. In pieces like Queen of Dreams, Divakaruni tackles this issue as daughters embrace Western culture while struggling with Indian mothers' expectations.

Deshpande focuses on the changing responsibilities and expectations of women while highlighting generational conflicts in traditional Indian contexts. Although critics appreciate how they depict generational disputes in a nuanced manner, they sometimes argue that the stories rely too much on clichéd East-versus-West divisions.

5. Cultural Reflection Through Symbolism

Symbols are used by all three writers to represent cultural identity. Lahiri uses rituals, cuisine, and language to represent cultural memory and kinship. Divakaruni examines cultural legacy and the roles that women play in passing it down through the use of spices, mythology, and Indian epics. Deshpande, however, challenges the limitations of convention on women's life by using commonplace household items and locations.

Although some contend that particular symbols (such as food in Lahiri or spices in Divakaruni) run the risk of becoming simplistic or unduly familiar, critics praise the metaphorical complexity in their works.

Critical Responses

1. Strengths

Empathy for Women's Struggles: All three writers have received high appreciation for their perceptive and sympathetic depictions of women overcoming social, emotional, and cultural obstacles.

Poetic and Accessible Writing: Reviewers emphasize their skill at incorporating deep issues into poetic and easily understood stories.

Universal Appeal: Although their works concentrate on Indian surroundings, their themes of gender dynamics, identity, and belonging make them relevant worldwide.

2. Critiques

Excessive Focus on Fragmentation: According to some critics, a persistent emphasis on fragmentation runs the risk of depicting women as victims who never get better without delving deeply enough into empowerment or finding a solution. Despite criticizing cultural conventions, these writers sometimes perpetuate preconceptions about Indian women (submissiveness, sacrificial duties) or the experience of immigrants (continuous estrangement).

Repetition of Themes: According to critics, their works may seem repetitive when they repeatedly examine the same subjects, such as marriage, identity, and generational strife.

3. Comparative Criticism

Because of her reticent emotional tone, Lahiri is frequently criticized by readers who believe her characters are shallow and lifeless. Nonetheless, her understated yet elegant minimalist style is praised. While Divakaruni is praised for her symbolic and inventive stories, she is criticized for occasionally stra-



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ying into melodrama or romanticizing India too much.

Although Deshpande is praised for her feminist analysis of Indian patriarchy, her work is occasionally viewed as having a smaller scope than that of Lahiri and Divakaruni's diasporic concerns.

Conclusion

Indian English women's writing vividly captures the fragmented identities and cultural reflections of modern women navigating the crossroads of tradition and modernity. Characters like Saru, Shobha, and Sumita embody the resilience and courage required to confront the ethical dilemmas and societal pressures that shape their lives. These narratives reveal the transformative power of self-awareness and cultural negotiation, illustrating that the journey to identity is both deeply personal and inherently tied to broader cultural contexts. By portraying women who reclaim their voices and agency, authors like Shashi Deshpande, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni challenge stereotypes and celebrate the evolving roles of Indian women. Ultimately, their works inspire a deeper understanding of the complexities of identity, the importance of cultural heritage, and the enduring strength of women in the face of adversity.

Shasi Deshpande once told in an interview: "My characters take their own ways. I've heard people saying we should have strong women characters. But my writing has to do with woman as they are" (Viswanath,p.12).

The emergence of middle class working women in the still monolith, traditional society has given rise to many complexities unknown to earlier Indian ethos. Although the additional income of husband and wife free them from financial crisis, the dual responsibilities faced by the working wives make their plight miserable most of the time.

Deshpande has depicted women's ethical problems and many similar related obstacles in the ways of Indian women, who want to chart out a path different from the rigidly assigned ones of the past. Not only Shasi Deshpande who voiced for the crisis. Women writers like Shasi Deshpande, Jhumpa lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni all opinion that at times "having a life outside the family is very important for women" (Viswanath, p.13). It can, therefore, be said that her female protagonists have managed to achieve their space by redefining their relationships, while maintaining their ethical values and emerging as fully developed individual identity. It can be concluded that morals, ethical values and identity have formed India and Indians, which should be safeguarded at all costs by each and every person of India.

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