



## Claiming Voices in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur

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### ABSTRACT

Women in our country have been traditionally characterized as the silent sufferer and upholders of the rich Indian customs and are always kept in subordination to the male members of the family. But now a days a massive change has taken place and there is awareness in women regarding themselves. Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur offer two distinct but interconnected trajectories of feminist writing in India. Their protagonists share a deep yearning for autonomy and self-definition. They seek to have an identity of their own 'Loud and Independent'. They focused on the struggle of women against patriarchal traditions, social restrictions and gender inequality. Their novels highlight women's struggle for identity, freedom, dignity and equality, making these significant voices of feminist writing in Indian English literature.

**Keywords:** Claiming Voice, Inequality, Patriarchy, Feminist, Indian Women, Male-dominated

### RESEARCH PAPER

Our social structure and equation of power is such that it's difficult for women to get their 'voices' heard. Though they constitute an almost equal part of the total population yet-one fact remains in general that they have been never considered equal to man. Women in our country have been traditionally characterized as the silent sufferer and upholder of the rich Indian customs, ideally warm, gentle and submissive who are to be kept in subordination to the male members of the family. But now a tremendous change has taken place in the cliché of portraying women in Indian society. In contemporary times there is awareness in women regarding themselves. They seek to have an identity of their own 'loud and independent,' women have raised their voices against inequality and oppression in the modern and postmodern era. In the process of evolvment, they realize that they can depend a lot on their creative faculties for their development. Betty Fredian writes in the *Feminine Mystique*:

“The only way for a woman as for a man is to find herself, to know herself as a person by the creative work of her own. There is no other way.”

In all their novels, Manju Kapur and Shashi Deshpande try to explore the emotional self of their protagonists both the novelists examine the complexities of human relationships and the changes they undergo with passage of time. The common qualities in the protagonists of both these writers are their desire to analyze their own role in their subjugation, rebelliousness and the quest for identity. However the major difference between the two is that Manju Kapur focuses on female roles while Shashi Deshpande rises above feminist concerns to tackle the existentialist question itself. Shashi Deshpande’s fiction is deeply rooted in the psychology of the middle-class Indian woman struggling within the confines of domesticity. Critics frequently highlight her subtle but penetrating realism. As one critic notes, “Deshpande presents women who move through silence, self-doubt, and familial obligations in order to reclaim their own voices” (Nayak, 2016, p.45). Her protagonists, such as Jaya in ‘That Long Silence’ or Saru in ‘The Dark Holds No Terrors’, internalize patriarchal values even as they gradually resist them. Deshpande’s feminism is introspective, experiential, and grounded in everyday struggles. She exposes the emotional labor involved in sustaining patriarchal relationships, portraying women who wrestle with guilt, fear, anger, and suppressed desires. Jaya, Indu, Saru, Mira etc. all the female characters of Deshpande gradually undergo a process of introspection and self-analysis to understand their place and role in the family as well as in the society. Her novel *That Long Silence* was awarded Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990. If we discuss only the title of the novel, it expresses the novelist's outburst. Unlike Deshpande's Saru in ‘The Dark Holds No Terror’, Virmati's character develops according to the social conditions and changes that take place around her. Yet she proves to be self-assured and independent and confronts most of the norms of her age. Kapur succeeds in re-creating the troubled times and sketching a realistic picture of a country in transition. But after being socially not accepted for so many years Virmati succumbs to the enticement of marrying the professor. This time she feels trapped, particularly she must adjust to the professor's first family, who naturally hates her. Subsequently, she tries to impose same kind of restrictions on her daughter which her parents had imposed upon her. Kapur seems to suggest that even with education and independence, what is essential is to face the fact that there is no more in life than dependence on parents, marriage and other such social institutions. It is not easy to find a concrete answer to the questions posed by

these women. In the novels of both Deshpande and Kapur, one has pictures of woman who are defiant, intelligent, educated and assertive. Eventually they defeat the external forces which try to suppress their self-respect. Both Deshpande and Kapur present women who try to establish their own identity. The female protagonists of Deshpande and Kapur are mostly educated, aspiring individuals confined within the confines of a conservative society. For being educated they try to think independently for which their family and society at large are intolerant. Indu, the protagonist of Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*, dares to revolt-against the traditional taboos of the family and society and follows the course of life that gives her pleasure and satisfaction. She is born and brought up in a tradition-bound middle class family, but different from other girls. She marries according to her choice at the cost of displeasure of her own mother, and when she is dissatisfied with her husband, she goes to the extent of establishing an extra marital physical relation with another man in pursuit of her independent life. She does all to satisfy her husband even at the cost of suppression of herself, but the result is disappointing. After ten years of her dedicated married life, realization comes to her that she cannot achieve what she wants. She learns by experience that no wife in a male-dominated society can be independent. The identity of wife must merge with husband's will if she has to live in a family with so-called honour and dignity. Experience also teaches Indu that a wife is meant to please her husband, to look after his needs and comforts, to do what he likes and to do nothing that displeases him. She says, 'I realize now, that it was not for love, as I have been telling myself, but because I did not want conflate.... I had tenaciously clung to Jayant, to my marriage, not for love alone, but because I was afraid of failure. I had to show them (the world and the family) that my marriage was a success so I went on lying, even to myself, compromising, shedding bits of myself along the way.' (Rao, 2017, p.159) Deshpande makes us to realize the dilemma through Jaya, a married woman in 'That Long Silence', ends on an ambiguous note. Despite of the fact that Jaya is a courageous woman who tries to enter the norms of a new woman through her bold actions and creative writing, her married life completely depends on the decisions of Mohan. The way in which Deshpande has concluded her novel seems a setback to her voice of women's liberation, but by this she has provided a clear picture of women folk in India even now.

Manju Kapur, on the other hand, writes in the context of a post-liberalization India where women's education, careers, and marriage roles are undergoing transformation. Critics emphasize that Kapur "foregrounds women as agents negotiating modernity and

tradition, often pushing against social constraints with a deliberate and assertive energy” (Rao, 2017, p.122). Her protagonists—Virmati in *Difficult Daughters*, Astha in *A Married Woman*, or Shagun in *Custody*—embody the tensions between selfhood and societal expectations. Kapur’s narratives often highlight structural inequalities within the family, marriage, and social institutions, revealing how women bear the burden of both emotional and economic oppression. Manju Kapur’s novel *Home* discusses the problems faced by middle-class women. This novel has its setting in Delhi. Banwari Lal believes in conforming to the values of traditional patriarchal norms which dictates that men would work outside home and women within the home. The duty of men is to carry forward the family line, while women to facilitate their mission. It is the story of two sisters Sona and Rupa. The novel draws more episodes of exploitation in a joint family. It moves to the second generation with the birth of Sona’s children after a long wait of ten years. Kapur brings out another aspect of women’s exploitation, the gender based violence and how woman’s body is the target. Nisha in her infancy falls prey to the incestuous desires of Vicky, a fifteen year old cousin which affects her psychologically. Nisha is a representative of third generation. Nisha is an epitome of a new woman, more assertive, self-assured and confident one. In her college she falls in love with Suresh and daringly roams with him and doesn’t care for anybody. Her brother calls her, enquiries about her relationship and doubts her trustworthiness. She resists saying: “who you are to decide whether I am trustworthy or not?” And this rebelliousness in her behaviour shows her modernity. She is moved by Suresh’s nobility when he states that he does not need dowry or does not call for any fancy wedding even that he is not bothered even if she is a manglik. Nisha refuses to follow the customary marriage. Nisha longs for establishing her own identity and with this approach they marry. She is an example of a spirited new woman who wants to establish her new identity.

At the closing of the novel she is forced to give up her business as she thinks that she needs to take care of her home more than that of his own business. Nisha resembles Urmi in Deshpande’s *The Binding Vine*. The novel begins when grief-stricken Urmi rejects the consolation offered by her mother and her childhood friend, Vanna. At this moment she feels drawn towards the lives of three very different women Mira, Kalpana and Shakutai. Mira, the dead mother-in-law of Urmi was the first woman to influence her. This happens by chance when she finds the poems written by Mira. These poems of Mira explained loneliness of the unhappy marriage of hers. Mira’s poems reveal the pain of

vibrant young woman trapped in an unhappy marriage. Being because of a woman, her talent was curtailed from achieving limelight and her voice is muted and silenced.

"I could put my desires into a deep freeze and take them out intact and whole when he returned" (Deshpande, 2000, pp.164-165). The apprehension of this demand of sex by women has been effectively suggested by Deshpande. The feeling of having sex as adventure have started intimidating the age old establishment of marriage which is based on fidelity and natural love. Deshpande has raised the question of woman's right over her body which cannot be violated even in marriage and takes a bold step forward in protecting a woman's biological needs. Beside Deshpande gives many instances of extra martial love in his novels. It shows the urge of the woman to assert herself whether it is inside marriage or outside it. The married life of such women whether working or not, ends in discontent. Though Urmi is educated and very bold she does not reveal any radical attitude towards the institution of marriage, as she argues with Dr. Bhaskar that marriage is a necessity for women just like the innocent and ignorant-Shakutai, because it means security for her. Urmi confesses that she is conquered by her longing for physical fulfillment when Dr. Bhaskar declares that he is in love with Urmi. This is an opportunity for satisfying this urge. In her closeness with Dr. Bhaskar when she is on the verge of infidelity she refuses this offer because she is virtuous she is not a kind to overstep the limitations and tarnish the establishment of marriage.

Shakutai blames Kalpana for dressing well. Shakutai anxiety is the anxiety of the mother in patriarchal society. According to her, "Women must know fear." (Deshpande, 2000, p.164) and Kalpana's serious blunder is that she fears no one and she suffered only because of that fault of hers. For women like Shakutai the roles are clearly delineated and it is women's place to be afraid of everything. By the end of the novel Urmi's faith in love is confirmed and at the same time she decides to get Kalpana's story and Mira's poems published, Although Vanna and Shakutai calls her a traitor Urmi realizes that one has to get with one's life. Deshpande has depicted her protagonists as the true manifestation of woman, revolting and finally capitulating with herself. The Binding Vine is a strong statement regarding sexual violence against women. The novel focuses on the delicate issue of marital rape and domestic violence.

If Urmi is a woman with more sense of fidelity, Manju Kapur presents Nina in The Immigrant, a woman with a different perspective. Nina has lost all opportunities of married life, nearing the age of thirty is living a boring life. She says, "we are conditioned

to think a woman's fulfillment lies in birth-giving and motherhood just we are conditioned to feel failures if we don't marry.” (Kapur, 2008, p.230) She has sexual relationship before marriage. Then she meets Ananda and their gradual meetings leads to a liking for each other and as per her mother's wish she marries him. Despite her unconventional status of being an unmarried, thirty-year-old woman, working as a lecturer in a prestigious college in Delhi accepts a proposal for arranged marriage. Now she gets a brand-new identity. In Canada as Mrs. Ananda, she faces an onslaught on her self-respect.

In Canada she feels displaced. The behaviors of Ananda also changes in Canada. Her perspective is different from that of Ananda, the narrator explains "The immigrant who comes as a wife has a more difficult time. If work exists for her it is in the future, and after much finding feet. At present all she is, is a wife and a wife is alone for many hours. There will come a day when even books are powerless to distract. Then she realizes she is an immigrant for life." (Kapur, 2008, p.124). Dissatisfactory sexual life with Ananda, she is reminded of her past relation with Rahul. She even goes to compare both of them. Nina strays from her own virtue of morality and finds an extra marital affair with Anton.

She says, "I am married too but it's stupid to confine yourself to one person for your whole life. What about adventure? What about experiencing differences? Nobody owns anybody, you know." (Kapur, 2008, p.261). She parallels her infidelity and meat eating to that which is contaminated and Canadian. This is an indication of change in her traditional habits, which kept on changing throughout. These changes were influenced by something meaningful that had occurred as a result of her marriage and as a result of Ananda's patriarchal actions. Canadian values and society had an important impact on this change Lydia Gomes reflects, "As portrayed by the author, the freedom of western society sometimes superseded certain constraints of Indian cultural demands and universal patriarchy by allowing Nina the choice to make certain decisions in her own life." (Gomes, 2021, p.39). Critics emphasize that Kapur “foregrounds women as agents negotiating modernity and tradition, often pushing against social constraints with a deliberate and assertive energy” (Rao, 2017, p.122). Her protagonists—Virmati in *Difficult Daughters*, Astha in *A Married Woman*, or Shagun in *Custody*—embody the tensions between selfhood and societal expectations. Kapur’s narratives often highlight structural inequalities within the family, marriage, and social institutions, revealing how women bear the burden of both emotional and economic oppression.

Thematically, both authors critique patriarchal marriage, yet they differ in focus and intensity. Deshpande’s critique is psychological and interior. Her women often turn inward, reflecting on patterns of silence, generational trauma, and internalized patriarchy. As another critic observe, Deshpande “builds her feminism through the slow awakening of consciousness rather than radical rebellion” (George, 2010, p.63). In contrast, Kapur’s women more frequently enact outward forms of rebellion—choosing relationships outside marriage, asserting career priorities, or challenging traditional morality. Critics remark that Kapur “brings the woman’s body, desire, and agency into open discourse, refusing the ideal of the self-sacrificing woman” (Sen, 2019, p.88).

Stylistically, Deshpande favors an introspective, psychological narrative that unfolds through subtle emotional shifts. Her writing foregrounds silence, pauses, and internal struggle. Kapur’s narrative style is more sociological, mapping the external forces—institutions, communities, social expectations—that shape women’s lives. While Deshpande’s fiction unfolds primarily within the domestic sphere, Kapur situates her narratives at the intersection of home, workplace, education, and politics, reflecting broader shifts in India’s socio-cultural landscape.

Despite these differences, both writers significantly contribute to feminist discourse in Indian English literature. Their protagonists share a deep yearning for autonomy and self-definition. Both authors expose gendered double standards, critique traditional expectations of femininity, and give voice to women’s emotional complexities. As a comparative critical study suggests, “Deshpande emphasizes internal transformation while Kapur highlights the social negotiations accompanying a woman’s pursuit of freedom; together they represent complementary modes of Indian feminist fiction” (Mehta, 2018, p.210).

In essence, Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur offer two distinct but interconnected trajectories of feminist writing in India. Deshpande’s quiet, psychological realism and Kapur’s bold, socio-cultural critique form a continuum that reflects the evolving status of women across generations. Their works illuminate the multifaceted struggles of Indian women—struggles rooted as much in the inner self as in the external world.

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