

WOMEN'S VOICES IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE AND CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the study of emerging, potent voices of two women writers, Shashi Deshpande and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Belonging to India gives these writers certain common cultural traits, 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 similarities and contrasts between two writers from India living in two hemispheres, in order to highlight how the pulls and pressures of the past lives of women continue to influence their present. There is constant interplay of nostalgia and reality in Deshpande's and Divakaruni's novels. 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.

Key words: Traditional Bonds, Tradition and Modernity, Identity

Higher Education &
Research Society

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This paper undertakes a study of emerging, powerful voices of two women writers, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, now settled in the United States and Shashi Deshpande who is an Indian resident. Belonging to India gives these writers certain common cultural traits, while the differences between them result from the fact that living abroad widens the mental horizons of Indian women. So, Shashi Deshpande is the second daughter of the famous Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit scholar, Sriranga. She was born in Dharwad in Karnataka, South India and was educated in Dharwad, Bombay and Bangalore. Deshpande has degrees in Economics and Law which she finished with a Gold Medal. After marriage, when she was living in Bombay (today's Mumbai) she did a course on journalism at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, and worked for a couple of months as a journalist for the magazine "Onlooker". She started writing at that time, publishing her first short story in 1970. To start with her stories were published in magazines like "Femina", "Eve's Weekly", etc. Legacy the first collection of her short stories came out in 1978 and in 1980 her first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* was published. In June 1999, The Feminist Press of New York brought out her latest novel, *A Matter of Time*, her first work to be published in USA. She is a winner of the Sahitaya Akademi Award for the novel, *That Long Silence* and the Nanjangud Thirumalamba award. *Small Remedies*, her latest novel will be released in India on 2000. The heroines in the works of both the writers reflect the conflicts and tensions arising out of the attempt to negotiate between tradition and the desire to lead a new life that education has enabled them to imbibe. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction it is clear that the women who either live abroad or happen to be visiting India. These women are no doubt conditioned by the Indian upbringing but have risen above the traditional constraints. However in Shashi Deshpande's works all the women characters are professional, married most often outside their community, yet unable to break free from the traditional bonds during moments of choice and crisis. Divakaruni settled in U.S.A., is an award winning author and poet. Her works have been widely published in over 50 magazines including *Atlantic Monthly* and *New Yorker*. Her works have been translated into 11 languages including Dutch, Hebrew, Japanese and this

has settled her into a role as one of the premier Asian American writers of today. Divakaruni is a co-founder and former president of Maitri, a helpline founded in 1991 for South Asian women dealing with domestic abuse. Divakaruni's works are largely set in India and the United States, and often focus on the experiences of South Asian immigrants. She writes for children as well as adults and has published novels in multiple genres, including realistic fiction, historical fiction, magical realism, and fantasy. Much of Divakaruni's work is partially autobiographical. Most of her stories are set in the Bay Area of California, and she also excels at depicting the nuances of immigrant experience, she writes to shatter stereotypes and myths. She breaks down the barriers between people of different backgrounds, communities, ages, and different worlds. She focuses on the bicultural lives of Indian women struggling with cultural shackles to carve out an identity of their own. She could draw the contrast between the selflessness required of women in India and the freedom they got in their adopted land. One feels committed to the land where one is born and always in search of the opportunity to verbalize one's feelings and memories of the homeland. George Lamming in his essay "The Occasion for Speaking" tries to analyse the circumstances that led to the migration of certain writers and their absence from the homeland drags them into a state of separation from their roots sometimes temporarily and sometimes permanently. The questions like "Why have they migrated? And what, if any, are the peculiar pleasures of exile? Is their journey a part of a hunger for recognition?" Do they see such recognition as a confirmation of the fact that they are writers?" (12)---- keep haunting the critic and the reader alike. Divakaruni's writings raise themes of alienation and self-transformation at various levels and try to voice such questions by exploring their roots, allegiance, family, origin, community and identity through her works.

In Divakaruni's fiction the women characters are distanced from their homeland; they think more rationally, but they mentally retain some of the traditional beliefs. Deshpande's women on the other hand defy all traditions, but subconsciously they too, remain tradition-bound. Leaving India and its orthodoxy behind seems to be a solution to some of these problems in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction. In the case of Shashi Deshpande's works perhaps the only way possible for the temporarily wandering wife is a return to her domestic fold. Although the works of both these writers portray how modern Indian women are torn between their historical past and progressive present, between traditional ethos and modern culture, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni demonstrates a bolder attitude while Shashi Deshpande does not allow her liberal thinking to overpower her traditional outlook. The female characters in the fiction of both Shashi Deshpande and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are torn between old and new world values. They question the nature of their lives, and their roles as mothers, wives, daughters and professionals. This awareness leads them to rethink about their own lives as women, and in stills in them the confidence and strength to forge ahead. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni focuses on the

diasporic Indian women caught between two opposing worlds. They find themselves in an in-between state, struggling to carve out identities of their own. Whether it is Sudha or Anju in *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*. They are all trying to discover their own “selves” amidst joy and heartbreak. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni excels at depicting the cultural dialect of immigrant experience, like many other contemporary writers.

Shashi Deshpande’s characters also express their desires, frustrations, and ambitions but in their various ways; each looks for her own way of realizing her ambition as professional and each struggles to come to terms with her problems individually. The present study will focus on the fictions of Divakaruni and Deshpande. It shall attempt to analyze and argue how Indian women at home and abroad confront the dilemmas of existence relatively in the same ways. Deshpande’s first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, brings out the struggle of a woman in a family where a male child is preferred to a female child and the novel reveals how the insensitive attitude of the family towards a female can drive her into a schizophrenic state of mind. It portrays the secondary position of the woman in her parental house as well as her husband’s home where the male ego overpowers all other considerations in the relationship of marriage. Saru the protagonist has greater economic and social status than her husband Manohar. This leads to the victimization of Saru in the form of the sexual harassment, inflicted upon her due to the inferiority complex that her husband is suffering from. She decides to leave her children and husband and go back to her parental house. Here unfolds the secret of her life, the guilt she bears for her brother Dhruva’s death, the guilt of abandoning her parents to get married to Manohar. Added to these is the knowledge of her mother’s death that she acquires accidentally and decides to visit her father. Finally she resolves her problems and gains control over her life. What is remarkable about Deshpande’s work is the way she makes us question our existence. Her work reflects the shift in moral values, the social transitions, changing attitudes, and the problems arising out of the generation gap and breakdown of the joint family system.

In *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*, Divakaruni’s novel explains about the story of two women, their love, feelings, loneliness, frustrations, identity etc. Divakaruni’s *Sister of my heart*, follows two cousins from birth until their wedding day. From a young age the girls Sudha and Anju become best friends, sisters, and each other’s constant companion. Anju and Sudha are inseparable, but different. Beautiful and calm, Sudha is a storyteller and dreams of designing clothes and having a family. Anju has a fierce spirit and longs to study Literature in college. The girls get caught skipping school and this event, along with a health scare in the family, suddenly changes plans for college to plans of marriage. Book one ends with Anju and Sudha getting married on the same day. Sudha will move in with her husband and in-laws who live in another part of India. Anju’s husband works in the United States, and she plans to join him after getting a visa. More than

marriage has driven Anju and Sudha apart. Sudha has learned a dark secret about their family's past. Shame and guilt over keeping this secret causes Sudha to pull away from Anju. But her love for her sister does not falter, and she even refuses to elope for fear it would damage Anju's reputation. On the night of their double wedding, Anju becomes aware of her husband's attraction to Sudha. Anju does not blame Sudha, but it is with some relief the two young women begin to live separate lives. In *Sister of my heart*, Sudha quickly learns the ways of her demanding and controlling mother-in-law. After five long years, Sudha is elated to learn she is pregnant. Meanwhile, Anju's life in the United States has not entirely turned out as she expected. Anju and Sudha exchange regular letters and short phone calls, but their old intimacy is missing. The friends discover they are pregnant at the same time and both seem finally happy. Sudha's mother-in-law finds out that Sudha's child is a girl. She demands Sudha abort the baby, believing the first child should be a son. Sudha has nowhere to turn; leaving her husband would be grounds to talk to each other again as true sisters. Refusing to tie her life to another man and realizing Anju needs her, Sudha and her daughter decide to go to the United States. After many years, the sisters are reunited, but future obstacles still loom. In *The Vine of Desire* continues the story of Anju and Sudha, the two young women at the center of Divakaruni's bestselling novel *Sister of My Heart*. Far from Calcutta, the city of their childhood, and after years of living separate lives, Anju and Sudha rekindle their friendship in America. The deep-seated love they feel for each other provides the support each of them needs. It gives Anju the strength to pick up the pieces of her life after a miscarriage, and Sudha the confidence to make a life for herself and her baby daughter, Dayita-without her husband. The women's bond is shaken to the core when they must confront the deeply passionate feelings that Anju's husband has for Sudha. Meanwhile, the unlikely relationships they form with men and women in the world outside the immigrant Indian community as well as with their families in India profoundly transform them, forcing them to question the central assumptions of their lives. Through these novels, the writers explain the voices of women in different point of view. In Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*, Sudha was struggling with her husband and mother-in-law to save her unborn baby. Even though her mother-in-law is a female she cannot understand the feelings and love of a mother. In Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, same kind of treatment was imposed on the protagonist Saru in her parental house; at last she leaves her husband and lives her life. The sequel of *Sister of My Heart* is *The Vine of Desire*, Sudha leaves her husband and joins with her cousin sister Anju in America. In America, she lives for a short span of time because Anju's husband spoiled her. Without informing Anju, she leaves her house and went somewhere. In both the novels, the voices of women could not be heard by the men. Saru finds comfort in her love marriage with Manu. To get rid of her insecurities, fears and loneliness she started earning. As a typical status conscious husband, Manu felt uneasy and unhappy as his wife is more respected and more successful. He even raped her and she again left alone as she separated from him. However, the feeling of being alone does not despair her for long. She exhibits a real courage as she

tells herself, "All right, so I'm alone. But so's everyone else. Human beings ... they're going to fail you. But because there's just us, because there's no one else, we have to go on trying. If we can't believe in ourselves, we're sunk" (The Dark Holds No Terrors, 220). Saru frees herself from the shackles of tradition in quest of her self-identity which she ultimately realized in course of her life. As she struggles with her emotions and anxieties, Sarita gradually realizes that there is more to life than dependency on marriage and family-she resolves to use her new found truths to make a better life for herself. Sudha in Sister of My Heart and Saru in The Dark Holds No Terrors are similar in their characters. Both of them abandon everything and realize their life and survive alone.

There is constant interplay of nostalgia and reality in Deshpande's and Divakaruni's novels. 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. Their protagonists seek to synthesize traditions with the modern values which are the needs of the hour. They know how difficult it is to bring in new ideas in this patriarchal set up where the authority emanates from the eldest male in the family. To an extent they reconcile themselves to the rigidity of traditions but with reservations and carve out their own identity as "new women" living within the ambit of tradition.

This paper describes the similarities and contrasts between two writers from India living in two hemispheres, in order to highlight how the pulls and pressures of the past lives of women continue to influence their present. Creating consciousness and inventing identity is the significant theme in both the novels. Every human being is equal at birth and should have the right to survive on his/her own terms. Whether or not the changing times and the world scenario are acceptable to us, women are definitely taking front ranking positions in every sphere of life. So even if feminism as an ideology is rejected by man wherever woman is being given more space and acceptance we are in a way practicing its ideals.

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