

# Defining the New Woman: With Special Reference to the Major Works of Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur

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**Abstract** The change in the status of Indian woman has been the topic of much analysis and research. The Indian women writers' endeavour to bring out the changed Indian woman has also been studied at length, however only few incidents of revolt cannot be the basis on which a new avatar of the Indian woman can be endorsed. This paper aims to define the new woman who has emerged in the Indian society. On the basis of in-depth analysis of the major works of Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur this paper brings out the qualities of the new woman. It argues that certain traits clearly differentiate the new woman from the traditional Indian woman who was the epitome of silence, self abnegation, and subjugation. The protagonists of Deshpande and Kapur clearly walk a different path as they are not the self effacing, submissive women who follow the patriarchy. They are aware of their needs and are thus self realized and they do not conform to the norms yet they aim to actualize their dreams and aspirations. Hence, the new woman according to our analysis is one who is self realized, is a non conformist and who aims for self actualization.

**Key words** New woman; self- actualization; self-realization; non-conformity; tradition; freedom

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Woman in the Indian society upholds a paradoxical position which can be understood by her deep physical degradation in actual life along with a high idealization of her in the form of abstract thoughts. This is clearly understood by the fact that, at times, she is referred to as reincarnation of goddess Laxmi, Saraswati, Durga etc, and on the other hand she has to undergo continuous subjugation and oppression. In the Indian society wife has been addressed as “*Ardhangini*” and woman’s motherhood has been eulogized. This dual position was to some extent the outcome of external factors such as the Aryan invasion, the impact of Muslim culture and the British Empire, but the real perpetrator was the own deep rooted tradition and thinking which became stringent with the passage of time. As stated by Jawaharlal Nehru, the status of women in any civilization reflects the standard of the society of any nation, A.S. Altekar agrees when he opines, “One of the best way to understand the spirit of a civilization and to appreciate its excellences and realize its limitations is to study the history of the position and status of women in it” (1).

Saraswati Mishra in her book *Status of Women*, refers to The National Committee’s report on the status of women in India submitted in 1974 as, “Status refers to a position in a social system or sub-system which is distinguishable from and at the same time related to other positions through its designated rights and obligations. The knowledge about the status of any section of the society may be obtained through its “roles’ patterns and their importance as well as the consequently achieved privileges and symbols of specific respect” (15).

Indian Woman was denied equal rights in marital, familial, social, educational, economic and political fields; therefore, her subordinate status prevailed.

Fortunately, the initiatives taken by the Christian missionaries to propagate their religion and Macaulay's advocacy of education turned out to be a boon in disguise. It also turned out to be a revolutionary period in the history of women's liberation. The factors like patriarchal joint family system, polygamy, *Sati*, widow re-marriage, child marriage, *Purdah* system, denial of education to the girl child, attracted attention of the British government as well as Indian reformers. Eminent reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Dayanand Saraswati, Keshub Chandra Sen, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Ramkrishna Paramhansa, Swami Vivekananda and others tried to bring about unprecedented awakening among women. For the upliftment of women in India, certain laws like Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed in 1929, which raised the age for marriage of girls to 14 years. Besides removing the evils of child marriage they also concentrated on encouraging girl's education, which helped them in understanding and comprehending their own freedom and independent personality. The *Sati* system was declared a crime on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1829 and the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 removed all the legal barriers in the path of widow remarriage. In 1937, Hindu Women's Right to Property Act was passed to safeguard financial security of Hindu women. Apart from these reformatory measures, Mrs. Annie Besant's efforts to promote women's education resulted in the establishment of the Federation of University of Women in 1920. Although these initiatives were not able to bring the intended results but they did succeed in creating resurgence among the Indian women. The Indian woman experienced an air of freedom and the beginning of a new life. On the call of Mahatma Gandhi it became easier for women to leave their homes; they became aware of their capacity to work and it provided them a platform to articulate themselves.

However, in the last 60 years after freedom, some revolutionary changes were observed in the status of woman in India. Within three years of Independence, The Constitution of India was formulated which materialized Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi's conviction in giving an equal status to the Indian woman. According to the Indian Constitution a woman shares the same freedom of speech, protection of life and fundamental rights as an Indian man. Since independence, Indian woman has traveled a long way, conquered several barriers but there are still many unconquered frontiers, especially, issues related to women. The process of change initiated during the British regime, gathered momentum after India's independence and influenced the society and the Indian woman to a great extent. Industrialization led to the establishment of numerous industries which resulted in the migration of people from villages to industrial areas. This process of migration

became one of the reasons behind the disintegration of joint families. The breaking of the joint families and growing urbanization had another significant reverberation in the social practice of the traditional Indian society. But as an outcome of the process of industrialization parents soon realized the importance of education and training which automatically helped increasing the age of marriage for boys and girls. Education brought a significant change in woman's attitude and practices. As Girija Khanna notes,

The Indian women though conditioned by tradition, custom, public opinion and religious belief is showing a remarkable change as a result of education. Whether a typical housewife or a working women or a combination of both, women today have acquired a multitude of new functions while retaining quite a few old ones. The change in women has been remarkable though not revolutionary. (196)

In the 1980s Industrialization allured people to migrate in large numbers from rural areas to industrial cities in search of livelihood and better amenities. In order to provide better facilities, the middle-class educated women of these displaced families opted to work and this paved the way for economic emancipation in which women became as important as men in contributing to the family income. This changed situation urged women to play different roles their life as a result of which their behavior deviated significantly from that of the pre-independence women.

Thus, the image of the present-day middle class Indian woman is one who is proficient in every sphere of life. Educated and skilled is what has become the expected image of today's woman in India. She is not a liability or a slave but an equally responsible member of her family. Sudhir Kakar in his essay "Liberalisation has Challenged our Ossified Traditional Identity" opines,

Another driving force behind changes taking place in many areas of social life is the middle-class Indian women. The women's role as the prime mover of social change was made possible by two developments-one, an accelerated revision of the traditional view on the education of a daughter which encouraged higher education for girls and thus made their participation in work life possible, and; two, the growing financial needs of families, partly due to their higher consumption aspirations which welcomed the woman's contribution to the family income, even when her work went beyond such traditional occupations as that of a teacher or nurse. (48)

Hence, it is observed that education, industrialization and modernization played a vital role in improving the status of the Indian woman. Literature too, depicts the significant changes in the image of Indian woman in the various texts written by the Indian writers. The conventional image of a silent and submissive follower is transformed and is replaced by a more confident and intelligent woman. She is not the silent subordinate of her male relative, nor is she a blind self abnegating wife. Modern woman is portrayed as a sensitive and thinking being capable of walking shoulder to shoulder along with her male counter part. She is capable of articulating her opinion on issues, and is well aware of her surroundings, her limitations if any, and is confident enough to assert her individuality. The transformed image of Indian woman has become a frequent recurring phenomenon in a number of novels written by Indian writers. Bai aptly details the change as,

Women as an individual with throbbing pulse, feelings, and aspirations, involved in the vortex of life that is complicated, demanding and exhausting makes her appearance in the novels by women writers. The appearance of the fully awakened woman, prepared to accept the challenges in order to live a meaningful life is a recent phenomenon in Indian-English literature. (20)

Today, a woman wants to be treated as an individual and refuses to carry the burden of traditional bondages which have shackled her freedom since time immemorial. She readily confronts the traditional obligations bestowed upon her. Her individuality has given her new perspective towards life. She believes in having a career and financial independence rather than depending upon the institution of marriage as the ultimate settlement. Literature reflects life that is lived around us. These real life observations become inspiration for our novelists too, for their creativity, and therefore we observe the same chronological shift in the image of woman depicted in the writings of the Indian women novelists. This shift is further established by Meena Shrivadkar in the following words, “Woman’s emergence in society from the house and from ignorance by education was a phenomenon that could not long be disregarded and the writers did show an awareness of this phenomenon” (149).

### **Image of Indian Woman in Indian English Fiction**

Education came to be realized not only as a vital instrument for general amelioration of the Indian society, but it also acted as a very powerful medium

in improving the status of Indian woman. Indian woman came in contact with the western ideas and culture which imbibed in her the urge to achieve economic stability along with educational enlightenment. Her hitherto dormant thirst for knowledge and recognition found a new expression through education. Her covert capabilities were tapped that lay dormant because of disuse. This new spirit inspired Indian woman to experiment in different fields and establish her talents which included writing literature in English language as well. Indian society with a history of more than 3000 years, has undergone many vigorous changes and these changes have created their own relative significance, and the one segment of Indian society that has perhaps been most affected is Indian woman. The traditional image of Indian woman is, one who is an epitome of sacrifice and suffering. She is considered a monument of patience and devotion, a self-less bestower of love and affection. In India, "...with its strong bend for tradition, woman was expected mainly to live for others than for herself because 'others' controlled and moulded the social structure" (Shriwadkar 153).

Indian English Fiction produced by the early Indian Women Novelists portray complex and multifaceted image of Indian woman. She is shown to be enacting various roles — of a mother, a wife, a daughter and a sister; woman as *Shakti*, protecting good and destroying evil, and so on. However, the image of "...traditional woman, the *Sita Savitri* type, was at once, easy and popular, particularly because the male dominated society was always willing to applaud and appreciate. It has, therefore, naturally pervaded more and lingered longer in Indian literature..." (Shriwadkar 153). These presentations by the earlier male novelists fail to bring the real women with her strength and weakness, and even influenced the creativity of early women novelists. It was only with the appearance of the female novelists after 1980's that the real Indian woman is said to have come alive. As observed by eminent scholar and critic Prof. R. S. Pathak,

Indian fiction in English has been enriched by several highly talented women novelists including Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Attia Hosain, Santha Rama Rau and Shashi Deshpande. They have written of Indian women, their conflicts and predicaments against the background of contemporary India. While doing so, they have analysed the socio-cultural modes and values that have given Indian women their image and role towards themselves and the society. The changing contexts have placed these women writers in an unenviable position. Their chief contribution consists of their exploring the moral and psychic dilemmas and repercussions of their women

characters along with their efforts to cope with the challenges and achieve a new harmony of relationship with themselves and their surroundings. (11)

Indian women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai gave a distinct dimension to the image of woman in Indian English Fiction. In their works the modern woman is seen struggling to shed the burden of inhibitions imposed on her since ages. Though the much honored “*Sita Savitri*” image still upholds the scepter, it is to the credit of these women novelists that we come across a life size picture of the contemporary woman with all her longings and aspirations, hopes and frustrations. They explored the areas of woman’s plight, raised issues related to the emancipation of their spirit, depicted their transformation from traditional to modern as well as analyzed the silent corners of their psyche. Bai remarks woman as an “individual with throbbing pulse, feelings and aspirations, involved in the whirlwind of life” (20) that is complicated, demanding and exhausting manifests in the novels of Indian Women Novelists. It is in their writings that we come across woman who aspires, attempts and strives to be her true self.

In the novels written by the Big Three, we find the stereotype or the traditional image of woman, who accepts fulfillment only through sacrifice and suffering. That women are “... mysterious, women are fascinating, women are strange, women are whimsical, women are irrational” (“Deshpande interview with Dickman” 129) was the general depiction by the male novelists. Of course, exceptional deviations from the accepted norms were seen (Rosie in R. K. Narayan’s *The Guide* and Gauri in Mulk R. Anand’s *Gauri*) in a few novels written by the male novelists. But often the repeated image that was depicted was where women were not given individual identity. Their existence was seen in relation to either their men or to the society. They were considered as the silent observer of the happenings. Their existence went unnoticed and they remained the silent sufferers for no fault of theirs. They remained the subservient followers as the men and the society outlined and fabricated their orchestration. But with the passage of time, the age old image of woman seems to be slowly blurring and gradually transforming into the new image. Pathak elaborates on the distinct portrayal of women characters by Indian women novelists by stating,

The earlier novels by Indian women novelists project the traditional image of woman. But as times changed, the portrayal became realistic with a thrust on her sense of frustration and alienation. The characters created by them,

like their creators, were torn apart by the conflicting forces of tradition and modernity. Their crisis of value adaptation and attachment with family and home pulled them asunder. The plight of the working woman was still worse, aggravated by her problems of marital adjustment and quest for and assertion of her. (12)

Kamala Markandaya is the earliest of the top-ranking women novelists, who attracted the spot light with her very first novel *Nectar in the Sieve* (1954), which deals with the theme of rural poverty and a woman's constant struggle to survive. She projects traditional women characters, belonging to various strata of society and they occupy the central stage in most of her works. Bai throws light upon Kamala Markandaya's portrayal of female characters as, "Her women are well-drilled in the tenets of Indian ethos. Hence they accept the prevalent social norms and moral codes to a large measure. They possess an admirable strength to face the calamities of life and are adept at the wisdom of compromise and adjustment" (44).

Ruth Praver Jhabwala is considered an outsider insider as she came to India at the age of 24 after her marriage with a Parsi architect. In her works *To Whom She Will* (1955) and *Esmond in India* (1958) she exposes the follies and foibles of the young girl with a mild touch of satire. Her works show her awareness of the changing position of woman and her attitude in accordance to the cultural changes in the society. Jasbir Jain in her essay on Nayantara Sahgal commends the strength of Sahgal's female characters by adding that,

Placed within domesticity her early heroines gradually move on to wider spaces, areas of competition and face problems of survival and this movement blurs the boundaries between the home and the world, rather than submit to the separation between them. The self is always in question as the individual struggles with the imposition of roles which tradition and convention thrust on her. (116)

Anita Desai is undoubtedly one of the major stalwarts among Indian English novelists. Her works like *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), *Journey to Ithaca* (1995), *Fasting Feasting* (1999) and *The Zig Zag Way* (2004) after 1980, give us a clear understanding of her broadened oeuvre. In her earlier novels, she experimented with varied themes like domestic disharmony, psyche of a working male, trauma and suffering of Indians settled abroad, self-exile and spirituality, gender discrimination etc.



Anita Desai provided a unique distinction to Indian English Fiction through her stream-of-consciousness technique and interior monologues. Through this technique Desai examines the working of inner and outer thought process of a human mind. She pioneered the trend of exploring the psychological state/condition of Indian woman which was till then an undiscovered realm. Her writings present a kaleidoscopic image of the inner turmoil within the psyche of her protagonists. Her women characters are introspective, hypersensitive, occasionally eccentric, who live in the world of fantasy. Desai probes deep into the dark interiors of the human psyche and successfully portrays the problem of isolation and alienation in modern society. To some extent her female protagonists are unable to connect to the society, and therefore, feel tormented by their own consciousness that lead them to the problem of hyper sensitivity. D. Maya in her essay on Anita Desai writes, “She may not be called a pioneer in fictionalizing the Indian woman’s cause. But can claim the unique distinction of giving a new dimension to Indian English fiction ... which shifted the focus to the unexplored realm of the female psyche” (135).

Meena Shirwadkar in her book *Image of Woman in Indo-English Novel* comments, “Writers appear not to have paid much attention to the recent phenomenon of the educated earning wife and her adjustment or maladjustment in the family” (32). Shashi Deshpande completely revolutionized this unexplored realm with her writings as she examined the anguish and conflict of modern educated Indian woman caught in the conflict between tradition and modernity. Deshpande is the most confident voice exploring individual and universal precedents through her female protagonists. In treating woman as an individual, she highlights subtleties of human behavior based on the subconscious and conscious mind. Her protagonists are in search of self-fulfillment and they negotiate their identities within the family and society. Deshpande’s female protagonists are depicted as human beings able to think and raise questions which women had never dared to ask. In spite of being born in the traditional families, these women protagonists wish to move out of the limited space of their marital homes and have a career and an individual identity of their own.

The new generation of novelists whose works appeared after 1980’s like Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Namita Gokhale, and Shobha De have concentrated on the plight and problems of women in diverse section of the Indian society. They present female characters as educated aspiring individuals caged within the confines of a male dominated society. They successfully expose the challenges through which Indian women passes in their attempt to attain self-fulfillment. Their canvas for portrayal of women characters is widespread as it includes women from

Indian traditional backgrounds to those who have migrated to foreign countries.

Hence, while analyzing the changing status of woman in India we find that the traditionally imposed image of woman better known as “*Sita-Savitri*” image has undergone a major change. Indian woman today cannot be defined as silent, subservient and sacrificing being. She is an individual with her own voice, aspiration and identity. Even Indian English Fiction celebrates the new Indian woman by unraveling various aspects of her personality. Whether it is her open quest for self or her uninhibited acceptance of her sexuality, the new Indian woman has become the favorite of Indian English fiction written by women. The contemporary women writers are not only writing about the new woman, but are voicing the feelings and aspirations along with the burden and frustration of today’s modern educated, middle-class woman. Thus, this whole process of change in the image from traditional to modern has culminated into a new image of woman which the Indian English Fiction has helped to define.

### **New Woman**

The idea of New Woman has its genesis in centuries old feminist struggle. The break from the traditional image time and again led to the creation of New Woman. In the Indian context New Woman can be understood by the words of Usha Bande and Atma Ram. In *Woman in Indian Short Stories-Feministic Perspective*, they uphold,

...the “New Woman” is one who, shorn of her ‘feminine mystique’, is aware of herself as an individual, she is free from her traditional, social and moral constrictions and is able to live with a heightened sense of dignity, and individuality. The “New Woman, then, is the product of a new economic order in which woman casts aside her ‘invisibility’, comes out of the metaphorical *pardah* and avails of the opportunities provided by education, enfranchisement and employment. She, with her male counterpart, struggles for achievements in the professional and economical spheres, and deconstructs the image of a submissive, repressed and self-effacing being, the picture that emerges is of a self-reliant, emancipated and happy individual, a person, sexually uninhibited intelligent, confident and assertive. (14)

Questioning is the first step towards resistance and it is essential for the growth of an individual. The New Woman with her awareness of self and the world has learnt to voice her dissent and has recognized her unique potential. She is a self-

realized confident and assertive woman who is fully aware of her strengths and weaknesses, her dreams and aspirations, and most importantly her feelings and desires. The New Woman has gradually established that she too has wishes, likes and dislikes and that these are as important for her as they are for a man. Her awareness of her secondary position and the extent of oppression within the family and society make her introspect and understand her individuality. Being well aware of her inner strength, the new woman tries to actualize her true self, and does not endorse the archaic thinking which defines a woman's existence in the following words, "Like a slave while working/serving; a minister when counseling/advising; Goddess Lakshmi in her looks/personality; the earth in forbearance/endurance; a mother while feeding; Rambha, the celestial prostitute, in bed; these six are the true characteristics of an ideal wife (qtd. in Uma 2-3).

Focused on discovering an autonomous identity she recognizes the futility in being an acquiescent, self-abnegating daughter, sister, wife or mother. She does not feel insecure of the privileged position enjoyed by her brother rather her underprivileged position in the family strengthens her resolve and determines her to strive for her own individual goal. Two distinct strands that worked in this process of image (re) construction are education and economic independence. In spite of social and cultural limitations the new woman is focused on re- instating the self that would withstand the impact of gender discrimination. Her awareness of her mental and physical capabilities helps her ascertain her expectation from marriage, family and her own life, which were until now decided by the male members of family. Hence, she has started accepting herself as an indispensable member of the family and not as the "other."

On the basis of the above changes witnessed in the Indian woman, the New Woman in the Indian society can be defined as a woman who possesses three main qualities. First, she is self-realized, second, she is a non-conformist questioning tradition and third, she is self-reliant, an independent individual.

### **Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur as the Pioneers of Change**

The aforementioned traits clearly emerge in the female lead characters of Shashi Deshpande's and Manju Kapur's work. Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur are two eminent contemporary novelists of India. Their writing celebrates the essence of being an Indian woman and have persistently voiced the process of their evolution. While Deshpande is the daughter of a renowned regional dramatist, Sri Ranga and was fortunate to grow in an environment suffused with literary discussions, Manju Kapur's job of English Professor at Miranda House College,

a prestigious college of Delhi University, kept her connected with literature. What brings them together is their pre-occupation with paradigm shift in the attitude of woman in the Indian society.

Disillusioned with the condition of the archetype women around them, the heroines of Shashi Dehapande and Manju Kapur vehemently pursue self-realization. In the words of Deshpande, “What is self-realization but an understanding of the restrictions and regulations you live under” (“Interview with Romita Chaudhary” 24)? By confronting and accepting their individual self, these female characters become more determined and display courage to decide for “self” which eventually leads them towards gratification in life. According to Shashi Deshpande, “the solution cannot be ‘given’, because it is ‘self-bound’, in other words, it depends on the individuals concerned- it depends on the fiber of their self. A deeper awareness of the self leads to the understanding of its true nature” (qtd. in Mala 76). “No education and money, nothing can help you to live a better life. I think it’s more important to know what you are. Without that knowledge you cannot survive. You cannot live at all. You are just surviving. Once you have knowledge the possibilities are endless” (“Deshpande interview with Pallavi” 257). By knowing their real self these protagonists temporarily withdraw themselves to their interior resources which ultimately provide them the necessary sustenance and strength to face their problems in life. The discovery brings about a positive change in their attitude which guides them to perceive the unresolved crisis in their life in a different way. Lise Ee Jia Lau in her article summarizes the growth of Deshpande’s protagonists as, “By the end of the novels, most of Deshpande’s protagonists who have been brought up on maxims like “A husband is a sheltering tree”. Have found enough strength and confidence within themselves...the female protagonists becomes self-aware, undergoes the process of self-development/self-improvement, and eventually achieves self-fulfillment” (165).

Shashi Deshpande’s most celebrated character, Jaya of *That Long Silence* transforms into a mature person when she realizes that her life is her own and she is responsible for her troubles in her life. It was due to her weakness of resolve that she failed to articulate and assert her own desires. She realized her lack of commitment to her own dreams and aspirations and led a life defined by her husband. After this realization Jaya starts analyzing her circumstances from a different perspective. She becomes free from all inhibitions and decides to reconstruct her devastated and tattered life once again. Deshpande’s other heroine, Manjari or Jiji from *Moving On* is an assertive individual from early adolescence. She rebels against her parents by marrying Shyam and giving up her medical career.

Though Jiji's rebellious nature helps her to fulfill her passionate needs and desires to some extent but, it was only after her realization as an individual that she truly anticipates her responsibilities. Thus, self-realized Jiji decides to control and take charge of the happenings in her life. She fights to become independent emotionally and financially, in order to build a better future for herself and her children. Most of the heroines of Deshpande like Urmi, Indu, Sumi, Aru show an inclination towards independence which comes due to self realization or awareness of their individual needs. Her writings seem to portray the evolution of the protagonists from the state of confusion and bewilderment to the level of fully realized individuals, who display courage and confidence in accepting their life with all the strengths and shortcomings. Devi, the epitome of this process of continuous evolution, is a fully realized individual from the very beginning of her life. The strength of her personality, her individuality and her undaunted attitude to achieve happiness marks her as a new woman. Devi unabashedly transgresses every social dogma by her liaison with a married man.

Manju Kapur's protagonists display a mixed yet a much emancipated attitude towards their individuality. Her first protagonist Virmati of *Difficult Daughters* encapsulates an important trait of a new woman. Her fiercely independent nature and obsessive love for her Professor, a married man entails her to transgress the set norms of the society. Throughout the novel, Virmati never retreats from her dreams and desires, and ultimately when she achieves it, she accepts the relationship with all its challenges. Virmati truly establishes herself as one of the most emancipated spirits in Indian English Fiction. Astha in *A Married Woman* starts realizing a void in her mundane life as she was often made to realize her limited space, by words like, "Please keep to what you know best, the home, children, teaching" (67). Her road to selfhood leads her through the unconventional relationship with a woman. Even though this act of Astha uproots the traditional dictates, Kapur justifies it as,

What she is trying to do is to juggle her own needs and desires with those of her family. She does this by having an affair with a woman, and it only works temporarily. It is not as though she has a very happy relationship with her lover or that she uses this relationship in order to leave her family. Her children are her primary obligation. She is trying to get some personal happiness out of that space. ("Manju Kapur interview with Vandana Pathak" 113)

However, from the open end of the novel we can conclude that Astha's return to her family is only a temporary retreat, as her search for real meaning of life or the

attainment of ultimate happiness remains an unfulfilled dream for her. Kapur's next protagonist, Nina of *The Immigrant* is a self realized person from the beginning of the novel. She is an independent individual who marries a dentist Ananda, and migrates to Canada with a heart full of dreams. However, after a short span of isolated and discontented living, Nina forays toward rediscovery of self.

Living side by side of these new women, there are few minor characters like Sulu, Ajji, Vimala, Kusum, Virmati's mother, Professor's first wife, who provide a striking contrast to the degree of change observed between them and our enlightened "New Woman." Their traditional mindset significantly sets them apart from the new woman.

Hence as projected by these two novelists, self-realization or awareness of true self is integral for changing the attitude of women towards oppressive customs. The years of subordination and a confined life has created a limited space for women. Therefore, unless there is self-realization, any transgression from the circumscribing conditions would lead to only temporary fulfillment.

Awakened from the slumbering state of subjugation and peripheral existence perpetuated by the society and the lawmakers, Indian woman shows significant signs of transformation in her attitude. Equipped with education, enlightenment and self-discovery these revolutionary women protagonists of Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur confront the restricting forces which arbitrate their path of self-growth. The protagonists like Indu, Jaya, Astha and Nina try hard to conform to the existing traditional structure but are compelled to revolt when their existence as an individual is reduced to a mere object. The other protagonists like Urmi, Aru, Jiji, Devi and Virmati, disseminate the spirit of non-conformity from their early days. They are the embodiment of individuals who think and question every single rigid imposition that constricts them from achieving their goal in life.

The New Woman is awakened to the futility of the various long-preserved notions and taboos and has started opposing them. Her educated, speculative mind compels her to question the traditions and customs which are responsible for her subjugation. Gender bias which starts right from the cradle and the stultifying life of a girl compels her to raise a voice of dissent against such traditions that make her the custodian of family honor. She questions the dual morality of patriarchal system which grants freedom for boys and restriction for girls. She is intolerant towards woman's subjugation in marriage which makes her completely subservient to her husband who in turn is allotted a position equivalent to God. She refuses to toe the line of the ideal Indian woman who is submissive, sacrificing and self-effacing. Hence she raises her voice wherever she is suppressed in the name of

tradition or patriarchy. Thus the new woman “is standing up, asking discomfoting, unconventional, unnerving questions, she is exploding the myth of motherhood, subverting the myth of purity and virginity.”<sup>34</sup> She speaks to break the silence which since time immemorial has been misinterpreted as her behavioral quality. It is important to state over here that the new woman is not against all traditions but refuses to adhere to those traditions which constrict and suffocate her existence.

However, it is also very prominent that none of these protagonists rebel or resist patriarchy simply because of their aggressive and intolerant behavior. Nor do they rebel just to be simply pronounced as whistleblowers. These women of substance use their thinking power to analyze the present situation and when certain norms become an obstacle in their growth they break the norms without hesitation. They are simple and ordinary individuals and look for a happy life, but the conventions of the society creates inconvenience in their lives. As mentioned earlier, they are self-sufficient and confident about their capabilities, and believe in relying on their innate abilities; therefore, they resist the dominating doctrines which try to limit their future. Manjari, Devi, Virmati, Astha, and Nina reject the traditional concept of purity of woman and look for sexual gratification. These protagonists display the ability to make their decisions and live to fulfill these dreams, because they believe in themselves and their decision.

In their pursuit to strive for their self-fulfillment these non-conformists undergo several challenges both in the home and society. The process becomes even more painful as their refusal to abide by the customized framework does not assure happiness for them.

All the female characters of the two novelists can be broadly classified into four groups. The first section belongs to the innumerable minor female characters in the six novels who present a striking contrast to the female protagonists of the novel. By accepting their dependence on the male members of their family, as their destiny, they propagate themselves as the custodians of tradition. The archetypical women live their life as ordained by the society and accept it as their destiny. Hence, the question of resentment or articulation never arises. A number of such prototypes are found in the novel *That Long Silence*, *Moving On*, *Difficult Daughter's* and *A Married Woman*. Characters like Jaya's Aunts, Mohan's mother, Kusum, Malu, Kasturi and Astha's mother represent the common fate of a number of such females. They believe in the existing structure of the society where the question of a woman's personal identity does not exist and “the husband is like a sheltering tree...” (*That Long Silence* 144).

The second category of female protagonists accepts their fate without

questioning the impositions levied on them. It is only in few instances that they assert their individuality. They are not very different from their submissive predecessors but once in a while they do assert themselves. Protagonists like Jaya and Astha accept the conventional relationship with its limitations but feel dissatisfied in a number of situations where their own wishes clash with the desire of their family members. This conflict creates some imbalance in their traditionally structured family and, therefore, they are unable to revolt. It also arises as a consequence of their inability or the lack of courage to voice their dissent. However, their growing unhappiness and restlessness with their situation compels them to assert their will. Although, they cannot be categorized as independent individuals but they can be acknowledged as those who are on the road to emancipation.

The third group comprises of those enlightened women who Deshpande describes as, “The women who go to work, the women who take decisions, the women who take charge of their lives” (“Deshpande interview with Romita Choudhary” 178). For them, the superiority of the patriarchal norms does not carry any importance at all. What interests them is their freedom of choice, opinion, thought and action. They want to be allowed to live their life on their own terms. Self-fulfillment and happiness are what they seek in life. Protagonists like Devayani and Jiji (Manjari) believe in self-reliance and do not want to be maneuvered by the dos and don'ts but make their own rules. Their individual happiness is their ultimate longing. They willingly accept the consequence of their decision and want to be left with their own peace.

Whereas, the fourth section of protagonists truly exudes high self-esteem. Their high self-esteem and fiercely independent nature empowers them to keep looking for greater goals. They do wish to have a healthy family life, but their assertive nature never allows them to be satisfied by the traditional expectations of their family. The protagonists like Virmati and Nina try to fit in an ordinary married life but discontented they look for happiness elsewhere.

In our conventional society the identity of woman often gets diffused, shadowed and even merged as they are referred not by their names but by their relation to men in their lives i.e. “daughter, sister, wife and mother of so and so.” The New Woman is an individual with capacity to reflect on her position and speak for herself. Economic independence furnishes the New Woman with heightened confidence which provides her the courage to stand on her own and demand independence in terms of decision making. As Manjari of *Moving On* poignantly states, “Once having tasted freedom, I cannot get back into the harness



again” (307). The new woman frames her own opinion based on her observations and wishes to take decision regarding her career, marriage, sexuality and life. As compared to the traditional image of woman, new woman is a conscious human being and believes in independent identity. She asserts her individuality and resists being treated as an “object” or “property” by the patriarchal society. Thus, the new woman equipped with education, intelligence and determination is willing to take her own responsibility and understands the importance of economic independence. Supporting this thought Deshpande once stated, “Today, I believe that a woman should have her own source of income. Society never gives a woman her due unless she has money to call her own. It’s unfortunate, but it’s also a hard fact of life” (“My Money” 84).

Indian Women novelists mainly, Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur have added a new dimension to Indian English Fiction by highlighting the change in the Indian woman. Their protagonists break their silence and articulate their thoughts which signify assertion of self and liberation. Breaking the silence, asserting the individual self, questioning the patriarchal order and searching for self-fulfillment occupies the centre of focus in the literary works of these novelists Their writing highlights the place and position of the contemporary women in the Indian society. They authentically portray the feeling of frustration and alienation faced by women. Their portrayal of woman in Indian English fiction is a shift from the silent sufferer and up holder of the traditional values of family. They have successfully conveyed the process of change and the attitudinal transformation of woman from a mere “object” to a “thinking person.” In doing so, they have clearly given a definitive mould to the Indian woman, with her three distinct qualities of self- realization, non-conformity and self- reliance.

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