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The New Indian woman: Who is she, and what is "New" about her?

Lisa Ee Jia Lau

Geography Department, University of Durham, South Road, Durham DH1 3LE, UK

Synopsis

This article explores the rapid evolution of the New Indian Woman, defined as an urban, educated, middle classed Indian woman, whose development has paralleled the equally rapid growth of the middle-classes in India. It explores the double-edged positionality of women negotiating their societal roles and places, within and without the family and home. The oeuvre of Deshpande is particularly edifying in such a study as the progression of her novels and character depictions (spanning decades) reflects, traces, and captures the rapid social and cultural changes which have been taking place in urban India as a result of swift economic development and expansion. The works of other contemporary Indian women writers are also discussed for their conceptualization of what constitutes the New Indian Woman. These contemporary writings highlight social norms which may have been expected to change, but remarkably, either have not, or else have simply assumed a new guise.

Introduction

The slogan "India Shining" accompanied by high profile advertisements, is currently part of the government's elections campaign designed to draw attention to the swift rise in prosperity of the successful urban middle class in India. India is said to have the fastest growing economy in the world with a GDP growth of "10.4% in the third quarter of 2003–04.... [following] two good quarters of 5.7% and 8.4% growth in the first and second quarter of 2003–04, respectively" (Thiagarajan, 2004). In spite of this, the news is not *all* good, and "however much India may be shining, however much the feel-good factor may prevail in the country, the country is in a poor shape in many spheres: Hunger, water supply, domestic fuel, housing, primary education, health delivery, sanitation and unemployment are all matters of concern. The World Development Report 2004 has drawn a bleak picture of the state of the poor in India" (Indiresan, 2004). Many critics are pointing out that the urban middle class and upper classes are enjoying economic prosperity despite or even on the backs of the rural poor. "The top 20% of the urban population for instance, has increased its consumption expenditure by 30%, over roughly the period of the NDA [National Democratic Alliance] rule. The top 20% of the rural population also pushed their way ahead in the social scale, expanding their consumption expenditure by the order of 10% in this period. For the rest of the rural population, this period shows up an absolute squeeze on consumption. The "feel good" strata, in other words, are being held aloft by the sacrifices and the penury of at least half the population of the country" (Muralidharan, 2004).

There is little doubt that economic developments are responsible for the creation of a fast-growing, rapidly expanding middle-class, but the myth of the "great Indian middle class" has been exploded by a number of critics, who refuse to allow the negative externalities of this explosion of the middle class to be swept under the 'feel good' carpet.[1]

[1] "Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani recently boasted that he was the author of "feel good" current election slogan of the Bharatiya Janata Party led-National Democratic Alliance (NDA)."

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> "I am sick of reading about the modernity of the Indian middle class: its commitment to democracy as well as its respect for 'tradition'.…Where does the modernity of middle class Indian lie? I can now tell you. In his pocket…the middle class Indian, dressed in jeans and T-shirt, can afford to be 'liberal' in spending. He epitomizes modernity as consumption. Pocket modernity or modernity of the pocket" (Robinson, 2001).

Critics of modernization note that not only is poverty still rampant in rural India, even the small towns of India have deteriorated due to supposed increased financial prosperity, "…in a way I was beginning to see as distinctly Indian, prosperity had not enhanced, but lowered, living standards in general. Increased traffic had strangulated the city's [Jaipur] once spacious avenues; the pavements had been taken over by assorted stalls and *thelas*; the air was arid with exhaust smoke from diesel tempos, lorries, cars, scooters; and, marooned in this chaos, the rickshaw-pullers seemed to be drawing attention to their uncertain fate by creating a tremendous din with their bells" (Mishra, 1995, p. 67).

Another critic contends that "the fastest growing sector in India Shining is not IT or software, textiles or automobiles. It is inequality" (Sainath, 2004). In this political, economic, and volatile socio-cultural climate, where does the New Indian Woman stand, and what does she stand for?

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan contends that the image of the New Woman in India is primarily derived from the urban, educated, middle-class career woman (Rajan, 1993, p. 130). According to Rajan, the New Woman, primarily constructed by the media and for commercial ends, is new in the sense of "having evolved and arrived in response to the times, as well as being intrinsically 'modern' and 'liberated'" (Rajan, 1993, p. 130).

In the course of this article, using a range of literary texts, I will outline the emotional and everyday dilemmas which confront Rajan's New Indian Woman, and argue that not only is this New Indian Woman evolved in response to the times, but that she continues to occupy a tension-filled and contested space. This article will investigate how and with what means, the New Indian Woman carves a niche out for herself within the fabric of contemporary urban India, negotiating and compromising, struggling for a larger degree of individuality (than was previously permitted her) while remaining deeply rooted in her community.

This article will focus on the presentation of the "New Indian Woman" in the contemporary Literature in English by Indian women writers who are mainly resident or based in India. As Chowdhury points out, these writings have had to be sensitive to the changing times, and "Far from presenting a simplistic narrative of progress from imperialism to 'autonomy', women's writings in India had to take into account the fact that this was also a period when new machineries of control were established, and new ways of being Indian shaped and circulated" (Chowdhury, 1998, p. 308).

The role of literature in this investigation of the positionality of the New Indian Woman, is that of a product in the circuits of culture; which reflects, records, informs, shapes, influences, contributes to the culture it discusses, which draws from and comments upon, changes and is changed by the culture. As Sharpe had argued, "images produced in literature create certain forms of class, national or gendered consciousness" (Sharpe, 2000, p. 328). To that I would add that what images are selected for production in the literature, depends in large part not only on the individual artistry of the author, but on the geographical location and positionality of the authors.

This article will therefore consider the works of non-diasporic authors, authors entrenched in their specific geographical setting and whose writings are concerned with the portrayal of Indians living in India, and less concerned with exploring the issues of dislocation and the migratory experience, as do so many other Indian authors of the diaspora whose writings currently dominate the contemporary literary scene.[2]

One of the authors whose works are particularly significant for this study is Shashi Deshpande, who states that "My background is very firmly rooted here. I was never educated abroad, my novels…..are just about Indian people and the complexities of our life" (Deshpande, 1999, p. 248). Deshpande is self-proclaimed as the emphatic antithesis of the diasporic author, as diametrically opposite to the diasporic author as could be envisioned, and identifies closely with the circumstances

[2] At a time when the voice of the diasporic Indian women authors is beginning to be heard more and more strongly, it is both curious and unfortunate that the voices of women authors writing and publishing from within India do not command the same global attention. Diasporic Indians, especially those living in countries where they have facilities for publication and publicity available to them, are better positioned to formulate the image of Indian women. It must also be noted that outside the Indian subcontinent, it is generally easier to obtain the publications of diasporic Indian women writers than to obtain the work of home writers. (This may in part be due to the audience and the demand for specific literature, and to the marketing decisions of the publishing houses.) It is ironic that these articulate diasporic Indian women writers may be so much more effective than their Indian counterparts in marketing their ideas and ideals, that they almost consign the home writers to the position of subalternism.

of Indian women whose lives are entirely lived in India, and for whom traveling outside India and living abroad is not part of their world.

According to Deshpande herself, "I am not writing about women, I am not even writing about any particular class. I am writing about human beings. Now those human beings happen to be placed in a particular environment, an environment I am familiar with….. My characters are from a certain milieu and that milieu happens to be middle class" (Warrier, 2000). Be that as it may, Deshpande's protagonists are almost always women, and moreover, women who happen to be placed in exactly the time and environment under discussion in this article. The following section therefore traces her depiction of women characters in her novels, a depiction which will be shown to have shifted and grown over time, in keeping with the economic and socio-cultural changes of their society, or Deshpande's milieu, as she would term it. In the penultimate section of this article, the New Women in some other home authors' writings[3] are discussed in terms of the characteristics that define them as "New".

The Indian woman redepicted by Deshpande

For centuries, Indian women have lived by complex and rigid codes of behaviour, codes designed to curb rebellion and reward submission and obedience. With political and economic changes taking place with rapidity in India, social changes are increasingly the norm, and the rebellion of women is no longer as rare or as difficult as it once had been. Consequences are less dire, more options are available, the society seems increasingly tolerant, and media and 'Westernisation' influences are increasingly powerful and pervasive. There have also been more and more support groups in India organised for women who do not or cannot live by their society's customs. With the changes in economy and politics and the modernisation of India and other South Asian countries, it is important to trace the changing positionality of South Asian women over the generations. The oeuvre of Deshpande is particularly edifying as her works cover the time span from 1980 to the present. Her writing which focuses on the situation for women highlights issues of class differences, gender discriminations within and without the home, the changes in urban India leading to cultural changes for the people.

Positioning Deshpande's oeuvre

Deshpande is an award winning Indian author who has always been distanced from mainstream global South Asian literature and therefore relatively unknown on the Western literary scene despite her long-standing contribution to this literary subculture. She does not conform to the expected, does not offer the reader what is exotically exciting, and does not brandish her 'Indianness' either as a trophy or a tool. She has not leapt on the bandwagon of representing India/South Asia to the Western world. It is for all these reasons that her writings are doubly significant — because she records the changing social scenes in India as she views it, not as she would wish anyone else to view it. As Ritu Menon states, "One will not find in her [Deshpande's] novels any element of the "exotic," a *National Geographic-land-and-its-people* kind of treatment of the unfamiliar" (Menon, 1999, p. 248 in Deshpande, 1999).

As Deshpande herself had made clear, she is writing not about women, but about human beings. This distinction indicates that Deshpande does not subscribe to the relegation of women to any easily defined categories or pigeonholes, gender apparently being secondary to personality and strength of character in Deshpande's creations. The significance of Deshpande's chosen focus is that her novels habitually *refrain* from placing female protagonists in positions of helplessness or weakness,[4] (although in contrast, diasporic writers *do* habitually thus position their women characters[5]) and although many of her protagonists suffer emotional blows, they are not seen to be in need of male protection or shelter. In this way, Deshpande's writings are totally at odds with most contemporary portrayals of South Asian women, who are more often than not, victims of culture and circumstances. Another huge difference in the presentation of India by Deshpande and by diasporic authors is that Deshpande's

[3] One may well have reservations about the potentially misleading term "home author"; the term was chosen to imply that the writer is not only Indian by descent but also resides within India. It is not possible to ascertain the nationality of every diasporic writer, but the purpose of this differentiation between 'home' and 'diasporic' writers is less to determine the political status of the authors, and more to register the geographical residences and locations of the writers, which goes a long way in influencing the writing.

[4] For a discussion on why South Asian authors may be positioning their female protagonists in positions of helplessness or weakness, please refer to Lau, Lisa "Equating Womanhood with Victimhood: The Positionality of Women Protagonists in the Contemporary Writings of South Asian Women." *Women's Studies International Forum*, 2003, 26 (4): 369–378.

[5] A good example is the well known diasporic author, Chitra Divakaruni whose works do seek to emphasise that Indian women are in disadvantaged positions, victimized by their society, by virtue of being women.

India is not a static, unvarying place where traditions and customs carry on, timeless and unchanging — Deshpande's India is vibrant and constantly changing, the social changes are swift and upsetting, and her characters have to deal with these changes in social norms, customs, values, liberties, and expectations.

It is notable that the character or personality of the central protagonist and the main plot or story line in these six novels are remarkably similar. These novels are intended to be read as separate works, but they do appear to form a series, not in terms of sequels, but as parts of a developing oeuvre. In each novel, Deshpande's tale is triggered off at approximately the same starting point, and it is consequently of interest to note that the portrayals of the protagonists' circumstances have changed over time. "She [Deshpande] says that she knows how the women feel and she knows the mood of India" (Sandhu, 1991, p. 13). Deshpande's sustained writings over the decades are also interesting for the way in which they chart generational changes within families, reflecting and running parallel to the social changes in the wider Indian society.

Deshpande's heroine, the New Indian woman

To begin with, Deshpande's habitual and favoured central protagonist is the 'ordinary' Indian woman, unremarkable in the sense that she is an average, middle-class, middle-aged, fairly well-educated, urban woman. Significantly, none of Deshpande's protagonists are conventionally good-looking women.[6] Perhaps in the creation of such protagonists, Deshpande attempts to counter the more common (and particularly diasporic) tendency to portray women protagonists as exotically attractive. Instead of having faces which determine their fortunes, Deshpande's protagonists are intelligent, diligent, well-educated, well-read, competent and determined women. They are not notably likeable nor even pleasant women, but they are undoubtedly intelligent, capable, passionate ones. Although they are cast as ordinary women, not at all outwardly unusual in their walk of life, Deshpande appears to find it necessary to create protagonists with these characteristics, traits which perhaps stand the women in good stead when they attempt to rise out of their prescribed roles and shake off shackling notions of the society in which they have been bred and adapted. It is also possible that Deshpande's protagonists are best positioned to renegotiate their traditional roles because they consider themselves at the periphery of their social norms, which traditionally would have privileged pretty, fair, docile, compliant women, in short, all that they are not.

Having created such heroines, Deshpande also sets out some of the parameters of their social world, "For a woman, intelligence is always a burden…we like our women not to think" (Deshpande, 1983, p. 33). Deshpande's writings consistently explore how her protagonists cope in such a social climate. Although Deshpande situates her protagonists as ordinary middle class Indian women, the fact must not be overlooked that each of these women are somehow slightly out-of-place in their communities, and each has some angst which she carries and harbours. Deshpande's protagonists are culturally sensitive, but also culturally confrontational women. They test the boundaries of their culture at a point in their lives where they are strong and secure enough to successfully challenge the social norms.

Deshpande is also careful to sketch out the positions of her protagonists in their society. She makes it clear that how they are placed affects their choices to no small extent. All of her protagonists are married women, middle aged, and most of them mothers. Most have made love marriages, and all are, or have been, deeply in love with their husbands. All have been brought up in Hindu households although none of them appear deeply religious. The majority of them had rebelled against an older woman in their family, and most have left their natal homes only to return during a crisis.

Sarbjit Sandhu (1991) argues that Deshpande chooses to focus on such women because she herself hails from a similar background. According to Sandhu, Deshpande also chooses to write about middle-class women because these women represent a large section of contemporary Indian society, and because Deshpande is pre-occupied with the social forces at work on them in society. Perhaps Sandhu is justified in hinting that Deshpande's writing may be at least in part autobiographical, because her heroines are either writers themselves, or immensely interested in literature and writing. One other significant character trait which all her heroines share — to some extent — is their inclination to introspection. The following sections will analyse Deshpande's positing of her women characters by studying them in various roles and across different periods of time.

Characteristics of Deshpande's New Indian woman

This section will investigate various remarkable characteristics of, and enacted by, the cast of protagonists Deshpande creates, in their personal struggles to be New Indian Women.

[6] Saru, for example, was fat and unattractive in her youth, Indu was small and dark, and Urmi dresses shabbily.

To begin with, Deshpande's heroines are a curious contradiction in themselves. So fiercely independent that many cut themselves off from their families at a perceived threat to their individualities, they nevertheless turn to their husbands and become dependent on them for love, approval and identity. Saru may have pitied Smita[7] for docilely accepting the new name her husband chose for her, Jaya may have rejected *her* husband's choice of the name Suhasini for her,[8] Indu may have scoffed at the notion of women praying to the tulsi plant for their husbands' longevity,[9] but one and all realise that they nevertheless subscribe to the notion that "A husband is like a sheltering tree," a notion which runs through *The Long Silence* (1989) like a refrain.

Deshpande's heroines are uncomfortably, even fearfully, aware that they have defined themselves in relation to their husbands after resolutely cutting off even family ties to avoid being defined in relation to their families. "But twice in my life I had thought that I was free.....Both times I found out how wrong I was. New bonds replace the old, that is all" (Deshpande, 1983, p.14). These women eventually realise that they have simply avoided one trap only to fall into another, and this other is a trap so insidious that for all their education and intelligence, they had not managed to avoid being victims of it. Instead of having achieved autonomy from the need for societal endorsement, Deshpande's New Indian Women have simply transferred their locus of authority from society to husband, failing to do away with their need to refer to an external source for approbation.

These modern, middle-class women which Deshpande's protagonists definitely represent, find (to their own surprise) that they have imbibed the notions of men's and women's roles unquestioningly, "It seems to me that we had, both of us, rehearsed the roles of husband and wife so well that when the time came, we could play them flawlessly, word-perfect" (Deshpande, 1989, p. 95). This subconscious imbibing of gender roles may in part explain why the New Indian Woman may yet willingly embrace certain conventional roles. Deshpande portrays that although role-playing perfectly, her protagonists nevertheless experience a sense of loss, which may in part stem from unthinkingly subscribing to their roles.

Deshpande portrays marriage, with all its accompanying securities, resulting in further losses for her protagonists; loss of integrity, loss of articulation, loss of personal ambition, loss of courage. Over and above all these losses is the fear of the loss of a husband — of being that most inauspicious creature, the husbandless woman, the abandoned wife, the widow. ".....my marriage taught me this too. I had found in myself an immense capacity for deception. I had learnt to reveal to Jayant nothing but what he wanted to see, to say to him nothing but what he wanted to hear. I hid my responses and emotions as if they were bits of garbage" (Deshpande, 1983, p.38). Deshpande highlights the fragility of the seemingly strong marriage, exposing the solidarity of this middle-class husband and wife resting on a tissue of deceptions and half-truths.

Caught in a patriarchal society, Deshpande's New Indian Women are seen learning to devalue themselves. They readily compromise or even disregard personal cost and personal integrity, prepared to go to any lengths to keep their marriages intact. Deshpande's protagonists who were writers, like Jaya, Indu, and Madhu, shrink from raising controversial issues even when these issues lay close to their hearts. Deshpande traces the process that transformed these women from bold, sincere, forthright youths to women who prefer to take the line of least resistance, avoiding pain and conflict at all costs. Even the bright, ambitious Jaya learns to make marriage, and nothing else, her career. The tragedy is that having played their roles to perfection, these women find their lives hollow, meaningless and unfulfilled, realising only after many years that their definitions of success (as imbibed from their society) did not coincide with their personal definitions of happiness. The resultant emotion is that of having been cheated, "Love is a big fraud, a hoax, that's what it is. They tell you it's the greatest thing, the only thing in life. And you believe them and fall into the trap...." (Deshpande, 1983, p. 157).

To digress a little, Deshpande does include the hint of another possible social trap her protagonists manage to evade — Deshpande's subplots frequently introduce another man on the scene, a man taking a more than platonic interest in the protagonists. In the absence of Kishore, Bhaskar courts Urmi; Boozie, a senior doctor, teaches and aids Saru in her medical career; Naren seduces Indu; Kamal encourages Jaya's writings and teaches her self-respect;[10] but these women are remarkably quick to realise that having affairs and/or swapping their emotional alliances would not solve their problems. These New Women of Deshpande's novels are depicted as responsible and conscionable, and would be slow to exploit or abuse the privilege of personal freedom and autonomy.

[7] Refer to Appendix, *The dark holds no terrors* (1980), for synopsis.
[8] Refer to Appendix, *The long silence* (1988), for synopsis.
[9] Refer to Appendix, *Roots and shadows* (1983), for synopsis.
[10] Refer to Appendix: *The binding vine* (1993), *The dark holds no terrors* (1980), *Roots and shadows* (1983), *The long silence* (1988), respectively.

Deshpande's New Indian Women, for all their many strengths, are deeply insecure. They attempt to compare themselves with other members of their family to reassure themselves of their happiness, but eventually come to a sense of sisterhood and solidarity with the women of their extended family. Jaya, for example, had pitied the poor, insane Kusum, until she realised that she had used Kusum as a measuring stick to gloat over her own sanity and good fortune. Indu had not been able to understand her cousin, Padmini, initially, wondering at her wish to be married to any man who would say 'yes', but comes to the realisation that although she and her cousin seem worlds apart, they share certain notions: "The Indian way. The husband. A definite article. Permanent. Not only for now, but forever. To be accepted. Stop" (Deshpande, 1983, p. 126–27).

However, Deshpande does make the point that women from middle class backgrounds and with advantages (financial, education, familial) as those of her protagonists, are less likely to accept a husband's desertion, abuse, neglect, or infidelity, with equanimity. Jeeja, Jaya's cleaner and a woman clearly of a different economic and social class from that of Jaya's, uncomplainingly accepts a husband who was a polygamous drunkard, enduring this "with no anger behind her silence" (Deshpande, 1989, p. 51). Even more remarkably, Jeeja does not permit her daughter-in-law to protest her husband's (Jeeja's son) drinking and abuse. Jeeja's rationale is that "he keeps the *kumkum* on your forehead. What is a woman without that?" (Deshpande, 1989, p. 53). For women like Jeeja, it is the state of being married, of being a wife, of having the public recognition of wifehood, which is of significance, and for this privileged stature, nothing is too much to endure.

It is not only a matter of a class difference, but a difference of ideologies. Padmini, Indu's cousin, concurs with the likes of Jeeja in regarding marriage as a necessity. For reasons different from those of Jeeja's, admittedly, but a necessity nevertheless. "Of course I am marrying him because there is nothing else I can do…..There is only one thing I am really good at…..looking after a house. And to get a house, I have to get married" (Deshpande, 1983, p. 125). Padmini's logic clearly demonstrates that to her, a husband is simply a means to an end. Women who regard marriage as a necessity seem to regard the man they marry as an issue of secondary importance to the fact that having a husband provides security, a shield against the disapproval, contempt, or pity, from their community, and wifehood is an assurance of worth. It is a paradoxical development in a patriarchal society which has long assumed women either belong to their menfolk or are chattels of men, that marriage is regarded by women as a career, to the extent that men are objectified, stripped of personal worth and desirability, valued not for themselves but for what they can provide.

Deshpande's protagonists wrestle with a set of problems peculiar to women in their positions, which is by no means the problems which the majority of Indian women encounter. "The predicament of Deshpande's protagonists is peculiarly Indian as experienced and endorsed by many a Western-educated Indian reader" (Kirpal & Mukta, 1998, p. 9). It is true to some extent, that their privileged education and experiences have distanced Deshpande's protagonists from the more closely tradition-bound women, even if these women happen to be mothers, mother-in-laws, cousins, or otherwise closely related. Deshpande's protagonists do ponder the attitudes of the women they interact with, with no small degree of incredulity, surprised by the stoicism, acceptance, and resilience of women like Shakutai and Jeeja. Unable to fully empathise, Deshpande's protagonists seem a world apart. They do, however, struggle for understanding and attempt to decide whether the lack of resistance and protest over what they themselves would deem unsufferable, is a sign of strength, or simply despair, apathy and resignation.

> "Inner strength….A woman's life, they had told me, contained no choices...the women had no choice but to submit, to accept. And I had often wondered… have they been born without wills or have their wills atrophied through a lifetime of disuse? And yet Mini [Padmini], who had no choice either, had accepted the reality, the finality, with a grace and composure that spoke eloquently of that inner strength" (Deshpande, 1983, p. 6).

In her novels, Deshpande demonstrates the curious situation that has developed in a fast-expanding middle-class India — social changes have come so rapidly and encompassingly for women, that those who have moved into this new world are almost at a loss to comprehend the conditions and continuing restrictions upon those who have not.

The notion of acceptance being a sign of strength (especially on the part of the women), has long permeated the South Asian mentality, from mythologies which eulogise suffering as a virtue to contemporary novels like Deshpande's which grimly celebrate women who are wronged but who triumph by dint of patience and endurance. Deshpande's protagonists are torn between this culturally ingrained notion and their own theoretical notions of equality between sexes, personal fulfillment as important, and individual happiness as a

goal. In their personal lives, they are forced to reconcile these conflicting notions in the arena of marriage, especially in negotiating between the possibility of customs which may be both implicitly as well as traditionally gendered.

It is clear that Deshpande's protagonists have a strongly developed sense of self-worth, independent of family or husbands. More than that, they recognise the gulf between their goals and criteria, and those of the more traditional women:

> "I knew that these women had their own standards for judging people. Nothing about me…my academic distinctions, my career, my success, my money… none of these would impress her. To her I was just a childless woman. To get married, to bear children, to have sons and then grandchildren…they were still for them the only successes a woman could have. I had almost forgotten this breed of women since I had left home. Now seeing them was like discovering a new world. Each one of them, riddled with ignorance, prejudice and superstition, was a world of darkness in herself. And even more amazing was their ignorance of their own darkness" (Deshpande, 1983, p. 116).

Indu's use of language in her thoughts indicates how clearly she differentiates between herself as an educated, enlightened, liberated woman, and "this breed of women". Indu distances herself from them in her thoughts, mentally classifying them as belonging to another section of society, and although she comprehends their values, she makes it clear that she finds them limited and even pathetic.

The conclusion to the novels hint that Deshpande's protagonists are not prepared to pray to the tulsi plant any longer, metaphorically speaking.[11] Having discovered that they too had carried their own world of darkness despite all their advantages of birth, situation and education, Deshpande's protagonists prepare to break their silence and emerge from their dark worlds. Jaya makes changes within herself that renders it impossible to return to her old life, Saru is prepared to confront her husband without fears, and Indu commits adultery without guilt and chooses to disregard her husband's advice to turn away from her family. 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 to disperse with the shelter if that is the price they have to pay for regaining their individuality and autonomy. Deshpande's novels are almost Austenian in that the female protagonist becomes self-aware, undergoes the process of self-development/self-improvement, and eventually achieves self-fulfillment.

Progression and change

In Deshpande's earlier novels, the protagonists are fairly self-absorbed, wrestling for most part with their inner demons and searching for their identities. They are, however, always conscious of their extended families, and Deshpande makes it clear that her protagonists do not function in isolation, nor is the nuclear family an unrooted entity. For example, when Sumi moves back into the Big House with her daughters after Gopal's desertion, her extended family rally around her and close the gap of Gopal's absence as seamlessly as possible, providing generous support and understanding. Deshpande's protagonists are always seen moving from a nuclear family unit, *back* into the joint family for support and strength. This goes against the commonly held idea that the urbanization of India is undermining the joint family structure. Despite the fact that the Hindu ideology promotes the notion of the daughter as given away by her natal family into her husband's family, Deshpande insists that an Indian woman's natal family is of a cohesive nature, both before and after her marriage, and never more so than during a crisis.

Deshpande's portrayals of joint families do indicate that in the joint family, there will be strong members just as there will be parasitical members, there will be aggressors just as there will be defenders, but she paints an overall picture which suggests that there is comfort and solidarity to be found in the joint family, and that the joint family is the individual's first port of call for help when the nuclear family unit is threatened. Deshpande's protagonists are clearly women who had moved out of their joint families because they had found it restraining and limited, but they are women who have learnt anew to value the joint family structure. In a time when more and more nuclear families are breaking away from the joint family, Deshpande's novels celebrate the strength and support which can be found in the latter. As much as Deshpande criticises some aspects of tradition, she also celebrates its other aspects.

In her later novels, Deshpande departs from her previous focus on the childhood, marriage and struggles

[11] At a time when there is increased political valorisation of Hindu values, Deshpande's protagonists are seen to be swimming against the tide when they personally discard Hindu traditions which they no longer wish to subscribe to.

of the central protagonist (as was the case in *The dark holds no terrors*, *The long silence*, and *Roots and shadows*). By her 1993 novel, *The binding vine*, Deshpande had shifted her focus; Urmi, the central protagonist, is seen to be at the centre of a large network of other women characters, characters which receive a far higher degree of prominence than Deshpande has thus accorded them. This we can read as Deshpande noting the need to position her New Indian Woman in context with other women around her, in order to negotiate her role not only as a woman, but amongst other women.

Another significant progression of Deshpande's creation of the New Indian Woman is the taking into account the male perspective. In *Matter of time* Gopal, Sumi's husband, speaks in the first person. Deshpande explains her departure from her usual practise thus, "I wanted to see if I could use a male voice again, but not as I used to earlier." Ritu Menon notes that Deshpande who had heretofore used a male persona only in her short stories, had not only given Gopal the speaking voice, but had also "invest[ed] him with the same qualities usually reserved for her female protagonists: reflection and introspection" (Deshpande, 1999, p. 258). Besides Sumi's and Gopal's, there are many other 'speaking voices' in the novel from the other characters. Deshpande allows the other characters to tell their own stories, and the result is a wide range of personal stories, from several generations of Sumi's family. This may be Deshpande's attempt to explore multiple perspectives and avoid seeing solely a woman's point of view, to note that the New Indian Woman does not evolve in isolation.

Deshpande conducts an interesting investigation in one of her later novels, on how her New Indian Woman fares when the unthinkable happens to her — when she is deserted by her husband, as Sumi is in *Matter of time*. Deshpande's other protagonists had been afraid to even envision life without their husbands, and Jaya, who was forced to confront only the *possibility* of being deserted by Mohan, becomes emotionally paralysed. Sumi, however, is not cast in the same mould as Saru, Jaya, Indu and Urmi. There is no tremendous change in Sumi from the beginning of the novel to the conclusion. When the reader is introduced to Sumi, she is a woman already complete in herself.[12] Although introspective, Sumi does not undergo agonies of self-doubt, as did Deshpande's earlier protagonists. Sumi is stunned by Gopal's desertion, and describes herself as angry and humiliated, but she manages to take this drastic change of events in her stride, assuming full responsibility for her daughters, and even meeting Gopal calmly and without reproach. In Sumi, Deshpande has created her strongest protagonist yet, a high evolved New Indian woman, a woman able to live and love relatively free of myriad fears.

In her most recent novel, *Small remedies*, Deshpande's makes a further experiment — her protagonist makes the radical move of deserting her husband, something no conventional Indian woman would have countenanced. Madhu is the first of Deshpande's protagonists to take such an unusual step. Like Sumi who survived her husband's desertion, Madhu is a woman surrounded by loving friends and family members who provide the network of support. In this very contemporary novel, Deshpande seems to indicate that the Indian society is changing to the extent that support is not necessarily withdrawn from the single woman, whether deserted by her husband or who voluntarily deserts her husband. It is remarkable that Sumi does not appear to suffer the derision or contempt of her society for being a deserted wife. Similarly, Madhu does not appear to suffer any disapproval or loss of status for choosing to live away from her husband.

Perhaps in such portrayals, Deshpande is attempting to overturn the traditional norms by reflecting a middle class Indian community growing increasingly tolerant and accepting of social changes. Certainly Sumi and Madhu appear to function in a society which, for all its many customs and traditions, leaves them room for autonomy and individuality, a privilege previously only accorded to men.

Deshpande also suggests in her most recent novel that such women, who could perhaps be viewed as the New Indian Women, are not necessarily only found in current times. The protagonist of *Small remedies*, Madhu, realises that although she herself is a New Woman who has evolved in response to the times, the older woman whose biography she is writing, was also a New Woman ahead of her times. Savitribai was a woman who broke most of the social norms in a far less permissive era, leaving her husband not only to become a professional singer, but also to live with another man who played the tabla in accompaniment to her singing. Madhu struggles to grasp the enormity of such a course of action in the past generation, but only manages to glimpse the immense obstacles and difficulties faced and surmounted by Savitribai. Deshpande indicates that the New Woman may not be quite so new, and that

[12] It is worth mentioning that Urmi calls her mother by name, as do Sumi's daughters. In a society where anyone who is related would be addressed by their title denoting their relations, and even those who are not related may affectionately be called brother, sister, uncle or aunt, to have daughters addressing their mothers by name is extremely unusual.

women from several generations ago had already laid the foundations for the emergence of the New Woman.

Other New Indian women

This section will take a quick glance at the works of other contemporaries of Deshpande's; home writers who are also presenting the situation for contemporary South Asian women living in South Asia. These particular examples have been chosen because they also depict female protagonists attempting to take on the position of New Indian Women, but they explore the problems from slightly different facets than those explored by Deshpande. Deshpande's protagonists struggled with their *emotional* and *cultural* rootedness in tradition, but a protagonist like Desai's Moyna, has to struggle with the day to day practicalities of attempting to be a single, independent working girl, living away from her family.

Moyna, in Anita Desai's short story in *The rooftop dwellers*,[13] is a young, middleclass, urban Indian woman, trying to make her own way in the world. She has a degree in English Literature from a provincial university, and is portrayed as striving to make a career for herself in Delhi, working for a literary journal, living on her own away from her family. As a young single woman, she struggles to find suitable accommodation where she may live in safety and without social censure. She begins by living in a women's hostel but gets evicted for taking in a stray kitten. When Moyna searches for a barsati to live in, she finds that the New Indian Woman is less than welcome by many Delhi families:

> "…shamingly it was she who had been turned down by one prospective landlord or landlady after the other. She had been scrutinized with such suspicion, questioned with such hostility…they had nothing but fear and loathing for the single working woman, and the greatest dread of allowing one into their safe, decent homes…they narrowed their eyes, saw her as too young, too pretty, too unattached, too much an *instrument* of danger, and dismissed her as a candidate for their barsatis" (Desai, 2000, p. 163).

Moyna not only struggles to find accommodation, she is also at risk when taking public transport and has to either hire a rickshaw or else take the Ladies' Special bus (which costs more). Desai portrays that despite uncongenial landlords, uncomfortable living arrangements, a lack of home comforts, even having to cope alone when ill, at a pivotal point when Moyna loses her job and her mother offers to arrange a good marriage for her, Moyna decides unequivocally that she prefers to continue trying to manage on her own, "…such was her determination to make her new life as a working woman in the metropolis success, and such was her unexpected, unforeseen capacity for adjustment, that after a month or so the minimalism became no longer privation and a challenge, but simply a way of life" (Desai, 2000, p. 161). Desai presents us with an image of the New Indian Woman who is cheerfully willing to suffer all kinds of privations for the privilege of autonomy and freedom.

On the flip side of the coin are those Indian women, who are *not* permitted by their families or societies to even attempt being New Indian women. They are not less spirited than Deshpande's protagonists, but as Arundhati Roy for example, depicts, they are simply not positioned to achieve independence socially, financially, materially. In *The God of small things* we meet Ammu, a highly intelligent, bold and sentient woman, keenly aware of her position and fiercely resenting it. She leads a very confined life despite being a mother of two, is excluded from the family inheritance, forbidden to seek love with the man of her choice (because he is an untouchable), and made to feel she has no place and is unwanted at home. Roy is unequivocally clear about Ammu's tragedy, "She had made one mistake…." "She was twenty seven that year, and in the pit of her stomach she carried the cold knowledge that for her, life had been lived. She had had one chance. She made a mistake. She married the wrong man" (Roy, 1997, p. 38). In depicting a character who is not permitted to *be* a New Indian Woman, Roy highlights one of the key defining characteristics of the New Indian Woman: not only that she is urban, educated, middle-classed and has a large degree of automony, she is also a woman who has the privilege of space to make some mistakes, without blighting her entire life and social status, and future.

Roy's depiction of Ammu, it must be noted, is a relatively uncommon depiction within this genre. The majority of contemporary non-disaporic South Asian women writers depict female protagonists negotiating with their tradition and communities in aspiring towards New Indian Womanhood, rather than being choked off and having no possibility of negotiating changes.[14] Further examples of these are Padmanabhan's and

[13] *The rooftop dwellers* is one of a collection of short stories in Anita Desai's Diamond dust (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000).

[14] I wish to state that this is **not** a criticism of Roy's portrayal of an Indian woman, or any reflection on the realism of her characters or on her excellent novel.

Nambisan's protagonists,[15] Manjula (from Bombay) and Shari (from Delhi and Chennai), who being unsure marriage would satisfy them, both decide to travel. They make some mistakes, temporarily estrange themselves from their families, and in the process, learn about themselves. They are depicted as having the space to make some mistakes and yet continue to lead fulfilling lives, instead of being doomed to tragedy and lifelong suffering. This chance to experiment with their own lives, work through the consequences of making their own mistakes, is in part what marks them out as New Indian Women.

Before concluding this section, I just wish to draw attention very briefly to a different strategy on the part of a *diasporic* author, just for the sake of comparison, who writes of a protagonist who has been forced into an arranged marriage and a joint family arrangement in Kerala, but who wishes more autonomy and better treatment. Misra's protagonist, Janaki,[16] is not seen negotiating (or at any rate negotiating for very long) with her community. She links herself to an old flame who lives in UK, divorces her husband, and then proceeds to moves herself and her child to England. She opts out of the situation, leaving her family, home, and country, rather than staying to maneuver a better position within it. This is a strikingly different approach to the obstacles in the path of becoming a New Indian Woman, as compared to the negotiations in the texts of the home authors.

Conclusion

The forthright pursuit of individual fulfillment on the part of Deshpande's protagonists certainly indicates their departure from the traditional ideology that the good Hindu woman exists only to serve her family. And yet, Deshpande's protagonists are all of them culturally as well as technically Indian, and many of them Hindus. It is noteworthy that Deshpande depicts the urban middle-class Hindu woman departing from tradition at a time when politically, Hindu values are being touted and extolled. How do contemporary Indian women reconcile their new-found autonomy with traditional values?

Deshpande's New Indian Woman is not merely a rebel. She is a woman who both derives support from her family as well as provides support to her family. She is different from the traditional order of self-effacing women as described in the earlier section of this chapter, but neither is she a Western woman in her expectations and cultural inclinations. "The 'New woman' was to be modern, but she would also have to display the signs of national tradition…." (Spivak, 1990). It would seem that Deshpande's New Woman, while enjoying a greater degree of individuality, is also obliged to engage in a higher degree of self-integrity, moving away from the collective conscience to an individualized and painstakingly-negotiated personal set of ethics.

Moyna and many of Deshpande's protagonists are characters which largely concur with what Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1993) has termed the New Indian Woman, that is to say an independent, professional woman able to stand on her own and even able to defy certain customs. However,

> "I have a feeling that however independent and aggressive and powerful an Indian woman may be, she still has to go a long way before she is liberated in the real sense. At present a liberated woman is an outcast in our society, a miserable creature, with no sympathy or support from anywhere…perhaps this is a transitional period. She is yet to emerge as the truly New Woman who can defy everything that binds her and yet be happy. It is a slow, painful, trying and uphill task…" (Shanteshwar, 1993, p. 526).

Moreover, for those who genuinely become the New Indian Woman trying to balance a career with a marriage and family life, reality may not be as charming as the image, and the New Indian Woman may well find that she is torn between two spheres of life with no allowances made for her being forced to cope with a full professional life as well as a full domestic life, "…increasingly, work was not seen as a liberation but as a double burden as women had to hold both private and public responsibilities…"(Treacher & Shukrallah, 2001, p. 7).

This unoptimistic outlook concurs with the opinion of some that although the Indian women may strive to be New Women, this is not a notion which the other sections of Indian society is necessarily willing to embrace. In fact, the position of the New Indian Women may be subject to strong resistance (such as Moyna encountered when searching for accommodation) because "...the middle class Indian flees from modernity of the mind. Freedom terrifies him because it demands individual responsibility. Collective (read caste and family) responsibility offers a security that is difficult to resist. Female modernity challenges his patriarchal authority and opens up the frightening abyss of sexual choice" (Robinson, 2001).

[15] Taken from Manjula Padmanabhan's Getting there (London: Picador, 2000), and Kavery Nambisan's The mango coloured fish (New Delhi: Penguin, 1998).

[16] From Jaishree Misra's Ancient promises (London: Penguin, 2000).

In writing of contemporary Arab women, Treacher and Shukrallah had made the point that "two important areas of women's lives — their relationship to the family and to masculinity — cannot be challenged explicitly. In short, women can work and inhabit the public arena, as long as it does not conflict with the social concepts of masculinity or femininity. To challenge publicly such essential notions is to disturb the social order…" (Treacher & Shukrallah, 2001, p. 7). It would seem that this is equally applicable to the situation for the New Indian Women too, whose battle would be on multiple fronts while being required to maintain the status quo. New though some of her roles may be, the Indian woman is expected to continue her 'old' roles and duties, because "collectively and individually, middle-and upper-class women are expected to embody national cultural identity…(Puri, 1999, p. 2).

Deshpande illustrates just this point in her novels when she repeatedly observes that despite the New Women rapidly emerging in India, a large number of middle-class Indian women continue to subscribe to the traditional notions despite living modern lives. Marriage is still the destination and the desired goal for and of many young Indian girls, and social purdahs continue to exist. The New Indian Woman may not be that radical a change because in many cases, the figure of the New Indian Woman was tradition functioning under the guise of modernity. An example of this would be the education of girls, which has been much improved, but as Vrinda Nabar acknowledges, many girls obtain college degrees because it is an asset for a bride-to-be (and heightens her chances on the marriage market), rather than for the love of knowledge, self-development, or the start of a career (Nabar, 1995, p. 68). Therefore, although women were taking advantage of the increasing opportunities afforded to them, they were using them to fulfill traditional requirements rather than to change societal norms which disadvantage women.

Nevertheless, the New Indian Woman is appearing in more and more contemporary depictions, and long and hard as the struggle may be, it appears a struggle with many Indian women are prepared to engage with. Although they may find they have the worst of both worlds in having to simultaneously fulfill multiple roles in the home and workplace, and despite the fact that New Women are permitted to exist more or less on the condition that the status quo of masculinity is left unchallenged, greater numbers of New Indian Women are coming to the forefront, carving out new niches in urban Indian society, taking on new roles and at some level, to some degree, challenging the more traditionally defined places of women, and gradually changing the culture and customs of middle class India.

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Appendix A. Synopsis of Deshpande's Novels

The dark holds no terrors (1980)

Sarita (Saru), a doctor and the mother of two young children, Renuka and Abhijit, returns to her old home after her mother died. She returns ostensibly to see her father, but her other reason was more pressing. She was being repeatedly raped and sexually abused by her husband, Manohar, who preserved the facade of a devoted husband during their daylight hours and in their public life. Saru returned to find that her father had a young man living in the house as his companion and was self-sufficient. In the process of seeking refuge from nightly assaults from a husband who suffered an inferiority complex, Saru reawakens her old demons of feeling unwanted and unloved. Rebelling against her mother who blamed her for the death (by drowning) of Dhruva, her younger brother, the young Saru had insisted on attending medical college, moving out to a hostel, and later marrying Manohar, against her mother's wishes. Her mother disowned her and died without any apparent desire for reconciliation. Saru is left to reflect on her motives for her life's choices, on her family lifestyle, on her relationships with others, and her professional identity. Although Saru may have had a vague notion about returning to her old home and to her father to seek safety, sanctuary and support, she eventually arrives at the understanding that she must confront rather than flee the terrors in her life.

Roots and shadows (1983)

When we first encounter Indu, our protagonist, she is already a married woman and the new matriarch of her family. Brought up in a joint family, Indu rebelled against the dominance of Akka, the younger sister of her grandfather and the family matriarch. Indu married Jayant against Akka's wishes and refused to return to the joint family because they would not acknowledge her husband. On her deathbed, Akka summoned Indu, who returned after 10 years of living away, and found that she was Akka's sole heir. Indu found herself responsible for the welfare of her extended family and found also that she was in a position of power, in a position to arbitrate their futures. The return to her natal home removed Indu

from the course of her normal day-to-day life and put a physical distance between her and her husband for the first time. This affords Indu the opportunity to rethink her present life and her beliefs. Indu moves from regarding herself as a completely autonomous individual to regarding herself as a part of the joint family. The novel includes various subplots exposing the complexities and ramifications underlying the structure of the joint family. Indu commits adultery (without regret) with a distant cousin who dies by drowning at the close of the novel.

The long silence (1988)

Jaya's secure life as wife, mother, and home-maker, is threatened when her husband, Mohan, is asked to leave his job while under investigation for malpractice. The couple move out of their house and into Jaya's small apartment in Bombay after seeing their two teenaged children off on holiday with friends. Shifted abruptly out of her normal routine and having time hang heavy on her hands, Jaya begins to reflect, and discovers her attitude towards her husband and her life turning on its head. Delving into her memories, Jaya recalls Kamal, the man who had sincerely appreciated her in entirety, and breaks silence with herself to see beyond the image she has projected for the world to see. In the process of her re-evaluation, Jaya discovers suppressed fears and frustrations. She also writes the story she had never dared to write before. Her world swiftly crumbles around her when Mohan abruptly leaves her without explanation. A high fever takes hold of Jaya, but this fever passes, as does the crisis. The conclusion is ambiguous, leaving the reader with the knowledge that Mohan is vindicated of malpractice and will return to her, and that Jaya is free to either resume her life of old, or to make changes.

The binding vine (1993)

The protagonist, Urmila (Urmi) struggles to cope with the death of her baby daughter, Anu. Her husband, Kishore, is more often than not working away from home. Urmi lives with her mother and her son. In the process of grieving and recovery, Urmi involves herself with Shakutai, a poor, working-class woman whom she encounters by chance. Shakutai's tale forms the subplot to the novel. Shakutai's eldest daughter. Kalpana, is raped by her uncle and left in a coma. When her aunt, Shakutai's beloved sister, discovers her husband's crime, she commits suicide by dousing herself with kerosene and setting herself on fire. Urmi provides help and emotional support to Shakutai as she weathers all her tragedies. Urmi's other interest at a time when she was still mourning her daughter, was the discovery of her mother-in-law's writings. Mira, who died young, left a collection of poetry and records which Urmi read and translated, and with which she began to identify. In the process of understanding other women and empathising with them, Urmi finds her own way of coping with grief. The tales of various other women are also recounted, adding to the tapestry of the lives which touch Urmi's.

Matter of time (1996)

The novel begins with Gopal's baffling decision to leave his wife, Sumi, his three teenaged daughters, Aru, Charu and Seema, his marriage, his family, and his job. Gopal, who had not been an unhappy husband or father, moves to a different part of town, making no secret of his whereabouts, and takes up a new, low-paying job. Sumi is initially stunned, but pragmatically moves with her daughters back to the Big House to live with her parents. The family and the extended family flounder in their attempts to understand Gopal's actions and to reverse them. Sumi's mother, daughters, and sister, are amongst those who attempt to communicate with Gopal. Aru, Sumi's eldest daughter, consults a lawyer about her father's actions and is advised that there is little the law can do for her. Sumi initially seeks to purchase a new house, but finding none to her satisfaction, settles down to living in the Big House once more. Meanwhile, several generations of family secrets and stories are revealed, along with the reason for the estrangement between Sumi's parents. At the close of the novel, Sumi and her father, Shripati, are killed in an accident and Gopal realises that he no longer has a place in his family. His daughters have built new lives which do not include him; the eldest cleaving to her widowed grandmother, the second pursuing her medical career, and the youngest self-absorbed.

Small remedies (2000)

The protagonist, Madhu, is a middle-aged woman whose twelve-year-old son had recently died. Emotionally estranged from her husband, and still seeking to come to terms with the loss of her child, Madhu accepts the job of writing a biography of a famous professional singer, Savitribai, who lives in a small town. Madhu gladly moves away from her home in Bombay to take up temporary residence with a married couple, Hari and Lata, who are distant relatives, in order to live near Savitribai. Savitribai was once Madhu's neighbour, and is therefore part of Madhu's past. She grants Madhu regular interviews in order to relate the details of her life

and her career, but Madhu realises that Savitribai is only relating what she wishes the world to remember her for, leaving out the parts of her story which contain the most painful and personal memories. Madhu realises that she herself is living in the same way, attempting to cut herself off from emotional attachments and commitments to save herself from pain. In the course of her healing and recovery, Madhu's childhood is revealed to the reader, along with all the various characters who have played significant roles in Madhu's life. Madhu gradually begins to form new ties of friendship and affection with the new people she lives amongst, and gradually reconciles her understanding of her own past enough to permit herself to accept a future.

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