



# Beyond Stereotypes: The Ethical and Cultural Evolution of Women in Indian Literature

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**ABSTRACT:** While Indian literature in general has always problematized the portrayal of women, it has often continued the millennial old prejudice rather than try to fathom out how their cultural and moral identities have evolved with time. However, modern stories have started to question such traditional representations in their tales and provide a real examination of women's iniquity, capability, superior power, resilience and learning to find their way out. In this conversation the writers of Indian English fiction, specifically *The Dark Holds No Terrors* by Shashi Deshpande, *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri, *Clothes* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni intervene with a reworking of women's roles beyond stereotypes of subservience. These pieces not only highlight the moral conundrums, identity crises, and cultural compromises that all women face in their domestic as well as in their diasporic lives but also surface the practical considerations associated with the production of texts written by women. This is a discourse of conflicts of custom and self-assertion, of obligation and independence, of cultural affiliation and realm of individual development, looked upon from the point of view of Saru, Shobha, and Sumita. This study analyzes these stories as an effort to redefine the Indian woman not as a symbol of traditional values but as a person grappling with issues of social and ethical issues.

**Keywords:** Cultural Displacement, Assimilation, Self-discovery; Multiculturalism. Hybridity.

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## 1. Introduction

Indian literature has repeatedly talked of women's ordeal, yet rarely has such portrayal been beyond clichés like hard silence, loyalty, and patience. Many novels do not explore the deeper existential and ethical conflicts that create a woman's identity in a world that is changing very swiftly. But Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* departs from

these conventional tales by studying the path of a protagonist's discovery and moral dilemma in Saru. The book is subtly about a middle-class working lady divided between her own goals and society's expectations.

Themes of identity, displacement, and cultural assimilation, like this, are explored in the writing of contemporary Indian English authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri or Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The woman is shown to encounter great difficulties in transforming her role in marriage, in the family and the society by these writers; these writers show this character in the predicament between tradition and modernity. It's these stories of a person in a multicultural society that tell the tale of the difficulties with moving from personal history to being part of a society (Saru), wanting to be out of that same society (Shobha), or changing from a wife to widow (Sumita). Travels' central role in women's liberation and the centrality of the crisis of identity, ethical principles and cultural hybridity all buttress the idea that women's liberation implies an internal as well as exterior awakening.

This discussion will discuss how *The Dark Holds No Terrors* as well as other contemporary Indian literary works challenges traditional gender norms, discusses the ambiguous relationship between identity and ethics, and provides a new perspective on womanhood in modern Indian literature.

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

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

## **Discussion**

Although women's issues are explored in many Indian books, their representation is frequently superficial. Rather than delving into deep ethical values, rather than deepening women's work, they simply accentuate characteristics such as patience, devotion, courage, and the acceptance of fate, which reinforce traditional preconceptions of the Indian woman. On the contrary, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* stands out for addressing a woman's struggle against moral values and identity. This book offers Indian English fiction a new viewpoint.

While Saru is visiting her father's house in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, she observes their relationships – with her husband (since deceased), her late mother and brother (Dhruva), and her children (Renu and Abhi). Though she doesn't experience much change, she learns more about herself and other people. Awareness lessens her worries so she is brave enough to

face reality. At first, she appears lost, alone and insecure but later sets off on a path of self-discovery. Still, the stereotypical picture of the Hindu woman flits across Saru's face before vanishing. Separated from her spouse, she was destined to have lost herself and her path was a female one, intimate and connected to her identity as a woman.

Saru, having been raised in a happy home, struggles with surprise and uncertainty, and wishes to have her father's support. In her narrative, it follows a lady who is driven, and self-confident and later learns about her 'self' through adversity. She knows that people can have happy and fulfilling lives through their inner power. Through her ethical struggle, she finds herself a new identity and content to live within.

Saru recalls her mother's harsh words about her appearance:

***“I was an ugly girl. At least my mother told me so. I am ugly. I stood in front of the mirror and mouthed the words to myself. And as I stood there, she came up to me, saying ... how many times must I tell you? Looking at yourself in the mirror! I'll give you a certificate to say that you're beautiful—will that satisfy you?”***

In Shashi Deshpande's *There Are No Horrors in the Dark*, Saru remembers her mother's derogatory comments on her looks to underline the deeply imbibed gendered norms restricting a woman's self-perception. Her mother's judgment about her reflects the stringent beauty standards women find themselves in traditional Indian society, where a woman's value is so often determined by her physical appearance. "I was an ugly girl. At least my mother told me so."

When she is standing in front of the mirror, and doubts her value, Saru is proving that she has internalized these criticisms. Her mother's contemptuous and sarcastic remark, 'I'll give you a certificate that you're beautiful, will that satisfy you?' further invalidates her feelings and reinforces a sense of inadequacy. This is such a perfect representation of the psychological impact that many women endure from the standards that they are held to within their culture and families, at the expense of beauty.

Saru can be used by Deshpande to make a moral predicament of the women to whom there is a conflict between social appreciation and self-recognition. It shows a more comprehensive view of self-worth based upon individuality and individual agency, and it calls the pride of a woman's identity for her looks. Finally, Saru's experience is an epitome of how Indian women in the literature are culturally developing and overcoming ingrained

prejudice for the realization of their identity on their terms outside of traditional norms.

Her mother's remarks reject her and lead her to believe she must not be a woman. In contemporary India, Saru, a working woman belonging to the middle class has to balance her personal goals with the goals of society. As a doctor, she loves what she does, but her career success wears thin on her marriage and results in emotional problems. She maintains resilience amid the trauma she faces. She learns that her real sanctuary is within herself and she cannot run away. By going through Saru's persona, Shashi Deshpande tries to reframe and reinterpret women's identity and moral principles against the backdrop of emerging social upheaval. The mirror symbolizes self-awareness. Saru knows it won't be safe in her homeland, but it does prompt her to ask questions that she's never dared to ask before. After she got married to Manohar, who came from a lower caste social stratum, she disobeyed her parents' wishes. After her mother dies, she wants to get away from her husband's vicious, incomprehensible sadism; she returns home. Instead of seeking solace, she confronts her inner struggle, accepting as much as she knows about morality. The reflection allows her to rediscover herself, uncover her latent capabilities, and finally accept as opposed to repress her abilities. The struggle of her ethical and personal principles is apparent, but slow to sense.

Through self-reflection, Saru comes to know about his fundamental ethical principles and applies them to solve life problems. She's anxious, ambitious, determined, lonely, confused, detached. She has to spend time alone to process her doubts about life, and relationships. This solitude is not about escapism; she needs to reclaim her identity. By confronting her illusions, she gains the courage to face reality.

At first, marriage serves as a haven and a continuation of Saru's identity as a mother. Regarding the intricate role marriage plays in a woman's life, Shashi Deshpande says:

***“Marriage invariably takes you to the world of women, of trying to please, of the fear of not pleasing, of surrender, of self-abnegation. To love another and to retain yourself intact—is that possible? To assert yourself and not to be aggressive, to escape domination and not to dominate?”***

Identity struggles are a worldwide problem, especially for displaced people. This is how Jhumpa Lahiri puts it:

*“The question of identity is always a difficult one, especially for those who are displaced, like immigrants, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children. The older I get, the more I realize that I have inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though I am, in many ways, more American than they are. In fact, it is still very hard for me to think of myself as American.”*

By strengthening ties to their native country through social conventions, holidays, and traditions, cultural assimilation helps immigrants develop a sense of identity. They preserve their cultural heritage even in heterogeneous environments. According to Stuart Hall, identity is constantly changing:

*“Identities are never unified. In late modern times, they are increasingly fragmented and fractured—never singular, but multiply constructed across different social contexts, discourses, and positions.”*

Stories by Jhumpa Lahiri frequently examine cultural identity and the tensions it causes. Shobha remembers the Indian Rice Ceremony, a customary rite for infants, in *Interpreter of Maladies*. Her recollection of this incident demonstrates her strong emotional ties to her ancestry:

*“It’s like India,” Shobha said, watching him tend his makeshift candelabra. “Sometimes the current disappears for hours at a stretch. I once had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark. The baby just cried and cried. It must have been so hot.”*

Instead of bringing families together, this event emphasizes how disconnected their past and present are. Shobha's brittle identity is highlighted by her need for cultural continuity in a strange place. Homi Bhabha goes into further detail about the idea of cultural identity hybridity:

*“In the restless drive for cultural translation, hybridity opens up a cleavage in the language of culture. This suggests that the symbol’s repetition across cultural contexts should not obscure the fact that each social practice is, in itself, different and differential.”*

A similar identity crisis arises in *The Blessed House*, where Sanjeev and Twinkle are both

religiously different. Hindu identity is a priority for Sanjeev, while Twinkle, who loves Christian artefacts, prefers the more flexible approach:

***“We are not Christian,” Sanjeev said.***

***“No, we’re not Christian. We’re good little Hindus,” Twinkle replied, placing a statue of Christ on the mantelpiece.***

At a party, their guests question Sanjeev’s faith. He responds:

***“There are Christians in India, but we’re not.”***

Another story addresses the concern of an immigrant father whose American-born son cannot speak Bengali. Despite this, he reassures himself:

***“If I can survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer.”***

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Clothes* explores the evolution of identity through Sumita, a young Indian woman adjusting to American culture. Initially, she perceives her T-shirt as a symbol of her new life:

***“The T-shirt is sunrise-orange—the colour of joy, of my new American life.”***

Despite this, her husband Somesh's death is tragic. She is a woman who has been widowed but refuses to return home, which goes against Indian custom. She reflects on her newfound identity in a foreign land, as evidenced by her choice to wear Western clothing instead of the typical widow's attire:

***“That’s when I know I can’t go back... all over India, at this very moment, widows in white saris are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws—doves with cut-off wings.”***

The themes of identity and self-discovery in these works highlight the ongoing journeys of personal development and cultural adjustment. Saru, Shobha and Sanjeev, as well as Sumita, all suffer from identity struggles, but they are all able to assert their own identities in their individual way.

In *The Blessed House*, Sanjeev and Twinkle face a similar crisis of identity. Hindu

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An additional tale concerns the burden of an immigrant father whose American-born son is unable to communicate in Bengali. Despite this, he reassures himself:

*“If I can survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer.”*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Clothes* portrays the process of change and identity development through the eyes of a young Indian woman named Sumita. ". At first, she sees her T-shirt as a representation of her new life:

*“The T-shirt is sunrise-orange—the colour of joy, of my new American life.”*

Despite this, her husband Somesh's death is tragic. Despite being widowed, she defies cultural expectations by refusing to return to India. Her new identity in a foreign country is evident from her choice to wear Western clothing instead of the typical widow's attire:

*“That’s when I know I can’t go back... all over India, at this very moment, widows in white saris are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws—doves with cut-off wings.”*

Ultimately, these works explore identity and self-discovery themes, which highlight that personal growth and cultural adjustment are ongoing journeys.

**1.1. Beyond Stereotypes of ethical and cultural Evolution in Shashi Deshpande’s Works:**

**2.1.1 The Immigrant Experience and the Struggle for Identity**

The characters in Jhumpa Lahiri often struggle to reconcile their Indian heritage with the expectations of Western society. The *Namesake's* indictment of Ashimani Ganguli, an immigrant mother who experiences a lifelong struggle, is the most effective way to convey

this internal conflict. (Lahiri,2003,p49). Ashima must adapt to a foreign culture for the sake of her family, while also trying to maintain her Bengali heritage. This constant teasing leads to a fractured sense of self, caught between tradition and assimilation.

### **2.1.2. Gender Roles and Cultural Expectations**

Lahiri often explores the relationship between gender and cultural identity, particularly concerning how women are perceived as guardians of tradition in diasporic societies. In *Unaccustomed Earth* (J. LAHIRI, 2008), the story of "Hell-Heaven" centres on Aparna, a native Bengali woman, who struggles to fit in with her Americanized family. Despite her desire to preserve her heritage and maintain independence, she feels emotionally disconnected from both herself and her partner.

### **2.1.3. Generational Conflict and Identity Fragmentation**

Lahiri analyzes how generational disparities in immigrant families contribute to their identity challenges. "... The Namesake depicts Ashimá, the first-generation immigrant in a similar manner to her son Gogol and his wife Moushumi, who both struggle with cultural differences that can sometimes lead to problems with traditional practices. This is especially true for women, who are faced with a significant age gap and need to balance their ambitions with those of their families.

### **1.1. 4. Loneliness and Cultural Alienation**

Lahiri's female heroes often feel extremely isolated due to their cultural duality. The most prominent manifestation of this disagreement is demonstrated by Mrs. Claus. Das from *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) is emotionally detached from her expected roles as wife and mother and burdened with her secrets. In "A Temporary Matter," Shoba's sorrow for her stillborn child disrupts her identity and progressively weakens herself as a woman and spouse.

## **2.2. Beyond Stereotypes of ethical and cultural Evolution in Jhumpa Lahiri's Works:**

### **2.2.1..Managing Identity: Immigrant Perspectives.**

It is a common issue for Jhumpa Lahiri's characters to reconcile their Indian roots with the cultural preferences of those in the Western world. This internal turmoil is portrayed in Ashima Ganguli's memoir *The Namesake* (2003), which follows her experiences as an immigrant mother. In her writing, she likens her experience to a lifelong pregnancy, which was always uncomfortable and demanding. 49). Despite her efforts to maintain Bengali traditions, she must also adapt quickly to a foreign culture for the benefit of her family. This

constant tussle leads to a dissociation of the familiar past within an evolving present.

### **2.2.2. Gender and Cultural Identity: The Burden of Tradition.**

Often, Lahiri explores the intersection of gender and cultural expectations, with a particular focus on how women are seen as the carriers of tradition in diasporic societies.[p]. "Hell-Heaven" is the title of *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), a film that tells the story of Aparna, an immigrant from India who finds herself alienated by her Americanized environment. With a history of being separated from both her husband and child, she struggles to balance the need for cultural preservation with an interest in freedom. The struggle described by Aparna highlights the larger context of women's obligations to balance their religious commitments with a desire for autonomy amid modern society.

### **2.2.3. Generational Divides and the Fragmentation of Identity**

The way immigrant families experience generational differences is explored by Lahiri. *The Namesake* depicted Ashim as a first-generation immigrant with ties to her native India, while her son and his wife are the second-gen conflicting strugglers between cultural integration and preservation of identity. They both have different personalities in their family's community. Women who have always had to balance personal with professional ambitions are struggling with this particularly.'

### **2.2.4. Loneliness and the Alienation of Cultural Duality**

Often Lahiri's female protagonists are deeply isolated because of their cultural identity. Mrs. in *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), Das turns this same internal separation over, weighed down by the heavy weight of the unspoken secrets and emotional distance in her role as wife and mother. Thus, in "A Temporary Matter," Shoba's sorrow concerning her dead child challenges her as a woman and a husband, resulting in a greater feeling of loneliness. Such stories portray how women become alienated and emotionally distanced from their families, work and commitments, pulled by temporalities of duty, tradition or self-loathing. Why?

## **2.3. Beyond Stereotypes of ethical and cultural Evolution in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Works:**

### **2.3.1. Displacement and the Search for Identity**

In *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Tilo is a mysterious spice mistress who must serve others while suppressing her desires and identity. Tilo's identity is a blur, as she struggles between her role as the protector of Indian rituals and her desire for love and autonomy. She declares, "You don't recognize me as my true self." In Divakaruni's 1997 article, "I am Tilo and I was

once the Mistress of Spices.". (pg10). A common theme in Divakaruni's writing is the struggle between cultural duty and personal goals, with women finding themselves caught between self-fulfilment and ritualistic conduct.

### **2.3.2. Cultural Constraints and the Pursuit of Freedom**

The challenges of women who are caught between societal expectations and their aspirations for independence are frequently addressed by Divakaruni. *Why? Sister of My Heart* (1999) portrays Anju and Sudha as daughters, wives, and mothers who are influenced by customary practices. These traditions serve the narrative. Despite their mutual desire for cultural allegiance, they are divided and seek to balance self-discovery with the need to fulfil other obligations. (pg.233). The conflict between inherited duties and individual responsibility is evident in their journey mums...

### **2.3.3. Generational Clashes and Identity Crisis**

Generations are a major factor in identity fragmentation,' Divakaruni suggests. In *Queen of Dreams* (2004), Rakhi, a second-generation American, finds herself in limbo as she attempts to reconcile her family's American and Indian backgrounds. Her disconnection from either culture results in a feeling of being trapped between two worlds. Generational conflict is a reflection of the overall experience of immigrant women, who must navigate between their traditions and those of their new environment.

### **2.3.4. Trauma and Emotional Disintegration**

In Divakaruni's stories, emotional turmoil contributes to the fragmentation of identity. *The Vine of Desire* (2002) portrays Anju and his wife Sudha as being troubled by personal circumstances. Emotionally, they are separated by circumstances and distance that lead to identity reversal. They face the same psychological barrier that many immigrant women experience, as they strive to redefine their role in a constantly shifting world.'

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

Comparing the works of Jhumpa Lahiri, Shashi Deshpande, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni suggests that they share similar themes and literary techniques. Despite unique writing styles and practices, these authors explore common aspects regarding split identifications and cultural reflections of Indian women.

## **Common Themes and Findings**

### **1. Identities and Diasporic Experiences**

All three authors study identity fragmentation across different contexts. Lahiri's account centres on how bicultural challenges affect immigrants, and second-generation individuals while she examines the path to uniting Indian roots with Western integration. Through her story, Divakaruni illustrates how immigrant women experience internal conflicts when they must choose between Western cultural norms and traditional Indian traditions. In her work, Deshpande focuses on domestic issues that stem from the gender gap and patriarchal structures alongside cultural traditions in modern Indian society.

Although they are rather delicate in their portrayals of identity, critics might claim that they have oversimplified the experience of women and immigrants by oversimplifying their complicated lives.

### **2. The Role of Women as Cultural Custodians**

The writers portray women as cultural protectors. In Lahiri's novels, immigrant mothers, like Ashima, try to continue with cultural traditions, but they have to face resistance from their children. Through food preparation and storytelling, women are presented by Divakaruni as the guardians of Indian culture. It also emphasizes family existing between married couples. Deshpande notes that women in Indian households are expected to maintain social and family norms at personal expense. Even as some have lauded their work to put women in the centre of cultural narratives about their country, they recognize that such portrayals are equally potentially rather than challengingly reinforcing traditional gender norms.

### **3. The Role of Women in the Marriage**

The marriage theme is a dominant theme in their work which focuses on how marriage serves to mold and occasionally forever sever women's identities. In her other work, *The Dark Holds No Terror*, Deshpande describes the obnoxious life of existence in marriage, where gender assignment is contingent upon the role she plays in the family.

*Sister of My Heart* is an example of how Divakaruni portrays weddings in immigrant settings where the cultural norms clash. Lahiri shows alienation and miscommunications in its depiction of the cultural differences between the spouses in a bicultural situation (*Unaccustomed Earth*). Although their critiques agree that they describe the difficulties of marriage, John Nicholson criticizes the over-generalisation of women's suffering and the lack of solutions or empowering ideas.

#### **4. Generational and Cultural Tensions**

**Lahiri and Divakaruna frequently disagree with each other, particularly on immigration. In *The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri depicts a conflict of trying to blend American identity with Native American heritage in an American-raised Native male. In novels such as *Queen of Dreams* and others, Divakaruni speaks to this issue by writing about daughters who move to the West but still struggle to live up to their Indian mothers' expectations.**

**Deshpande emphasizes that when discussing the generational divides in traditional Indian societies, the discussion is about the evolving responsibilities and the expectations of women.**

#### **5. Cultural Reflection Through Symbolism**

Symbols in the works of all three writers represent cultural identity. Lahiri's exemplify of the use of language, cuisines, and rituals is cultural memory and a means of keeping the line of connection. Divakaruni enters the territory of the role of women bringing cultural legacy of spices, mythology, or an Indian epic. Deshpande attempts to challenge traditional views about women's lives through everyday home equipment and places.

### **Critical Responses**

#### **1. Strengths**

**Appointment for Women's Struggles: All three writers have received a large amount of praise for their ability to depict women as subject to socially, emotionally, and culturally complex obstacles. Reviewers of poetry and accessible writing define themselves as people who write simply to explain powerful themes in an easily balanced narrative. Although their works take place in Indian environments, their themes of gender and belonging as well as personal identity still universally applicable.**

#### **2. Critiques**

**Overenthusiastic Attention to Fragmentation: The overemphasis on fragmentation is attributed to some, and they say it could make women appear as victims who never get better unless there is an effort to empower them or at least find a solution. Even if these writers go against cultural norms, they can still hold on to stereotypes about the Indian woman (willing submissiveness as dutiful sacrificial duties) or the immigrant experience (continual estrangement).**

They argue that the complaints of repetition can be found in their revisiting of themes, such as marriage, identity and generational conflict.

## **Comparative Criticism**

Lahiri's conceited emotional nature is the reason many readers dislike her characters. Her minimalist style is both simple and elegant and is still much sought after. Although Divakaruni is often thought of as doing symbolic and inventive storytelling, she has been accused of sometimes misunderstanding them. Why? Feminist analysis of Indian patriarchy is more and more respected but some place her work in a rather narrower scope than Lahiri and Dionysus.

## **Conclusion**

Included here is women's writing in India as it brings in a unique perspective on the fragmentation of identities and the conflicting cultural attitudes of women attempting to find a balance between tradition and modernity. Saru, Shobha and Sumita are tough and determined characters who symbolize the inevitable character that is sometimes needed to fight through moral challenges and societal expectations which are inevitable battles of "self-determination". The narratives highlight the transformative power of self-awareness and cultural negotiation, revealing that identity-seeking is both deeply personal but also intertwined with wider social structures.

Through the voices and agency of Shashi Deshpande, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in their books on women, they challenge conventional stereotypes. ". As per Deshpande, her characters go their separate ways. It has been my understanding that we should have strong women figures. Women are the subject of my writing, as stated in Viswanath on (pg.12. ". The emergence of middle-class working women in a society that is still reliant on old structures is brought to the forefront by these authors, highlighting the challenges of maintaining financial autonomy while fulfilling family duties. Although financial stability is often provided by dual-income households, working women frequently find themselves dealing with both work and domestic responsibilities, which can lead to emotional and moral tensions.

Deshpande and her peers illustrate the obstacles faced by women who aim to achieve a different fate than what society has expected. Their emphasis is on a life that transcends family duties, acknowledging that individual achievement and career aspirations are crucial to identifying one's authentic self. As per Vaswanath, women must have a life apart from

their family, as they suggest. (pg. 13) In this series, the female protagonists redefine relationships and assert their autonomy as well as ethical issues while preserving some of their cultural and moral traditions.

In the end, these works of literature stress how identity is defined and shaped by ethics and cultural heritage. These objects serve as a reminder that while traditions are to be respected, they must also acknowledge individual freedom and progress. Along with its personal development, the narrative of Indian women in literature reveals an overall change that necessitates both cultural preservation and individual autonomy.

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