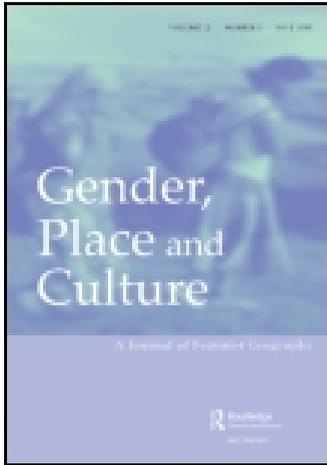


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Publisher: Routledge

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Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cgpc20>

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Published online: 23 May 2013.



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To cite this article: Lisa Lau (2014) No longer good girls: sexual transgressions in Indian women's writings, *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 21:3, 279-296, DOI: [10.1080/0966369X.2013.791252](https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.791252)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.791252>

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No longer good girls: sexual transgressions in Indian women's writings

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(Received 6 March 2012; final version received 3 September 2012)

Indian women's writing in English has long depicted Indian women as victims of society, whose rights are routinely exploited and whose welfare and happiness are commonly sacrificed for the good of their families and communities. The literature has often depicted the women as complicit, accepting and upholding the definition of a good woman as one who is faithful, virtuous, self-effacing and obedient. This definition is also one the women instil in their daughters, thus reinforcing this code of ethics. This article observes that there is a tide running contrary to this and that there is a new breed of women in twenty-first century Indian literary fiction in English: women who are single and married, working and non-working, middle and upper-middle class and wives and mothers, who are no longer prepared to be 'good girls'. These women knowingly, thoughtfully and successfully defy societal conventions to have pre and extramarital affairs, divorces and even custody battles for children, without shame, guilt, dire consequences or even societal condemnation. This article argues that these writings represent a quietly radical departure from the conventional depictions of the roles, expectations and morals of middle-class urban twenty-first century Indian women.

Keywords: Indian women writers; modernity; new Indian women; sexual autonomy

Introduction

In Indian Writing in English (IWE), one of the defining traits of Indian womanhood is the self-sacrificial tendency of women to short-change themselves for the good of their families (willingly or otherwise), and the expectation they will do so; '[a] fine slide occurs between women's interests and the welfare of the family ...' (Srilata 1998, 319). As a result of this habitual Sita-like self-immolation on the altar of family needs and welfare, Indian women are commonly identified, and also self-identify as victims, 'Women are often projected in Indian women's fiction as trapped in the categories of wife, mother and daughter. These women are usually depicted as victims of social and political injustice, cruelty and exploitation' (Hussain 2005, 55). For several decades, IWE, particularly that by women writers, has consistently depicted the victimising of Indian women in a multitude of arenas and aspects, reinforcing the image of Indian women as victims of society, culture, honour and tradition. In fact, as I have previously argued, from the 1960s, for several decades, Indian women's novels are practically *characterised* by the theme of victimised women in a highly patriarchal society (Lau 2003).

This article, however, demonstrates that IWE of the last decade and a half, by Indian women writers working in India, reflects quite a different trend and depicts a very different breed of women. Examining some selected recent writings, this article identifies a radical

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social change being portrayed by these women novelists in middle-class urban Indian society. These authors write of the increasing societal acceptance of Indian wives and mothers having non-marital or extramarital relationships, seeking divorces and generally breaking the mould of the virtuous married woman. None of these activities are without precedent, but what is remarkable is how sympathetically these authors present women protagonists who would have either been formerly vilified or else cast as a tragic victim whose immoral activities would doom her to inexorably dire consequences. IWE by women is now showcasing women protagonists casting aside guilt and the traditional teachings of modesty and shame, and reaching out increasingly towards self-fulfilment and happiness, which includes sexual autonomy. Middle-class Indian women past the first flush of youth are depicted as more autonomous than ever before, daring to defy societal taboos and apparently getting away with it fairly unscathed.

This article begins by considering the position of Indian women as traditionally depicted, taking into account the social characteristics of the New Indian Woman, providing the contextual background from which the new breed of Indian women are breaking away. The next section analyses the literary fiction of three selected authors, who are Indian women working from India and who specialise in writing about middle-class Indian women. Unlike many home Indian writers who are largely unknown outside India, the writings of Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur and Anita Nair have become well established in the West as well as in India, winning literary acclaim and ever-widening readerships and influence. Their novels of the past 15 years run very much counter to the claim that ‘... yet no writer gives open approval to the alternative of the mistress, since adultery is always punished, if not by death, then at least by disillusionment and despair’ (Kalpana 2005, 67). Once, Kalpana’s contention would have been entirely accurate, but a new breed of Indian women protagonists and characters has come onto the literary scene, and they are no longer ‘good girls’.

The traditional and the modern (new) Indian woman

In her search through Hindi, Urdu and English texts of the nineteenth century, Ruby Lal finds that in stories within educational treatises and manuals of conduct, there is a portrait of the ‘ideal’ woman, ‘... marked out as “ideal” precisely by how she behaved in her “married home”, and by a prescribed lack of independent initiative and thought’ (2008, 330). This depiction of Indian women’s lives as not “free” and “modern”, but “traditional”, modest and restrained, dutiful, disciplined, oriented towards the good of family and the community’ (Lal 2008, 327), is pervasive and continues well into and right through the twentieth century. Even at the end of the twentieth century, as Madhu Kishwar contends, gender roles continue to be deeply unequal in Indian society, and women’s identities and welfare are still directly tied to and dependent on their families. Unmarried Indian girls¹ may lead a ‘narrowly confined and dependent life’, while Indian women are aware that their welfare depends above all on getting a ‘kindly disposed husband’ (Kishwar 1999, 17).

Although marriage remains a highly desirable goal for Indian women and one of the greatest concerns of their families, marriage itself is not necessarily always a happy state for the women. Even modern salaried Indian women aspire to marriage and wifehood above all other roles, but it is still commonplace that ‘[a] wife is treated not as an individual who controls her own life and assets but as herself an asset who must perform several functions’ (Kishwar 1999, 17). That is to say her individuality may be valued less than her positionality: a point not always well appreciated by women imbued with notions of (good or bad) modernity.²

The ideal Indian wife has always been posited as Sita, the all-virtuous, much-wronged wife of Rama. Shela Kumar quotes Anita Desai listing the expected traits of a good Indian woman and wife: 'She is meek, docile, trusting, faithful and forgiving' (Kumar 2009). Indian wives are expected to shoulder the responsibility for upholding the social appearances of their husbands and marriages at all costs (Puri 1999, 148). However, whether in happy or unhappy marriages, Indian women are aware that it is through the positions of wifedom and motherhood that they have traditionally managed to secure greater degrees of power and influence, particularly within their families. Roles of power accorded to women are typical roles relational to her male kinsmen, '– wife of, mother of, daughter of and so on' (Kumar 2009). As such, it has always been in the interest of the women themselves to uphold the family and strengthen it, and this has become accepted as a duty and noble aim, '[t]he sanctity of the family and the woman's overwhelming responsibility to it are still stressed' (Caplan 1985, 193).

Of late, the identity of the Indian woman has been much discussed in the context of the New Indian Woman, the image of which has been studied quite intensively.

By the dawn of the twentieth century, a new woman had emerged ... The new woman represented the values of 'cleanliness, orderliness, thrift, responsibility, intelligence,' and had 'a moderate interest in and knowledge of the public world of men. These were added to, rather than substituted for, the traditional virtues of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion to the husbands, respect for elders, and household competence'. (Bumiller 1990, 18)

The image of this New Indian Woman is derived primarily from a particular segment of Indian society, namely the middle-class, urban and educated (Rajan 1993, 130). The issue of being middle-(and upper-) class and 'new' comes with particular codes of conduct and social expectations and pressures:

Being middle-class was not just about acquiring financial security; it was also about attaining and maintaining respectability, sexual modesty, family honor. Put another way, middle-classness was a *moral* virtue, a structure of feeling, the habitation of a safe space that distinguished one from less fortunate (less worthy) Others, and therefore a vantage point on the world. And since respectability, sexual modesty, and family honor were predicated on the conduct of women, women's behavior was monitored especially intently. Hence, the aspiration of families to acquire middle-class status resulted in a particularly close watch on women's bodies, movements, behavior, clothes, and speech patterns. (Mankekar 1999, 114)

Attaining a particular class therefore is not merely a socio-economic status but a mindset and way of life, and with that, a set of morals and code of ethics, particularly for the women, notwithstanding 'Bad Modernities' gradually morphing into just 'Modernities'.

Srilata further refines the definition of New Indian Women, noting that class alone is not the sole eligibility marker, making a clear distinction between the middle-class urban working woman or housewife (of Elizabeth Bumiller's description) and the New Woman who is an English-educated member of the 'modern global upper middle class' (1998, 307). From this social construction, it seems that the New Indian Woman is not just any urban salaried woman, but a woman of particular privileges leading a cosmopolitan lifestyle. This slight shift of the social goalposts, this cosmopolitan redefinition, is aspired to by those wanting to be the New Indian Woman: the attainment of which stretches some middle-class working women considerably. There is pressure, therefore, on the *ideal* of New Indian Woman, and Srilata goes so far as to say 'The liberal modern figure of the New Woman haunts the construction of the middle-class woman today' (1998, 308), indicating that this status of New Woman is hard won and still relatively elite among the middle classes even in the present day.

Rajan (1993) argues that the media has much to do with the image construction of women and claims that the primary site of this construction is in commercial advertisements in the media, in print, well as on television, '[t]he Indian identity is largely a function of the nation-wide reach of commercial advertisements' (Rajan 1993, 132). The Indian mass media is in fact the producer of forms of knowledge about femininity (Munshi 1998; Mankekar 1999), interpellating and constructing the contemporary figure of the Indian woman. The identity of the New Indian Woman is derived from a 'combined hegemony of global consumer capitalism and national state broadcasting' (Rajan 1993, 137).

Chanda (2000) explored the televisual modern woman via Indian television advertisements, concluding that the gendered division of housework remained unchallenged by advertisements, which only suggests that technology and appliances could be bought to manage the house up to traditional standards and expectations, so that women's time could be freed up for personal development and fulfilment and for careers and jobs outside the house, but not to relieve women of household responsibilities or reallocate these roles. Chanda finds that 'patriarchal gender roles [...] are rearticulated to suit consumerism' (2000, 49) and that modernity for women via these ads is depicted as freedom to choose and to buy things. 'While women are increasingly glamourized and sexualised in the media, the ideal Indian woman still remains the demure Sita' (Dhillon and Dhawan 2011, 548).

Mankekar, who investigated the construction of the New Woman in state-run television channels, agrees that the new Indian woman is middle-class and modern, but emphatically not Western (1999, 152). 'Modernity has been constructed within the Indian context as a set of practices either indicative of "westernization" (and therefore, according to modernity's detractors, morally unsound) or signifying (for modernity's supporters) the liberatory and the progressive' (Srilata 1998, 302). It is clear that only in certain selective forms is modernity desirable for New Indian Women, and 'Westernisation' is broadly regarded as a negative form of modernity or Bad Modernity. Rajan's definition of the New Indian Woman is entirely in accordance with this non-Westernised portrayal: 'She is "new" in the senses both of having evolved and arrived in response to the times, as well as of being intrinsically "modern" and "liberated"... but does not thereby become "westernized"' (Rajan 1993, 130). Furthermore, Rajan notes that the Indian women portrayed in advertisements are attractive women, hardworking and even socially aware; the list of traits characterising New Indian Women continues to grow, and this social entity becomes at once more complex and also more multidimensional. The complexity extends to the difficulty, for example, of including Tharu and Niranjana's new women, who are 'active, critical, angry' (1994, 93) in films featuring women's campaign against sexual and domestic violence, dowry and sale of arrack; would such women come under Good or Bad Modernity? By fighting for traditional virtues using non-traditional forms, Indian women conflate and problematise the concepts of Good and Bad Modernities, and further complicate the construction of the (cosmopolitan) New Indian Woman.

Rajan reminds us that Indian women should not be regarded as a monolithic group and that there is a difference – sharp polarisation even – between the representation of older and younger women. Younger women (particularly teenagers) may enact rebellion and even project sexual desire, but older women have to be married and have to exercise their autonomy, education and earnings for the well-being of their families, rather than themselves (Rajan 1993, 131). There is a difference in expectations of and from Indian women of different ages; age and marital status are criteria in determining the levels and types of autonomy. However, the modernity which is still feminine in an Indian sense and

Indian female autonomy are acceptable, as long as they are carried out alongside the continued habit of selflessness and sacrifice on the part of the women (Rajan 1993). 'To South Asian women, the individualism and independence so valued in the West appears selfish and irresponsible' (Hussain 2005, 22), because Indian women may not prioritise individual interests, regarding their interests as being indistinguishable and wrapped up in the family's interests (Kishwar 1999, 87).

Kishwar's point is borne out in Meenakshi Thapan's (2001) work looking at gender identity among adolescent upper-and middle-class women in urban India, tracking the formation of the constructs and parameters utilised and prioritised by this very young group of women still in schools in India, namely the pressure of their families and peer group cultures. Working with 16–17-year olds in New Delhi, she finds that despite increasing career choices, a young Indian woman's identity 'is firmly entrenched in the family and in tradition' (Thapan 2001, 369), as well as grounded in prevailing media images. The socialisation of these young women grooms them to simultaneously wish to reproduce traditional virtues and replicate traditional roles, while taking on the trappings of the new women, in terms of career, autonomy, individuality and choice.

In terms of career being an identity constructor, this mostly pertains to the women of middle classes, but Radhakrishnan's work on knowledge professionals notes that '[o]nly recently has it become common for middle-class women in urban India to work full-time; consequently, these women are at the helm of key ideological transitions within the Indian middle class' (2007, 144). However, even as careers and salaried work demonstrably affect the identity formations of the New Indian Woman, recent research also demonstrates that Indian women's modern identities are still 'intricately woven together with traditional practice' (Daya 2010, 486) and that the cooking, serving, eating and selection of foods, for example, continue to play a central role in symbolising the new Indian women.

Given all these, it appears that there may be some ambivalence in her position; the New Indian Woman may find herself educationally, technologically and even financially advantaged/privileged, but still confined (voluntarily and otherwise) within certain (oppressive) social and cultural norms and expectations. There is clearly a societal expectation that it still falls to Indian women, new or otherwise, to preserve and uphold the sanctity of the 'Indian culture' and 'family life' – whatever that may include – and this implicitly involves the rejection of westernisation, western feminism and romantic love, all of which Srilata (1998) argues is configured as Bad Modernity, while marriage continues to be naturalised as Good Modernity. Indian women are still expected to show fidelity to their roles as 'dutiful housewives and nurturing mothers' (Mankekar 1999, 91) and bear the responsibility of 'nurturing and caring for others' (Munshi 1998, 580). Being middle- or middle-upper class and being New Women do not exempt Indian women from these traditional roles.

All that said, the new wave of IWE is moving in a direction that radically contradicts the bedrock of this expectation, in a way where modern practises can no longer be constructed as Good Modernity, moving to a social scene where New Indian Women (even if they are mothers) can freely divorce, have pre and extramarital affairs and can do so with neither guilt nor social consequences. Right up to the turn of the century, and even today in many circles, as Bagchi (1995, 136) writes, that there are generally only two images of women offered to Indians: 'those of the chaste, docile and obedient woman, and the unchaste, vile and voluptuous woman [...]'. These images stand in contrast to one another, but the New Indian Woman of the twenty-first century would perhaps beg to differ and demonstrate that these opposing images can be reconciled. The literature

increasingly depicts New Indian Women as being at once loving mothers, good daughters and respected pillars of society, while also being divorcees, mistresses and the ‘other’ woman. Just how this is done in IWE is what this article investigates. This article considers eight novels in total, some in-depth and some as part of an author’s oeuvre: Shashi Deshpande’s *In the Country of Deceit* (2011), Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2003), *The Immigrant* (2009) and *Custody*, (2011) and Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe* (2003), *Mistress* (2006) and *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010). These three Indian women writers live and work in India and are notably *not* diasporic writers or even sojourner writers³; their lives and their writings are focused primarily and deeply immersed in middle-class urban Indian life.

As Mukherjee contends, ‘It is . . . impossible to write a good novel today that remains suspended out of time and space; it must have a definite location in the temporal and spatial reality’ (1971, 18). The novel, with its time-space coordinates, depicts and comments upon change – which is one of its most basic themes – as opposed to continuity. Joshi (2006) in fact goes so far as to claim the novel informed, directed and embodied the exchange of ideas and values between postcolonial centre and periphery. Playing significant roles in modern India, the novel form seems eminently suitable for depiction and comment upon myriad changes crowding thick and fast into urban and industrialised parts of India.

In terms of IWE, ‘[l]iterary production [in India] in English is triply privileged [. . .], drawing on the language’s American-based global ascendancy, on the subcontinental legacy of British colonialism, and relatedly, on Indian class divisions’ (Orsini 2002, 84). Radhakrishnan (2007) argues that the middle-classes of India have become invested with the symbolic authority to make claims about India, and as such, it would seem apt to argue that the Indian English urban novel written by and for the middle-classes could constitute ‘an exploration of the insidious pressures of metropolitan living on the emergent professional middle class’ (Sharma 2004, 97).

In addition to or perhaps as a consequence of its privileges, IWE has represented India, particularly to the non-Indian world, in a unique way. Orsini (2002) notes that English is the preferred language of the urban middle-classes, and for some elites, their only language. As such, given the intertwining of politics and poetics in the novel, which has been referred to as ‘an incorporating quasi-encyclopaedic cultural form’ (Said 1993, 84), the stylistic changes and innovations introduced by Indian women writers to the body of literature written in English could well reflect and even impact upon the changing social order being depicted, ‘. . . literature [novels by Indian women] constitutes a dominant narrative of modern Indian womanhood’ (Daya 2009, 98).

Making the case for the other woman

Deshpande’s work has been not only critically acclaimed, but also critically analysed and studied for decades, and she has always unashamedly and openly declared that she writes about the society she knows, and particularly about the ordinary middle-class Indian woman. Her latest work, *In the Country of Deceit* (*CoD*), is a distinctively Deshpande’s novel; the texture and the characters are all typically and instantly recognisably of Deshpande’s voice and style.

Deshpande’s writing consistently depicts the inner life of middle-class Indian women (usually Kannada speakers) who seek an identity beyond that of the familial one, who seek a role outside the culturally prescribed one, and *CoD*’s protagonist is no different, except that she is Deshpande’s most quietly radical protagonist to date. That said, none of Deshpande’s protagonists have been exactly ordinary despite being average Indian

women: from Sarita in *The Dark Holds no Terrors* (1990) to Jaya in *That Long Silence* (1989), to Urmi in *The Binding Vine* (1993), to Sumi and her daughters in *A Matter of Time* (1999), to Indu in *Roots and Shadows* (1983) and Madhu in *Small Remedies* (2000), her women protagonists have one and all been strong minded, independent and upright women, negotiating fulfilment and happiness within the confines of their life rather than escaping the parameters drawn for them by society. The protagonist of *CoD* is not notably different from her predecessors except in one way: she is no victim of circumstance; Devayani deliberately, without necessity or pressure, sexually transgresses her society's code of ethics, and her own.

Devayani is a spinster, highly respected, intensely private, intellectual and well educated, a pillar of her community, and like many other Deshpande protagonists, devoted to her family. Also like other Deshpande protagonists, she is reserved and introspective, not a flighty, thoughtless creature; Deshpande's protagonists are typically women of some gravitas. Uncharacteristically, Devayani becomes 'the other woman', the woman who has a love affair and sexual intercourse with someone else's husband. Early in the storyline, Devayani falls deeply and earnestly in love with a police district superintendent, a married man and father. Devayani voices the sentiments and values of her community:

I believe in marriage. I believe marriage means loyalty, it means being honest. I think it is wrong, treacherous to deceive your wife (or husband – yes, there's that too). I am always on the side of the wronged wife or husband, I'm against the wrongdoer. As for love, I think it does not justify deceiving another person, I don't think it excuses cruelty (*CoD* 2008, 94)

Intrinsically a 'good girl', Devayani tries to rationalise her misdeeds to herself, first arguing that her guilt is not as great as her lover's guilt, 'It was he who needed to think of marriage, to talk of marriage, it was he who had to agonise over loyalty and faithlessness' (*CoD* 2008, 94). Next, Devayani rationalises that her/their happiness justifies the affair, 'I don't know how many couples get this, but for me – I never expected this; this complete sharing of everything, it's like a miracle . . .' (*CoD* 2008, 200). Devayani's final and chief rationalisation of the affair is not just the sincerity and strength of her feelings (which in her eyes, redeems it from being plain sordid), but her genuine need for her lover, 'How easily you ask me to give him up. Have you any idea what he means to me? It's like asking me to give up life, to give up breath . . . Even the thought of living without him makes me feel like dying' (*CoD* 2008, 200). The author depicts a powerful and instant mutual connection between Ashok and Devayani, understated but in perfect synchrony. The rightness of their compatibility is presented as the counter balance to the wrongness of their affair.

Devayani goes so far as to attempt to justify why and how her relationship with Ashok not only should exist, but should be permitted to exist:

Wrong? Why is it wrong? Why is it you can have your beloved and I can't have mine? . . . You know, as well as I do, that there are no boundaries for love, that you cannot draw a line and say, 'I will not go beyond this line.' It makes a nonsense of what love is, of what it means . . .

What is wrong is his marriage. . . . Why does he never speak of her? When even criminals get a second chance, why can't he have a second chance? Why can you correct all mistakes, but not this one? (*CoD* 2008, 199)

However, ultimately, Devayani acknowledges that there is no rationalisation possible, and what actually fuels the relationship is their mutual desire for it, which is all the justification required, and yet not a justification at all. 'I knew it was wrong: nothing could make it not wrong [. . .] Why had I done it? I knew the answer. I did it because I wanted him, I wanted

to be with him, I wanted to be in his company, I wanted to sleep with him, I wanted this relationship ...' (CoD 2008, 142).

Devayani does not spare herself, 'I turned my face from side to side and wondered, do I look like an adultress? Adultress. What an ugly word' (CoD 2008, 148). She acknowledges honestly that she is wronging others, but carries on the affair even though she is fully aware that it has no future, will not end in marriage with her lover, 'He loved me, but he also had his ambition, his work, his dreams of a future life. And, threaded through the design of his life was the strong strand of his love for his daughter, a thread that linked him, whether he liked it or not, to his wife. Love was not enough, no, it was never enough' (CoD 2008, 210).

Early in the relationship, Devayani carefully decides the price she will pay: 'You get used to everything – you learn how to live with suffering, pain, death. Why not with guilt then? Yes, I would learn to cope with guilt as well' (CoD 2008, 152). The fact that she does not expect to get off scot-free, and in fact expects to face serious consequences for her actions, is a point in her favour. Deshpande pulls no punches in depicting Devayani as the mistress, the other woman and the adulteress, and yet she renders this a sympathetic protagonist. Devayani is down to earth, unsparing of herself, clear-eyed, candid, entirely realistic and basically decent and high principled. She transgresses because of her strong feelings, but despite compromising her own principles, does not lose her integrity. Somehow, her self-honesty seems to render her less culpable.

Deshpande presents this as a tragic love story – lovers who have met at the wrong times in their lives, true love which must be sacrificed for principle and for family and community – but Deshpande removes the dramatic element of the tragedy, leaving only the quiet sorrow and resilient emotional tenacity of the protagonist. There are no Indian clichés here of over-wrought families tearing at their hair and beating their breasts and wailing that the girl has brought dishonour on all of them. On the contrary, Devayani has the love and support of her close family members. Deshpande does not play to the gallery, she does not exoticise, she does not stereotype. Her cast of characters act with sincerity and natural feeling, they are dismayed but still loving when they discover Devayani's affair, they worry about her being hurt, they advise gently against it, they show respect for her autonomy, they are chagrined, anxious, bewildered, upset and even distressed, but they do not denounce her in Bollywood fashion with melodramatic and histrionic scenes.

However, Deshpande ultimately upholds the code of ethics of her society. She warns that despite accepting culpability, despite being sincere, such affairs nevertheless erode and corrupt both the self and the society: once embarked on the 'affair', Devayani moves beyond her normal landscape into a '*Country of Deceit*'. Her life which had been an open book to date has to contain secret escapades and stolen hours/days. She recognises the emotional and moral damage to herself and to the people who love her, 'I could no longer be open and honest with people I loved; I had to deceive them. I was glad they were far away, these two women who loved me' (CoD 2008, 147).

Eventually, Ashok chooses his daughter over Devayani and their love, as Devayani herself mutually ends the relationship, 'I'm tired of lying and deceiving others. I have always known it is much worse for you. Like I said, there are greater claims on your commitment, on your loyalty, than there are on mine. But I too have my bonds and I can't go on lying to the people I love, I can't go on deceiving them' (CoD 2008, 237). Despite her earlier attempts to justify herself, Devayani acknowledges that 'The word love can't change anything. It is not a detergent that can wash out the stains. The wrong remains a wrong' (CoD 2008, 236).

This novel is radical not because it has a protagonist who has an affair, but because (1) it demonstrates that an affair can be a private matter (up to a point), without public impact and damage, hence rendering it less condemnatory and (2) the struggle is more one of personal morals rather than social morals, i.e. the real issue here is Devayani's integrity and self-respect, not fear of societal condemnation and alienation. Deshpande's narrative does not lean into Bad Modernity, simplistically claiming genuine love and desire justifies or absolves anything. Nevertheless, in an extremely modern manner, Deshpande allows Devayani to 'get away with it' in the sense that she does not ruin her life, and in fact, at the end, she receives a good job offer, keeps the respect of her family and community and retains her dignity. In this sense, Deshpande is turning Indian convention on its head by asserting not just the right of the individual to desire and pursue (illicit) individual happiness (temporarily at least), but also demonstrating that a woman need not set the good of the family above her own *all* of the time, and even more radically, that nothing terrible will happen even if she prioritises her own happiness. However, with the end of the affair and Ashok returning to his family, Deshpande does nod towards convention and Good Tradition, seeming to gesture that while infidelity may be acceptable temporarily, it is unsustainable in the longer term and that the well-being and interests of children should not be sacrificed.

This, however, is not necessarily the perspective shared by Manju Kapur's novels, some of whose protagonists are much less hesitant to risk the sanctity of marriage and even their children's well-being. Kapur's oeuvre features middle-class women protagonists, providing for a good study on the changing attitudes of Indian women and their society towards sexual intercourse, infidelity and marriage, particularly across the period of her writing of about 13 years, beginning just before the turn of the century.

In Kapur's first novel, *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati is a woman in love with a married man.⁴ It is clear that Virmati is a product of her time.⁵ In love with her professor, Virmati refuses the arranged marriage her family expects of her, is disgraced, but manages to further her education, becoming a teacher and even a school principal. Although a highly educated and independent career woman, Virmati is desperate to marry the professor. She has premarital intercourse with him which led to pregnancy and abortion, and afterwards, she thinks, 'She was his for life, whether he ever married her or not. Her body was marked by him. She could never look elsewhere, never entertain another choice' (Kapur 1998, 177). Virmati may not have been faithful within the confines of societal expectations, but very traditionally, she expects herself to be faithful to her already-married lover. Also, even after having lost her virginity, Virmati still ardently and desperately wishes for marriage, which in her eyes would restore her virtuous status and redeem her. When eventually the professor marries her as his second wife, Virmati is relieved, '... she was pleased to finally detect a recognisable pattern in her life' (Kapur 1998, 207). Virmati cannot conceive of another lifestyle or life route apart from marriage. Even her career and working life are but a waiting for her real life, i.e. as a wife, to begin.

If Virmati's sexual infidelity was 'redeemed' by the fact she married her lover and thus regained her respectability, Kapur's next protagonist ventured a little further in transgression. Astha, from *The Married Woman*, who was a sheltered innocent before marriage,⁶ initially has a happy arranged marriage, even a sexually active and experimental one. As the years go on, and after two children, Astha finds her talents and her Self unappreciated at any other than the domestic level, and finds a woman lover – Pipeelika – a widow. This is both a friendship and a lesbian relationship. The novel explains that all the trappings of domestic happiness – financial security, husband and children, pleasant in-laws – are nevertheless, not necessarily enough or fulfilling for the

married woman, who will look elsewhere, for both career and sexual fulfilment and intellectual and emotional understanding.

It is probable that Astha turned to a woman rather than to a man for her extramarital affair, because she was attempting to transgress as safely as possible. 'Astha was brought up properly, as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear. One slip might find her alone, vulnerable, unprotected. The infinite ways in which she could be harmed were not specified, but Astha absorbed them through her skin, and ever after was drawn to the safe and secure' (Kapur 2003, 1). Therefore, despite the unorthodoxy of a lesbian relationship, Astha still has not openly challenged her society and its moral norms; furthermore, it appears that as long as the façade of happy families is well maintained, much can be accommodated if not forgiven, and particularly if the husband's honour and role are not publicly compromised or threatened.

Kapur's fourth novel,⁷ *The Immigrant*, showcases flagrant, direct sexual transgression: a married protagonist repeatedly cheating on her husband. Nina has a protracted affair with a classmate, but even in this novel, the sexual transgression is not without safety nets. For one thing, Nina is a diasporic protagonist, an Indian, woman who immigrates to Canada after marriage, and is physically far from family, India, and those social circles. For another thing, Nina is only a wife, not a mother, unlike Astha. Also, Nina's husband cheats on her, which somehow seems to suggest that he is less than an innocent victim of Nina's infidelities. Like Astha's loneliness in her married life, Nina's immigrant situation is also depicted as an alienating, lonely, and misunderstood one, giving rise to the temptation of having an affair. This time, however, the transgression is not softened by the lover being another woman. That said, while Kapur does not precisely sanction extra marital affairs, she provides many extenuating reasons for her protagonists' sexual transgressions. The basic message underlying all her novels thus far is that although her protagonists have not been good girls, they have deviated from this path of virtue under stress – for love for a man, for lack of self-fulfilment, out of boredom, removed from their families and countries. Moreover, the fact that Kapur does not lead her protagonists to sticky ends, rather, permits their lives to carry on without being devastated by the consequences of their actions, shows a sympathetic inclination to these less-than-good-girls.

It is not until her fifth and latest novel that Kapur boldly creates a protagonist who is both wife and mother, and cheats on her husband simply because she has fallen for another man. In fact, in *Custody*, Shagun does not endure discontentment in marriage or even cheat behind her husband's back for long; when her cheating is discovered, Shagun unapologetically walks out, divorces her husband, abandons her picture-book-perfect family life, marries her lover and moves to New York. The bulk of the novel discusses the subsequent complications and struggles for custody of the two children of that marriage. Shagun too does not come to any sticky end, she even begins a career, continues to keep the love and regard of her new husband, socio-economically moves up several rungs and manages to maintain the adoration of her son even if she loses custody of her young daughter. She is represented as a loving mother.

Shagun is not just the most openly transgressing of Kapur's protagonists, but she is also the most beautiful. Kapur has no qualms about making this far-from-good-girl anything less than stunningly beautiful, and her husband is not the insensitive, self-absorbed husbands of her earlier novels, but a kind and talented man, generous and thoughtful. Shagun is the first amoral protagonist Kapur presents, single-minded in her determination to have her lover, forcing her aged, mortified mother to be a conspirator in her plans, seeming to suffer very few pangs of conscience, and is more concerned with the pragmatic difficulties of extricating herself from her first marriage than concerned with

any sense of shame. Her first marriage was not lonely or alienating, and in fact had been satisfactory until she fell for another man. She has flickers of guilt at the beginning, but increasingly prioritises her own pursuit of satisfaction and happiness, and with much success.

Kapur's (2011) protagonist is no longer willing to suffer and sacrifice for her family, and is willing instead to dismantle the family and cause pain in pursuit of her personal contentment. Shagun is no incarnation of the virtuous and self-sacrificing Sita, but she may well be a representative of a new type of twenty-first century urban middle-class Indian woman. In fact, in *Custody*, Kapur's women characters are increasingly sexually liberated women; both Shagun and Ishita easily and quickly embark on sexual relationships before their subsequent marriages to those men. Kapur's novel contains no hint of any lack of regard the Indian men hold their women in for their sexual forwardness, and it is, therefore, not only her women characters who defy social convention and traditional moral standards, but also her men characters.

This novel also illustrates that not only is there life-after-divorce for both Indian men and Indian women, but that there is marriage-after-divorce and that second marriages can work out quite nicely. This novel moves well beyond Kapur's earlier protagonists' struggle to reconcile themselves with discontentment within marriage, moving boldly into the still relatively new and uncharted territories of Indian divorces, custody battles for children, break-ups of families (nuclear and extended) and into the new world of ex-spouses, step-parents, estranged children and the making of new families and new extended families. Not only does Kapur demonstrate Indian women who are no longer good girls, but she also demonstrates that these women are tearing up the traditional Indian model of the family and unapologetically recharting new domestic territories altogether.

Of the three writers, Nair is perhaps the one who has taken the flaunting of societal norms the furthest, earliest. Her novels showcase women having affairs, not precisely recklessly, but with much less reservation than one may expect of middle-class Indian women. In *Ladies's Coupe* (2003), Anita Nair already presented several highly memorable women protagonists, all frustratedly trying to break out of the prescribed mould of the 'good girl', chief among them the protagonist Akhilandeshwari, 45-year-old spinster and breadwinner of her family, who first defies her family conventions by eating eggs, and then goes on to eventually defy family and societal norms by electing to live alone, travel alone and, finally, have an affair in a hotel room.⁸ In *Mistress* (2006), Nair's protagonist, Radha, finds her husband crude, mercenary and boorish, and has an affair with Chris, a Western writer and musician staying at the resort owned by her husband. Radha becomes pregnant by Chris, and eventually leaves both her husband and Chris, and the novel ends with her husband determined to woo her back. There do not seem to be serious negative consequences for her flouting of marital fidelity. Radha's beloved uncle, the male protagonist in the novel, has three lovers: Lalitha, a local woman/prostitute; Angela, a British woman and his student; and Maya, a married woman who is his old-age lover. He treats all his mistresses with tenderness, and in some cases, even with a degree of reverence. None of the women in the *Mistress* seem reviled or even held in less respect for being mistresses or adulteresses. In this novel, Nair presents middle-class women of at least two generations in extramarital affairs.

Nair's (2010) novel, *Lessons in Forgetting (LF)*, features a protagonist not unlike Deshpande's Devayani in many respects: refined, elegant, devoted to family. Meera who lives in a picture-perfect house with her mother and grandmother is wooed and married by Giri who is enthralled with their class and style. However, although Meera has much social capital, she has little financial capital. Wanting to sell the house, and unaware Meera is not

just unwilling but unable to do so, Giri leaves Meera, literally walking out of the house and the marriage without any notice. Meera loses her status not only as a wife but also as corporate wife and all the privileges that entails. For all her traditional and correct upbringing, and her modest, ladylike demeanour, Meera then embarks on an affair with a man half her age⁹ before embarking on a more permanent relationship with Jak, her employer. Essentially, *LF* is about women learning how to let go of the past and find happiness in non-traditional routes and places.

This novel also features other women who seem to transgress the traditional route and 'good girl' parameters. Jak's aunt, for example, Kala Chithi, walks out of her marriage when her husband decides to take a second wife after seven years of marriage with no children, 'I am not going back [...] I said. If you force me to, I'll leave home. I will be a whore but I won't be a wife. Not Ambi's wife' (*LF* 2010, 206). Kala goes on to have a quiet but dignified life as a single woman.

Discussion

Nair's novels seem to routinely depict middle-class women who would usually be categorised as 'good girls', engaging in sexually and societally transgressive behaviour. For about a decade and a half at least, Nair and other key Indian women writers in English such as Kapur and Deshpande have portrayed women protagonists taking and exercising considerable sexual liberties. The landscape of the eight novels discussed above collectively depicts social settings where the respectable Indian middle-class women, wives and even mothers embark on sexual affairs in search of happiness and individual fulfilment. Some do so with hesitation, self-surprise, anxiety and guilt, but others without reservation, regret, shame or guilt. These novels are radical because even in 1999, Puri was still making the argument that '... women's narratives reveal how the concerns with sexual respectability are pervasive and in effect act as instruments of social regulation in their lives' (Puri 1999, 199). However, in these novels, sexual respectability does not in fact deter women from defying social regulation, suggesting that sexual respectability is perhaps no longer as effective an instrument of social regulation as before. Middle-classness as Mankekar (1999) argued is partly distinguished by its women's (modest, reticent and virtuous) behaviour. However, *IWE* depicts the successful retaining or sustaining of middle-classness despite the women's taking sexual liberties; the protagonists of these novels are, therefore, successfully altering the boundaries of middle-classness.

Depictions of extramarital affairs and bold women with voracious sexual appetites are hardly new in the Indian literature, but the interesting current shift in the literature is that the sexually transgressive woman is *no longer* posited as the outsider, the lost, the depraved to be held up as a moral lesson for all good girls. Instead, these women can be – and are in these novels – pillars of their communities, at the heart of their families, good citizens. The women protagonists of these novels are not victims, nor even long-suffering, wronged wives; some in fact have become the other woman, the mistress and adulteress. The novels no longer necessarily depict such women as sluts or vamps or temptresses. In fact, many sympathetically depict sexually transgressing women who are classy, elegant, intellectual, sincere, family oriented and highly conventional.

Narrative plotlines usually signal the boundaries of societal convention as well as their authors' sympathies. Daya (2009) had previously contended that contemporary novels by Indian women show punishments of sexual transgressions as implicitly condemned by their narratives, carried out as they are by villains or misguided authorities. However, the

narratives of these novels discussed here go one step beyond this, and mostly do not punish their protagonists at all, implicitly or otherwise. That particular stick so long held over the heads of good girls has been quietly removed by these women writers. Their novels do not demonstrate that being 'bad girls' shatters the women's lives or lead them to dire ends; in fact, the narrative lines and plots depict growing levels of acceptance – admittedly tempered, nuanced, varying levels of acceptance – with families learning to accommodate and even accept this departure from the societally prescribed code of ethics. These women protagonists do not lose much, and some even seem rewarded for their risk and boldness in flaunting social norms and transgressing sexual boundaries.

The men in these novels – lovers, husbands and male family members – do not seem to hold the women in lower esteem as a result of their premarital, extramarital or simply non-marital affairs. Neither do the community as a whole – the friends, well-wishers, colleagues and neighbours – much condemn the women, although there may be some background tut-tutting. Rajan had argued that family, because of its centrality in Indian women's identity construction and the roles in life they play, can be 'the major, if not primary site of women's oppression' (2004, 80), and yet, the families of these women protagonists do not seem to much oppress them, instead provide the women with shelter and support as well as identities and societal validations. They are not depicted as particularly liberated, modern or exceptional families in any way, but simply as loving, good-hearted ones, tending to genuine concern and hand-wringing distress rather than disownment and rejection, attempting to adjust and accept rather than resorting to chest-beating or outraged histrionics.

Equally, the women are not depicted as westernised or exceptional either, they are average middle-class urban Indian women, born and bred in India, living and working there all their lives (except for a couple of protagonists in Kapur's novels, who immigrate to Canada and New York). The representation of sexual freedoms and autonomies in these novels indicates that the good girl image of the respectable Indian (married) woman is not quite as exhaustive or typical as may be imagined. It would seem that New Indian Women are not quite as sexually conventional as traditionally portrayed. Daya contends that in fact, '... sexual transgression is perhaps the primary means through which Indian women are constructed as modern' (2010, 476). And yet, the women protagonists of Deshpande's, Kapur's and Nair's novels would not necessarily construct or consider themselves particularly modern, nor are they even necessarily trying to be. They do not see themselves as trendsetters, they are not even trying to rebel; the novels do not depict sexual transgression as being for the sake of wilfulness or defiance. What the women are tentatively exploring and discovering is that this path of sexual autonomy in seeking individual fulfilment is not as closed off or forbidden as it perhaps used to be, and the exercise of sexual autonomy has resulted in some degree of liberation and greater individuality, with relatively few negative repercussions.

Rajan (1993) had made the point that there is a generational difference between younger and older Indian women, contending that the younger women may have a greater ability to enact rebellion and sexual desire. However, these novels depict older, married and even women of grandmother-ages conducting affairs and being sexually bold and transgressive. In fact, according to Kalpana's argument about marriage leading to women being 'zeroed out as an individual ... no longer ... entitled to ideas, opinions, preferences of her own' (2005, 46–47), and differential personal growth leading to decreasing satisfaction between husband and wife, being married may practically be an incentive to conducting extramarital affairs. However, none of this new sexual liberation or transgression as depicted in the novels threatens the institution of marriage in

conventional Indian terms. As Puri notes, ‘middle class women may be ambivalent about marriage, but none of the marriageable-age women indicates that she does not want to ever marry; nor do any of the currently married women suggest that they would prefer not to be married’ (1999, 137). Marriage as an institution in these novels is not impugned upon, even if marital fidelity is increasingly transgressed.

The protagonists of all the novels are middle-class women, but there are of course positionality differences even within this broad categorisation. Devayani is able to get away with direct flouting of social sexual conventions – namely adultery with a married man – by virtue of flying under the radar and managing to subsume her affair into her relatively unscrutinised and exceptionally private lifestyle. Ishita in *Custody* does not have Devayani’s personal autonomies, but as a divorced woman, she too finds herself somewhat more protected from the public glare of scrutiny than an unmarried young woman. However, a Shagun (also in *Custody*), strikingly beautiful, married and mother of two children, existing primarily within the arena of her natal and married families, has no such camouflage from society, and comes under the full glare of public scrutiny. That said, Shagun manages to launch her affair and carry it through to subsequent divorce, remarriage and immigration, by dint of sheer self-absorption and determination to have what she wants, coupled with a lack of care of consequences for herself and everyone involved. In all these cases, it is not precisely wealth or the privilege of family connections which enable the women to sexually transgress; it seems to depend on either lifestyle and adroit manoeuvrings or the ability to simply refuse to care about reputation and societal disapprobation. From this, we could perhaps conclude that the prison bars of being a good and virtuous Indian woman are perhaps no longer – for middle-class Indian women at least – as rigorously policed as has traditionally been the case and that the bars can be bent by sheer force of (sexual) desire and/or the ability to wriggle out from under the trapping weight of gender-cultural expectations.¹⁰

Conclusion

The question naturally arises as to why and how middle-class women are able to seemingly ‘get away’ with sexual transgressions, as depicted in the literary representations, considering how the bodies of women have been long held as the battle site of cultural honour and the trope of mother India (Oza 2001). If middle-class women are regarded as almost emblematic of India’s progress, development and prosperity, and if the New Indian Woman is pushed to the forefront as encapsulating Good Modernity, is not sexual transgression from this iconic figure a threat?

Srilata would have it that the New Indian Woman is pan-Indian, not peculiar to a particular caste, religion or region, but is ‘above all an *individual* with agency that is about being publicly visible (even feminist) and falling in love’ (1998, 307). Adding to this shifting identity construction of the New Indian Woman, Thapan (2001, 360) argues that she ‘emphasizes the “secular” (modern), nontraditional (contemporary), liberated (Westernized) and “trendy” aspects of everyday life’, and this emphasis is underlaid by the ‘shift in the way Indian women are presented towards an emphasis on glamour and sexuality. This becomes extremely clear by looking at the print, television and film content available to the urban Indian consumer’ (Dhillon and Dhawan 2011, 540). It would seem, therefore, that among the new definitions of Indian women and Indian modernity as represented by the public media, there is a sea change in the construction of gender roles and the pushing back of gender boundaries, for a select few within the middle-classes at least, even if they are still considerably a minority group.

This new understanding of the New Indian Woman is illustrated by and encapsulated in the protagonists of the novels discussed above. These women may not be the conventional definition of good girls, but their actions and their society's perhaps surprising levels of acceptance and accommodation of their transgressing sexual and social regulation indicate that perhaps Indian society may not be as conventional or unchanging as previously made out to be. Good girls or good women – women who are happy, loved, successful and respected – can have affairs, divorces and remarriages, without shame and without public or private dishonour, remaining dear and true to their families. They are in fact forging new ground, forcing a certain elasticity into the boundaries of what good girls may and may not do, redefining the 'good girl' Indian model. They may even be gently easing Bad Modernity into being just Modernity.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank the GPC editorial team, especially Robyn Longhurst and Gemma Parsons for their careful editing of this article.

Notes

1. For an extended analysis and discussion on the autonomy of the unmarried New Indian Woman, see Lau (2010).
2. Srilata (1998) outlines Good Tradition and Bad Tradition, Good Modernity and Bad Modernity: 'The middle-class woman, constructed through the discourses of the social reform movement, followed a set of practices deemed as Good Tradition to attain a Good Modernity. Her modernity (of which her education was an important marker) was coded as good because it was pressed into the service of tradition. Much of what went under the name of Bad Modernity (such as romantic love and the wearing of western clothes) was out-of-bounds for her. What was tabooed as Bad Modernity for the woman of the social reform movement is recast as Good Modernity in the present context. The New Woman has an easier relationship with modernity' (Srilata 1998, 307).
3. With homes both inside and outside India.
4. The narrative is developed by Virmati's daughter who herself having left her husband is tracking the story of her mother's life.
5. The period just prior to India's independence, India in the 1930s and 1940s.
6. Discounting Astha's two crushes and some kissing experience.
7. Kapur's third novel, *Home* (2006), is not extensively discussed here because although it did feature a discontented middle-class woman, its theme was not sexual transgression as a move towards greater autonomy. *Home* illustrates the intricacies for an unwed young woman of living in a joint family. The protagonist longs for a meaningful career, but is forced into waiting for marriage. Her family provides identity and direction, but few freedoms (sexual or otherwise), trapping the woman in the 'good girl' model.
8. The novel also features Marikolanthu who loves her mistress so much that she becomes first her mistress' lesbian lover, then prostitutes herself to her mistress' husband to keep him from straying. It must be noted that Marikolanthu is not a middle-class woman, but a servant and of the poorer/lower classes. From the novel's context, her sexual experiments/transgressions are not regarded in the same light, seeming somehow less transgressive. This may well be a comment on the class system, on the part of the author.
9. With Rishi Soman, a wannabe actor.
10. That said, Smriti in *LF* is a cautionary case in point that if convention is flouted unthinkingly and naively, there can still be danger and dire consequences for the women, who despite middle-class status, are still exceptionally vulnerable, particularly to the less law-abiding, as well as non-middle class sections, of their community.

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ABSTRACT TRANSLATIONS

Ya no más niñas buenas: transgresión sexual en la escritura de las mujeres indias

La escritura de las mujeres indias en inglés las ha descrito por mucho tiempo como víctimas de la sociedad, cuyos derechos son explotados rutinariamente y cuyo bienestar y felicidad son comúnmente sacrificados por el bien de sus familias y comunidades. La literatura a menudo ha descrito a las mujeres como cómplices, aceptando y sosteniendo la definición de una buena mujer como aquella que es fiel, virtuosa, modesta y obediente. Esta definición es también la que las mujeres les inculcan a sus hijas, reforzando así este código ético. Este artículo observa que hay una corriente contraria a esto, y que hay una nueva generación de mujeres en la ficción de la literatura india en inglés del siglo veintiuno; mujeres que son solteras y casadas, con trabajo y sin trabajo, clase media y clase media-alta, mujeres y madres, que ya no están preparadas para ser "niñas buenas". Estas mujeres, a sabiendas, concienzuda y exitosamente desafían las convenciones sociales para tener aventuras pre y extra maritales, divorcios, e incluso batallas por la custodia de sus hijos, sin vergüenza, culpa, consecuencias terribles o incluso condena social. Este artículo sostiene que estos escritos representan una partida silenciosamente radical de las descripciones convencionales de los roles, las expectativas, y las morales de las mujeres indias de clase media urbana del siglo veintiuno.

Palabras claves: mujeres escritoras indias; modernidad; Nuevas Mujeres Indias; autonomía sexual

不再当好女孩：印度女性书写中的性逾越

印度女性的英语写作，经常将印度女性描绘成社会中的牺牲者，她们的权利总是受到剥夺，而她们的福祉与幸福则通常为了家庭与社群而牺牲。这些文献经常将女性描绘成共谋者，接受并拥护忠诚、贞洁、谦逊、顺从的好女人之定义。女性亦将这些定义加诸在她们的女儿身上，因而强化了这些道德符码。本文则观察到一个与上述现象相反的趋势，此即在二十一世纪印度的英文文学小说中产生了新

的女性类型；此类女性无论是单身或已婚、工作或无业、中产或中上阶级、身为妻子或母亲，皆不再准备成为“好女孩”。这些女性刻意、深思熟虑且成功地反抗了社会传统价值，拥有婚前或婚外情、离婚，甚至争取子女的监护权而不必感到羞耻、内疚、承担悲惨的后果甚至是社会谴责。本文主张，这些作品暗中激进地背离了二十一世纪印度中产阶级都会女性的传统女性角色、期待与道德叙述。

关键词：印度女性作家；现代性；新印度女性；性自主