

Reclaiming the Self: Feminist Consciousness in Shashi Deshpande's Novels

Saloni Prasad (Mrs Kumar)

Professor, Dept of English
College of Commerce, Arts & Science
Magadh University, Bodh Gaya

Abstract

This article examines the evolution of feminist consciousness across the novelistic corpus of Shashi Deshpande, situating her within the broader constellation of Indian English women's writing alongside Anita Desai, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, and Gauri Deshpande. Drawing on feminist literary theory from Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Adrienne Rich, bell hooks, Gayatri Spivak, and Chandra Mohanty, alongside established Deshpande scholarship, the study traces how silence, marriage, motherhood, and memory function simultaneously as instruments of patriarchal control and as sites of female agency in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows*, *That Long Silence*, *The Binding Vine*, *A Matter of Time*, and *Small Remedies*. The analysis foregrounds Deshpande's realist, interior-monologue-driven prose and her recurring symbolism of darkness, sound, and binding threads as narrative strategies that enact what French feminists term *écriture féminine* within an Indian middle-class domestic idiom. The article argues that Deshpande's protagonists do not achieve liberation through rupture but through incremental, intersectional renegotiations of selfhood within family and caste-class structures, thereby complicating universalist feminist paradigms while enriching the "woman question" in postcolonial Indian literature.

Keywords: Feminist consciousness, selfhood, patriarchy, silence, marriage, *écriture féminine*, Indian middle-class domesticity

I. Introduction

Shashi Deshpande occupies a distinctive position in the history of Indian English fiction: a writer who moved from a Kannada-speaking, Karnataka-rooted literary milieu into English narrative art without severing her allegiance to regional cultural texture, and who produced, across nine novels beginning with *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), one of the most sustained fictional interrogations of middle-class Indian womanhood in postcolonial letters [1] [6]. Writing in the wake of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, which she regarded as a genuine "pathbreaker" that "changed everything for Indians writing in English," Deshpande nonetheless resisted the idea that Indian English fiction should be measured against a metropolitan center, declaring "to me as a reader there are no margins" [1]. This refusal of marginality is significant for a feminist reading of her work, since it signals her insistence that the domestic, quotidian struggles of Indian women constitute a legitimate and central literary subject rather than a provincial footnote to a national or postcolonial narrative dominated by male protagonists and historical grand narratives [1].

Deshpande's fiction emerged alongside, and in productive tension with, that of Anita Desai, whose *Clear Light of Day* she admired but whose vision of India she found occasionally too exoticized for an English readership; Ruth Praver Jhabvala, whose outsider's gaze on Indian domestic life differs from Deshpande's insider realism; Nayantara Sahgal, whose novels foreground the intersection of politics and female self-realization within elite, politically connected families [8]; and Gauri Deshpande, one among a wider cohort of women novelists who, alongside Kamala Markandaya, Santha Rama Rau, Bharati Mukherjee, and others, "left their permanent imprint" on Indian English fiction even as "the life of the ordinary Indian woman hasn't changed much" [1] [8]. Unlike Sahgal's women, who move within the "vortex of politics" and elite historical events [8], Deshpande's protagonists—Indu, Saru, Jaya, Urmila, Sumi, Madhu—are drawn overwhelmingly from the educated, career-oriented, urban middle class, and their struggles are refracted through domestic space rather than the public sphere of nationalist or parliamentary politics [1] [6]. This essay argues that it is precisely this sustained attention to the domestic interior—the drawing room, the kitchen, the marital bed, the mother-daughter conversation—that makes Deshpande's fiction a rich site for tracing the emergence, contestation, and partial achievement of feminist consciousness in Indian women's writing.

II. Theoretical Framework: Feminist Consciousness, Selfhood, and the Woman Question

Feminist consciousness, as it operates in Deshpande's novels, cannot be separated from the broader theoretical vocabulary developed by twentieth-century feminist criticism. Simone de Beauvoir's foundational claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" underlies the entire architecture of Deshpande's fiction, in which girls are systematically socialized into subordinate roles through family ritual, marriage arrangement, and internalized shame [2]. Beauvoir's critique of marriage as an institution that "transforms into rights and duties those mutual relations which should be founded on a spontaneous urge," rendering the two bodies "degrading" objects of mutual possession rather than autonomous persons, finds direct fictional embodiment in the marital relationships Deshpande depicts, from Jaya and Mohan's compelled companionship in *That Long Silence* to Mira's coerced sexuality in *The Binding Vine* [6].

Kate Millet's notion of "sexual politics"—the recognition that power relations between men and women pervade even the most intimate domestic exchanges—is echoed in Deshpande's own insistence that patriarchy operates as "male domination and the power relationships by which men dominate women" within her fiction [3]. Adrienne Rich's exhortations to women writers to look afresh at inherited myth, refusing the roles scripted for them by patriarchal tradition, resonate with Deshpande's repeated invocation and subsequent rejection of mythological women—Sita, Gandhari, Draupadi—whom her protagonists initially model themselves upon and later repudiate as inadequate templates for a modern, thinking woman's life [1] [3]. Jaya's realization in *That Long Silence* that she, like Gandhari, had "bandaged my eyes tightly" and "didn't want to know anything" is a paradigmatic instance of a Rich-inflected feminist self-scrutiny: an unblinding, a refusal of inherited narrative [3].

bell hooks's theorization of solidarity among women "from margin to center," and her essay on sisterhood as "political solidarity among women," provides a critical vocabulary for reading the female networks Deshpande constructs in *The Binding Vine*, where Urmi, Shakutai, Vanaa, Inni, and the dead Mira are bound together not by unproblematic sisterly affection but by painful, asymmetrical, class-inflected relations of care [5] [6]. Gayatri Spivak's foundational question "Can the subaltern speak?" complicates any simple celebratory reading of female solidarity, since it draws attention to the ways in which even sympathetic intermediaries—educated, English-speaking women like Urmi—may inadvertently speak *for* rather than *with* the subaltern woman, whose access to authorized speech remains structurally foreclosed [11] [12] [13]. Chandra Mohanty's critique of universalizing feminist categories in "Under Western Eyes" further cautions against reading Deshpande's middle-class women as representative of "Indian women" tout court, and instead demands attention to the specific class, caste, and regional positioning of her protagonists relative to women like Shakutai and Kalpana in *The Binding Vine*, whose predicaments are shaped by economic precarity and social vulnerability in ways categorically different from Urmi's [10]. This intersectional caution, elaborated further through Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework as cited in recent scholarship on Deshpande's short fiction, is essential to any responsible account of "feminist consciousness" in her oeuvre [10].

Deshpande herself resisted straightforward identification as a feminist polemicist, insisting "I'm a novelist, I write novels, not feminist tracts" and lamenting that being categorized as a "women's writer" caused critics to overlook the universality of her human concerns [6]. Yet in her essay "Why I Am a Feminist" she affirmed unambiguously that "women are neither inferior nor subordinate human beings, but one half of the human race," and in interview she articulated a rights-based feminist philosophy centered on individual autonomy, decision-making capacity, and freedom from oppression rooted purely in gender [3]. This productive tension between authorial disavowal and textual feminist argument is itself a critical datum: it suggests that Deshpande's feminism operates less as ideological program than as what critics have called a sustained "quest for authentic selfhood," in which her protagonists move, in the words of one critic, "from despair to hope, from self negation to self assertion" [3].

Silence as Oppression and Agency: *That Long Silence* and *Roots and Shadows*

Silence is the master trope of Deshpande's feminist poetics, functioning simultaneously as the instrument of women's oppression and, paradoxically, as the terrain upon which resistance is first imagined. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya's seventeen years of marital silence are figured through the image of "a pair of bullocks yoked together," a phrase Jaya recognizes as inadequate to the emotional reality of marriage, since bullocks "do not know whether one loves the other or not," yet are compelled to move in the same direction under social rather than affective compulsion [3]. Jaya's married identity as "Suhasini"—the compliant, ever-smiling wife name assigned to her by Mohan—stands in explicit opposition to "Jaya," the name given by her father and associated with a sharpened, defiant "animus" [3]. The novel dramatizes what critics term the "double personality aspect of every modern educated middle-class married woman," in which the socially compliant Suhasini persona is progressively cracked open by the resurgent Jaya self, and it is precisely the act of writing—the breaking of the "long silence" through autobiographical narration—that constitutes Jaya's, and by extension Deshpande's, central feminist gesture [3]. This narrative strategy exemplifies what French feminist theory calls *écriture féminine*: the recovery of a repressed female voice through the physical, embodied act of inscription, here rendered not as

abstract *jouissance* but as the concrete labor of an "unsuccessful writer" finally permitting herself to write her own life rather than the domesticated fictions she had previously produced [3].

Crucially, *That Long Silence* refuses to romanticize silence as pure agency; it also documents the "mute, traditional bound women" — Kusum, Vanitamani, Jeeja, Jaya's grandmother, Mohan's mother and sister Vimala — who "opt for positive resignation in life," suggesting that silence for many women remains simply oppression without recuperation, a point that qualifies any triumphalist feminist reading of the novel [3]. Deshpande's insistence that "women should be recognized, heard and understood; they must not be kept as cage birds" operates, then, as an aspirational rather than descriptive claim about the condition of most of the women depicted in the text [3].

Roots and Shadows extends this exploration of silence into the register of inheritance and intergenerational patriarchy. Scholarship on the novel identifies its central concern with the transmission of patriarchal authority through family structures, particularly the domineering matriarch Akka, whose control over the family's assets and destinies replicates, rather than subverts, patriarchal logics of power even though she is herself a woman [2]. The protagonist Indu's negotiation with inherited wealth, familial expectation, and her own aspirations toward autonomous selfhood exemplifies Deshpande's recurring narrative structure: a woman returning to her natal home, confronting the "roots" of her socialization, and emerging with a reconfigured, if incomplete, sense of self [2]. Comparative analysis across *Roots and Shadows*, *That Long Silence*, and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* demonstrates that Deshpande's female characters "challenge traditional gender roles, negotiate societal expectations, and seek personal liberation" through remarkably consistent narrative mechanisms: retrospective first-person narration, extended interior monologue, and a climactic moment of partial self-recognition rather than definitive rupture from family [2].

III. Marriage, Disillusionment, and Self-Determination: *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

If *That Long Silence* interrogates silence as the medium of marital oppression, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*—described by Deshpande as her "most loved work"—interrogates marriage itself as a contested, indeed violent, institution [1]. The protagonist Saru, a successful doctor married to Manohar, an underpaid lecturer, becomes the object of her husband's nocturnal sexual aggression, itself a psychological displacement of his professional emasculation and resentment of her superior income and status [6]. Scholarship situates this dynamic as an early and unusually candid fictional treatment of marital rape in Indian English literature, one that anticipates the more explicit treatment of the same theme in *The Binding Vine* [6]. Saru's night-time assaults occur in stark contrast to Manohar's daytime persona of a considerate, even loving husband, dramatizing what one critical study calls the "splitting" of the "New Indian Woman" between public professional achievement and private domestic subjugation [10].

Deshpande frames Saru's predicament within the mythic templates offered to Indian women—goddess, mother, chaste wife, temptress—templates she explicitly critiques through the voice of her characters, arguing that "all the women in the legends have been made by men to satisfy their different needs," leaving little space for "a real thinking, feeling woman" [1]. Saru's journey away from her marital home to her natal family, and her subsequent, painful reckoning with her mother's rejection of her (rooted in son-preference and gendered blame for her brother's death), demonstrates that the "dark" of the title operates on multiple registers: marital violence, filial guilt, and the psychological darkness of internalized patriarchal judgment [1] [10]. That "the dark holds no terrors" by the novel's end signals not the disappearance of patriarchal threat but Saru's acquisition of the interior resources—self-knowledge, professional identity, refusal of victimhood—that allow her to face that threat without complete self-annihilation, an ending consistent with Deshpande's characteristic refusal of both total tragedy and total liberation [1] [2].

IV. Motherhood, Trauma, and Female Solidarity: *The Binding Vine*

The Binding Vine (1992) develops Deshpande's feminist consciousness along two braided axes: the trauma of maternal loss and the possibility, always qualified, of female solidarity across class lines. The novel opens with Urmila's grief over the death of her infant daughter Anu, a grief she refuses to relinquish because "to let go of that pain... would be a betrayal" of her daughter's memory [6] [7]. This maternal mourning becomes, paradoxically, the affective aperture through which Urmila becomes attentive to other women's suffering: she is drawn into the life of her long-dead mother-in-law Mira, a "thwarted writer" whose Kannada poems, discovered and translated by Urmila, reveal decades of silent suffering under marital rape, and into the life of Kalpana, a young woman lying comatose after a brutal rape by her own uncle [6] [7].

The novel's juxtaposition of rape "committed within and outside marriage" is critically significant: Mira's poetic testimony—"But tell me, friend, did Laxmi too / twist brocade tassels round her fingers / and tremble, fearing the coming / of the dark-clouded, engulfing night"—renders visible a suffering that had no other outlet, since the "violation of one's body, even if sanctified by marriage, can be as humiliating and traumatic an experience as rape"

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