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Voices of Silence and Resistance: A Feminist Study of Selected Novels of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract

This research paper attempts a feminist critical analysis of Silent Voice and its consequences on the lived experience of the female protagonists of the novels of two leading women writers of India, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande and how it functions in the two novels along with resistance as the other theme. The study draws on second wave and postcolonial theories of femininity to examine the silenced condition of women in patriarchal structures and through the socialization and cultural internalization of women, as well as to map the diverse and complex modes of resistance employed by these characters. Desai's novels include: *Cry, the Peacock* (1963); *Voices in the City* (1965); and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* The four are discussed in relation to the other three works by Deshpande, namely, *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) and *A Matter of Time* (1996). The paper suggests that both the authors, in spite of their stylistic differences, meet in the obsession with interiority of the female consciousness, the violence of the silent structures imposed on the social sphere, and the delicate but not insignificant gestures of self-assertion made by female characters. The research finds that the silence of these fictional women is not always passively subservient to oppression, but rather a complex and often subversive response to oppression; that resistance, even if it is muted, is an enduring statement of feminism.

Keywords: Feminism, Indian women writers, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, silence, resistance, patriarchy, postcolonial feminism, female subjectivity.

INTRODUCTION

The tradition of writing in English by Indian women has now become an important and creative one, especially since the mid-

twentieth century. In this tradition, the novels of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande have a privileged and lasting place. Both writers have had as their central focus, and in a persistent

way, the inner world of women: their anxieties, their suppressions, their yearnings, their quiet and not-so-quiet revolts against a social order that has systematically denied them voice and agency.

The title of this paper *Voices of Silence and Resistance* intentionally conveys the paradox that both writers' fiction is set in motion by. In their novels, silence isn't merely a lack of words. It's an imposition, a strategy, an identity, and sometimes a weapon. Resistance, in turn, is often hesitant, introvert, even self-destructive, but nonetheless clearly 'counter' to the domination of patriarchy.

Feminist literary criticism, with its theoretical blossoming in the 1960s and 1970s, has offered the means of reading women's writing not only as aesthetic artifacts, but as documents of culture which show the structure of gender oppression and the promise of female emancipation. Feminist criticism in India should also grapple with the unique and complex positioning of women in the Indian context, characterized by the influence of caste, class, religion and gender in the age of modernity.

This paper explores the selected novels of Desai and Deshpande: in the light of the above mentioned dual framework: Western feminist theory and postcolonial feminist critique, it is argued that these works not only highlight commonalities but also differences in their feminist vision.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper takes an eclectic approach which draws from several strands of feminist thought. The readings offered here are in part based on the foundational philosophical insight of Simone de Beauvoir (1949), which was stated in *The Second Sex* that woman is not born but made, that femininity is a cultural and social construction, rather than a biological destiny. Both Desai and Deshpande have constructed female characters which are directly relevant to De Beauvoir's analysis of woman as the 'Other'

of man defined by and in relation to man's subjectivity.

Both writers focus on a theme of the myth of the happy housewife and the use of domestic ideology as a tool for patriarchal control, as explored in both Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Deshpande is especially concerned with the educated, middle-class woman who is thwarted by her intelligence, and who is forced to remain in the domestic sphere.

The concept of gynocriticism, defined by Elaine Showalter as the study of women's writing as a unique written tradition, having its own thematic and formal characteristics is also used here. This can be a productive framework in which to consider the preoccupations of both Desai and Deshpande with interiority, with stream of consciousness and the domestic space as a site of both confinement and subversion.

Also, the postcolonial feminist critics like Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Uma Narayan are referred to in order to discuss the particular stresses of the Indian socio-cultural context. However, the question 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', posed by Spivak, rings out loud with regard to the silenced heroines of Desai's and Deshpande's film, though the middle class urban women they depict are in a more ambivalent position than Spivak's subaltern.

Last, the psychoanalytic feminist perspectives of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray offer instruments to interpret the dynamics of silence, body and language in these texts. The idea of the semiotic as the pre-linguistic, women's disruptive force which bursts into and disturbs the symbolic order of patriarchal language is relevant to the analysis of Desai's experimental prose style.

Anita Desai: the aesthetics of anguish and articulate silence

Interiority and Isolation in *Cry, the Peacock* (1963): In *Cry the Peacock*, her first novel, we see

Anita Desai's protagonist, Maya, a young, sensitive, and imaginatively rich woman married to Gautama, a much older emotionally unavailable lawyer. The novel is organized around Maya's slipping into madness or, as the patriarchy that surrounds her would have it, madness, and the culminating violence. The basic tragedy of Maya is that she lacks a language suitable to her experience and that the world around her is not listening even the one she knows.

Maya's silence doesn't happen through choice; it's a result of a systematic invalidation of her experience. Gautama says that her fears, her dreams, her emotional needs are irrational. When the astrologer predicts that one of them will have to die, Maya struggles to accept the weight of that word and doesn't tell anyone. In a style that is akin to stream of consciousness, Desai exhibits a strikingly lyrical intensity in her depiction of Maya's inner world, one in which she is attuned to the most exquisite of sensory experiences and the subtlety of emotion, a world that is completely unknown to the people who surround her.

The peacock in the title is an extremely powerful symbol. The peacock's call is both beautiful and empty a yard of feeling that to the social order means nothing. Maya, like the peacock, cries but her cries are swallowed by the silence that the patriarchy world imposes on feminine suffering. Her resistance, the last act of murder-suicide, is both an exercise of agency and a statement of entrapment. It is the only form of resistance that a woman can have if she is denied the right to express herself in any other way.

Desai's prose in *Cry, the Peacock* has an almost unbearable lyricism it has a double feminist function: to show the richness of Maya's inner life and thus to vindicate her against the charge of mere irrationality; and to suggest, by its very beauty and excess, the inadequacy of any available language to be fully contained or expressive of feminine experience.

Urban Alienation and Female Identity in *Voices in the City* (1965): In Desai's second novel, *Voices in the City*, the centrepiece is Calcutta, now renamed as a metaphorical city of darkness and death, and its focus is on three siblings, Nirode, Monisha and Amla. The novel is most important for its feminist issues, in the character of Monisha, who ends up at the point of complete spiritual annihilation when she marries a conventional and prosperous Bengali family.

The diary entries by Monisha which are interspersed throughout the novel, is one of the most powerful portrayal of female interiority in Indian English fiction. That she writes is an act of resistance – it is the only place she can tell the truth about her experience. But this private space is sullied by the knowledge that it is futile: the world will never be different, the marriage will never be away, and her words will not be heard. Monisha's suicide can be seen as a logical conclusion to a life in which all avenues of meaningful living have been shut off.

Amla, on the other hand, is a different kind of feminist: the creative woman, searching for herself in art. But the gender of her quest also limits her: all her interactions with men involve a power struggle; and the city is a space of male domination, where Amla must work as an outsider. Her voice as painter and her voice as consciousness is tenuous and difficult: a refusal, not a self-assertion.

So, Desai gives us, in *Voices in the City*, a range of female reactions to patriarchal enclosure, from the deadly silence of Monisha to the fragile expression of Amla. Both responses are incomplete, both come with a price, the price cost to women who want to be more than the Patriarchal order can be.

The Refusal of Motherhood in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975): *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* represents an important step forward in Desai's feminist agenda. The protagonist Sita, pregnant with her fifth child, refuses to give birth literally and symbolically

to biological reproduction, the defining feature of her life and a means to its confinement. She goes to Manori Island, home of her strange father, to create a haven beyond normal time and normal expectations from patriarchy on the female body.

Sita's rebellion is not just against one husband, against one pregnancy but against the whole ideology of motherhood as women's main and ultimate purpose. Of course, she cannot 'keep the child from being born into this world' but Desai is not sentimental about her protagonist's delusion. But the motivation behind resisting is very feminist; it is the right of the woman to decide what to do with her body, and to refuse to accept the social script which puts her in the position of a reproductive function.

Another theme in the novel is that of escape and return. Sita is not forever to stay on the island, she has to go back to the mainland, to the husband, to the house, to the natural and inevitable birth. But the return is not an easy one. Returning from her retreat, Sita brings back with her some of her awareness of herself, her desires and her limitations, some self-knowledge, albeit partial but nonetheless real. Desai says that resistance, even if unsuccessful in its entirety, still leaves a residue which effects a change in the resistant subject.

Shashi Deshpande: Language, Identity, And the Grammar of Silence

The Long Silence of Jaya in That Long Silence (1988): That Long Silence is widely regarded as Shashi Deshpande's finest achievement and one of the most important feminist novels in Indian English literature. The novel's protagonist, Jaya, is a writer who has chosen silence – the silence of self-erasure, of compliance, of the performance of the good wife – in order to preserve her marriage and her social position. The novel is her attempt, forced by a crisis in her husband Mohan's career, to understand the choices she has made and the self she has suppressed.

The title is richly ambivalent. The 'long silence' refers not only to Jaya's personal silence her abandonment of her own literary voice in favour of the domestic role – but also to the historical silence of Indian women, the silences that have been imposed by centuries of patriarchal culture. Deshpande draws an explicit connection between Jaya and the mythological Sita, who was asked to prove her purity not once but twice, who endured in silence and patience – and ultimately, in some versions of the myth, was swallowed by the earth. The mythological parallel is not merely ornamental; it suggests the deep historical roots of the silence that Jaya has internalised.

What is particularly sophisticated about Deshpande's treatment of silence in this novel is her recognition that Jaya is not simply a victim. She has chosen her silence – has chosen it partly out of love for Mohan, partly out of social pragmatism, and partly out of a genuine uncertainty about her own desires and capabilities. The novel refuses the comfortable feminist narrative of the straightforwardly oppressed woman discovering her authentic self; instead, it presents a more troubling portrait of a woman who has participated in her own silencing and who must reckon with this participation.

Jaya's resistance, when it comes, is the act of writing – the act, precisely, of breaking the long silence. The novel is itself the record of this breaking. That Deshpande chooses writing, the act of giving language to suppressed experience, as her protagonist's form of resistance is deeply significant: it locates feminist liberation not in social revolution or domestic rupture but in the reclamation of voice and the capacity for self-narration.

The Body as Site of Oppression in The Dark Holds No Terrors (1980): Deshpande's earlier novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, confronts a dimension of female experience that is rarely treated directly in Indian fiction – sexual violence within marriage. The protagonist Sarita

(Saru), a successful doctor, returns to her childhood home after discovering that her husband Manohar sexually assaults her at night, using the cover of darkness to express a rage that he cannot articulate in daylight. The novel traces the history of Saru's silences – the silence she maintained around her brother's drowning, the silence she has kept around her husband's nocturnal violence – and her gradual, painful movement toward speech and understanding.

The novel's feminist argument is that Saru's husband's violence is not simply the action of an individual disturbed man; it is the expression of a systemic male resentment at female success. Manohar cannot tolerate that his wife earns more than he does, that she is more professionally successful, that in the public world she commands respect while he is merely her appendage. The darkness of the title is thus both literal – the darkness in which the assaults occur – and metaphorical: the darkness of male insecurity, of patriarchal ego, of the violence that thrives in secrecy and silence.

Saru's body is a central site of the novel's feminist concerns. Her body is at once her professional instrument – she is a healer, she uses her body and its knowledge in the service of others – and the site of her victimisation. The dissociation she develops, the way she separates herself mentally from what is done to her body at night, is a survival strategy that also represents a fragmentation of self. Deshpande suggests that the price women pay for the silence that is demanded of them is precisely this kind of self-fragmentation – a splitting of the self into a public, competent persona and a private, violated interiority.

The act of returning to her father's home – the home that gave her no warmth, where she was always the less-favoured child after her brother's death – is itself an act of resistance. Saru comes back not to find comfort but to confront the past she has avoided, to understand the continuities between the silences of her childhood and the silences of her marriage.

Deshpande does not offer a simple resolution; the novel ends ambiguously, with Saru still in the process of understanding rather than having achieved liberation. But the process itself – the willingness to face the dark, to break silence, to seek understanding – is presented as a form of resistance.

Memory, Loss, and Feminine Endurance in *A Matter of Time* (1996): *A Matter of Time* is perhaps Deshpande's most structurally ambitious novel, moving across three generations of a family to explore the long-term consequences of male abandonment and female survival. When Gopal walks out on his wife Sumi and their three daughters without explanation, the shock reverberates backward and forward in time, connecting to the earlier abandonment of Sumi's mother Kalyani by her husband Shripati. The novel thus situates individual acts of patriarchal irresponsibility within a historical and intergenerational frame.

The feminist significance of *A Matter of Time* lies in its insistence on the endurance and adaptability of women in the face of male failure. Sumi, though devastated by Gopal's departure, begins – tentatively and then with increasing confidence – to reclaim herself. She returns to writing, she reconnects with her sense of self, she begins to live again. The cruel irony of her death in an accident, just as this reclamation is beginning, is Deshpande's bleakest statement about the precariousness of female survival in a patriarchal world – but it is also, paradoxically, a tribute to the reality and significance of Sumi's resistance, however brief.

Kalyani's story, occupying the older generation, presents a different form of endurance – the silent, stoic survival of a woman who has been abandoned but who refuses either to collapse or to seek redress. Kalyani's silence is not the same as Jaya's in *That Long Silence*; it is not a silence of self-erasure but of profound self-containment, of a woman who has gathered herself inward because the outward world has offered nothing. Deshpande is careful to present

this form of endurance with respect, even as she also shows its costs.

Comparative Analysis: Convergences And Divergences

The Language of Silence: Both Desai and Deshpande are preoccupied with the relationship between women and language specifically with the failure of available language to express the truth of women's experience. Yet their treatments of this theme differ significantly in style and emphasis. Desai employs a highly lyrical, symbolically charged prose that itself enacts the excess of feminine experience over masculine linguistic norms. Her silences are eloquent, her imagery dense and suggestive. Deshpande, by contrast, writes in a more direct, introspective mode closer to spoken thought, to the texture of consciousness as it actually unfolds. Her silences are more literal, more social, more embedded in the everyday.

This stylistic difference reflects a difference in feminist orientation. Desai is drawn toward the existential and the aesthetic dimensions of female oppression the ways in which women's inner lives are richer and deeper than the social world allows, and the tragedy that results from this mismatch. Deshpande is more sociological, more concerned with the specific social and institutional structures marriage, the family, professional life, the gendered division of labour that constrain women's choices and silence their voices.

Yet both writers share a conviction that the recovery or creation of a feminine language a mode of expression adequate to women's experience is central to feminist resistance. Whether through the lyrical excess of Desai's prose or the confessional directness of Deshpande's, both writers are engaged in the project of giving voice to what patriarchal culture has kept silent.

Forms of Resistance: The forms of resistance enacted by the female protagonists of both writers range from the destructive to the

creative, from the inward to the outward. At one extreme are the women who can find no viable form of resistance and whose only option is self-destruction: Maya in *Cry*, the Peacock, Monisha in *Voices in the City*. At another extreme are women who manage, with great difficulty and at great cost, to begin the process of self-reclamation: Jaya in *That Long Silence*, Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Amla in *Voices in the City*.

It is significant that in both writers, the most consistent form of positive resistance is creative or intellectual activity writing, painting, thinking. This reflects a specifically feminist valorisation of the life of the mind as a site of female agency, but it also reflects the social reality of their protagonists: educated, middle-class women for whom physical escape from domestic confinement may be impossible but for whom intellectual and creative life offers at least a partial alternative.

Both writers are also aware of the ambivalence of female resistance the ways in which it can be co-opted, can fail, can be complicit in the very structures it opposes. Jaya's writing has been suppressed by her own choices; Saru's success has made her a target for her husband's violence; Sita's retreat to Manori cannot be sustained. Resistance, in the world these writers create, is never easy, never complete, and never final.

Patriarchy and the Indian Middle Class: Both Desai and Deshpande locate their feminist concerns squarely within the Indian middle class. Their protagonists are educated women, often of urban background, whose patriarchal oppression is not the crude, overtly violent oppression of poverty and illiteracy but the more subtle, psychologically sophisticated oppression of bourgeois domesticity the expectation that a woman will subordinate her own desires and capacities to the needs of her husband and family, and that she will do so with apparent willingness and grace.

This focus on the middle class has been both praised and criticised by feminist scholars. It is praised for revealing the extent to which patriarchal oppression operates even among the privileged and educated, undermining any comfortable assumption that women's liberation is simply a matter of economic development or educational access. It is criticised for its relative inattention to the specific oppression of women from less privileged social locations – the Dalit woman, the tribal woman, the woman of the urban poor.

Both Desai and Deshpande are largely guilty of this limitation, and it is important to acknowledge it. Yet within the specific social space they inhabit and represent, their feminist analysis is penetrating and valuable. The middle-class home is not a neutral space; it is a primary site of patriarchal reproduction, and the novels of both writers illuminate this with unflinching honesty.

Silence as Subversion: Redefining Feminist Agency

A recurring theoretical challenge in feminist criticism is the question of how to interpret female silence: is it always a sign of oppression, or can it also be a form of resistance? This question is of particular relevance to the novels under discussion, where silence occupies such a central and ambivalent position.

It would be reductive to read all silence in these novels as straightforward victimisation. Deshpande herself, in *That Long Silence*, presents a more nuanced picture. Jaya's silence is partly imposed by patriarchal pressure, but it is also partly chosen – and her choice, however constrained, is not simply passive. She has used silence as a strategy for survival, for maintaining a marriage that she values, for avoiding confrontations she does not feel equipped to win. This is not the silence of the powerless but the silence of a woman exercising the very limited form of power available to her.

Similarly, Kalyani's silence in *A Matter of Time* – the deep, self-contained silence of a

woman abandoned but not broken – can be read not as defeat but as a form of what might be called stoic resistance: a refusal to be entirely defined or destroyed by patriarchal violence. Her silence preserves something inviolable in her, a core of self that has not been surrendered.

This reading of silence as potentially subversive connects to the theoretical work of feminist scholars such as Adrienne Rich, who, in her essay 'On Lies, Secrets, and Silence' (1979), distinguished between the silence that is imposed and the silence that is chosen – the silence of the oppressed who cannot speak and the silence of the resistant who will not speak in the terms the dominant order demands. Both Desai and Deshpande explore this distinction, though they are also careful to show the costs and limitations of silence as a strategy, and ultimately to affirm the necessity of speech.

The movement from silence to speech from Jaya's long silence to the act of writing that constitutes the novel, from Saru's dissociation to her confrontation of the past – is ultimately the feminist trajectory both writers endorse. But they are too honest to present this movement as simple or cost-free. The breaking of silence involves pain, risk, and the possibility of failure. It is an achievement, not a given.

Mythological and Cultural Underpinnings of Female Silencing

Both Desai and Deshpande are deeply aware of the mythological and cultural structures that underpin and legitimise female silencing in the Indian context. The figure of Sita dutiful wife, patient sufferer, ultimately swallowed by the earth rather than continuing to exist in a world that demands impossible standards of her – is explicitly invoked by Deshpande in *That Long Silence* and *A Matter of Time*, and implicitly present in much of Desai's work.

The Sita myth, as analysed by feminist scholars including Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita, functions as a powerful ideological tool for the enforcement of female submission. By

presenting patient suffering and self-abnegation as the highest female virtues, the myth provides patriarchal culture with a sacred sanction for the silencing of women's protests and desires. Both Deshpande and Desai engage with this mythology in a critical spirit acknowledging its power over the consciousness of their protagonists while also exposing its function as an instrument of oppression.

Deshpande's *Jaya* explicitly reflects on her identification with the mythological Sita and recognises this identification as part of the problem as a cultural programme she has internalised and which has contributed to her own silencing. Her act of writing is thus not only a personal liberation but a cultural one: it involves a conscious rejection of the mythological script that has been written for her and an attempt to write a new script, one that does not require submission and silence as the price of female virtue.

Desai's engagement with mythology and cultural symbolism operates at a more oblique level, through imagery and allusion rather than through her protagonists' explicit reflections. The peacock of *Cry, the Peacock*, the seasonal imagery of *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, the urban symbolism of *Voices in the City* all draw on a deep cultural reservoir of Indian symbolic meaning to illuminate the situation of the female protagonists and to suggest the weight of cultural tradition that bears down upon them.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that the novels of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande constitute a major contribution to feminist literature in English, and that their preoccupation with the twin themes of silence and resistance gives these novels their distinctive moral and aesthetic character. Both writers, working from different stylistic positions and with different emphases, produce fictions that take the inner life of women with absolute seriousness that refuse to dismiss or diminish the anguish of women

who cannot speak, and that trace, with honesty and compassion, the difficult and costly processes by which some women begin to reclaim their voices.

The silences in these novels are not empty; they are full of suppressed feeling, unspoken desire, and unexpressed intelligence. The resistances are not triumphant; they are tentative, often incomplete, sometimes self-destructive. But together, they constitute what this paper has called the voices of silence a feminist counter-discourse that speaks through and against the enforced muteness of women in a patriarchal society.

Theoretically, the paper has drawn on a range of feminist frameworks de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, Millett's social and political feminism, Showalter's gynocriticism, Spivak's postcolonial feminism, and Kristeva's psychoanalytic feminism to show that these novels are amenable to multiple feminist readings and that their richness lies precisely in this resistance to reduction to any single theoretical framework. The complexity of the female experience they represent demands a correspondingly complex critical response.

For the student of Indian women's writing, the significance of Desai and Deshpande lies not only in their individual achievements but in the way their work, read together, maps the terrain of feminist concerns in post-independence India. Their novels remind us that the condition of women is not simply an economic or political question but a question of consciousness, language, and culture of the scripts that are written for women and the voices that women must find or create for themselves in order to write new ones.

Future research might profitably extend this comparative framework to include other contemporary Indian women writers Manju Kapur, Githa Hariharan, Arundhati Roy, Meena Kandasamy in order to trace the evolution and diversification of feminist discourse in Indian English fiction across the late twentieth and

early twenty-first centuries. Such a study would also benefit from attending more carefully to the voices of women writing in Indian languages, whose feminist concerns and strategies may differ significantly from those of the Anglophone writers considered here.

In the final analysis, the novels of Desai and Deshpande are not merely literary achievements; they are feminist acts. By giving their silenced protagonists the gift of language the language of fiction, of interiority, of women's truth these writers perform, at the level of the text, the very resistance they describe at the level of plot and character. Their voices continue to speak, and to matter.

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