

RESEARCH ARTICLE



2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

Subverting Silence: Feminine Identity and Agency in the Works of Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair

Shaik Nazima Nikhath^{1*} and Dr. P. V. Laxmiprasad²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of English, Anurag University, Venkatapur, Ghatkesar, Medchal-Malkajgiri, Hyderabad, Telangana 500088, India.

Registration No.: 24HS302A14

*Email: 24hs302a14@anurag.edu.in

² Associate Professor and Research Supervisor, Department of English, Anurag University, Venkatapur, Ghatkesar, Medchal-Malkajgiri, Hyderabad, Telangana 500088, India.

Email: Laxmiprasad.english@anurag.edu.in

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.14.4.37](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.14.4.37)



Article info

Article Received: 22/08/2026
Article Accepted: 14/09/2026
Published online: 18/10/2026

Abstract

Indian women's writing in English has created a significant space for challenging patriarchal notions of femininity through narratives of self-determination, agency, resistance, and self-expression. The novels of Anita Nair and Shashi Deshpande foreground the emotional, psychological, and social obstacles experienced by women within predominantly patriarchal societies, historically within complex social and cultural conditions. This article examines the dual nature of silence as both an instrument of oppression and a potential form of resistance in selected novels: *Ladies Coupé*, *Mistress*, *The Binding Vine*, *Small Remedies*, *That Long Silence*, and *Lessons in Forgetting*. Drawing on feminist literary criticism, the study focuses on female desire, body politics, identity formation, silence, and resistance to patriarchal norms. Particular attention is given to the ways in which female characters negotiate marriage, family expectations, sexuality, emotional trauma, social respectability, and personal autonomy. In Deshpande's fiction, silence is examined primarily through psychological conflict, domestic oppression, memory, trauma, and the recovery of female voices. In Nair's fiction, female desire, emotional freedom, bodily autonomy, and self-discovery receive greater emphasis. A comparative reading demonstrates that both writers represent women as active agents who negotiate restrictive social structures rather than remaining passive victims of them. The article argues that silence can move from imposed submission toward self-awareness, articulation, and resistance. By transforming marginalization into self-assertion and silence into speech, Deshpande and Nair contribute significantly to feminist

discourse in Indian English literature. Their fiction ultimately presents feminine identity as a dynamic process shaped by negotiation, emotional resilience, self-expression, and the pursuit of autonomy.

Keywords: Silence, Agency, Identity, Resistance, Patriarchy, Feminism.

INTRODUCTION

Indian English literature has been significantly influenced by the proliferation of female authors who challenge traditional notions of femininity and domesticity. Through their narratives, an increasing number of female novelists articulate their emotions, suppressed desires, and opposition to patriarchal oppression. Anita Nair and Shashi Deshpande are two of the most renowned authors in this field; their works offer profound insights into the social realities and inner lives of women.

In feminist discourse, the concept of silence is a critical element. Traditionally, silence has been associated with the sacrifice, obedience, and submission that women are expected to demonstrate in patriarchal societies. Feminist critics blame women's silence on the historical denial of voice, language, and representation. Simone de Beauvoir observes that patriarchal systems have consistently designated women as the "Other," which has hindered their ability to exercise their autonomy (de Beauvoir 16). Furthermore, Elaine Showalter emphasizes that female writers employ their writing to reclaim suppressed female experiences (Showalter 13).

The primary characters in the novels of Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair are compelled to determine their identities in the presence of oppressive family and social structures. Their silence often serves as a reflection of social conditioning, gender-based marginalization, and emotional trauma. Conversely, this silence ultimately functions as a form of resistance and self-expression. Symbolically, the transition from silence to speech represents the self-awareness,

empowerment, and agency reclamation of women.

The objective of this article is to investigate the manner in which Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair depict female identity and power in a selection of their works. The protagonists challenge patriarchal norms and assert their individuality through their emotional resilience, self-expression, and personal agency.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a feminist literary-critical approach to examine selected novels by Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair. The analysis focuses on representations of silence, female identity, agency, desire, body politics, marriage, and resistance. The selected primary texts are read comparatively to identify recurring patterns in the representation of women within patriarchal social structures. The discussion is informed by feminist theoretical perspectives associated with Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Elaine Showalter, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and other scholars cited in the study. The approach is interpretive and text-centred, with attention to the psychological, social, emotional, and cultural dimensions of the female characters' experiences.

Feminist Framework: Silence, Identity, and Agency

Feminist literary criticism has substantially altered the representations of women in literature and society. Women's identities and voices have been historically silenced by patriarchal presumptions. The psychological and emotional challenges that women face in their pursuit of autonomy within oppressive social structures are frequently the

subject of examination by feminist writers in Indian English literature. Authors like Anita Nair and Shashi Deshpande depict women who encounter challenges with identity, agency, and silence in their personal and professional lives. These representations serve to emphasize the constraints that marriage, family, and tradition impose on women, while also demonstrating the emergence of female self-determination and resistance.

The notion of silence is one of the most fundamental themes in feminist discourse. For a long time, silence has been linked to the marginalization and oppression of women in patriarchal societies. Women are typically expected to maintain emotional restraint, obedience, and submissiveness. Feminist scholars argue that silence is a political condition shaped by gendered power dynamics rather than merely the absence of speech. Simone de Beauvoir argues that women have historically been denied autonomy and self-determination because they are perceived as the "Other" in comparison with men (Beauvoir 16). The consequences of this condition include social invisibility and emotional suppression. In Indian society, women are often expected to maintain silence as a result of socialization that prioritizes family honor and social conformity over individual autonomy.

That Long Silence and other works employ silence as a metaphor for internal struggle and oppression. Jaya, the protagonist, experiences emotional stifling in her marriage as a result of her husband's ongoing suppression of her goals and voice to meet his expectations. Deshpande posits that women internalize silence as a means of surviving within the home. The novel simultaneously demonstrates the potential of silence as a tool for self-reflection and resistance. Jaya's gradual acceptance of her identity is indicative of the feminist aspiration for self-expression and independence (Deshpande, *That Long Silence* 34). Consequently, silence is transformed into an active process of resistance

to patriarchal authority rather than a passive act of submission.

Furthermore, the feminist framework prioritizes the process through which women cultivate their identities. The concept of identity in feminist literature is intricately linked to individuality, selfhood, and social positioning. In patriarchal societies, women are frequently denied the autonomy to make their own decisions, as they are traditionally limited to relational roles such as wife, mother, or daughter. Judith Butler contends that gender identity is socially constructed through repeated cultural performances rather than being biologically determined (Butler 45). This viewpoint facilitates an understanding of how women in Indian English fiction redefine themselves by questioning the gender norms imposed upon them.

The protagonist of *Ladies Coupé*, Akhila, embarks on a journey of self-discovery and challenges conventional notions of femininity and marriage. The novel illustrates a diverse array of female experiences shaped by emotional desires and social norms through her interactions with other female passengers. The conflict between Akhila's personal objectives and societal norms is highlighted by her pursuit of identity. Nair underscores the significance of emotional freedom and personal choice by depicting identity as dynamic and adaptable (Nair, *Ladies Coupé* 52). Moreover, the women in *The Binding Vine* strive to recover their emotional pasts and experiences, which they have suppressed through memory and storytelling. These narratives challenge patriarchal systems that restrict women's ability to express their desires and suffering.

Agency serves as an additional fundamental concept in feminist theory. It highlights the remarkable resilience of women in their capacity to resist oppressive systems, assert their identities, and take responsibility. Feminist scholars contend that agency can be demonstrated through delicate actions such as

negotiation, self-awareness, and resistance, rather than overt rebellion. Elaine Showalter indicates that women's writing frequently illustrates a transition from silence to articulation and from dependence to autonomy (Showalter 13). Female characters in the selected novels assert their emotional and intellectual autonomy, thereby defying societal expectations.

The protagonist of *Lessons in Forgetting*, Meera, undergoes a significant personal transformation as a consequence of emotional betrayal and abandonment. Her narrative illustrates how a woman can reclaim control over her identity and reconstruct it without seeking patriarchal approval. Likewise, the women in *Small Remedies* employ emotional strength, artistic expression, and memory to challenge societal expectations. Rather than presenting agency as absolute freedom, the novel illustrates it as a continual process of negotiation within constrictive social structures.

In the writing of Indian women, postcolonial feminist theory further advances the examination of agency, identity, and silence. Postcolonial feminists emphasize the cultural diversity of women's experiences in non-Western societies, in contrast to the universalizing tendencies of Western feminism. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak examines how the "subaltern," or marginalized woman, can communicate within dominant ideological frameworks (Spivak 287). This theoretical framework is particularly pertinent to the examination of Indian female characters who are torn between tradition and modernity. In the novels that have been chosen, women are subjected to a variety of oppressions that are influenced by their gender, social class, and cultural background.

Feminist frameworks also emphasize the importance of female body politics and desire. The morality and social norms of patriarchal cultures are primary means by which women's bodies and sexuality are restricted. Women's

sexual and emotional desires are presented as legitimate components of their identities by feminist authors who challenge these limitations. Anita Nair explores the complexities of female sexuality, emotional discontent, and personal independence in her novel *Mistress*. The novel expands feminist discourse in Indian English literature by challenging conventional gender norms and exploring topics that have historically been stigmatized.

Consequently, the feminist framework of silence, identity, and agency can be employed to critically analyze the novels of Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair. Their narratives effectively describe the obstacles that women encounter as they endeavor to achieve emotional liberation, social acceptance, and self-discovery in the presence of patriarchal oppression. These authors have significantly contributed to the tradition of feminist writing in India by transforming silence into speech and submission into resistance.

SILENCE AND FEMALE IDENTITY IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S FICTION

Silence as Psychological Oppression

In Indian English fiction, *That Long Silence* is one of the most potent critiques of female silence. The protagonist, Jaya, embodies the challenges encountered by middle-class Indian women constrained by patriarchal marriages. Her silence is the result of years of emotional suppression and social conditioning.

Jaya is regarded by Mohan, her husband, as the epitome of a devoted wife. She gradually loses her distinctiveness as a consequence of the pressure to conform to patriarchal norms. Deshpande comments, "I had finally learned it—no questions, no answers, only silence," during the extended period of silence. This silence conveys substantial emotional distance in addition to submission.

Jaya is unable to reconcile her personal objectives and social obligations, which is indicative of her identity crisis. In an effort to

maintain harmony within the household, she suppresses her inclination to write. Feminist critics assert that patriarchal marriage frequently eliminates female individuality by perpetuating male authority (Millet 54). As a result, silence is internalized as a linguistic instrument of patriarchal ideology.

Conversely, the narrative ultimately transforms inaction into self-awareness. Jaya resolves to speak up once more when she observes that silence promotes oppression. This realization represents the initial step toward personal agency and emotional freedom.

The Female Body and Trauma in *The Binding Vine*

Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* examines the female body as a site of violence, memory, and resistance. Kalpana and Urmi are central to the novel's exploration of the challenges women face in a patriarchal society.

In patriarchal societies, the sexual abuse of Kalpana serves as an illustration of the vulnerability of women's bodies. In the absence of discourse regarding sexual violence, society's failure to recognize women's suffering becomes evident. Urmi's perspective is that social norms frequently prioritize family honor over women's suffering, leading to the neglect or erasure of their experiences (Deshpande, *The Binding Vine* 112).

The novel challenges the societal norm that women should endure silence. Urmi's commitment to preserving the voices of marginalized women constitutes a feminist response to the erasure of women's histories. These experiences are recounted in the novel, transforming silence into testimony.

Additionally, Deshpande examines the emotional challenges associated with motherhood and the strain of emotional repression. She illustrates the fracture of female identity resulting from social expectations that require self-sacrifice and obedience. The novel demonstrates the gradual recognition of

women's resilience through shared experiences and emotional solidarity.

Memory, Art, and Selfhood in *Small Remedies*

Memory, grief, and artistic identity are central to Deshpande's *Small Remedies*, particularly through the experiences of Madhu. The novel investigates how women manage personal trauma while simultaneously achieving emotional autonomy.

Madhu undergoes a period of profound grief, guilt, and a diminished sense of self subsequent to her son's passing. She is reduced to solitude due to her emotional isolation and unresolved grief. Nevertheless, her relationship with the singer Savitribai delineates an alternative perspective on female autonomy.

Patriarchal conventions are challenged by Savitribai's unwavering devotion to music and her rejection of restrictive domestic expectations. Her life exemplifies her artistic independence and rejection of restrictive social conventions. She exemplifies female agency by refusing to compromise her individuality in exchange for social acceptance.

Deshpande provides examples in the novel of how women can reimagine their identities through creativity and self-expression. Through art, women can assert their subjectivity, break the silence, and regain their voices.

FEMALE DESIRE AND RESISTANCE IN ANITA NAIR'S FICTION

Women's Search for Freedom in *Ladies Coupé*

Ladies Coupé offers a thorough examination of women's self-discovery and identity. Akhila is the protagonist of the novel, a middle-aged unmarried woman. She questions whether a woman can survive independently without the assistance of a man.

A train journey serves as a metaphor for psychological transformation. In the course of her interactions with other female passengers, Akhila acquires knowledge about a variety of

experiences related to oppression, sexuality, marriage, and resistance. Each narrative illuminates distinct aspects of women's challenges in patriarchal societies.

Janaki's reliance on men for protection is a testament to traditional gender roles. In spite of this, Marikolanthu's experiences expose social hypocrisy and sexual exploitation. She asserts that "a woman's body is never her own" (Nair, *Ladies Coupé* 186), demonstrating the extent to which patriarchal structures influence women's sexuality.

The eventual sexual and emotional autonomy of Akhila challenges patriarchal notions of what constitutes a respectable woman. The novel implies that in order to achieve self-awareness, women must surpass the limitations imposed by society.

Desire and Artistic Sensibility in *Mistress*

Mistress employs an assortment of narrative perspectives and relationships to examine emotional complexity, desire, and art. Rather than presenting female desire as a moral transgression, the novel portrays it as a source of personal identity and emotional fulfillment.

Radha's unhappiness with her marriage is indicative of the emotional vacuum that epitomizes patriarchal relationships. Her affection for Chris serves as an expression of her desire for emotional autonomy and acceptance. Men's sexual autonomy is frequently granted in patriarchal societies, while women's sexual desires are discouraged. The regulation of female sexuality has historically been employed by feminist theorists to maintain patriarchal power structures (Butler 43).

Nair challenges these discriminatory norms by portraying the emotional and sexual needs of women as legitimate components of their identities. Radha's choices are presented as the consequences of emotional neglect and psychological dissatisfaction rather than as evidence of immorality.

Furthermore, the novel establishes a correlation between classical art forms and human emotions. Events reveal the internal conflicts of the characters, indicating that identity is both performative and fragmented.

Trauma and Reinvention in *Lessons in Forgetting*

Meera's journey from abandonment to self-discovery in *Lessons in Forgetting* demonstrates the resilience of women. Meera's identity is established at the outset of the novel through her roles as a wife and mother. She is compelled to confront her emotional dependence and suppressed individuality in the aftermath of her husband's abrupt departure.

The novel critiques the patriarchal notion that a woman's identity is solely determined by her marriage. Meera gradually builds her self-assurance and confidence through professional activity and emotional reflection. Feminist assertions concerning the economic and psychological autonomy of women are reflected in her transformation.

Nair conveys the concept of female agency as a gradual process of self-discovery, rather than as a sudden act of rebellion. Her emotional transformation serves as an illustration of the process by which women reestablish their identities in the wake of social disenchantment and trauma.

DISCUSSION

Comparative Analysis of Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair

Deshpande and Nair employ distinct approaches to storytelling, despite the fact that they both examine the obstacles encountered by women in patriarchal societies. Nair prioritizes social, sexual, and emotional liberation, while Deshpande concentrates on psychological realism and oppression within the domestic sphere.

Deshpande's protagonists are predominantly located in middle-class urban

households, where individuals often maintain silence to suppress their emotions. Themes of internal conflict and introspection are prominent in her narratives. Women are impeded in their capacity to articulate their suppressed emotions by a patriarchal society that promotes family harmony over personal fulfillment.

However, Nair's female characters actively lead lives that defy social norms and are unconventional. Through her art, she challenges conventional moral frameworks and provides a more realistic depiction of female desire. Nair emphasizes the essential nature of a woman's emotional and physical autonomy in relation to her identity.

Both writers critique patriarchal systems, including the family, marriage, and the concept of social respectability, despite their differences. Through resistance, emotional expression, and introspection, their protagonists endeavor to achieve self-actualization. They demonstrate that women are capable of reclaiming their agency by converting silence into expression.

The process of feminist awakening is exemplified by the transition from silence to speech. Women's experiences have historically been marginalized in dominant discourses, but the literary works of both authors give voice to these experiences.

Comparative Analysis: Representation of Marriage and Patriarchy

The selected novels underscore the patriarchal aspect of marriage. In order to preserve male authority and domestic stability, women are expected to relinquish their distinctiveness.

Jaya's marriage restricts her intellectual and emotional autonomy in *That Long Silence*. The expectation of complete obedience from Mohan limits her identity to domestic responsibilities. Many of the female characters in *Ladies Coupé* experience unhappy marriages

as a result of the stigmatization of female independence by society.

Patriarchal cultures regard silence, endurance, and sacrifice as embodiments of the ideal of womanhood. Women who are unable to adhere to these standards are marginalized and excluded from society. Marriage frequently perpetuates emotional and financial dependence, which in turn perpetuates gender inequality, according to feminist academics (Firestone 98).

However, these structures are gradually weakened as the protagonists assert emotional autonomy and challenge conventional gender roles. Their resistance is indicative of the expansion of feminist consciousness within Indian society.

Politics of the Body and Female Desire

A significant emphasis is placed on the female body in patriarchal discourse. Society regulates women's sexuality by maintaining cultural and moral norms.

Deshpande frequently portrays the body as a site of oppression and suffering, particularly in her works concerning emotional repression and sexual violence. In contrast, Nair examines female sexuality as a legitimate form of self-expression in her fiction.

Radha in *Mistress* and Akhila in *Ladies Coupé* challenge patriarchal standards of female respectability by acknowledging their emotional and sexual desires. Their experiences are in direct opposition to the cultural expectation that women should maintain selflessness and obedience.

In accordance with feminist theory, the regulation of women's bodies is one of the primary mechanisms of patriarchal power (Butler 56). In contrast to social structures that attempt to regulate female identity, women assert their bodily autonomy.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Anita Nair and Shashi Deshpande's novels, which emphasize women's experiences of repression, silence, desire, and oppression, make substantial contributions to feminist discourse in Indian English literature. Their narratives illustrate how patriarchal systems stifle women's individuality by examining their aspirations for autonomy and self-determination.

Silence serves as both an instrument of oppression and a form of resistance in these novels. Silence is initially enforced by social conditioning and emotional repression; however, it is ultimately replaced by self-awareness and expression. The protagonists gradually regain their identity, agency, and voice through introspection, emotional expression, and resistance to patriarchal norms.

Deshpande's fiction addresses psychological conflict and domestic oppression, whereas Nair emphasizes emotional autonomy and bodily integrity. However, both authors are opposed to traditional gender norms and support the understanding of women as autonomous individuals rather than passive social constructs.

The findings of this investigation illustrate the impact of self-discovery, resistance, and negotiation on the development of feminine identity in Indian English fiction. Women make substantial contributions to contemporary feminist thought by redefining agency in literary and social discourse through their presence and influence. Future scholarship may extend this comparative feminist reading to additional Indian women writers and to other forms of literary representation of agency and resistance.

References

- Beauvoir, S. de. (2011). *The second sex* (H. M. Parshley, Trans.). Vintage Books. (Original work published 1949)
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

- Deshpande, S. (1989). *That long silence*. Penguin Books India.
- Deshpande, S. (1993). *The binding vine*. Penguin Books India.
- Deshpande, S. (2000). *Small remedies*. Penguin Books India.
- Firestone, S. (1970). *The dialectic of sex: The case for feminist revolution*. William Morrow.
- Millet, K. (2000). *Sexual politics*. University of Illinois Press. (Original work published 1970)
- Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Duke University Press.
- Nair, A. (2001). *Ladies coupé*. Penguin Books India.
- Nair, A. (2005). *Mistress*. Penguin Books India.
- Nair, A. (2010). *Lessons in forgetting*. HarperCollins India.
- Showalter, E. (1977). *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton University Press.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.

Shaikh Nazima Nikhath is the Head of the Department (HOD) of Allied Sciences and a Lecturer in English at Don Bosco Degree College, Hyderabad, with 14 years of teaching experience. She is passionate about helping students develop their communication, speaking, writing, vocabulary, and grammar skills through interactive and practical learning. She encourages students to overcome hesitation, express themselves confidently, and use English effectively in academic, professional, and everyday situations.

She also serves as the In-charge of the college's Social Club, actively organizing community events and health-awareness programmes that promote civic responsibility. Currently, she is pursuing her Ph.D. at Anurag University, with her research focused on feminist literature, and her academic interests also include ecofeminism. She holds an M.A. in English from Acharya Nagarjuna University and a B.Ed.

She believes that teaching English is not merely about learning a language, but about empowering students with the confidence to communicate, participate, and create opportunities for themselves.