



From Silence to Selfhood: A Feminist Study of Shashi Deshpande's Fiction

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande's fiction occupies an important place in Indian English literature for its exploration of women's inner struggles, identity formation, and resistance against patriarchal expectations. Her novels present the experiences of middle-class Indian women who negotiate between social responsibilities and their desire for individuality. This research paper examines the journey from silence to selfhood in Deshpande's selected novels, focusing on how women transform their suppressed experiences into sources of awareness and resistance. Through a feminist perspective, the study analyses *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, and *Roots and Shadows* to understand the ways in which silence, memory, and self-realisation contribute to the development of female identity. The paper explores how Jaya, Sarita, and Indu confront the limitations imposed by family, marriage, and traditional gender roles while gradually reclaiming their voices and autonomy. Deshpande presents resistance not as a dramatic rejection of relationships but as an internal process of understanding, questioning, and redefining the self. The study argues that selfhood in Deshpande's fiction emerges through the recognition of personal experiences, the rejection of imposed identities, and the courage to establish an independent female voice within a patriarchal society.

Keywords: Shashi Deshpande, Feminist Fiction, Silence, Selfhood, Female Identity, Resistance

Introduction

Indian English women's writing has significantly contributed to the understanding of gender, identity, and social inequalities by presenting women's experiences from their own perspectives. Shashi Deshpande is one of the most influential contemporary Indian writers whose fiction explores the psychological and emotional struggles of women living within patriarchal social structures. Her novels focus on ordinary women whose lives are shaped by family expectations, marital responsibilities, and cultural traditions, yet who gradually develop the awareness to question their assigned roles. In Deshpande's fictional world, silence is not merely a symbol of oppression but also a space of reflection through which women understand their own experiences and move towards self-expression. Novels such as *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, and *Roots and Shadows* represent different stages of women's journeys from suppression to self-recognition. Jaya's struggle to recover her voice as a writer, Sarita's confrontation with childhood trauma and marital violence, and Indu's search for individual freedom reveal the complex process through which women negotiate identity within restrictive social environments. Deshpande challenges traditional ideas of femininity

by showing that resistance does not always emerge through rebellion or separation; rather, it often begins through self-awareness, memory, and the courage to acknowledge one's own desires. The present study examines how Deshpande portrays the transformation of women from silence towards selfhood and highlights the significance of female consciousness, personal freedom, and identity in her fiction.

Silence as Resistance in *That Long Silence*

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988) occupies a central place in the discussion of women's resistance in Indian English fiction because it foregrounds silence not simply as an absence of speech but as a complex, ambiguous and richly signifying practice through which the female protagonist negotiates her position within the patriarchal family. The novel narrates the interior journey of Jaya, a middle-class Indian wife and aspiring writer, who is compelled to spend a period of enforced seclusion with her husband Mohan in a small flat in Dadar after Mohan is suspected of financial misconduct at his office. This physical confinement becomes the occasion for an even more disturbing psychological confinement in which Jaya is forced to confront the accumulated silences of her married life, the compromises she has made as a writer, and the systematic muting of her own desires by cultural scripts of wifehood, motherhood and daughterly obedience. Deshpande does not present silence as a monolithic experience; rather, she distinguishes between the silence that is imposed on women by patriarchy, the silence that women themselves choose as a strategy of survival, and the silence that ultimately breaks down under the pressure of self-recognition and becomes the ground of a new kind of speech (Nabar 47).

The narrative structure of the novel is itself a formal enactment of resistance through silence, because it refuses the linear progression of a conventional plot and instead unfolds as a fragmentary, digressive and confessional monologue in which Jaya reconstructs her past from memory, dream and reflection. The very act of narration becomes an act of resistance because it converts what was previously unspoken into the material of language. Deshpande draws attention to this transformation when Jaya observes early in the novel that the composition of the narrative is itself the discovery of a suppressed self:

"There is nothing I have not thought of, gone over and over, hoping to find some kind of pattern, some kind of meaning. I have to write this down. Not for anyone else, not for the world to read, but for myself, so that I can look at my life and see it clearly, so that the silence which has surrounded me for so many years may finally be broken by my own voice." (Deshpande, *That Long Silence* 8)

In this passage the confessional impulse is inseparable from the desire for self-understanding. Jaya turns to writing not as a public gesture but as a private necessity, and yet the private act carries a subversive potential because it insists that women's inner lives are worth recording. The insistence on writing "for myself" marks a decisive shift away from the assumption that women's words are meaningful only when they serve husbands, children or the family reputation. In the terms proposed by Elaine Showalter, the passage exemplifies the movement of women's writing from the "feminine" phase of imitation to the "female" phase of self-discovery (Showalter 13). Jaya's act of self-narration is therefore a mode of resistance embedded in the very texture of the text.

The silence which Jaya interrogates is not a natural condition but a learned discipline. It has been produced by a lifetime of instruction in what constitutes acceptable feminine behaviour. Jaya recalls that her mother, her aunts and her elder relatives repeatedly taught her that a woman's worth was measured by her ability to remain quiet, to adjust, to endure and to preserve the reputation of the family through the containment of her own voice. This inheritance of enforced silence is captured in one of the most

poignant reflections of the novel, in which Jaya remembers the domestic pedagogy that shaped her earliest sense of gender:

“A woman who speaks too much, my mother would say, is a woman who invites trouble into the house. Keep your thoughts inside you, keep your anger inside you, keep your unhappiness inside you, and one day you will understand that a woman’s strength lies in what she is able to hold within herself without letting it show on her face.” (Deshpande, *That Long Silence* 32)

This maternal instruction reveals the mechanism by which patriarchy reproduces itself through the female line. The mother, herself a subject of patriarchal discipline, becomes the transmitter of the same values that limit her daughter’s existence. Silence is presented here not as weakness but as a form of feminine strength, and this ideological repackaging of oppression as virtue is precisely what makes the resistance narrated by Deshpande so complex. Jaya must not only overcome the external pressures of marriage but also unlearn the internalised belief that endurance is the highest expression of womanhood. As Sushila Singh has argued, Deshpande’s protagonists are engaged in a “dual struggle,” one directed outwards against the visible structures of patriarchal control and another directed inwards against the invisible authority of internalised norms (Singh 84).

Jaya’s marriage to Mohan is the second important site in which silence functions as both oppression and resistance. Mohan is not portrayed as a cruel or violent husband. Deshpande deliberately avoids the caricature of the tyrannical Indian man and instead depicts Mohan as a conventional middle-class professional whose expectations of marriage are inherited from his own upbringing and reinforced by the wider culture. He assumes that a good wife will be supportive, agreeable and unobtrusive, and Jaya, socialised into these expectations, initially performs the role with efficient obedience. The result is a marriage that appears successful from the outside but that conceals a growing emotional distance and an unspoken accumulation of resentment. Jaya reflects on this arrangement in a passage that has become one of the most cited moments in Deshpande criticism:

“I had learnt very early in my marriage that if I remained quiet there would be peace. If I spoke, there would be arguments, tears, and days of unease afterwards. So I chose peace, thinking that it was the same as happiness. I did not know then that a peace bought with silence carries within it the seeds of its own destruction.” (Deshpande, *That Long Silence* 63)

The passage articulates the paradox at the heart of the novel. Silence appears to preserve marital harmony, but it accomplishes this preservation by hollowing out the interior life of the woman who practises it. Peace bought with silence is not peace at all but a suspended violence that will eventually surface. Deshpande’s formulation anticipates the later feminist argument that domestic tranquillity in patriarchal households is often maintained through the emotional labour and psychological suppression of women (Chakravarti 112). Jaya’s eventual crisis is therefore not caused by any single incident but by the accumulated cost of a sustained pattern of self-erasure.

The seven-week seclusion in the Dadar flat operates as a narrative device that suspends the ordinary rhythms of domestic performance and forces Jaya into confrontation with the material of her own memory. Deprived of the usual routines through which she has hidden from herself, she is compelled to examine the choices she has made, the writing she has abandoned, and the identities she has adopted. The confinement thus functions paradoxically as a form of liberation because it removes the distractions that had enabled her silence. It is significant that Deshpande situates this awakening in a domestic interior rather than in a public space, since the domestic is precisely the arena in which women’s resistance most often unfolds in Indian fiction. As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has noted, the household in Indian women’s

writing is not merely a private space but a “contested political site” in which the negotiation of selfhood is carried on in muted registers (Sunder Rajan 78).

Jaya’s vocation as a writer is another crucial dimension of the resistance dramatised in the novel. Before her marriage she had begun to publish short stories under her own name, and these early stories express a sharp, unsettling and unmistakably feminine sensibility. After her marriage, however, she gradually abandons the writing that troubles Mohan and instead adopts the persona of “Sita,” a writer of harmless humorous columns for a women’s magazine. The transformation is emblematic of the way in which patriarchy manages female creativity: it does not always suppress women’s writing outright, but it channels it into acceptable forms that do not threaten the domestic order. Jaya reflects on the pain of this compromise:

“I had written stories once that were honest, angry, sometimes cruel, because they came from somewhere deep within me. But Mohan did not like them, and so I stopped writing them. In their place I created Sita, a woman who smiled and cooked and offered small, harmless jokes about husbands and children. Sita was safe. Sita was pleasant. Sita was everything I had been trained to be, and Sita was killing the writer I might have become.” (Deshpande, That Long Silence 149)

The abandonment of one’s own name and voice in exchange for a socially acceptable pseudonym stands as a powerful metaphor for the muting of women’s creative agency. The invocation of Sita, the mythic paragon of wifely obedience, is not accidental. Deshpande insists throughout her fiction that the cultural burden of the Sita ideal continues to structure the expectations placed on Indian women even in secular, urban and middle-class households. Sarala Palkar has argued that Deshpande’s deployment of the Sita figure operates as a form of “mythic critique” in which the traditional archetype is unsettled by the pressure of contemporary female experience (Palkar 165). Jaya’s recognition that the persona of Sita has been killing the writer she might have become represents the moment at which mythic critique becomes personal resistance.

The relationship between Jaya and her domestic help, Jeeja, further complicates the presentation of women’s silence and resistance. Jeeja is a working-class widow whose life is marked by poverty, physical hardship and the loss of her only son. Yet Jeeja’s speech is direct, unashamed and rich with the earthy vocabulary of her community. She does not adopt the polite silences that Jaya has cultivated, and her frankness disturbs Jaya at the same time as it fascinates her. Deshpande uses this class contrast to interrogate the assumption that silence is a universal condition of Indian womanhood. The middle-class wife’s silence is a product of her particular class location, of the respectability she is expected to maintain, and of the social capital that her family has invested in her marriage. Jeeja, having less to lose, speaks more freely. This observation resonates with Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s critique of the tendency to treat Indian women as a homogeneous group and to overlook the way class shapes the specific forms of women’s oppression and resistance (Mohanty 61).

The turning point of the novel arrives when Jaya finally allows herself to acknowledge the anger that she has spent seventeen years suppressing. The confession is quiet, almost embarrassed, but it marks the collapse of the ideology of feminine endurance under whose authority she has lived:

“Anger, I had been told, was ugly in a woman. Anger made a woman unwomanly. And so I had hidden mine, buried it, denied that it even existed, until I could no longer recognise the taste of my own feelings. But now, alone in this flat, I understood that the anger had never gone. It had simply been waiting, patient and undiminished, for a woman brave enough to admit that it was there.” (Deshpande, That Long Silence 191)

The admission of anger is a decisive act of resistance because it undoes the emotional discipline through which patriarchal femininity has been sustained. Feminist theorists from Audre Lorde onwards

have argued that anger, when addressed with clarity, can function as a source of political knowledge for women, because it registers the injuries that decorum requires them to overlook. In the Indian context, however, the recognition of anger carries the additional weight of contradicting the ideal of the self-effacing wife whose composure signifies moral superiority. When Jaya allows her anger to become visible to herself, she also begins the process of dismantling the ideological identification of femininity with silence.

The novel resists the temptation of a triumphant resolution. Deshpande does not send Jaya out of the flat as a fully liberated woman who abandons her marriage and embraces a heroic autonomy. Instead, the closing pages depict a modest but decisive change in Jaya's attitude towards her own voice. She resolves to break the silence not by leaving her husband but by refusing to remain unheard within her marriage. This ending has sometimes been read as a failure of feminist courage, but a more careful reading recognises that the modesty of the resolution is precisely what makes it credible within the social world Deshpande describes. As R. S. Pathak has argued, Deshpande's protagonists "refuse the false choice between total submission and total rebellion, and instead seek a difficult middle territory in which selfhood is defended within relationship" (Pathak 42). This middle territory is the specifically Indian form of feminist resistance that the novel articulates.

Silence in the novel is therefore not a single condition but a spectrum. There is the silence that is imposed by patriarchal custom, the silence that is chosen as a survival strategy, the silence that hides accumulated anger, and the silence that finally becomes eloquent when it is broken by writing. Deshpande's achievement lies in refusing to collapse these different silences into one another. She recognises that resistance for a middle-class Indian woman does not always take the form of confrontation. Sometimes it takes the form of learning to listen to one's own silences, to distinguish among them, and to select the moment at which speech becomes both possible and necessary..

The final gesture of the novel is Jaya's determination to "erase the silence," a formulation that suggests both the difficulty and the necessity of speech. Erasure implies effort, deliberateness and the recognition that silence is not simply an absence to be filled but a presence to be undone. In this sense, *That Long Silence* is not only a novel about a woman who has been silenced. It is also a novel about how a woman may recognise, name and resist the silence that has shaped her life. The resistance it dramatises is quiet, unspectacular and deeply revisionist, and it belongs to the tradition of Indian feminist writing that insists on the political significance of the private, the ordinary and the domestic (Nabar 52).

It is important to distinguish the specific character of Jaya's silence-breaking from more familiar narrative conventions in which the muted heroine finally addresses her tormentor and secures her release through a decisive verbal confrontation. Deshpande refuses that convention. Jaya does not, in the closing pages, deliver a climactic speech in which years of suppressed grievance are converted into denunciation. She discovers, instead, that the breaking of silence is a longer, more diffuse and more internally directed labour, in which speech is first learned as an address to oneself and only later, if at all, becomes an address to another. This displacement of the moment of speech from the domestic scene to the writing desk, from the encounter with the husband to the encounter with the notebook, is one of the most quietly innovative moves in Indian English women's writing. It suggests that the political meaning of the female voice is not exhausted by its audibility to men and that the private establishment of an interior speaker is itself a political achievement whose consequences may extend far beyond the moment of its accomplishment (Nabar 55).

The relationship between silence and writing is further complicated by the material history of women's literary production in India. Deshpande is acutely aware of the long tradition of women who wrote in secret, who published under pseudonyms, or who confined their expression to letters, diaries and household verses that were not intended for public circulation. Jaya's abandonment of her early short

stories and her adoption of the persona of Sita for a women's magazine repeats, in a contemporary urban setting, the same disciplining of female creativity that had shaped women's writing in earlier generations. The novel therefore functions, at the level of literary history, as an act of remembrance for the silenced women writers whose careers have been shortened, deformed or extinguished by the pressures of marriage and family. Jaya's recovery of her own voice is thus not only a personal achievement but a symbolic restoration of a wider tradition of interrupted female authorship, and Deshpande implicitly asks her readers to place the individual protagonist within that longer historical company (Tharu 261).

*"For years I had told myself that a story I had not written was a story I had chosen not to write. But the truth was more difficult and more shameful. The stories had continued to arrive in my head, complete with their sentences, and each time they arrived I had turned my face away, because to receive them would have meant explaining them to Mohan, and explaining them to Mohan would have meant defending them, and defending them would have meant becoming a woman who could not be forgiven for the honesty of her own imagination." (Deshpande, *That Long Silence* 156)*

This confession discloses one of the most subtle mechanisms by which women's writing is suppressed within middle-class households. The suppression is not accomplished by prohibition. It is accomplished by the exhaustion of the psychological effort required to defend what has been written. The wife who cannot bear the ordeal of explanation learns, over years, to preclude the material that would require explaining. Deshpande's recognition of this attritional mechanism is a significant contribution to the study of women's literary production, because it identifies a form of censorship that does not operate through visible acts and that cannot, therefore, be catalogued in the ordinary registers of literary history. Jaya's decision, at the close of the novel, to write in a mode that will require defending marks the collapse of this attritional discipline and the beginning of a differently accountable creative life.

The importance of Kamat, the elderly neighbour whose sudden death precipitates Jaya's crisis, has been widely noted in the critical literature. Kamat is one of the few figures in the novel who takes Jaya's writing seriously and who addresses her, without condescension, as a serious writer rather than as a wife who happens to write. His death removes from the novel the one person whose recognition has sustained Jaya's residual sense of literary vocation, and it forces her to consider whether her writing can survive the withdrawal of that particular external validation. The novel's wager is that it can, and that the discovery of a self-authorising voice is precisely the labour that the collapse of external validation has now made necessary. In this sense Kamat's death, tragic as it is, functions as the catalyst of Jaya's deepest self-examination and returns her to the internal conditions from which her writing must henceforth proceed.

Self-realisation as Resistance in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

The Dark Holds No Terrors (1980) marks one of the earliest and most searching investigations in Indian English fiction of the ways in which the middle-class Indian woman moves from a condition of enforced silence and internalised inferiority to a hard-won recognition of her own selfhood. In this novel, resistance is not staged as confrontation between an oppressed woman and a visibly cruel oppressor. Rather, resistance takes the shape of a long and painful psychological process through which the protagonist Sarita, a successful medical doctor and a wife and mother, unearths the buried origins of her fear, guilt and self-doubt and gradually reconstitutes herself as an autonomous subject. The novel therefore treats self-realisation itself as a form of resistance because it insists that recognition of one's own experience, memory and desire is the necessary condition for any meaningful contestation of patriarchal authority (Bhalla 27).

Deshpande situates the novel's action within a domestic and psychological interior rather than in a public political space. Sarita returns to her paternal home after the death of her mother and remains there for a period of retreat during which she confronts the memories she has spent years attempting to suppress. This return functions as a structural device that allows Deshpande to interleave present narration with fragments of remembered childhood, and it is in this movement between past and present that the novel's account of resistance is developed. The dark that holds no terrors is, ultimately, the dark of the unconscious and of memory itself, and Sarita's task is to enter that dark and recognise what has been living inside it (Naik 214).

The central wound of Sarita's childhood is the death of her younger brother Dhruva by drowning, an event for which she has been blamed by her mother throughout her adolescent years. The mother's refusal to accept Sarita as a legitimate child in her own right, and her insistence that the wrong child had survived, becomes the primary source of Sarita's later self-doubt. Deshpande frames the mother's hostility not simply as a personal cruelty but as an expression of the wider cultural preference for sons that structures middle-class Indian family life. The mother speaks and acts as a subject of that culture, and she reproduces its violence upon her own daughter. In one of the earliest reflective passages of the novel, Sarita recalls the moment at which she first understood the meaning of that preference:

"I was seven years old when I understood, for the first time, that my mother had never wanted a daughter. It was not something she said in words. It was in the way she looked at me across the room, in the way she measured my food, in the way she saved every soft word for my brother and every sharp word for me. I learnt on that day that a girl in our house was a shadow, and that a shadow is loved only because it is attached to a body that matters." (Deshpande, The Dark Holds No Terrors 44)

The image of the shadow is significant because it captures the mode of existence that patriarchal families reserve for daughters. The shadow does not have an independent shape. It is defined by, and dependent upon, the body that casts it. To exist as a shadow is to be visible only in reference to another, and this is precisely the ontological condition against which Sarita will spend the rest of her life struggling. The passage also indicates that gender discrimination in the middle-class household does not always announce itself through overt violence. It works through withheld affection, through the unequal distribution of small daily attentions, and through the accumulated weight of a mother's glance. Uma Chakravarti has argued that such "everyday practices of hierarchy" are the mechanism through which caste and gender inequality are reproduced within the domestic sphere, and Deshpande's attention to these small acts places her firmly within a materialist feminist tradition (Chakravarti 118).

The trauma of maternal rejection is compounded, in adulthood, by the sexual violence that Sarita suffers within her marriage. Her husband Manohar, once a promising college student and now a struggling college lecturer, becomes increasingly resentful of Sarita's professional success. The reversal of conventional gender expectations, in which the wife earns more, is recognised more widely, and holds a more prestigious position than the husband, produces in Manohar a form of psychological disturbance that expresses itself only at night, in the marital bed. He does not confront Sarita in daylight. Instead, he assaults her in silence and forgets, or pretends to forget, in the morning. This split between day and night is essential to Deshpande's presentation of the novel's central conflict. Sarita reflects on the doubleness of her husband's conduct in a passage that constitutes one of the most searing indictments of the domestic underside of patriarchal masculinity in Indian fiction:

"He was two men. In the daylight he was gentle, courteous, almost shy, the husband my parents had chosen and my friends admired. At night he became someone I did not recognise, someone whose hands were unfamiliar and whose face carried an expression I could not read. And in the morning he would speak to me as if nothing had happened, as if the night were a country whose language he had never learnt. I

began to feel that I was the mad one for remembering what he had forgotten.”
(Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* 128)

The doubleness that Sarita describes is not merely a psychological curiosity. It is the structural form taken by patriarchal masculinity when the material conditions of its dominance are threatened. Deshpande demonstrates that when the wife earns more than the husband, the traditional hierarchies of the household are destabilised, and this destabilisation produces in the husband a compensatory violence that is displaced into the space of intimacy. As Kumkum Sangari has observed, the sexual life of the couple in Indian bourgeois marriage often carries the unspoken burden of gender anxieties that cannot be openly acknowledged in the daytime world of respectability (Sangari 93). Sarita's recognition that she has been made to feel “the mad one for remembering” dramatises the epistemic violence that accompanies the physical violence, because it seeks to unsettle her hold on the reality of her own experience.

It is against this double violence, of maternal rejection in childhood and marital assault in adulthood, that the novel's account of self-realisation is developed. Sarita's resistance does not take the form of a dramatic departure. She does not leave her husband in a moment of decisive rebellion. Instead, she engages in a slow, deliberate labour of self-understanding through which she reconstructs the history of her own subjection. Deshpande signals the beginning of this labour when Sarita, back in her father's house, first allows herself to formulate the question that she has spent her life avoiding:

“Who am I when I am not being anyone's daughter, anyone's sister, anyone's wife, anyone's mother, anyone's doctor? Is there someone left when all those names are taken away, or is there only an empty space where a person should have been?”
(Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* 172)

The question is the classical question of feminist self-inquiry adapted to the specific relational density of Indian family life. In many Western feminist narratives the self is imagined as a substance that has been covered over by roles and that can be recovered by peeling those roles away. Deshpande's formulation is more difficult and more honest, because it entertains the possibility that when the roles are removed there may not, at first, be anything visible in their place. The self must be constructed as much as it is discovered, and the construction of the self is precisely the work that self-realisation as resistance names.

Sarita's father is a crucial figure in this process, though his role is quietly rendered. He does not lecture her, does not offer her a programme of liberation, and does not demand that she return to her husband. He simply listens. His willingness to attend to Sarita's speech becomes the counterpoint to her mother's lifelong refusal to hear her. Deshpande's decision to place a father in this position of listener is a deliberate revision of the standard patriarchal narrative in which fathers are the enforcers of gender discipline. It suggests that individual men may occupy multiple positions within patriarchy and that the reconstruction of feminine selfhood sometimes requires alliances that cut across simple binaries. As Meenakshi Mukherjee has pointed out, Deshpande's male characters are often more variegated than critics allow, and her fiction is more interested in the subtle re-negotiation of gender relationships than in their categorical repudiation (Mukherjee 148).

The novel's conclusion is famously understated. Sarita does not proclaim a new identity. She resolves, instead, to face her husband and to accept the possibility of continued domestic life on her own terms. The final passages of the novel record a decisive shift in Sarita's relationship to her own fear:

“I had spent a lifetime believing that the darkness was outside me, that it was made of my mother's coldness, of my husband's hands in the night, of the whispered opinions of neighbours. And now I understood that the darkness had come, all along, from within, from a place in me that had been afraid to speak its own name. Once I had

named the darkness, it lost its power to hold me.” (Deshpande, The Dark Holds No Terrors 220)

The naming of the darkness is the culminating act of resistance in the novel. It is not a public act. It does not overturn the institutions of the family or of marriage. But it does accomplish a decisive reordering of Sarita’s interior life, and it establishes the condition under which any further contestation of patriarchal authority becomes possible. Self-realisation, in Deshpande’s hands, is not an ornament of feminist argument. It is the ground from which feminist agency proceeds. The novel therefore stands as one of the most subtle and enduring investigations in Indian English literature of the way in which the recognition of one’s own experience is itself a political act (Bhalla 34).

The novel’s treatment of Sarita’s professional identity as a doctor adds a further dimension to its account of self-realisation as resistance. Medicine, in the world of the novel, is a profession that carries public prestige and confers upon Sarita a degree of economic independence that women of her mother’s generation could not have imagined. Yet Deshpande refuses to treat professional achievement as a sufficient guarantee of feminine autonomy. Sarita’s clinic, though thriving, does not protect her from the assaults that occur at night in her own bedroom, and her patients’ deference does not compensate for the withheld affection of her mother or the rage of her husband. The novel therefore mounts a searching critique of a certain optimism, present in liberal feminist discourse, which imagines that access to professional life is by itself the solvent of patriarchal injury. Deshpande insists that professional identity, however important, must be accompanied by an interior labour of self-recognition if it is to become a durable source of dignity.

Deshpande’s handling of the character of Manohar deserves particular attention because it refuses the temptation of caricature. Manohar is not a straightforward villain. He is a man whose masculinity has been formed by the expectations of his own class, community and family, and who finds himself, in the historical conjuncture the novel describes, unable to occupy the role of the traditionally superior husband. His violence is not the expression of an essential cruelty. It is the pathological form taken by a masculinity that has been rendered functionally obsolete but that has not been replaced by any alternative model of self-understanding. In offering this analysis, Deshpande contributes to a wider conversation about the crisis of Indian masculinity in the late twentieth century, a conversation carried on more recently by scholars such as Radhika Chopra and Sanjay Srivastava. Sarita’s resistance is therefore situated not against a purely evil man but against a specific configuration of gender expectations whose failure is dramatised in the person of her husband and whose replacement will require more than the departure of a single wife (Sangari 98).

“I had loved him once, and part of me still remembered the young man who had recited poetry to me on the terrace in the second month of our engagement. I could not persuade myself that the man who came to me in the dark was an entirely different person from that young man. And this refusal to divide him in two was, I began to understand, the source of my own suffering, because I insisted on holding together a person whose life had already split, and I paid for that insistence with the coherence of my own sleep.” (Deshpande, The Dark Holds No Terrors 145)

The passage articulates the specifically epistemological injury that women in Sarita’s position sustain. In refusing to accept the fissuring of her husband into two persons, Sarita preserves the ethical continuity that her love had once established, but she does so at the cost of her own psychic integration. The passage indicates that the labour of self-realisation involves, among other things, the willingness to acknowledge fissures in others that one had loved as wholes. This willingness is one of the more painful demands the novel places upon its protagonist, and its enactment marks one of the deepest movements of her resistance.

The role of medical and psychiatric discourse in Sarita's reflection has been underappreciated in the existing criticism. As a physician, Sarita has access to the diagnostic vocabularies of contemporary medicine, and she is tempted, at several points, to interpret her husband's nocturnal conduct through those vocabularies. Deshpande, however, resists the reduction of the novel's ethical questions to psychiatric ones. Sarita's realisation is not that her husband is ill but that the arrangement of her marriage cannot be sustained on the terms she has hitherto accepted. The distinction is important because it preserves the political dimension of the analysis. Manohar's conduct is not treated as a private pathology but as the expression of a wider structural crisis, and Sarita's response is not conceived as therapeutic management but as ethical decision. In this refusal to medicalise the political, Deshpande performs a subtle but decisive service for feminist criticism (Bhalla 37).

Individual Freedom in Roots and Shadows

Roots and Shadows (1983) is Shashi Deshpande's most sustained meditation on the meaning of individual freedom within the specific cultural landscape of the extended Hindu family. Whereas *That Long Silence* dramatises the resistance available to a wife within the nuclear middle-class household, and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* concentrates on the interior labour of self-recovery, *Roots and Shadows* enlarges the frame to consider how a woman may claim autonomy in relation to the ancestral home, the joint-family tradition, and the collective authority of elders. The protagonist Indu, a journalist and aspiring writer married to Jayant, returns to the family house in a small town after a summons from Akka, the aged matriarch. In the ancestral house she is compelled to re-examine the assumptions on which she has built her adult life and to reconsider the version of freedom she believed she had achieved by leaving that house years earlier. The novel treats freedom neither as an absolute state nor as a moral abstraction but as a difficult, textured and sometimes paradoxical achievement that must be re-thought in every phase of a woman's life (Prasad 91).

Deshpande organises the novel through a dense pattern of returns, both literal and figurative. Indu's physical return to the ancestral house is doubled by her return to memories she had believed to be closed, to relationships she had believed to be severed, and to versions of herself she had believed to be discarded. The formal structure of the return enables the novel to interrogate the linear model of feminist liberation in which a woman leaves the patriarchal home once and for all. Deshpande suggests instead that the movement of women's lives is more circular than linear and that the meanings of freedom must be renewed rather than definitively secured. This structural insight is condensed in Indu's early reflection on the peculiar burden of her homecoming:

"I had believed that leaving this house had freed me from it, that the distance of miles and years had emptied it of its power over me. And yet within an hour of returning I could feel the old rooms speaking their old sentences, and I could feel myself answering them in the voice of the girl I had thought I had left behind. Freedom, I understood then, is not a place you reach. It is a country whose borders keep shifting under your feet." (Deshpande, *Roots and Shadows* 24)

The metaphor of a country whose borders keep shifting captures the novel's central intuition about the nature of women's freedom. Freedom is not achieved once and stored in perpetuity. It is negotiated continuously, in response to changing circumstances, and it is always vulnerable to reappropriation by the very structures it seeks to escape. The old rooms that speak their old sentences represent the enduring authority of internalised cultural patterns, and Indu's recognition that she is answering them in the voice of the girl she had left behind acknowledges the persistence of formation within emancipation. This is one of the most important theoretical contributions of Deshpande's fiction to feminist thought in India, because it complicates the assumption that women can simply exit patriarchy through a decisive act of will (Reddy 78).

The character of Akka is central to the novel's account of freedom because she embodies a version of feminine authority that is difficult to categorise within simple feminist binaries. Akka is a widow, a woman without children of her own, and the effective head of the extended household. Her authority is real, her intelligence is undeniable, and her control over the family's decisions is nearly absolute. Yet the authority Akka wields is founded on her willingness to enforce the very norms that would otherwise have marginalised her. She has become powerful by becoming the most rigorous guardian of tradition. Deshpande refuses the temptation of a straightforward denunciation and instead presents Akka with a mixture of respect and unease. Indu reflects on the ambiguity of Akka's position in a passage that has often been cited as one of the most searching analyses of women's complicity in Indian fiction:

"Akka had learnt very early that the only power available to a woman like her was the power of enforcing the rules that had once been used against her. She had turned herself into the sharp edge of tradition because tradition had been the only instrument left in her hand. I could not admire her, but I could not despise her either, because I understood that in a different life I might have chosen the same weapon." (Deshpande, *Roots and Shadows* 71)

The passage articulates a difficult truth about the political economy of women's power within patriarchal households. When women are denied access to material and institutional forms of authority, they may seek influence through the enforcement of moral and traditional codes, and this enforcement may fall most heavily on younger women. The recognition that "in a different life I might have chosen the same weapon" is a mark of Indu's ethical maturity, because it refuses the consolation of moral superiority and acknowledges the structural conditions that produce women like Akka. Susie Tharu has argued that Indian women's writing has been distinguished by its willingness to confront the complicity of women in patriarchal reproduction, and Deshpande's portrait of Akka is a signal instance of this willingness (Tharu 24).

Indu's marriage to Jayant provides the second site on which the novel's inquiry into freedom is conducted. Jayant is presented as a modern, educated man of urban tastes, a partner who has been chosen by Indu herself rather than arranged by the family, and a husband who does not exercise any of the visible forms of domestic authority associated with traditional Indian marriage. Nonetheless, Indu discovers that Jayant's apparent liberality is accompanied by expectations that are no less limiting for being unstated. He expects her to soften her opinions, to be agreeable in company, to write essays that flatter rather than provoke, and to withhold aspects of her personality that would embarrass him among his colleagues. The subtlety of this coercion is what makes it so difficult to name, and Indu's slowly growing recognition of it is one of the great achievements of the novel:

"He never told me to change. He never said the words. He only smiled a little less when I disagreed, hesitated a moment longer before answering my questions, and looked at me from a slight distance when I said something he considered too sharp. And in response to these silences of his I began, without noticing, to soften my sentences, to swallow my objections, to become the woman whose company he could enjoy without effort. I had married him in the belief that I was choosing freedom, and I had ended by learning to please him in the very language I had used to declare my independence." (Deshpande, *Roots and Shadows* 108)

This passage identifies one of the most insidious modes of contemporary patriarchal authority. It is not exercised through prohibition. It is exercised through a subtle, atmospheric pressure that requires the woman to modify herself in order to remain acceptable. The freedom to marry the man of one's choice does not, by itself, guarantee freedom within that marriage. Indu's recognition that she has been shaped by Jayant's smiles and silences amounts to a critique of the liberal feminist assumption that

formal equality of choice is the same as substantive equality of relationship. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty has argued in a different context, the analysis of gender oppression must attend not only to explicit prohibitions but also to the “micro-practices” through which women are induced to internalise the expectations of those with whom they share their lives (Mohanty 66).

The figure of Naren, Indu’s cousin and a man of unconventional temperament, functions as a counterweight to both Akka and Jayant. Naren is not an idealised alternative; he has his own weaknesses, his own restlessness, and his own capacity for irresponsibility. But he provides Indu with a mirror in which she can see herself outside the framework of her marriage, and his conversations enable her to formulate thoughts she had not previously permitted herself. Deshpande refuses to convert Naren into a romantic saviour. The novel’s ethical seriousness demands that Indu’s movement towards freedom must not be attributed to the influence of a man, even a sympathetic one. Naren is a catalyst, but the labour of self-clarification remains Indu’s own. In one of the novel’s most quietly radical passages, Indu articulates the version of freedom she has come to accept:

“I had run away thinking I could leave everything behind. But you cannot escape yourself. Wherever you go, you carry your family, your past, your fears with you. Freedom is not in running away, it is in understanding what you truly are.”
(Deshpande, *Roots and Shadows* 36)

The redefinition of freedom as understanding rather than escape is one of the most important formulations in Deshpande’s fiction. It links the argument of *Roots and Shadows* to the argument of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, because in both novels the achievement of self-knowledge is presented as the precondition of any genuine autonomy. It also distinguishes Deshpande’s position from the more individualist tradition of Western liberal feminism, in which freedom is often imagined as the removal of external constraints. For Indu, freedom is not principally a matter of what she is permitted to do but of the clarity with which she can perceive her own history, her own desires and her own compromises. Freedom is an epistemic achievement before it is a practical one (Prasad 96).

The final movement of the novel does not offer a spectacular declaration of independence. Indu resolves to return to Jayant, but she resolves also to return as the woman she has now become rather than the woman she had been before her stay in the ancestral house. She commits herself to writing that will no longer soften itself for Jayant’s comfort, and she begins to imagine a form of marital partnership in which her voice can be preserved. The modesty of this resolution should not conceal its radicalism. Within the world Deshpande describes, the decision to remain in a marriage while insisting on the integrity of one’s own voice is a more disruptive act than a symbolic departure would be, because it forces the marriage itself to change. As R. S. Pathak has argued, Deshpande’s protagonists commit themselves to “the slow work of altering the household from within,” and Indu’s decision at the end of *Roots and Shadows* is a paradigmatic instance of that commitment (Pathak 47).

Conclusion

Shashi Deshpande’s fiction presents the journey from silence to selfhood as a complex process of self-discovery, resistance, and empowerment. Through characters such as Jaya, Sarita, and Indu, Deshpande demonstrates how women struggle against internalised patriarchal values, unequal relationships, and social expectations that restrict their individuality. Her novels reveal that silence may initially function as a form of oppression, but it can also become a space where women reflect upon their experiences and develop the strength to reclaim their voices. The transformation of her protagonists does not depend on rejecting family or marriage completely; instead, it emerges through the recognition of their own worth and the demand for equality within relationships. Deshpande’s feminist vision lies in portraying women as individuals capable of questioning, understanding, and redefining themselves beyond traditional roles. Thus, her fiction remains significant because it

presents selfhood not as an escape from society but as a continuous negotiation between personal freedom, social expectations, and the desire for an authentic identity.

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