



From Silence to Selfhood: Negotiating Women's Subjectivity in the Selected Novels of Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair

Ms. K. Aruna

Research Scholar

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Anurag University, Hyderabad

&

Dr Maria Justina Grey

Research Supervisor

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Anurag University, Hyderabad

Abstract: The emergence of women novelists in Indian English literature has transformed the representation of female identity, agency, and subjectivity. Moving beyond stereotypical portrayals of women as passive figures confined to domestic spaces, contemporary writers have foregrounded the complexities of women's psychological, emotional, and social experiences. Among these writers, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair occupy a distinctive place for their nuanced exploration of women's struggles for selfhood within patriarchal structures. While Deshpande portrays women who negotiate silence, domesticity, and emotional repression through introspection, Anita Nair presents protagonists who actively challenge societal conventions and reclaim their identities through self-expression and personal choice.

The present paper seeks to explore the construction and negotiation of women's subjectivity in the selected novels of Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair through a comparative feminist perspective. Drawing upon the feminist theories of Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Judith Butler, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the study investigates how the protagonists evolve from socially conditioned silence to autonomous selfhood. The

paper argues that subjectivity in these novels is not merely an assertion of individuality but a continuous process of resisting patriarchal norms, reconstructing identity, and redefining agency. Deshpande's protagonists often attain selfhood through introspection and emotional resilience, whereas Anita Nair's women embrace resistance, mobility, and self-determination.

Keywords: Women's Subjectivity; Selfhood; Feminism; Agency; Patriarchy; Identity; Shashi Deshpande; Anita Nair; Indian English Fiction

Indian English literature has grown into an important space. It shows the many sides of Indian society. It especially shows women's experiences. These women deal with identity inside strong patriarchal systems. Early Indian fiction often showed women in ideal roles. These roles included the devoted wife. They included the obedient daughter. They included the self-sacrificing mother. Contemporary women writers have changed this focus. They now look at the inner mental worlds of female experience. Their stories question the social systems that control women's lives. They also explore chances for agency, resistance, and self-definition.

Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair are among the most important contemporary Indian English novelists. They have always studied the complex sides of female consciousness. Their fiction puts women's inner lives at the centre. It shows the hard process of building an independent identity. This happens inside family and society limits. These writers do not show women only as victims of patriarchy. They show them as thinking people. These women question old rules. They face inner conflicts. They slowly redefine themselves. The idea of subjectivity is central in feminist literary criticism. Subjectivity means a person's awareness of the self. It means knowing oneself as an independent, thinking, and feeling being. This identity is shaped by social, cultural, historical, and ideological forces. Feminist scholars say women's subjectivity has been pushed aside for a long time. Patriarchal societies have treated women as objects. They have not treated them as subjects of experience. Simone de Beauvoir famously says that woman has been built as "the Other." She has been denied the status of an independent



subject. So the fight for selfhood becomes a fight to take back one's voice. It becomes a fight for agency and identity.

Shashi Deshpande's fiction shows this fight. Her main characters live in middle-class home spaces. These spaces are full of silence, emotional repression, and gender inequality. Novels such as *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, and *Roots and Shadows* show women. Their journeys toward selfhood start with noticing their own silenced lives. Their resistance is often quiet. It grows through reflection, memory, and mental change. It does not grow through open rebellion. Anita Nair, by contrast, shows women who openly challenge patriarchal systems. They seek fulfilment beyond usual gender roles. Works such as *That Long Silence*, *Mistress*, and *Eating Wasps* show these women. They deal with desire and sexuality. They deal with professional goals. They deal with emotional independence. Nair broadens the discourse of women's subjectivity by emphasizing bodily autonomy, mobility, and self-determination.

The title "From Silence to Selfhood" encapsulates the transformative journey undertaken by the female protagonists in both writers' fiction. Silence symbolizes not merely the absence of speech but the suppression of identity, emotions, and aspirations. Selfhood, on the other hand, signifies the emergence of agency, confidence, and the capacity to define one's own existence.

This paper adopts a comparative feminist approach to examine how Deshpande and Anita Nair negotiate women's subjectivity through their narratives. Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Judith Butler, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, it analyzes how the selected novels redefine female identity in contemporary Indian society. Ultimately, the study argues that both novelists portray women's subjectivity as a continuous process of negotiation rather than a fixed achievement, thereby enriching feminist discourse in Indian English literature.

The novels of Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair have attracted sustained scholarly attention because of their nuanced portrayal of women's psychological, emotional, and social experiences. Critics generally agree that both novelists challenge patriarchal assumptions and



foreground women's search for identity, agency, and selfhood. Although their narrative styles differ, their works significantly contribute to feminist discourse in Indian English literature.

Scholars have consistently recognized Shashi Deshpande as one of the foremost chroniclers of middle-class Indian women's inner lives. Her fiction departs from sensational representations of female oppression and instead explores the subtle mechanisms through which patriarchy shapes women's identities.

Another recurring critical concern is Deshpande's psychological realism. Rather than depicting dramatic rebellion, she presents subtle emotional negotiations that gradually reshape women's identities. Scholars note that her protagonists achieve liberation primarily through introspection, self-awareness, and emotional resilience. Consequently, Deshpande's fiction is often interpreted as emphasizing internal transformation rather than external revolution.

In contrast, Anita Nair portrays women who negotiate subjectivity through mobility, self-expression, sexuality, and conscious resistance to patriarchal norms. Her novels extend feminist discourse beyond domestic spaces and engage with broader questions of desire, profession, social mobility, and individual freedom. Critics appreciate her ability to depict women belonging to different generations, classes, and cultural backgrounds while highlighting their common struggle for autonomy.

Among Anita Nair's works, *Ladies Coupe* has received considerable scholarly attention. Critics interpret the train compartment as a symbolic space where women narrate their personal histories free from patriarchal surveillance. Simone de Beauvoir argues that patriarchal societies define women as "the Other," denying them autonomous subjectivity (Beauvoir 16). This concept is central to understanding the protagonists' struggle for identity in both novelists' works. Their journeys involve rejecting externally imposed identities and reclaiming self-definition.

Elaine Showalter's concept of gynocriticism has also influenced scholarship on Deshpande and Nair. Showalter advocates studying women's writing through women's experiences, literary traditions, and cultural contexts rather than measuring it against male



literary standards (Showalter 13). Both novelists create female-centred narratives that privilege women's perspectives and experiences.

Similarly, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers valuable insights into the construction of female identity. Butler argues that gender is not an innate essence but a repeated social performance shaped by cultural expectations (Butler 24). This theoretical perspective helps explain how the protagonists in both writers' fiction negotiate, resist, and reconstruct socially prescribed gender roles.

Despite extensive scholarship on both authors individually, there remains considerable scope for comparative studies focusing specifically on the negotiation of women's subjectivity. Many earlier studies examine feminism, gender discrimination, marriage, or identity separately; however, fewer investigations analyze how silence transforms into selfhood through evolving forms of female subjectivity across the fiction of both writers.

The present study seeks to bridge this gap by examining women's subjectivity as a dynamic and multidimensional process. It argues that Deshpande and Nair portray selfhood not as an accomplished state but as an ongoing negotiation shaped by memory, experience, resistance, and personal agency. Through a comparative feminist analysis, this paper demonstrates how both writers redefine women's identities in contemporary Indian English fiction while offering distinct narrative models of female empowerment.

The present study employs a comparative feminist theoretical framework to examine the negotiation of women's subjectivity in the selected novels of Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair. Since subjectivity is a multidimensional concept encompassing identity, agency, consciousness, and selfhood, no single feminist theory is sufficient to explain the complexity of women's experiences represented in these novels. Therefore, this paper integrates the theoretical perspectives of Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Judith Butler, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and bell hooks. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of how women's identities are constructed, contested, and transformed within patriarchal societies.

The philosophical foundation of women's subjectivity is rooted in Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir argues that women have historically been denied



autonomous subjecthood because patriarchal society defines them as “the Other.” While men occupy the position of the universal subject, women are relegated to secondary status, their identities shaped by male expectations rather than personal aspirations (Beauvoir 16). Beauvoir’s famous assertion that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” underscores the socially constructed nature of gender. Rather than viewing femininity as biologically predetermined, Beauvoir explains that social institutions—including family, religion, education, and marriage—produce gender roles that restrict women’s freedom (Beauvoir 283).

This perspective is particularly relevant to Shashi Deshpande’s protagonists. Women such as Jaya in *That Long Silence* and Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* gradually recognize that their identities have been shaped by patriarchal expectations.

Elaine Showalter’s theory of gynocriticism shifts literary criticism from analyzing women as represented in male-authored texts to studying women as producers of literature and creators of meaning. In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter proposes that women’s writing constitutes a distinct literary tradition shaped by women’s experiences, values, and cultural realities (Showalter 13). Showalter identifies three phases in the development of women’s literature: the Feminine phase, characterized by imitation of male literary conventions; the Feminist phase, marked by protest against patriarchy; and the Female phase, in which women confidently explore their own experiences and identities (Showalter 36–39).

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, articulated in *Gender Trouble*, offers another important lens for understanding women’s subjectivity. Butler argues that gender is not an inherent or fixed identity but is repeatedly performed through culturally prescribed behaviors, language, and social practices (Butler 24). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, examine the ways patriarchal literary traditions have silenced women and confined them within restrictive stereotypes such as the “angel” and the “monster” (Gilbert and Gubar 17). bell hooks expands feminist discourse by emphasizing that women’s experiences are shaped not only by gender but also by class, caste, race, culture, and other intersecting structures of power. She argues that feminism must address these interconnected systems of domination in order to



achieve genuine liberation (hooks 18). Hooks' perspective therefore enables a more inclusive analysis of women's subjectivity by recognizing its diversity and complexity.

Shashi Deshpande holds an important place in modern Indian English literature. She deeply studies women's inner lives. Unlike many feminist writers who show open rebellion, Deshpande shows the quiet mental struggles of ordinary middle-class women. These women deal with identity inside patriarchal family systems. Her main characters are educated. They are sensitive. They are intellectually aware. Yet they stay limited by deep cultural expectations. Through looking inside themselves, memory, and emotional conflict, they slowly rebuild their identities. The journey from silence to selfhood is central to Deshpande's fictional world.

That Long Silence is widely regarded as Deshpande's finest feminist novel because it presents silence not merely as the absence of speech but as an instrument through which patriarchy disciplines women. The protagonist, Jaya, is an educated writer who has gradually abandoned her creative aspirations to become the ideal wife expected by her husband, Mohan. Jaya realizes that throughout her married life she has equated silence with virtue. She suppresses anger, disappointment, and ambition to preserve domestic harmony. However, this silence eventually becomes psychologically destructive because it erases her individuality. As Beauvoir argues, patriarchal culture encourages women to exist for others rather than as autonomous subjects (Beauvoir 16). Jaya's identity has been constructed almost entirely in relation to her husband and family.

Her reflections reveal the internalization of patriarchal ideology. She repeatedly questions why women are expected to sacrifice their individuality while men retain their freedom. Rather than presenting Jaya as a passive victim, Deshpande portrays her as a woman gradually awakening to the realization that silence itself sustains oppression.

Writing becomes Jaya's most significant act of resistance. Although she had abandoned her literary career after marriage, the narrative itself represents her reclaiming her voice. Through storytelling and introspection, she reconstructs her fragmented identity and begins to recognize herself as an independent thinking subject. Showalter's concept of gynocriticism



becomes particularly relevant here because Jaya's narrative privileges female experience and transforms domestic life into a legitimate literary subject (Showalter 13).

Importantly, Deshpande does not conclude the novel with dramatic emancipation. Instead, Jaya's decision to speak honestly symbolizes the beginning of selfhood rather than its completion. Subjectivity, therefore, emerges as an ongoing process of self-negotiation rather than a final achievement.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Deshpande extends her exploration of women's subjectivity by examining the relationship between childhood trauma, professional success, and marital conflict. The protagonist, Sarita, returns to her parental home after experiencing emotional and sexual violence within her marriage. The physical journey back home becomes a psychological journey into memory. Sarita's childhood reveals the gender discrimination that shaped her identity. Her mother openly preferred her brother, reinforcing the patriarchal belief that sons possess greater value than daughters. Such experiences create a fractured sense of self that continues into adulthood.

Professionally, Sarita becomes a successful doctor, reversing traditional gender expectations. Ironically, her success destabilizes her marriage because her husband, Manu, feels threatened by her professional achievements. Butler's theory of gender performativity explains this tension. Manu's understanding of masculinity depends upon occupying a socially privileged position. When Sarita achieves greater social and economic success, the conventional performance of gender begins to collapse (Butler 24). The marital relationship illustrates how patriarchal masculinity often depends upon female subordination. Sarita recognizes that her fear is not solely of her husband's violence but also of the cultural norms that normalize male authority. Her growing awareness enables her to reject guilt and reclaim responsibility for her own life.

Deshpande deliberately avoids simplistic resolutions. Sarita's liberation occurs through psychological transformation rather than external escape. By confronting painful memories and recognizing the social origins of her suffering, she reconstructs her identity beyond imposed definitions of wife, daughter, and mother.



Roots and Shadows examines the tension between tradition and individuality through its protagonist Indu. Having rejected the rigid conventions of her conservative family, Indu attempts to create an independent life through education and marriage. Nevertheless, she discovers that physical separation from tradition does not automatically produce psychological freedom. When Indu returns to her ancestral home after the death of Akka, she is compelled to confront her family history, cultural inheritance, and unresolved emotional conflicts. Memory becomes an important mechanism through which subjectivity is reconstructed.

Unlike Jaya and Sarita, Indu's struggle is less concerned with immediate domestic oppression and more with the complexity of negotiating cultural identity. She recognizes that freedom cannot be achieved simply by rejecting tradition; instead, authentic selfhood requires critically engaging with one's past. Gilbert and Gubar argue that women writers challenge patriarchal literary stereotypes by creating female characters who reject restrictive cultural identities (Gilbert and Gubar 17). Indu embodies this resistance.

One of Deshpande's biggest successes is her way of telling stories. She often uses first-person narration. She uses interior monologue. She uses flashbacks. She uses psychological realism. These methods show women's consciousness. They let readers go straight into the protagonists' feelings. They let readers see their doubts. They let readers see their hopes. Silence works as a repeated story tool. Memory works as one. Dreams work as one. Introspection works as one. Through these, hidden sides of female identity slowly appear. Deshpande avoids drama and excess. Instead, she shows the ordinary lives of middle-class women. She does this with great psychological depth. Her focus on inner life sets her apart from many earlier Indian novelists. Those novelists often defined female characters mainly through outer social roles.

Their movement from silence toward selfhood exemplifies Beauvoir's belief that women become autonomous subjects by rejecting identities imposed by others (Beauvoir 283). As a result, Deshpande's fiction turns ordinary home experiences into deep studies of female consciousness. Her novels show that subjectivity is built through reflection. It is built through resistance. It is built through emotional strength. It is built through the courage to take back one's voice. In this way, she makes a lasting gift to feminist literary discussion in India and beyond.



Among modern Indian English novelists, Anita Nair has become a strong voice in feminist fiction. She does this through careful pictures of women. These women deal with identity. They deal with desire. They deal with memory. They deal with agency. They do this inside the complex sides of Indian society.

Ladies Coupé is one of Anita Nair's most famous feminist novels. It is set mainly inside the women's compartment of a long-distance train. This space becomes a special place free from men's watching. Six women tell their life stories there. Their talks become acts of confession. They become acts of reflection. They become acts of resistance. These talks help each woman look again at her identity. The main character is Akhila. She is a forty-five-year-old unmarried woman. She has given her life to supporting her family. Social expectations have stopped her from making her own choices. This has left her emotionally alone. Her train journey becomes an inner journey toward knowing herself.

Simone de Beauvoir argues that women's identities have traditionally been defined through relationships with men rather than through autonomous existence (Beauvoir 16). Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity further illuminates Akhila's transformation. Throughout her life, she has performed the socially sanctioned roles of dutiful daughter and responsible sister. By the novel's conclusion, she consciously abandons these performances and embraces an identity shaped by personal choice rather than cultural expectation (Butler 24). Importantly, Nair shows selfhood not as being alone. She shows it as deciding for oneself. Akhila's journey proves that subjectivity comes from the freedom to shape one's own life. It does not come from following old rules.

Nair dismantles the binary between the "ideal woman" and the "fallen woman" identified by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Gilbert and Gubar 17). The novel shows that desire is not only physical. It is also intellectual. It is also emotional. Female subjectivity grows through knowing one's own goals. It does not grow through needing male approval. Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism provides an important framework here because Nair privileges women's experiences and emotions as legitimate literary subjects (Showalter 13). Memory plays a key role in building identity throughout the novel. Past experiences keep shaping present



choices. This shows that subjectivity has many layers. It is not fixed or still. Characters keep rethinking their pasts. This suggests that identity stays open to change. It stays open to renewal.

bell hooks argues that feminist analysis must recognize the intersections of gender, class, and culture in shaping women's lives (Hooks 18). Nair's novel exemplifies this intersectional approach by portraying women from varied social locations whose struggles cannot be reduced to gender alone. Economic status, education, family structures, and cultural traditions all contribute to the formation of subjectivity. Despite experiences of violence and marginalization, the women in *Eating Wasps* refuse victimhood. Their resilience lies not merely in survival but in their ability to redefine themselves beyond traumatic experiences. Memory becomes an instrument of empowerment rather than imprisonment.

The novel also foregrounds female solidarity as a source of strength. Relationships among women enable emotional healing and encourage resistance against patriarchal domination. Subjectivity therefore emerges not only through individual introspection but also through collective support and shared experiences.

Anita Nair employs multiple narrative techniques to portray women's consciousness. Polyphonic narration, shifting perspectives, nonlinear chronology, and symbolic spaces create a rich representation of female experience. Anita Nair greatly widens feminist discussion in Indian English literature. She joins psychological realism with social criticism. Her main characters do not only fight against patriarchy. They actively invent new ways of living. She explores desire. She explores movement. She explores memory. She explores female solidarity. Through these, Nair shows that selfhood comes from conscious action. It does not come from passive acceptance.

Silence holds a central place in both writers' fiction. It works in different ways for each. In Shashi Deshpande's novels, silence often stands for emotional repression. It also stands for patriarchy that has been taken inside. Jaya's silence in *That Long Silence* and Sarita's emotional isolation in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* illustrate how women are socialized to suppress anger, ambition, and desire in order to preserve domestic harmony. Subjectivity emerges when these women begin to interrogate the cultural values that have shaped their identities.



In Anita Nair's fiction, however, silence is frequently replaced by dialogue, confession, and storytelling. The women in *Ladies Coupé* discover themselves by narrating their lives to one another, while *Eating Wasps* demonstrates how shared stories create collective resilience. Thus, whereas Deshpande emphasizes introspective silence as the starting point of selfhood, Nair foregrounds voice as the medium through which women construct new identities.

Marriage constitutes another important area of comparison. Both novelists critique patriarchal marriage, yet their approaches differ significantly. Deshpande portrays marriage as a psychologically restrictive institution that often demands female self-effacement. Jaya and Sarita experience marriage as a site where personal aspirations are subordinated to male authority. Nair likewise critiques marital expectations but presents women who increasingly challenge conventional notions of wifehood and domesticity. Akhila's refusal to define herself solely through marriage represents an explicit rejection of patriarchal norms.

Identity formation also differs between the two writers. Deshpande's protagonists achieve selfhood primarily through introspection, memory, and emotional resilience. Their transformation is gradual and psychological. Nair's characters, in contrast, frequently pursue identity through travel, professional independence, female solidarity, and conscious acts of resistance. Their journeys involve outward action as well as inward reflection.

From a theoretical perspective, Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as "the Other" provides a common framework for interpreting both writers. Their protagonists reject identities imposed by patriarchal society and seek to become autonomous subjects (Beauvoir 16). Judith Butler's "Theory of Gender Performativity" further illuminates how the characters question socially constructed gender roles and reconstruct themselves through alternative performances of femininity (Butler 24). Elaine Showalter's gynocritical approach explains why both novelists privilege women's experiences, voices, and perspectives, thereby contributing to an independent tradition of women's writing (Showalter 13).

Together, the two novelists widen the chances for feminist writing in Indian English literature. Deshpande shows that selfhood starts with noticing silence. It also starts with the courage to face one's inner conflicts. Nair shows that subjectivity grows through voice. It grows



through agency. It grows through self-determination. Their fiction shows that women's identity is not fixed. It is not set in advance. It is always negotiated through real-life experience.

The present study has examined the negotiation of women's subjectivity in the selected novels of Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair through a comparative feminist perspective. The study also shows that women's subjectivity cannot be understood only through gender. Class shapes each protagonist's experience. Education shapes it too. Family structures shape it. Culture shapes it. Personal history shapes it. All these factors work together. As a result, the selected novels add to modern feminist discussion. They present identity as something that keeps changing. They present it as something built through relationships. They present it as something always negotiated.

Future research may extend this inquiry by examining women's subjectivity in relation to caste, ecology, globalization, digital culture, queer identities, or comparative studies involving other Indian women novelists such as Anita Desai, Manju Kapur, Kavery Nambisan, or Namita Gokhale. Such studies would further enrich feminist literary criticism and deepen our understanding of women's evolving subjectivities in contemporary Indian literature.

Works Cited

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2011.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
- Deshpande, Shashi. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. Penguin Books India, 1990.
- . *Roots and Shadows*. Orient Longman, 1983.
- . *That Long Silence*. Penguin Books India, 1989.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press, 1979.
- hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. 2nd ed., South End Press, 2000.
- Nair, Anita. *Eating Wasps*. Context, 2018.
- . *Italics*. Penguin Books India, 2001.



---. *Mistress*. Penguin Books India, 2005.

Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton UP, 1977.