



## Subaltern Women and Marginal Voices in the Fiction of Shashi Deshpande

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### Abstract:

Shashi Deshpande occupies a distinctive place in Indian English literature for her nuanced depiction of women's psychological realities within patriarchal Indian society. Her novels foreground the experiences of middle-class women who remain marginalized in spite of education and social suppleness. This paper examines the representation of subaltern women and marginal voices in Deshpande's novels through the theoretical framework of postcolonial feminism and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern. Focusing on *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows*, *The Binding Vine*, *Small Remedies*, and *A Matter of Time*, the study explores themes of silence, psychological colonization, conjugal conflict, physical violence, identity crisis, and female self-articulation. Deshpande's protagonists inhabit subaltern positions within domestic and cultural structures that deny them support and voice. Through self-analysis, memory, and psychological realism, Deshpande transforms silence into a subtle mode of confrontation and self-realization. The paper argues that her fiction recovers relegated female subjectivities and challenges patriarchal systems that reduce women to secondary beings in postcolonial Indian society.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, marginal voices, patriarchy, silence, feminism, Indian English fiction, female identity, resistance

## 1. Introduction

Indian English literature has gradually emerged as a significant medium for enunciating the anxieties of marginalized communities, particularly women whose identities have historically been silenced within male-controlled social structures. Postcolonial Indian women writers challenged dominant narratives that confined women to domesticity, obedience, and invisibility. Among these writers, Shashi Deshpande occupies a significant position for her sensitive exploration of women's interior worlds and emotional struggles.

Deshpande's fiction focuses the lives of educated middle-class women who appear socially privileged yet remain psychologically and culturally marginalized. Unlike radical feminist writers who advocate direct revolt, Deshpande presents ordinary women negotiating spaces of resistance within domestic and social institutions. Her protagonists struggle with fragmented identities, marital dissatisfaction, emotional suppression, and the desire for selfhood. Through these experiences, Deshpande reveals how patriarchy functions not merely through external restrictions but through internalized conditioning.

The idea of the "subaltern," primarily associated with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and the Subaltern Studies group, denotes marginalized groups that are excluded from dominant systems of power and representational frameworks. Though the women in Shashi Deshpande's works are not invariably victims of economic adversity, they nonetheless occupy subaltern positions within patriarchal structures. These systems systematically withhold from them autonomy, the ability to articulate their experiences, and full subjectivity. Their obligatory or chosen silence thus functions as a powerful symbol of their exclusion from the dominant discourse.

This paper examines how Deshpande foregrounds marginal female voices in her fiction and transforms silence into a mode of resistance. Through detailed textual analysis of selected novels, the study explores the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of female subalternity in postcolonial India.

## **2.Theoretical Framework: Subalternity and Women’s Silence**

The term “subaltern,” first introduced by Antonio Gramsci and later theorized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, refers to groups that are socially and politically marginalized and excluded from dominant structures of power and authority. In her landmark essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Spivak argues that the female subaltern experiences a “double marginalization” — oppressed both by colonial domination and patriarchal structures. Consequently, women are deprived not only of political authority but also of linguistic and cultural autonomy, leaving their voices systematically marginalized and largely inexpressible within dominant discourses.

In traditional Indian society, silence has historically been regarded as an essential feminine virtue, deeply rooted in cultural, religious, and social conventions. From mythological narratives and classical texts to everyday patriarchal practices, the ideal woman is often represented as submissive, self-sacrificing, emotionally restrained, and submissive. Characters associated with Sita-like endurance or the quiet devotion of the *pativrata* (dutiful wife) are admired, whereas assertiveness, anger, or the open articulation of personal desires are frequently condemned as inappropriate or unfeminine. In such a framework, silence signifies far more than the mere absence of speech; it functions as a performative expression of modesty, patience, and moral virtue.

Patriarchal structures further strengthen this conditioning by encouraging women to place familial harmony — commonly understood as domestic peace — above their own aspirations, individuality, or emotional well-being. Women are socialized to believe that questioning male authority, expressing unhappiness, or asserting independence may disrupt the family structure and bring social disgrace. Consequently, personal identity becomes systematically suppressed, with a woman’s selfhood defined primarily through relational roles such as daughter, wife, mother, or daughter-in-law, rather than through individual autonomy. Over generations, silence thus evolves simultaneously into a mechanism of survival and an instrument of patriarchal control.

That *Long Silence* and other fictions by Shashi Deshpande critically examine and dismantle these deeply ingrained cultural assumptions. In novels such as *Roots and Shadows*, *The Binding Vine*, and *Small Remedies*, Deshpande depicts women who have internalized the expectation of silence as an inevitable part of their being. Her characters are often middle-class women who primarily appear submissive and accommodating, enduring emotional neglect, marital dissatisfaction, betrayal, or personal grief in silence. Yet Deshpande refuses to idealize this silent endurance. Instead, she reveals its deeply damaging psychological effects, including suppressed anger, fragmented identity, persistent guilt, diminished self-worth, and profound emotional isolation.

What differentiates Deshpande’s fiction is her nuanced portrayal of gradual self-awareness and awakening. Her female characters slowly come to understand that silence is not necessarily a sign of virtue but often a form of self-negation. Such realization frequently emerges through moments of personal crisis — the collapse of a marital relations, the death of a child, or encounters with disturbance — compelling them to reassess the patriarchal compromises they have long accepted. Through introspective narration, fragmented storytelling, and intense psychological realism, Deshpande depicts the difficult yet emancipatory journey of breaking silence. She captures not only the fear, guilt, and uncertainty involved in this process but also the hesitant emergence of voice, identity, and agency.

Deshpande’s novels suggest that although silence has traditionally been imposed as an ideal feminine trait, its undisputed acceptance sustains women’s oppression and erasure. By articulating the unspoken experiences of women, her fiction challenges conventional notions of feminine virtue and creates space for the assertion of authentic selfhood within — and at times in resistance to — the structures of Indian middle-class patriarchy.

Theoretical viewpoints from Simone de Beauvoir and Chandra Talpade Mohanty further illuminate Deshpande's feminist concerns. Beauvoir's notion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" explains how gender roles are socially produced, while Mohanty analyses universalized representations of Third World women and emphasizes culturally specific experiences of oppression.

Deshpande's protagonists embody these complexities. Their marginalization is not exclusively economic but psychological and cultural. They are silenced within marriage, family, motherhood, and tradition. Yet silence in Deshpande is not purely passive submission; it becomes a space for contemplation and subsequent articulation.

### **3. Patriarchal Silencing and Domestic Oppression in *That Long Silence***

*That Long Silence* remains one of Deshpande's most profound explorations of female silence and subaltern existence. The protagonist Jaya epitomizes the educated middle-class woman trapped within patriarchal domesticity. Though intellectually capable and creatively gifted, she suppresses her ambitions to conform to the ideal image of a dutiful wife.

Jaya's silence is culturally conditioned. Her husband Mohan expects compliance and emotional restraint, reducing her identity to that of wife and mother. She repeatedly questions her own existence: "Who am I? Mohan's wife, Rahul's and Rati's mother?" This fragmentation of identity reflects the subaltern condition in which women are denied autonomous subjectivity.

The metaphor of the "long silence" symbolizes centuries of subdued female expression. Jaya recognizes that silence has strengthened patriarchal domination. Her silence is not natural but learned—a strategy for survival within marriage. She fears that self-expression might threaten domestic stability. Thus, marriage becomes a site of internal colonization where women willingly erase themselves to preserve patriarchal structures.

Deshpande also contrasts Jaya with other marginalized female figures such as Jeeja and Mukta, illustrating that silence cuts across class and generational boundaries. The domestic sphere itself emerges as a political space where power relations are enacted and reinforced.

Yet the novel ultimately suggests the possibility of resistance. Jaya's introspection enables her to recognize the falseness of her silence. Her decision to write and reclaim her narrative marks a movement from subaltern muteness toward articulation. The shift is subtle rather than revolutionary, reflecting Deshpande's belief in gradual self-realization rather than violent rebellion.

### **Trauma, Violence, and Identity in *The Dark Holds No Terrors***

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* examines the psychological trauma experienced by women within patriarchal family structures. The protagonist Sarita (Saru), a successful doctor, appears economically independent yet remains emotionally marginalized within marriage and family.

Saru's subjugation originates in childhood itself. Her mother openly favors her brother and blames Saru for his death. This gender discrimination inculcates guilt and insecurity, demonstrating how patriarchal values are internalized within familial structures. Saru learns early that male children are valued more highly than daughters.

Her professional success further destabilizes her marriage. Saru earns more than her husband Manohar, whose masculine ego becomes threatened by her achievements. The domestic sphere transforms into a site of violence where Manohar asserts dominance through sexual aggression. Deshpande's portrayal of marital rape exposes the hidden brutality underlying middle-class respectability.

The novel illustrates that economic independence alone cannot guarantee liberation. Despite being educated and professionally accomplished, Saru remains psychologically trapped within patriarchal expectations. Her return to her parental home becomes an existential journey toward self-discovery.

Shashi Deshpande reveals how women internalize subalternity through guilt, fear, and emotional dependence. Saru's struggle is therefore not merely against her husband but against deeply embedded cultural conditioning that defines women through submission and sacrifice.

### **Tradition, Rebellion, and Female Selfhood in *Roots and Shadows***

*Roots and Shadows* explores the tension between tradition and female autonomy through the protagonist Indu. Although Indu rebels against conservative family structures by marrying outside caste norms, she remains psychologically tied to her ancestral home and inherited values.

The ancestral household functions as a metaphor for patriarchal authority. Women within this structure are expected to preserve family honor through compliance and self-denial. Even economically secure women remain marginalized because cultural norms deny them independent identity.

Indu represents the "double bind" experienced by modern Indian women. She seeks freedom and individuality yet cannot completely detach herself from tradition. Her rebellion is therefore partial and conflicted.

Deshpande demonstrates that subalternity is not confined to illiteracy or poverty. Educated women too remain trapped within ideological systems that regulate female behavior. Indu's journey toward self-awareness reflects Deshpande's belief that liberation begins through questioning inherited assumptions and confronting internalized oppression.

### **Female Body, Sexual Violence, and Silenced Histories in *The Binding Vine***

*The Binding Vine* expands Deshpande's exploration of subaltern women by foregrounding issues of bodily violence and historical erasure. The novel examines how women's experiences are silenced by institutions such as family, medicine, and social morality.

The victim Kalpana symbolizes the voiceless female body. Her trauma is appropriated and interpreted by others, while her own voice remains absent. Deshpande critiques a society that denies women authority over their own bodies and experiences.

The protagonist Urmila (Urmi) attempts to recover forgotten female narratives, particularly through the poems of her mother-in-law Mira. Mira's secret writings become symbolic acts of suppressed self-expression. Through these fragmented female voices, Deshpande reconstructs women's hidden histories erased by patriarchal culture.

The title metaphor, "binding vine," suggests interconnected female experiences across generations. Shared suffering creates spaces of empathy and solidarity among women. Deshpande thereby transforms storytelling into an act of feminist historiography that resists patriarchal erasure.

The novel also critiques the social construction of motherhood and female respectability. Women who seek autonomy are frequently labeled immoral or deviant. Yet Deshpande portrays female articulation as essential for reclaiming subjectivity.

### **Intergenerational Marginality in *A Matter of Time and Small Remedies***

*A Matter of Time and Small Remedies* explore the transmission of silence, suffering, and resilience across generations of women.

In *A Matter of Time*, Deshpande presents three generations of women—Kalyani, Sumi, and Aru—whose lives are designed by desertion, emotional subjugation, and social expectations. The novel demonstrates how patriarchal suffering becomes hereditary, passed from mothers to daughters through silence and endurance.

Similarly, *Small Remedies* reconstructs fragmented female histories through the life of Savitribai, a singer who defies social norms in pursuit of artistic freedom. Her marginalization arises from her refusal to conform to prescribed notions of female respectability.

Deshpande suggests that female creativity itself becomes threatening within patriarchal culture. Women who pursue self-expression are often ostracized or morally condemned. Yet storytelling and memory enable the recovery of suppressed identities.

These novels reveal that women subjugation is relational and intergenerational rather than individual. Marginal voices emerge collectively through shared histories of pain and resistance.

#### **4. Narrative Technique and Representation of Marginal Voices**

One of Deshpande's greatest achievements lies in her narrative technique. Her use of introspection, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, and fragmented memories allows intimate access to women's suppressed emotions and psychological conflicts.

Unlike overtly political fiction, Deshpande's realism is subtle and deeply psychological. Ordinary domestic experiences become sites of ideological struggle. Kitchens, bedrooms, conversations, and silences emerge as arenas where gendered power relations are negotiated.

Her narratives avoid simplistic binaries between victimhood and empowerment. Women in her fiction are neither passive sufferers nor heroic revolutionaries. Their resistance is gradual, incomplete, and intensely personal. This ambiguity enhances the realism and complexity of her portrayal of subaltern consciousness.

Deshpande's emphasis on psychological interiority is itself politically significant. By foregrounding women's emotional experiences, she challenges literary traditions that marginalize female subjectivity.

#### **Deshpande's Feminist Humanism**

Deshpande's feminism is distinctly Indian and humanistic. She does not advocate the destruction of family structures or violent revolt against patriarchy. Instead, her fiction emphasizes negotiation, introspection, and ethical self-awareness.

Her protagonists seek not domination over men but recognition of their humanity and individuality. Deshpande critiques patriarchy while acknowledging the emotional complexity of familial relationships and cultural traditions.

Silence in her fiction functions both as oppression and as reflection. It becomes a space through which women gradually achieve self-knowledge and articulation. Thus, Deshpande transforms ordinary domestic life into a profound exploration of gender, identity, and human relationships.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Shashi Deshpande significantly contributes to Indian feminist and postcolonial literature through her nuanced representation of subaltern women and marginal voices. Her fiction reveals how patriarchy operates not only through external restrictions but also through psychological conditioning, cultural expectations, and emotional silencing.

By portraying women's inner struggles, fractured identities, and gradual journeys toward self-articulation, Shashi Deshpande transforms ordinary domestic experiences into powerful critiques of gender inequality. Her protagonists may appear passive, yet their introspection and eventual assertion of selfhood constitute meaningful forms of resistance.

Deshpande's novels recover silenced female histories and challenge structures that deny women independent identity. In giving literary expression to marginalized voices, she expands the discourse of subalternity beyond class and caste to include the emotional and psychological realities of middle-class women.

Ultimately, her fiction demonstrates that the struggle for identity is inseparable from the struggle for voice. Through memory, introspection, and narration, Deshpande's women reclaim the agency long denied to them. Her work affirms that the subaltern woman can indeed speak—when provided the space and language to articulate her experience.

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