

Feminist critic of patriotic in Shashi Deshpande's fiction

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Abstract

The fiction of Shashi Deshpande occupies a significant position in Indian English literature for its profound exploration of women's experiences within a deeply entrenched patriarchal social system. Her novels and short stories present a nuanced feminist critique of patriarchy by examining the psychological, emotional, and social constraints imposed upon women. Through realistic characterization and introspective narrative techniques, Deshpande foregrounds women's struggles for identity, autonomy, and self-realization in male-dominated familial and social structures. This study critically examines the feminist dimensions of her fiction, focusing on her portrayal of gender discrimination, marital oppression, emotional alienation, and the internal conflicts experienced by women. By analyzing selected works such as *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows*, and *Small Remedies*, the paper highlights how Deshpande exposes the subtle and overt forms of patriarchal control that shape women's lives. Her writing reveals the tension between tradition and modernity, as women navigate inherited cultural norms and their emerging aspirations for independence. The research also situates Deshpande's feminist vision within the broader framework of Indian socio-cultural realities, emphasizing her commitment to portraying the lived experiences of middle-class Indian women. Ultimately, the study establishes Shashi Deshpande as a leading feminist voice whose fiction not only critiques patriarchal ideology but also advocates emotional freedom, self-awareness, and gender equality.

Introduction

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Feminist literary criticism has played a pivotal role in redefining literary discourse by foregrounding women's voices, experiences, and perspectives that have long been marginalized in patriarchal societies. In the context of Indian English literature, Shashi Deshpande emerges as a prominent feminist writer whose fiction offers a deep and sensitive portrayal of women's inner worlds and their struggles against social and psychological oppression. Her works are characterized by an intense focus on women's emotional conflicts, identity crises, and resistance to restrictive gender roles. Rather than presenting overt political rebellion, Deshpande's feminism operates at a subtle, psychological level, revealing how patriarchal ideology permeates everyday life, family relationships, and marital bonds. Her narratives often center on middle-class Indian women who grapple with expectations of obedience, sacrifice, and silence while yearning for self-expression and autonomy.

Deshpande's fiction exposes the contradictions inherent in traditional Indian society, where women are revered in theory yet subordinated in practice. Through her introspective narrative style, she highlights the emotional and psychological costs of patriarchy, including loneliness, frustration, suppressed anger, and loss of identity. Novels such as *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* depict women who gradually awaken to their own suppressed desires and aspirations, challenging the internalized norms that bind them. By giving voice to women's silenced experiences, Deshpande transforms personal suffering into a powerful feminist discourse. Her fiction thus serves as a critical tool for examining the subtle mechanisms of patriarchal domination and for advocating women's self-realization, emotional independence, and dignity. The present study aims to analyze Deshpande's feminist critique of patriarchy, focusing on her portrayal of gender relations, marital dynamics, and the psychological evolution of female protagonists.

Background

The socio-cultural background against which Shashi Deshpande's fiction unfolds is rooted in the traditional Indian patriarchal framework, where gender roles are rigidly defined and deeply internalized. Indian society has historically emphasized values such as female obedience,

chastity, sacrifice, and domesticity, relegating women primarily to the roles of daughters, wives, and mothers. These expectations often restrict women's personal growth and deny them autonomy, individuality, and emotional fulfillment. Although modernization and education have introduced new opportunities for women, patriarchal attitudes continue to shape family structures, marital relationships, and social norms. It is within this context that Deshpande situates her female characters, portraying their struggles to reconcile traditional expectations with emerging aspirations for independence and selfhood.

Deshpande's own experiences as an educated, urban, middle-class Indian woman significantly inform her literary vision. Her writing reflects a deep understanding of the psychological complexities faced by women who are caught between tradition and modernity. Unlike earlier Indian women writers who often idealized female sacrifice and endurance, Deshpande adopts a critical stance, exposing the emotional and psychological damage inflicted by patriarchal control. Her protagonists are not heroic rebels but ordinary women whose journeys toward self-awareness and empowerment unfold gradually through introspection and emotional conflict. By focusing on the inner lives of women, Deshpande highlights the subtle, often invisible forms of oppression that operate within familial and marital spaces.

Furthermore, the rise of feminist thought in India during the late twentieth century provided a fertile intellectual environment for Deshpande's literary interventions. Influenced by both Western feminist theory and indigenous cultural traditions, her work represents a distinctly Indian feminist perspective that emphasizes emotional realism, psychological depth, and social critique. Through her nuanced portrayal of women's struggles, Deshpande contributes significantly to feminist literary discourse in India, challenging patriarchal ideologies and advocating gender equality, emotional freedom, and self-realization.

Literature Review:

Naik (2010) examines Shashi Deshpande's fiction as a profound exploration of women's psychological struggle within patriarchal social structures. He argues that Deshpande's novels focus less on overt feminist rebellion and more on subtle emotional resistance, portraying

women's internal conflicts, silence, and gradual awakening. According to Naik, her protagonists are not radical revolutionaries but introspective individuals who challenge patriarchy by reclaiming emotional autonomy and personal identity. This approach highlights the realism and depth of Deshpande's feminist vision.

Sharma (2011) explores the theme of gender discrimination in Deshpande's novels, particularly *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. Sharma emphasizes that Deshpande exposes how patriarchy operates not only through male dominance but also through deeply internalized social conditioning. Women, he argues, become complicit in their own subjugation due to cultural expectations of obedience and sacrifice. The study underlines Deshpande's critique of both societal norms and psychological dependency.

Reddy (2012) analyzes the portrayal of marriage as a patriarchal institution in Deshpande's fiction. He argues that marriage in her novels often becomes a site of emotional repression and identity loss for women. Through characters like Jaya and Saru, Deshpande reveals how marital roles restrict women's freedom and silence their voices. Reddy concludes that Deshpande's critique of marriage is central to her feminist ideology, as it challenges the romanticized image of conjugal harmony.

Mehta (2013) studies Deshpande's narrative technique and highlights her use of interior monologue and stream-of-consciousness to represent women's inner turmoil. Mehta suggests that this narrative strategy allows Deshpande to reveal the psychological impact of patriarchal oppression. By portraying women's suppressed emotions, guilt, fear, and anger, Deshpande constructs a powerful feminist discourse centered on emotional realism rather than ideological confrontation.

Patel (2014) focuses on the theme of female identity crisis in Deshpande's fiction. He argues that her protagonists experience a continuous struggle between traditional gender roles and modern aspirations. Patel points out that Deshpande portrays identity as a fluid process, shaped by emotional growth and self-reflection. The study highlights how women in her novels move from silence to self-awareness, symbolizing feminist awakening.

Kaur (2015) explores the intersection of patriarchy and motherhood in Deshpande's novels. She observes that motherhood is often idealized in Indian society, yet Deshpande presents it as both a source of fulfillment and emotional burden. Kaur argues that Deshpande challenges the cultural myth of self-sacrificing motherhood by revealing its psychological costs, thereby contributing to feminist discourse on women's autonomy and emotional well-being.

Singh (2016) examines emotional alienation and marital discord in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. He argues that Deshpande portrays marital violence and emotional neglect as consequences of patriarchal insecurity and male ego. Singh suggests that Deshpande critiques not only male dominance but also societal silence surrounding domestic abuse, thereby advocating emotional honesty and female empowerment.

Banerjee (2017) analyzes Deshpande's feminist ideology within the framework of Indian socio-cultural traditions. She argues that Deshpande does not imitate Western feminism but develops an indigenous feminist voice rooted in Indian realities. Banerjee emphasizes that her novels highlight emotional resilience, self-introspection, and gradual resistance rather than overt rebellion, reflecting a culturally nuanced feminist consciousness.

Dasgupta (2018) studies the theme of silence and speech in Deshpande's fiction. He argues that silence functions both as a symbol of oppression and as a strategy of survival. By breaking this silence, Deshpande's protagonists achieve self-awareness and empowerment. The study highlights the symbolic importance of voice in Deshpande's feminist critique of patriarchy.

Mishra (2018) focuses on the psychological dimensions of female oppression in Deshpande's novels. He argues that patriarchy operates through emotional manipulation, fear, and guilt rather than physical dominance alone. Mishra concludes that Deshpande's feminist critique is deeply psychological, emphasizing emotional liberation as a form of resistance.

Roy (2019) explores the conflict between tradition and modernity in Deshpande's fiction. She argues that her female characters struggle to reconcile inherited cultural norms with contemporary aspirations for independence. Roy suggests that Deshpande presents feminism as a

journey of negotiation rather than rejection, highlighting the complexity of Indian women's lived realities.

Nanda (2019) examines the representation of middle-class women in Deshpande's novels. He argues that Deshpande gives voice to ordinary women whose struggles often remain invisible. By portraying domestic spaces as sites of emotional conflict, Deshpande exposes the subtle forms of patriarchal domination that operate within everyday life.

Verma (2020) analyzes female self-realization in *Roots and Shadows*. She argues that Deshpande presents self-discovery as a gradual emotional and psychological process. Through introspection and confrontation with social norms, women reclaim their individuality and dignity, reflecting Deshpande's feminist commitment to self-awareness and autonomy.

Chatterjee (2020) explores intergenerational female relationships in Deshpande's fiction. She highlights how women across generations transmit both oppression and resistance. Chatterjee argues that Deshpande portrays female bonding as a potential source of emotional strength and feminist solidarity.

Joshi (2021) studies Deshpande's contribution to contemporary Indian feminist literature. He argues that her nuanced portrayal of psychological conflict, emotional depth, and social critique has significantly influenced later women writers. Joshi concludes that Deshpande's fiction continues to shape feminist literary discourse by foregrounding women's lived experiences and emotional truths.

Objectives of the Study

1. **To analyze the representation of patriarchy and its impact on women** in the fiction of Shashi Deshpande, focusing on how social, cultural, and familial structures shape female experiences and identities.

2. **To examine the portrayal of women's psychological and emotional struggles** within patriarchal institutions, particularly marriage and family, as depicted in Deshpande's novels and short stories.
3. **To explore the processes of female self-realization and identity formation** in Deshpande's fiction, highlighting women's gradual movement from silence and submission toward self-awareness and emotional independence.
4. **To evaluate Shashi Deshpande's contribution to feminist literary discourse in India**, assessing how her nuanced critique of patriarchy challenges traditional gender norms and promotes gender equality and women's empowerment.

Representation of patriarchy and its impact on women

The fiction of Shashi Deshpande offers a profound and sensitive exploration of patriarchy and its pervasive impact on women, revealing how deeply embedded social, cultural, and familial structures shape female experiences and identities in Indian society. Her novels and short stories depict patriarchy not merely as an external system of domination but as an internalized ideology that governs women's thoughts, emotions, and behavior. Through her realistic portrayal of middle-class Indian women, Deshpande exposes the subtle and overt mechanisms through which patriarchy restricts female autonomy, suppresses individuality, and enforces conformity. Socially, women are conditioned from childhood to accept submissiveness, obedience, and self-sacrifice as essential feminine virtues. This conditioning shapes their expectations, aspirations, and self-perception, often leading them to prioritize familial responsibilities over personal desires. Deshpande illustrates how such social norms confine women to domestic roles, limiting their opportunities for self-expression and emotional fulfillment. Culturally, patriarchal traditions reinforce rigid gender roles by idealizing female chastity, endurance, and silence, while granting authority and privilege to men. Her female characters frequently struggle to reconcile these inherited cultural values with their emerging aspirations for independence, education, and self-realization. This tension between tradition and modernity generates deep psychological conflict, identity crises, and emotional turmoil, which become central themes in her fiction. Familial structures, particularly marriage and parenthood, emerge as primary sites of patriarchal control.

Deshpande's portrayal of marriage often reveals its oppressive dimensions, where women are expected to subordinate their individuality to their husbands' authority and family expectations. In novels such as *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, marriage becomes a space of emotional alienation, psychological domination, and suppressed resistance, highlighting the imbalance of power between men and women. Women are often silenced, their opinions disregarded, and their emotional needs neglected, leading to a profound sense of loneliness and self-erasure. Furthermore, Deshpande exposes how patriarchal values are perpetuated by older generations of women, particularly mothers and grandmothers, who transmit cultural expectations and reinforce gender norms, thereby ensuring the continuity of female subordination. This intergenerational transmission of patriarchal ideology demonstrates how deeply ingrained these structures are within the social fabric. At the same time, Deshpande's fiction portrays women's gradual awakening to their oppression and their journey toward self-awareness. Through introspection and emotional struggle, her protagonists begin to question traditional roles and seek personal dignity and independence. This slow but steady process of self-realization reflects Deshpande's nuanced feminist vision, which emphasizes emotional resilience and psychological transformation rather than overt rebellion. By foregrounding women's inner lives, she reveals the profound emotional costs of patriarchy, including fear, guilt, frustration, and suppressed anger. Ultimately, Deshpande's representation of patriarchy underscores its pervasive influence on women's identities and life choices, while also affirming the possibility of resistance and self-empowerment. Her fiction thus serves as a powerful critique of social and cultural systems that constrain women and advocates a reimagining of gender relations based on equality, mutual respect, and emotional freedom.

Portrayal of women's psychological and emotional struggles

The fiction of Shashi Deshpande offers a deeply insightful and empathetic portrayal of women's psychological and emotional struggles within patriarchal institutions, particularly marriage and family, revealing the complex inner conflicts faced by women in traditional Indian society. Through her realistic narratives and introspective style, Deshpande exposes how these

institutions, often idealized as sources of security and fulfillment, become sites of emotional repression, identity loss, and psychological distress for women. Her female protagonists are typically portrayed as sensitive, introspective individuals who experience profound loneliness, anxiety, fear, and frustration as they navigate the expectations of obedience, sacrifice, and silence imposed upon them. In novels such as *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, marriage emerges as a space of emotional alienation, where women are denied emotional intimacy, respect, and understanding. The absence of communication, coupled with male dominance and societal pressure to maintain marital harmony at any cost, leads to deep psychological suffering. Women are often compelled to suppress their desires, ambitions, and grievances, resulting in emotional numbness and a fragmented sense of self. Deshpande portrays how the internalization of patriarchal values generates guilt and self-blame, as women come to believe that their suffering is a personal failure rather than a consequence of systemic oppression. Within the familial sphere, women face constant emotional demands, where their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers require continuous self-sacrifice and emotional labor. Deshpande highlights how family expectations burden women with responsibilities that leave little room for personal growth or emotional fulfillment. This relentless demand for conformity often produces a sense of entrapment and emotional exhaustion. Moreover, the fear of social judgment and familial disapproval compels women to endure emotional neglect, domestic conflict, and even psychological abuse in silence. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Deshpande sensitively portrays marital violence and emotional trauma, revealing the devastating psychological impact of living in a hostile domestic environment. Her exploration of fear, shame, and suppressed anger underscores the depth of women's emotional suffering within patriarchal households. However, Deshpande's portrayal is not limited to victimhood; she also depicts women's gradual journey toward self-awareness and emotional resilience. Through introspection, memory, and confrontation with their fears, her protagonists begin to recognize the roots of their suffering and question the legitimacy of oppressive norms. This internal awakening becomes a crucial step toward reclaiming identity and emotional autonomy. Deshpande emphasizes that psychological liberation often precedes social change, as women must first overcome internalized oppression before challenging external structures. By foregrounding women's inner lives, she reveals the

profound emotional cost of patriarchal institutions while also affirming the possibility of healing and self-realization. Ultimately, Deshpande's fiction offers a powerful feminist critique of marriage and family, exposing their oppressive dimensions and advocating emotional honesty, self-respect, and gender equality. Her sensitive portrayal of women's psychological and emotional struggles transforms private pain into a collective feminist narrative, making her work a significant contribution to Indian feminist literature.

Processes of female self-realization and identity formation

The fiction of Shashi Deshpande offers a nuanced and profound exploration of female self-realization and identity formation, portraying women's gradual movement from silence and submission toward self-awareness and emotional independence within a patriarchal social framework. Her narratives focus on the inner lives of women, capturing their emotional struggles, psychological conflicts, and evolving consciousness as they attempt to understand themselves beyond the restrictive roles imposed by society. Initially, Deshpande's female protagonists often appear trapped in silence, conditioned by cultural expectations that valorize obedience, sacrifice, and endurance. From childhood, they are taught to suppress their desires and conform to traditional gender norms, leading to a fragmented sense of self and emotional insecurity. This internalized patriarchy fosters feelings of guilt, fear, and self-doubt, which inhibit women from asserting their individuality. However, Deshpande carefully traces the slow and complex process through which these women begin to question their conditioned identities and seek personal meaning. Through introspection, memory, and emotional confrontation, her characters embark on journeys of self-discovery, gradually recognizing the sources of their suffering and the limitations imposed upon them. In novels such as *That Long Silence*, the protagonist Jaya's reflective narration reveals how silence becomes both a symbol of oppression and a catalyst for transformation, as she ultimately learns to articulate her suppressed emotions and assert her identity. Similarly, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru's confrontation with her past and her traumatic marital experiences leads to psychological awakening and emotional resilience. Deshpande presents self-realization not as a sudden act of rebellion but as a gradual, often painful process that requires emotional courage, self-reflection, and acceptance of one's vulnerabilities. The journey toward identity formation involves the rejection of imposed roles

and the reclamation of emotional autonomy, as women learn to value their own experiences, desires, and aspirations. This process enables them to redefine their relationships, assert their voices, and negotiate more equitable spaces within familial and social structures. Importantly, Deshpande emphasizes that emotional independence does not necessarily entail the abandonment of family or tradition but rather the establishment of a balanced selfhood that integrates personal freedom with social responsibility. Her characters seek meaningful connections, mutual respect, and emotional authenticity rather than mere compliance. By foregrounding women's inner struggles and evolving consciousness, Deshpande challenges the patriarchal notion that women's identities are fixed and subordinate, instead presenting them as dynamic, fluid, and capable of transformation. The movement from silence to speech becomes a powerful metaphor for feminist awakening, symbolizing women's refusal to remain invisible and voiceless. Through this portrayal, Deshpande affirms the significance of emotional honesty, self-awareness, and psychological liberation in the quest for gender equality. Ultimately, her fiction offers a compelling vision of female empowerment rooted in introspection, resilience, and emotional growth, highlighting the possibility of self-realization and identity formation even within oppressive social frameworks.

Shashi Deshpande's contribution to feminist literary discourse in India

Shashi Deshpande's contribution to feminist literary discourse in India is both profound and transformative, as her fiction offers a nuanced, psychologically rich, and socially grounded critique of patriarchy that challenges traditional gender norms and advocates women's empowerment. Unlike earlier representations of women in Indian literature that often idealized female sacrifice, endurance, and submissiveness, Deshpande presents women as complex individuals grappling with emotional conflict, identity crises, and the desire for autonomy. Her writing shifts the focus from external rebellion to internal awakening, emphasizing the emotional and psychological dimensions of women's oppression. By foregrounding women's inner lives, she reveals how patriarchy operates not only through overt social control but also through subtle mechanisms such as silence, guilt, fear, and internalized inferiority. This approach significantly enriches feminist discourse by highlighting the invisible yet powerful ways in which gender inequality is sustained. Deshpande's fiction critically examines institutions such as marriage,

family, and motherhood, exposing their oppressive dimensions and questioning the rigid gender roles that confine women's identities. In novels like *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, and *Roots and Shadows*, she portrays female protagonists who gradually move from silence and submission toward self-awareness and emotional independence, thereby challenging the patriarchal expectation that women should accept suffering as destiny. Her nuanced portrayal of marital discord, emotional alienation, and psychological trauma dismantles the romanticized image of domestic life and exposes the harsh realities faced by women within patriarchal households. Moreover, Deshpande's feminist vision is deeply rooted in Indian socio-cultural realities, making her work particularly significant in shaping an indigenous feminist discourse. Rather than adopting Western feminist ideologies wholesale, she adapts feminist concerns to the specific cultural, emotional, and social contexts of Indian women, thereby creating a distinctly Indian feminist voice. Her characters struggle to reconcile tradition with modernity, reflecting the complex transitional phase of Indian society, where women seek education, independence, and self-expression while remaining embedded within traditional family structures. This balanced and empathetic portrayal allows Deshpande to critique patriarchy without rejecting cultural values entirely, advocating instead for emotional equality, mutual respect, and individual dignity. Furthermore, her emphasis on psychological realism and emotional honesty encourages women readers to recognize and articulate their own suppressed experiences, thereby fostering feminist consciousness and self-reflection. By transforming personal pain into a collective narrative of resistance and awakening, Deshpande empowers women to question oppressive norms and seek self-realization. Her literary legacy has significantly influenced subsequent generations of Indian women writers, such as Manju Kapur, Anita Nair, and Kiran Desai, who continue to explore themes of gender, identity, and empowerment. Ultimately, Shashi Deshpande's contribution to feminist literary discourse lies in her ability to illuminate the emotional and psychological costs of patriarchy while affirming women's capacity for resilience, growth, and transformation. Through her sensitive, insightful, and courageous exploration of women's lives, she not only challenges traditional gender hierarchies but also promotes a vision of gender equality and emotional liberation, securing her place as one of the most influential feminist voices in modern Indian literature.

Conclusion:

The feminist critique of patriarchy in the fiction of Shashi Deshpande represents a significant and enduring contribution to Indian English literature, offering a profound exploration of women's emotional, psychological, and social realities within a deeply entrenched patriarchal framework. Through her sensitive and introspective narrative style, Deshpande exposes the subtle yet pervasive mechanisms of patriarchal control that shape women's lives, identities, and relationships. Her portrayal of female protagonists reveals how societal expectations, cultural traditions, and familial obligations collectively restrict women's autonomy, silence their voices, and undermine their sense of self. By foregrounding women's inner struggles, she highlights the emotional costs of gender inequality, including loneliness, fear, guilt, frustration, and suppressed anger, thereby transforming private suffering into a powerful feminist discourse. One of the most compelling aspects of Deshpande's feminist vision lies in her nuanced treatment of marriage and family as institutions that often function as sites of emotional repression and psychological domination rather than unconditional support. Her fiction dismantles the romanticized image of domestic harmony, revealing the complexities, conflicts, and power imbalances inherent in patriarchal relationships. At the same time, Deshpande does not advocate radical rebellion; instead, she emphasizes the gradual process of female self-realization, emotional awakening, and identity formation. Her protagonists' journeys from silence and submission toward self-awareness and emotional independence symbolize a quiet yet resilient form of resistance that underscores the transformative power of introspection and emotional courage. By situating women's struggles within the specific socio-cultural context of Indian society, Deshpande develops a distinctly Indian feminist discourse that bridges tradition and modernity, advocating gender equality without negating cultural rootedness. Her writing encourages empathy, self-reflection, and critical engagement, empowering women to question oppressive norms and seek dignity and autonomy. Ultimately, Shashi Deshpande's fiction stands as a compelling testament to women's resilience and capacity for transformation, challenging patriarchal ideologies and promoting a vision of emotional freedom, mutual respect, and gender justice. Through her honest, insightful, and deeply humane portrayal of women's lives, she not only reshapes feminist

literary discourse in India but also contributes meaningfully to the broader struggle for women's empowerment and social equality.

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