

Published on 14, Oct-Dec 2025

ISSN:2320-4842 (P) 3049-2688 (O)

Subjugation and Resistance: Unveiling Gender Inequality and Female Empowerment in the Works of Shashi Deshpande, Anita Nair, and Manju Kapur

B. Poonkodi

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Dr. Mohan. K

Associate Professor and Head

Department of English and Comparative Literature
Madurai Kamaraj University College, Madurai

Abstract

This article examines the interlinking of gender disparity, women oppression and emancipation in the selected novels of Shashi Deshpande, Anita Nair and Manju Kapur. Drawing on the use of three main characters Jaya, Akhila and Virmati, this paper analyzes how women themselves struggle with the social construct of these patriarchal societies, where their supposed roles are being resisted and how they break free of these prescripts and establish an identity, will and empowered selves. Application of feminist literary theories to the studies shows how both authors have been able to capture the silence of women in suffering, rebelling, and reclaiming their identity.

Keywords

Gender inequality, Female Empowerment, Patriarchy, Subjugation and Resistance

Introduction

That Long Silence by Shashi Deshpande, *ladies coupe* by Anita Nair and *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur are three novels that explain lucidly the intricate gazes of gender inequality, subjugation, and the expanding landscape of female emancipation in the Indian society. Located in strongly patriarchal environments, they follow stories about how women are controlled by spouses, cultural traditions, and families and at the same time deal with their needs of identity, liberation, and self-disclosure.

With the conflict that main characters, such as Jaya, Akhila, and Virmati, go through, the texts show the emotional, psychological, and social impacts that systematic oppression had, and the perseverance that women possess in overcoming it. These texts in fact do not only criticize established gender hierarchies but also speak of the female agency in re-inventing their roles and affirming autonomy as taking on boundaries. Collectively they shed light on the conflicts between tradition and modernity, silence and voice, submission and protest, and provide a rich feminist interpretation of the reinvention of feminine subjectivity in contemporary Indian writing.

That Long Silence by Shashi Deshpande is one of the most striking accounts of silent pains and unequal gender relations of women in Indian society that happened to be patriarchal. P. Mallikarjun Rao states that, "Deshpande portrays the silent endurance of women trapped within patriarchal marriages, but through Jaya, she simultaneously foregrounds the gradual awakening of female selfhood" (Rao 413). Jaya, who is a middle-class educated woman, is the central char-

acter and figure of inquiry in the novel whose experience represents the plight of thousands of women who have been unable to speak and who have been silenced by tradition, family pressures and societal convention.

As the story reflects through the inner turmoil within Jaya and her multiple personality syndrome Deshpande has revealed how women are systematically indoctrinated and we are taught to repress our individuality in parallel to playing the assigned roles of the male dominated society. The silence shows the passivity of Jaya as a mechanism of survival as well as the suppressed cry of the women who never have the right to express themselves, think, and feel.

Jaya is reinforced by this conditioning of the society that perceives worth of a woman based on woman being a dutiful wife, mother and care taker. Being brought in a conservative family, she is taught at an early age that silence and compliancy are the virtues of women. "To be a woman, you had to lie a little, cheat a little, and conceal a little"(TLS 37). The marriage to Mohan seems to perpetuate these ideals where she can only satisfy the home duties and neglect her goals and personality. Mohan is not a tyrant per se but he is patriarchal to the extent that he demands that Jaya should adhere to his ideals of a perfect wife.

Her aspirations as an author are rejected as second place and she is gently pushed into thinking that family harmony is more important than her happiness. In the process, Jaya finds herself suffocating her own silence the inability to speak out against a patriarchal order, which encompasses all those women who are silenced by such a system.

Jaya does not experience only an external but a strongly internalized "long silence" that leads to the critical psychological alienation. A highly educated and competent woman, she has a divided sense of self, which is torn and in-between vision of her real identity and roles ascribed to her. The picture presented by Deshpande is that her character is emotionally clogged and she had to suffer isolation and unuttered resentments in her marriage. Her communication being cut off with Mohan further isolates her and the manner in which gender inequalities are bred not only through strident oppression but also through emotional

negligence and inability to see a woman as an individual is established. Jaya failing to express her pain becomes symbolic of all the women whose emotional unpaid work and sufferings disappear in the society.

Although *That Long Silence* shows an atrocious scenario of gender subordination, it also reveals the potential change and an uprising. "For years I had accepted without question the authority of my husband. I had surrendered my voice, thinking silence was my strength"(ILS 63). The struggle that Jaya goes through is that of self-reflection and realization that she is culpable in maintaining her oppression. She understands that in as much as silence offers protection, it also continues her marginalisation and invisibility. At the end of the novel, Jaya starts to take control of her life and this aids in restoring her voice as she realizes she must deal with her fears. Deshpande deploys the slow awakening of Jaya to reiterate how the liberation process starts with overcoming the conditioning of patriarchy through the act of speaking out and breathing.

As in the case of *ladies coupe* in Anita Nairs work, Akhila seeks independence and self-discovery a route of her own which is not only heart wrenching but also transformative and rebellious against the societal norms regarding gender, family and how individuals grant themselves freedom of choice. Already in the first scene, Akhila is depicted as a 45-year-old unmarried woman, by the help of whom the whole family survives, who has forgotten her desires and lived a lifetime subordinating to the role of a daughter, a sister, and a bread-winner. "I had spent thirty-four years of my life listening, obeying, and pleasing. I had forgotten what it meant to be me"(LC 54). She is brought up in a conservative Brahmin family where she believes that the life of a woman becomes worthwhile only when her life revolves around others.

She has to take care of the family after the sudden death of her father and provide financially to the family including her mother and siblings, making her compromise with her youth and personal happiness. Such upbringing both constricts her emotional development, but also inculcates this sense of invisibility/marginality to her within a patriarchal structure that regards the value of a woman as entailing an ability to secure marriage, to equate

herself to this extent of being less than a man. A staging point in the story occurs when Akhila enters the *ladies coupe* which is a female board on a train ride to the town of Kanyakumari. On arriving here, she engages with five other women who have their tales of life and about struggle, compromise and success, viz., Janaki, Sheela, Margaret, Prabha and Marikolanthu. It is in these stories that Akhila starts to doubt her ideas and beliefs that have always been imposed by the strict laws of patriarchy in their living situation and voting preferences. "For the first time, I felt the power of being alone, without anyone dictating my life" (LC 123). As an example, the satisfaction of Janaki in her subordinate place is in stark contrast with Margaret who asserts her independence by rebelling against her dominating husband, whereas the traumatic ordeals faced by Marikolanthu are an indicator of the atrocities women go through in silence. These varied views are presented as reflections of the possibilities to Akhila that inspire in her a new aspirational need to rearrange her identity beyond her role as a daughter, sister, or a caregiver.

Perhaps, one of the major turning points of Akhila is that she understands that without autonomy, there is no selfhood. In her life, she has suppressed her personal self and always placed the needs of her family first before her needs. Chasing away her need to live up to her internalized notion of obedience and sacrifice, the discussions between the coup are slowly stripping the narrator of any apprehensive feelings that she had regarding her fears of loneliness and rejection of society. Jasbir Jain comments that, "The collective narratives of the six women represent a shared history of subjugation, yet they simultaneously function as a repository of empowerment and resilience" (Jain 213). The train ride is symbolic of her transition out of an unassertive and accepting person to an assertive and active one; this is the journey by which she is transitioning out of the confines of tradition and into the potential of liberation.

Throughout the process, Akhila starts to claim the desires that she has, both emotionally, sexually, and also her spiritual desires, that she has a right to live, live with her desires, rather than simply to exist, on behalf of others. The author has artfully entwined the individual

stories of six women during a train ride at night as they share their lives, experiences and personal struggles with each other.

The couple turns out to be not only a physical location, but a metaphoric safe haven where depowered women and females who have long suffered subjection in the society, inner emasculation, and gender demands mingle together to express themselves, their suppressed selves. Nair is able to unfold the story of Janaki, Margaret Shanti, Sheela, Prabha Devi, and Marikolanthu, through the layer to layer tale of the protagonist Akhila who yearns to establish herself in the society by independence and self-discovery, as purely different elements of Indian womanhood, each in its own way as class-caste and generational barriers, first and second generation Indian women.

Taken together, these stories oppose the patriarchy while also showing the internalised gender roles that women have been conditioned into. To give an example, the story of Janaki talks about a privileged and emotionally dependent life wherein she wants the family to give her affirmation instead of gaining personal fulfillment. Conversely, Margaret Shanti, who is the victim of a claustrophobic marriage, exhibits the intricacies of disobedience to a domineering husband. The character of Sheela as a very young girl struggling with an ailing mother provides the insights of an adolescent trying to find her identity. The story of Prabha Devi reveals oppression of women who are being asked to adhere to the standards of beauty, reputation and responsibility whereas Marikolanthu, highlights the curse of caste and gender in a story of sexual abuse.

In these interweaving narratives, Nair manages to depict the coup as a small world of women living in a patriarchal India, even though different women may occupy different social classes, what is as similar is that they share the same feeling of marginality and yearning to be free. The sharing of their stories develops a shared consciousness that enables Akhila to battle her fears and review her wishes to be independent. The coup is, thus, a safe zone in which there is a break of silence followed by sharing, and where women assume control of their identities.

The conflict of familial desire versus personal

desire in *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur as seen through Virmati that underlies the narrative exemplifies the power of oppression that the tradition imposes as well as the impulse of desire for freedom in pre-independent India. Virmati is brought up in a traditional Punjabi family where a woman is bound by her limiting domesticity, submission and sacrifice. She is made to think about the need to fulfill the family honor, at least since her early childhood, especially being the eldest daughter. "For the first time, Virmati understood that she had a choice to live for herself or be crushed by others' expectations" (DD 154). She has educational and self-fulfillment expectations that contradict her family stereotypes and this conflict leads to a battle between societal and familial expectations, namely that of a woman on one hand and her own desires on the other. Stuck between obligation to her family and the desire to have a self, Virmati finds her life to be the field of war between social demands and individual desires.

This conflict is aggravated by her relationship with Professor Harish who moves her towards transgression in a highly patriarchal society. Virmati is attracted to Harish irrespective of the fact that he is already wedded as he symbolizes intellectual interactions and emotional closeness, a lack of which she lacked during her conservative upbringing. Pursuing this relationship results in her estrangement in the family and the community as a sign of a difficult daughter disobeying social norms. However, her decisions do not lead to her freedom; on the contrary, they expose her to new kinds of slavery: now she is in a loveless, socially stigmatized marriage where she is always fighting with the feeling of guilt, loneliness, and unrealized dreams.

By using personal journey of Virmati, Kapur demonstrates how gender and duty meet the individual interest and agency in a society suspended between colonial modernity and traditional orthodoxy. "I wanted to study, to know more than the walls of this house, but each step forward felt like a betrayal" (DD 102). The difficulties experienced by Virmati are not only individual, they represent those of the whole generation of women who have to choose between loyalty to their families and the need to receive an education, to be independent and fulfilled in love-life.

Her life turns into the mirror of the greater sociocultural changes in India in the context of the freedom movement, where the demand of national emancipation was simmering with prejudiced practices of gender inequality. Lastly, the incapability of Virmati to balance her inner needs and those emanating in the family level characterize the immense price women pay trying to demonstrate their individuality in an essentially restrained society.

The clash of individualism and morality of the society constitutes the heart of personal and emotional progress of Virmati in the book *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur. The novel written against the socio-political framework of pre-Independence India reflects the extremely patriarchal society in which women are supposed to maintain the family pride and give up personal satisfaction and abide by strict social rules. Virmati, however, wants to have an education, independence and love her way and this, at once, pits her against the norms of the society. The fact that she becomes involved in a relationship with an already married man, Professor Harish, makes her relationship symbolic in her act of defiance to normal societal morality and subject herself to the disapproval of society. Her heart moves towards self-fulfillment, but she is continually held back by her upbringing and all the family responsibilities causing a psychological and emotional duality.

In the struggle through the life Virmati, Kapur shows how societal morality is used as a control factor and how it forced women and choices but did not cause men to be equally responsible. Virmati's desire to be independent meets not only the attachment to traditional rules of her mother Kasturi but also her cultural world, where the communal dignity is regarded above the personal satisfaction. Eventual exclusion in her family as well as the society shows the punitive nature of female behavior, in case the females do not conform to the accepted behavior by the society. However, irrespective of her emotional distress, Virmati's decisions represent a minor rebellion against a system of oppression which enslaves her.

So in effect, the novel enacts this tension in the paradox: as Virmati pursues liberation, instead she becomes enveloped in other kinds of subordination, especially in her marriage.

The journey of Virmati is used by Kapur to condemn the hypocrisy of morality, as well as remind the reader that the number of paths open to women who seek to become self are few in the highly troubled cultural environment.

In this way, the narration of the conflict becomes symbolic and reflects a larger confrontation women of transitional societies experience themselves in between tradition and modernity, opportunity and responsibility, and conformity and independence.

In Manju Kapur *Difficult Daughters*, education of females and mobility become a strong instrument of empowerment that defies the deep seated patriarchal notions and reorganizes the position of women in a staunchly conventional society. Kapur manages to convey the concept of identity searching through pursuit of education by means of the character of Virmati. Anuradha Roy observes that, "Kapur interrogates the politics of female education, exposing how knowledge becomes both a site of empowerment and social alienation" (Roy 87). When Virmati goes to Lahore to study despite her family refusing to accommodate her wishes, the move indicates that she is rebelling against fulfilling her expected roles, to be the dutiful daughter, good wife, and self-sacrificing mother. In this case, education is not just academic progress but a statement of resistance -a clear expression of her individuality, and her resistance to conformity to social norms that inhibit women and their intellectual and personal development.

The use of mobility in this education endeavor is supplementary because it gives Virmati the physical and psychological room to reconceptualize herself. Her departure with Amritsar to Lahore has symbolic meaning because this journey represents an opportunity to leave the circle of the family ruler and ethics. This move opens her up to progressive thought and modernity of the city so that she can dream of a life outside the confines of patriarchy. But Kapur also points out the paradox of mobility, as women, like Virmati, have opportunities to be empowered and be the subject of intense scrutiny at the same time and thus always having to negotiate social morality and their own wills.

Moreover, the tribulations of Virmati have

echo in broader issues of women liberation in the pre-independence India where women awakening to their own rights coincided with the national awakening. Kapur postulates that when enrollment and movement education act as organizers of re-definition of gender power, women are provided with the power of decision, mental freedom, and self-affirmation. Nevertheless, Virmati also reflects the restrictions that may occur because of the established patriarchal system in which social disapproval and the family duty continue to jeopardize the freedom of women.

In this way, by telling the story of Virmati, Kapur shows how the mobility and education of a woman are vital tools of empowerment that, at the same time, reveal the problems and paradoxes a woman has to contend with on the way to independence in a patriarchal system.

Communicated through Shashi Deshpande, *That Long Silence*, Anita Nair, *ladies coupe*, and Manju Kapur, *Difficult Daughters*, the display of the relationship between gender inequality, women subjugation, and empowerment, is transmitted in the context of the patriarchal Indian society. Though the novels are quite different in setting and the development of their characters, they also intersect in the idea of female struggle to strike a balance between their ambitions and community demands.

In *That long silence*, Jaya has become a representation of enforced silence in women in an authoritarian world of men. Her experience can be defined as an inner battle against her culturally constructed identity showing that the marital status, familial desires, and roles push us away towards suppressing individuality. Likewise, the setting of *ladies coupe*, Anita Nair locates the space of dialogue and narration as it is through her relations with other women in the coup that Akhila realizes herself. Compared to Jaya, Akhila wants a broader shared experience and eschews personal feelings to overcome her impulse to rebel and embrace her individual self. However, in *Difficult Daughters*, the rebellion against societal norms by Virmati in an attempt to define her own identity in relation to family obligations and her own desire to have education and love is depicted. Her rebellion, however as considerable as it is, has a very high personal price attached to it as it is symbolic of

how women usually end up paying a high premium to assault patriarchal morals.

Female agency is addressed differently by the novels as well. Deshpande puts emphasis on internal struggle- Jaya does not rebel, she tries to find her voice silenced by the society. Nair, in her turn, stresses on economic, sexuality, social defiance as the means to empowerment, and Akhila ends up opting individualism over conformity to society. Kapur brings out education and mobility as ways through which the women could assert their self-control over their lives, but the escape lays bare complicated relationships of cultural morality and honors in families.

Taken together the texts emphasize gender oppression as a point at which gender oppression intersects with marriage, sexuality, education and economic independence. Whereas The Long Silence is its portrayal of silent endurance, *ladies coupe* and *Difficult Daughters* can be described more along the lines of solidarity and restoration of agency and Conflict solidarity with societal morality, the fighting between individual autonomy and societal morality. Collectively, these stories question the diverse meanings of female identity, resistance, and empowerment through the literary literature of India and reveal the continuing challenge between breaking with tradition and individual liberation.

The comparative analysis of Shashi Deshpande The Long Silence, Anita Nair *ladies coupe* and Manju Kapur *Difficult Daughters* emphasizes complicated game of gender inequity, woman opposition, and woman emancipation in the Indian patriarchal society. Though the two novels are the products of different cultural, historical and social backgrounds, they share the fact that both are written within the general scheme of struggling with individuality, freedom, and agency against oppressive conventions by women. The silent endurance of women who are trapped by fixed gender roles which turned the process of recovering the voice not only into the act of subversion but also into a process of self-discovery is signified by the journey of Jaya in The long silence. In contrast, *ladies coupe* the idea of uniting forces goes under the influence of the power of female solidarity, as the sharing and discussing of the personal experience of Akhila and other travelers

allow them to subvert the societal taboos. *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur situates the conflict that the character of Virmati faces within a historical context of pre-independence India, when education and the soul mates love affair come into conflict with established family norms, and the price of acting against social mores is revealed.

These writers take on the established norms of patriarchy through their lead characters; challenging the acceptability of ascribed identities, critiquing moral standards, and highlighting a woman deserving the right to want, move and to have a financial balance. Whereas Deshpande highlights inner conflict of identity, Nair is thrilled by communal female empowerment, Kapur by generational change of perception between love and education.

Conclusion

These stories are powerful enough collectively to shed light on the continuum of subordination and rebellion that characterizes the dynamic of women in India as well as over time and space. They expose the fact that empowerment is never a linear process nor is it absolute but, is instead a product of courage whether by silent resistance, storytelling, and ferocity of assertion in autonomy. In that way, the study further confirms the lasting relevance of these works in terms of construing the changing roles of women and the never-ending negotiations between them and the traditions, conformity and independency, oppression and liberation.

Works cited

1. Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*. Penguin Books India, 1989.
2. Kapur, Manju. *Difficult Daughters*. Penguin Books India, 1998.
3. Nair, Anita. *Ladies Coupé*. Penguin Books India, 2001.
4. Rao, P. Mallikarjun. "Female Subjectivity and Silence in Shashi Deshpande's Novels." *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2011, pp. 403–416.
5. Jain, Jasbir. *Women in Indian Literature: Tradition and Modernity*. Rawat Publications, 2010, p. 213.
6. Roy, Anuradha. *Women Writers in Post-colonial India*. Zubaan, 2012, p. 87.