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Intersecting Dimensions of Political, Cultural, and Economic Structures and Gender Disparity in the Works of Anita Nair, Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur

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Abstract

This research explores how political institutions, social frameworks, and economic systems continue to sustain gender-based discrimination between men and women in the works of Anita Nair, Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur. Through a feminist and socio-political perspective, the study examines how female characters in postcolonial Indian literature struggle against patriarchal power, cultural conditioning, and economic dependence. The selected novels Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*, Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* and Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* reveal how women's personal experiences intersect with institutional barriers that maintain gender inequality. These novels show that the oppression is not limited to private or domestic spaces but is rooted in broader political, social and economic systems that define women's roles and restrict their freedom. Each writer portrays women's attempts to resist male authority and challenge traditional expectations through both subtle and direct means. Together, their works illustrate how the personal and the political are interconnected, suggesting that women's search for selfhood and independence represents a wider struggle for equality within the patriarchal structures of postcolonial Indian society. This study shows how literature acts as a form of resistance by expressing women's hidden experiences and challenging the cultural beliefs that support their oppression. Furthermore, the novels emphasize how difficult it is to create an identity in a culture where gender norms are ingrained and frequently passed down through the generations. The stories critically examine topics like caste, class, and education, demonstrating how these intertwined elements make women's struggle for independence even more difficult. By elevating the voices of women, these writers not only highlight structural inequalities but also offer alternate avenues for social change and empowerment. The study also examines how voice, silence, and narrative agency shape female subjectivity, highlighting the potency of storytelling as a means of challenging prevailing ideologies. In the end, this research advances our knowledge of how postcolonial feminist literature balances tradition and modernity, resistance and conformity, and enhances discussions of gender and power.

Key words: *Cultural beliefs, Freedom, Independence, Inequalities and Oppression*

Introduction

The political, social and economic structures in India which are very much a part of each other's existence create a complex and at the same time a very interwoven network that is responsible for the continuation of gender based discrimination and the maintenance of patriarchal dominance in all of Indian society. In that which is public and private, Indian women experience multi layered exclusion that comes in the form of access to education which is a restricted right, to work which is a rare opportunity and to

political play which is a foreign field to them, thus which in turn puts them in to what is known as the traditional domestic role. Indian women writers have brought to the fore in their literature these issues of inequality which they see not only in black and white terms but also in the gray areas in between which are the very roots of patriarchy in our social structure. In this group of authors among the forerunners we have Anita Nair, Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur who through their works in the field of contemporary Indian English literature present in depth studies of female identity, their acts of resistance and the processes of empowerment.

These writers show how women contend with familial obligations and societal pressure, and resist the structures that uphold gender oppression. This research analyses the impact of political, social and economic structures on the creation and perpetuation of the gender gap, and the novels focus on the women who challenge these complex restraints. This research situates personal accounts within the broader socio-political landscape, emphasizing the role of literature in highlighting the on-going inadequacies that impact women in postcolonial India. This paper seeks to demonstrate the extent to which these narratives depict women's struggles for agency, self-definition, and equity within the social order. This research draws from feminist theory and postcolonial studies to explore the intersections of gender, power, and political structures within contemporary Indian society. This allows a contemporary critique of the political and social inequalities of India as reflected in the novels of Nair, Deshpande and Kapur.

Social Systems and Patriarchal Conditioning

The middle-class Indian woman Jaya from Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* faces an internal conflict between fulfilling her family duties and pursuing her personal desires. The social custom of female silence which extends beyond words controls every aspect of her existence. Through its title the novel demonstrates how society uses silence to silence women. Through marriage society establishes a system which restricts women to perform only submissive actions while they must hide their personal selves. Through her story in *Ladies Coupe* by Anita Nair Akhila fights against the traditional belief that women need marriage and childbearing to achieve happiness. The train compartment functions as a miniaturized version of Indian society because women there exchange their accounts about facing oppression and fighting against it and surviving against all odds.

The stories demonstrate how cultural standards restrict women to specific gender-based roles which block their path to independence. Manju Kapur explores the time period of colonial rule and pre-independence through *Difficult Daughters* which shows how women faced strict limitations when trying to learn or express themselves. Virmati faces social banishment because she engages in an affair with a married professor yet her actions demonstrate the social exclusion that educated women must endure when they break traditional rules.

The authors use domestic spaces including homes and marriages and motherhood to show how social patriarchy restricts women through their belief that female value stems from male connections. The authors use domestic spaces to show how social inequalities both support and challenge the existing power structures.

Political Systems and Women's Marginalization

Political systems, both colonial and postcolonial, are a significant factor in shaping women's experiences in the chosen novels. In Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, the historical backdrop of India's fight for independence mirrors Virmati's own struggle for independence. On this larger historical canvas of India's nationalist movement, Kapur highlights the irony of political freedom that comes at the cost of women being excluded from real freedom. While men become embroiled in discourses of emancipation and self-rule, women's independence is limited to reforming domesticity and moral virtue. Virmati's mother, Kasturi, symbolizes the old order of women who are completely invested in social respectability and patriarchal subservience as Virmati carries within herself new consciousness wanting an education, a sense of self, and a deep love not from predetermined forms.

Kapur implicitly critiques nationalist politics for its patriarchal agenda: women were presented as symbols of purity and nationhood, but were not granted any agency in constructing their new India. As Partha Chatterjee observes in "*The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question*," nationalist discourse divided life into the "home" and the "world," assigning women to the spiritual, domestic domain while reserving the public and political sphere for men (Chatterjee 238). Virmati's isolation from both the nationalist movement and her family's approval reflects this ideological bifurcation. Even when she attempts to engage in education

and thought, her worth is evaluated in relation to men. In opposition, *That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande, and *Ladies Coupe* by Anita Nair, moves the politics of discourse away from the national to the microcosmic space of the domestic space. Both Deshpande and Nair engage with the political discourse of gender at the domestic level, illustrating that the family itself is simply a smaller political state, with hierarchies, control, and sanctions. The husband serves as the ruler or legislator; the wife and children are subjects who must conform to the husband's authority. In Jaya's life in *That Long Silence*, we can see how both her life and her silence reflect this domestic political order. Her silence is not only personal, but also serves a political purpose, as a form of compliance, within a household that is patriarchal where deviance from the husband's authority is met with punishment. The authority of Jaya's husband Mohan, represents the masculine state - rational, controlling, and intolerant of disorder. By breaking her silence and reclaiming her voice, Jaya engages in an act of political resistance that interrupts the micro-politics of gendered power. Deshpande has thereby reconfigured what appears to be an intimate, apolitical narrative into a poignant political commentary on the state, which reproduces patriarchy within domestic life.

For these novelists, these illustrations uncover how women's oppression starts at home, alongside their experiences in the workplace, the legal sphere, and socially expected norms. Essentially, these authors show that patriarchy operates as a political structure masked as family structure. Through moral discourse, emotional persuasion, or social obligation, women became invisible in both spheres, whether it was in the nationalist movement, or in the domestic. When Kapur, Deshpande, and Nair made space for their protagonists to speak, move, write, or refuse, they were engaging with fiction as a political act an act that meaningfully disrupts democratic claims to freedom through a feminist lens.

Economic Systems and Female Dependency

Economic dependence continues to be one of the most powerful mechanisms of gender inequality, shaping not only women's material conditions but also their psychological and social identities. Feminist theorists, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Heidi Hartmann, have written that women's economic marginalization is structurally produced through patriarchy and capitalism. As Beauvoir observes in *The Second Sex* (1949), a woman's socialization is designed to make her economically

and emotionally dependent on men, a condition that perpetuates her secondary status within both the family and society. Similarly, Hartmann, in her analysis of "the unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism," emphasizes that capitalism relies on patriarchal control over women's unpaid domestic labor, which sustains male dominance within economic production and reproduction

Historical economic systems both colonial and postcolonial have long limited women's access to property, paid work, and financial independence. This restriction undergirds the gendered subordination within the fiction of Shashi Deshpande, Anita Nair, and Manju Kapur. In Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, economic dependency illustrates the restrictions put on protagonist Jaya's identity and freedom within the marriage. Jaya's middle-class homemaker status ties her value to her husband Mohan's professional achievements, which renders her unpaid domestic duties invisible. While Deshpande's critique of this middle-class ideal draws attention to the moral virtue associated with economic subservience, Jaya's later choice to return to her writing not only symbolizes her creative expression but also her financial independence and assertion of agency in the patriarchal economy. Deshpande also positions the glorification of female domesticity as moral virtue against the backdrop of postcolonial Indian bourgeois society to further argue for male-centered capitalism and hegemony over female independence. Akhila, an income tax officer who is unmarried, occupies spaces of economic independence, yet still exists in a realm of social and emotional isolation. Nair illustrates how financial provisioning does not necessarily bastion psychological freedom to liberate women in a patriarchal order. Through the lives of women including maids, teachers, and homemakers. Nair interrogates how class and gender dynamics contribute to maintaining dependency. Many of the women, despite earning income, remain subject to their husbands or existing social constructions. Nair employs her novels to demonstrate that the women's economic empowerment must be joined with social acceptance and psychological independence to promulgate liberation. Manju Kapur's interlinks economic hardship with education and colonial change. While gaining an education opens doors to both economic and social mobility for Virmati, her attainment does not free her from bodily and financial subjugation. Kapur critiques the colonial economy of India and the bourgeois family for sustaining varieties of gender hierarchies that restrict women to moral and domestic labor.

In these novels, as Deshpande, Nair, and Kapur show, economic systems define how much agency women have over their own lives through dependence, familial class hierarchies, and their economic relationship to domestic or care work. Their protagonists' efforts to gain financial and personal legitimacy highlight the feminist struggle to gain equality within the dialectics of patriarchy and capitalism.

Resistance and Reclamation of Self

Despite the pervasive and entrenched nature of patriarchal oppression, the novels of Anita Nair, Shashi Deshpande, and Manju Kapur consistently portray their female protagonists as dynamic agents of change and transformation. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya's courageous decision to break her long-held silence emerges as a powerful act of resistance, marking her refusal to remain complicit in the erasure of her own identity and desires. Similarly, Akhila's journey in *Ladies Coupe* is emblematic of a profound process of self-discovery and assertion, as she confronts societal expectations and negotiates her autonomy within a framework that often devalues independent women. Meanwhile, Virmati's pursuit of education in *Difficult Daughters* represents not only personal ambition but also a challenge to the gendered limitations imposed by both colonial and traditional Indian structures. Though these acts of defiance are often intimate and personal, their implications extend into the political sphere, disrupting the prevailing ideologies that uphold gender inequality and social subordination.

By moving beyond mere portrayals of victimhood and oppression, these novels foreground the emergence of female subjectivity as a critical theme. The protagonists' growing self-awareness and assertion of agency signal a significant shift from passive endurance of patriarchal constraints to active self-definition and empowerment. This evolution reflects a nuanced understanding of resistance that transcends overt rebellion or revolutionary upheaval. Instead, the authors advocate for a reformation grounded in consciousness-raising and introspective transformation. They call for a reimagining of gender relations that operates within, yet challenges, existing socio-political and cultural systems. Through this subtle but profound form of resistance, the novels highlight the importance of women reclaiming control over their bodies, voices, and choices as essential steps toward dismantling systemic inequality.

In doing so, Nair, Deshpande, and Kapur's narratives offer a vision of empowerment that is both attainable and sustainable one rooted in the reclamation of selfhood and the assertion of individual dignity. Their heroines embody the possibilities of change that arise not only from external social movements but also from internal awakening, reflecting the multifaceted nature of feminist resistance in postcolonial Indian society. Thus, the reclamation of self in these novels is not merely a personal triumph but a form of political agency that challenges and transforms the structures that seek to confine women's identities and roles.

Conclusion

Gender inequality is a network of social, economic, and political oppressions rather than a single phenomenon, as demonstrated by the fiction of Anita Nair, Shashi Deshpande, and Manju Kapur. These writers promote women's self-realization as a means of emancipation and contest patriarchal structures through their female protagonists. Their creations shed light on the changing terrain of Indian womanhood, where resistance manifests itself in a variety of ways, including solitude, education, storytelling, and silence. The interaction between women's agency and power structures emphasizes that real equality necessitates change at all structural levels, not just in people's personal lives. These authors reveal the inseparability of individual liberty and social change by redefining the limits of the domestic and public spheres. Their stories compel readers to view women as active agents who actively shape their own destinies rather than as helpless victims. In the end, their fiction serves as a window into social realities as well as a tool for imagining a more just society.

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