

The Alienated, the Silenced, and the Reinvented Self: Three Figures of Female Subjectivity in the Fiction of Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Bharati Mukherjee

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Abstract

Criticism of women's representation in Indian fiction has tended to read its major novelists in isolation, to privilege thematic content over narrative form, and to treat "the Indian woman" as a relatively unitary category. This article addresses these gaps through a comparative feminist reading of three novelists usually kept apart by the institutional division between "Indian English" and "diasporic" literary study: Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Bharati Mukherjee. It argues that the three construct three distinct yet mutually illuminating figures of female subjectivity—the *alienated* self, whose predicament is interiorised as psychic crisis (Desai); the *silenced* self, who negotiates the oppression and the uses of silence toward a qualified voice (Deshpande); and the *reinvented* self, who refashions identity across borders at a cost the fiction does not always acknowledge (Mukherjee). Reading the novels through existential, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial-feminist frameworks, and attending throughout to focalisation, narrative time, and symbolic form, the article contends that these three figures are best understood not as a developmental sequence in which diasporic agency supersedes national constraint, but as coexisting strategies, each disclosing what the others repress. It further argues that all three imaginations remain bounded by an upper-caste, middle-class vantage that the analysis makes visible as a limit rather than a norm. The study contributes a comparative, form-attentive, and intersectional model for reading women's fiction across the national/diasporic divide.

Keywords: Indian English fiction; feminist literary criticism; female subjectivity; Anita Desai; Shashi Deshpande; Bharati Mukherjee; postcolonial feminism; narrative form; intersectionality; diaspora

1. Introduction

The representation of women in Indian fiction has generated an extensive body of criticism, yet that criticism has been shaped by three persistent habits that limit its purchase. The first is a tendency to study major novelists in isolation, producing rich single-author monographs but rarely the sustained comparison that would reveal how differently the available strategies of representation actually work. The second is a subordination of narrative form to thematic content: the analysis of *what happens* to women characters has overwhelmingly predominated over the analysis of *how* their experience is narrated, so that focalisation, narrative time, and symbolic patterning are frequently named but seldom made the substance

of the argument. The third is a homogenising impulse—registered and criticised by Indian feminist scholarship but not thereby dispelled—that treats "the Indian woman" as a unitary figure, noting the caste and class location of characters in passing rather than making it analytically central (Tharu and Lalita; Sunder Rajan).

This article addresses these three limitations together by reading, comparatively and across the divide that usually separates them, three novelists whose imaginations of the female self are strikingly distinct: Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Bharati Mukherjee. Desai and Deshpande are conventionally located within the Indian English novel, Mukherjee within diasporic or Asian-American writing, and the institutional separation of these fields has obscured a comparison that this article contends is uniquely revealing. Its central claim is that the three construct three coherent and mutually illuminating figures of female subjectivity, here named the *alienated*, the *silenced*, and the *reinvented* self, and that the comparative relation among these figures—rather than any one of them in isolation—constitutes the most productive object of analysis.

The argument proceeds in four moves. It first sets out the theoretical and critical framework and the method. It then reads each novelist in turn, establishing the distinctive figure of selfhood each constructs and the narrative form through which that figure is achieved. Finally, in a comparative discussion, it argues two theses that together constitute the article's contribution: first, that the three figures must be read not as a developmental progression from constraint to freedom but as coexisting strategies, each purchased at a distinctive cost; and second, that all three, for all their differences, share an upper-caste, middle-class horizon that the analysis must register as a limit on their representation of Indian womanhood.

2. Theoretical Framework and Critical Context

The reading offered here draws on several strands of feminist thought, on the principle that no single framework is adequate to the range of the material and that the disagreements among them are analytically productive. Its most basic analytic derives from Simone de Beauvoir's account of woman as the Other against whom man constitutes himself as subject, and of femininity as a cultural becoming rather than a natural essence: her proposition that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (283) reframes womanhood as a process directed by the institutions and narratives that surround the female subject. This existential frame is supplemented by psychoanalytic attention to the formation of gendered subjectivity in the unconscious—indispensable to Desai—and by Judith Butler's argument that gender is performatively constituted through repeated enactment rather than expressed from a prior essence, which illuminates Mukherjee's serial selves.

The framework's centre of gravity, however, lies in its postcolonial and intersectional commitments, which discipline the application of the rest. Gayatri Spivak's interrogation of whether the gendered subaltern can be heard, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of the homogenised "third world woman" produced under "Western eyes," together caution against reading the Indian woman as a uniform victim awaiting liberation along a Western trajectory. For the Indian material this caution is given specific content by Uma Chakravarti's demonstration that gender subordination cannot be disaggregated from caste, since the control of female sexuality functions as the mechanism by which caste purity and patrilineal succession are reproduced (579). Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's account of the Indian woman as a figure produced and contested across competing discourses, neither simply a victim of tradition nor a free liberal subject, supplies the corresponding literary-critical orientation.

To these thematic frameworks the article joins a commitment to the analysis of narrative form, drawing on Gérard Genette's account of focalisation—the question of whose perception orients a narrative—and of narrative time, which furnishes precise instruments for distinguishing the novelists' methods. The wager throughout is that the portrayal of woman is inseparable from the form of her portrayal, and that a feminist reading attentive only to what befalls characters, and not to how their experience is narrated, forfeits much of what fiction discloses. This form-plus-feminism orientation, and the insistence on intersectional difference, together define the article's departure from the descriptive, theme-bound, single-author criticism that has dominated the field.

3. Corpus and Method

The study is qualitative, interpretive, and comparative. Its method is close textual analysis informed by the frameworks above and conducted along two axes: intra-textual reading of each novel as a structure of character, form, and figuration, and inter-textual reading of the novels against one another, across each author's oeuvre and across the three authors. Comparison here is a method of discovery rather than a mode of presentation: by holding a theme constant—marriage, silence, the body, migration, alienation—and varying the author, the analysis isolates what is distinctive in each writer's treatment.

The corpus comprises, for Desai, *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Fasting, Feasting*, and *Clear Light of Day*; for Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *That Long Silence*, *Roots and Shadows*, and *A Matter of Time*; and for Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, *The Holder of the World*, and *Leave It to Me*. These novels are selected for their centrality to each writer's engagement with women's experience, for their range across the psychological, social-realist, and diasporic modes, and for their comparability across a shared preoccupation with female selfhood under patriarchal constraint.

4. Anita Desai: The Alienated Self

Desai's distinctive contribution was to turn the Indian English novel inward, shifting its centre of gravity from the public world of nation and community to the interior life of the female psyche. Her characteristic event is not an action but a state of mind, and her characteristic subject is the cultivated, middle- or upper-class woman whose sensibility and intelligence find no adequate field of exercise and whose surplus of unused interior life turns inward as obsession, alienation, and, in the extreme, madness. Early criticism fixed on this quality as "feminine sensibility," a phrase that both honoured Desai's psychological fineness and threatened to confine her to an apolitical aesthetic of feeling (Bande). The reading offered here resists that confinement: Desai's interiors are the inward face of a social order, and her women's psychic crises are coded responses to determinate conditions of marriage, family, and gendered constraint.

The formal instrument of this vision is a narration densely focalised, in Genette's sense, through the consciousness of the female protagonist, so that the reader inhabits the heroine's mind and shares both its acuity and its distortions. In *Cry, the Peacock*, the young wife Maya, married to the older, emotionally arid Gautama and haunted by an astrologer's prophecy that one of the couple will die, is rendered wholly from within, so that her disproportionate grief and mounting obsession register not as diagnosable hysteria—her husband's verdict—but as evidence of a genuine emotional starvation. The astrologer's prophecy operates less as a supernatural device than as the form Maya's entrapment takes in her own mind: the name she gives to a future foreclosed, the obsessive object of a consciousness that has no other, no work and no project, nothing in Beauvoir's terms but immanence. Her killing of Gautama and subsequent madness are not liberation but the catastrophic externalisation of a stifled agency that can express itself

only as destruction; Desai's refusal of a redemptive ending measures the seriousness of her account of confinement.

Voices in the City distributes this analysis across a family and a city, contrasting the fates of two sisters. Monisha, married into a wealthy, tradition-bound Calcutta joint family and childless, records her suffocation in a secret diary—Desai's formal acknowledgement that the silenced woman's truth survives only in the margins of the spoken world—before ending her life by self-immolation, a death whose medium of fire carries a resonance at once personal and cultural. Amla, working in the city and drawn into an unhappy love, embodies the possibility of a modern, urban womanhood that Monisha is denied, yet the freedom the city offers is shadowed by the same alienation, and the novel figures Calcutta itself as a devouring Kali, situating the sisters' crises within a cultural mythology of ambivalent female power. In *Fasting, Feasting*, Desai's method matures into a cross-cultural critique conducted through the master-symbol of food. The Indian daughter Uma, denied education and marriage and reduced to the servant of her fused parental authority ("MamaPapa"), is figured alimentarily as the one who serves and is herself unnourished; the novel's American half discovers, in the bulimia of the Patton daughter, a related pathology of consumption, refusing the consoling contrast between an oppressive India and a liberating West. The fate of Uma's brilliant cousin Anamika—married off in place of an Oxford scholarship, abused, and finally burned to death in a transparent dowry murder—is Desai's most unsparing stroke, and its intersectional specificity is exact: this is the violence by which the propertied family secures its status through the control of women, precisely as Chakravarti's analysis would predict.

Across these novels Desai's method displays a symbolic density that is diagnostic rather than decorative. In *Cry, the Peacock* the recurrent figure of the dancing Shiva—Nataraja, whose dance is at once creation and destruction—and the peacock myth that gives the novel its title, in which the birds cry in agony for the rains and mate as they die, fuse desire and death into a single image, so that Maya's longing for life and intimacy is inseparable from the death-haunted terms in which she can conceive it. The three-part structure of that novel enacts formally the closing of a trap, and the near-total internal focalisation ensures that the reader experiences that closing from within a deteriorating mind rather than judging it from without. In *Voices in the City* the diary through which Monisha records her suffocation is a comparable formal choice: denied any outlet in the life of the household, the silenced woman's truth survives only in secret writing, in the margins of the spoken world. Form, in Desai, is not the vehicle of meaning but its substance, and this is the deepest answer to the charge that she is a novelist of mere private feeling.

Against the bleakness of these novels, *Clear Light of Day* offers a qualified counter-case in Bim, the unmarried history teacher whose economic independence and intellectual engagement constitute a genuine, if bounded, autonomy realised within rather than against the family. That the novel's movement is toward reconciliation rather than escape has divided critics; the reading here holds that Desai presents Bim's reconciliation as valuable—a psychological wholeness the other heroines never approach—while declining to disguise that it is a reconciliation with, and not a liberation from, the structures of family and tradition. Bim's autonomy is the most Desai's imagination affirms, and its boundedness measures the constraint even her freest woman cannot wholly transcend. Across the four novels, Desai renders a social analysis through a psychological method: she does not lecture on patriarchy but immerses the reader in the consciousness it produces, making the structure of oppression felt as the texture of a mind. Her inwardness is her politics—and its limit is a near-exclusive concentration on the privileged classes, whose leisure becomes the empty space in which obsession breeds.

5. Shashi Deshpande: The Silenced Self

Where Desai's mode is the immersive rendering of a consciousness in crisis, Deshpande's is the spare, ironic, retrospective realism of the educated middle-class woman examining her own life. Her heroines are not idle aesthetes but working women—doctors, teachers, writers—who have received the education and entered the professions that liberal modernity offered as instruments of emancipation, and whose predicament is the discovery that these have not delivered the autonomy they promised. Her great subject is the gap between the formal equality of the modern Indian woman and the subordination that survives within marriage and family; her great theme is silence, understood with a distinctive doubleness as both imposed oppression and chosen strategy (Sunita Reddy).

The formal signature of this project is first-person retrospective narration, in which the ironic gap between the self that acted and the self that now judges becomes the medium of analysis. This is a point much of the criticism, fixated on a simple silence-to-voice arc, has missed: Deshpande's narrators are not transparent mouthpieces but constructed, self-questioning, sometimes unreliable voices, and the reader is invited to weigh their self-accounts (Sebastian). *The Dark Holds No Terrors* stages the dark underside of the liberal promise: the successful doctor Sarita earns more and enjoys more standing than her husband, and this reversal of the expected hierarchy curdles into nocturnal sexual violence as the husband, humiliated by day, punishes the wife whose success the gender order cannot accommodate. Deshpande's explicit treatment of marital rape—bold for an Indian novel of 1980—exemplifies the radical-feminist insight that the most intimate relations are organised by power, and the novel layers this marital crisis over a childhood wound of maternal rejection, locating the mother-daughter relationship as a primary site where patriarchal values are transmitted from woman to woman.

That Long Silence is Deshpande's fullest treatment of silence as at once condition and strategy. Confined to a cramped flat when her husband is implicated in a professional inquiry, the narrator Jaya reckons with a life built on a silence she has herself maintained: she has suppressed her anger and abandoned the writing that expressed her real feeling, because to speak truly would have threatened the marriage. Her silence is thus both imposed and chosen, and its breaking is correspondingly fraught; the novel ends not with a triumphant assumption of voice but with a tentative resolution whose success it pointedly leaves open. Read through Spivak's question about the subaltern's capacity to speak, Jaya's movement toward voice is real but hedged with the recognition that the available forms of speech may not accommodate what she has to say. *Roots and Shadows* extends the analysis to the transmission of patriarchy between women through the figure of the dead matriarch Akka, who ruled the joint family and who embodies the way women become the enforcers of the very order that has constrained them; the educated Indu discovers that her apparent emancipation conceals a deeper self-suppression. *A Matter of Time*, uniquely abandoning first-person narration for an omniscient third that matches its almost mythic treatment of recurrence, sets a daughter's abandonment by her husband against her mother's decades-long marital silence, suggesting the reproduction of women's endurance across generations while registering, in the granddaughters' clear-eyed refusal, the possibility of change. The subtlety of Deshpande's method lies in a narration that invites suspicion of its own narrator. Jaya, Sarita, and Indu recount their lives in a retrospective first person shadowed by irony, and the reader is positioned to notice the evasions and rationalisations that structure their self-accounts—to read against the grain of the very voice that solicits sympathy. This unreliability is not a flaw but the instrument of Deshpande's realism: it registers the difficulty of self-knowledge for a woman schooled in accommodation, and it refuses the consoling clarity of the confessional. When Jaya recognises that she has silenced herself as much as she has been silenced, the recognition is hedged with

the awareness that even this insight may be another of the stories she tells to make her life bearable. Deshpande thus complicates the silence-to-voice paradigm that dominates her criticism: voice, when it comes, is neither pure nor final, and the woman who breaks her silence must reckon with the possibility that speech is its own kind of performance.

The generational reach of *A Matter of Time* extends this analysis into historical time. By setting Sumi's abandonment beside her mother Kalyani's—a woman condemned to decades of marital silence after her husband simply ceased to speak to her—the novel discloses a pattern of women's endurance reproduced across generations, and its shift to omniscient narration lends that pattern an almost mythic inevitability. Yet the youngest generation's refusal to accept their elders' resignation keeps the question of change open, and it is characteristic of Deshpande that she poses the possibility of transformation as a question the daughters must answer rather than a promise the novel can make. Deshpande's achievement is a fiction adequate to the specific texture of the modern woman's subordination—one that operates not through spectacular confinement but through daily accommodations and self-suppressions—though her women, almost uniformly upper-caste, urban, and educated, represent a particular and privileged fraction of Indian womanhood.

6. Bharati Mukherjee: The Reinvented Self

Mukherjee's fiction belongs to a different world—of migration, diaspora, and the violent remaking of the self across borders—and is animated by a different ideology, which she articulated with combative clarity. Repudiating the nostalgia of the expatriate who clings to an originary homeland, she embraced the figure of the immigrant who sheds the past and is reborn in the New World, insisting that this transformation, however violent, is a kind of triumph ("American Dreamer"). Her heroines are accordingly kinetic figures in motion, remaking their identities as they cross from one world to another, and the formal correlative of this vision is a fractured, accelerated, present-tense narration whose very breathlessness enacts the shedding of selves it describes.

Jasmine follows its protagonist through a sequence of names and selves—Jyoti, born in a Punjabi village; Jasmine, renamed by her modern husband; widowed at seventeen; an illegal immigrant to America who is raped on her first night and kills her attacker; Jase, a caregiver in New York; and Jane, the partner of an Iowa banker whom she leaves, at the novel's close, to follow her former employer to California, vowing to "reposition the stars" against the astrologer who had foretold her widowhood. Read through Butler's account of identity as performatively constituted, Jasmine's serial selfhood is the novel's deepest theme: she is not a fixed self that survives her transformations but a series of selves called into being by successive situations (Alam). Yet the celebratory reading Mukherjee's rhetoric invites must be held against the novel's evidence. Jasmine's reinventions are purchased through extraordinary violence, and the exuberant rhetoric of rebirth tends to aestheticise that violence, recoding trauma as opportunity; moreover, as postcolonial critics have noted, the novel's celebration of American self-fashioning rests on an implicit contrast between a static, fatalistic India and a dynamic, liberating America that verges on the Orientalist opposition Mohanty's critique warned against (González and Oliva). *The Holder of the World* extends the inquiry into the transnational self across three centuries, recovering, through a contemporary narrator's quest for a fabled diamond, the life of a seventeenth-century New England Puritan woman who travels to Mughal India and becomes the lover of a Hindu raja; a deliberate rewriting of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, it projects the immigrant theme back into colonial history and claims for the transnational woman a long lineage (Maxey). *Leave It to Me* pursues the logic of reinvention to a darker extreme, following an adopted

Indian-American woman who reinvents herself as "Devi" in a violent quest to avenge herself upon her biological parents, so that self-fashioning shades into annihilation. The sequence of names is the novel's central formal device, each renaming marking a violent rupture rather than an organic growth: Jyoti is remade as Jasmine by a husband who would modernise her, Jasmine becomes Jase in the aftermath of the rape she survives and avenges, and Jase becomes Jane in the domesticity she will finally abandon. The framing prophecy of the village astrologer, who foretells widowhood and exile, is the fate against which the whole trajectory is pitched, and Jasmine's closing vow to reposition the stars claims for the migrant an authorship of destiny that Desai's and Deshpande's women never approach. Yet the novel purchases this authorship through the killing of her rapist and the abandonment of the paralysed Bud, and its exhilaration is inseparable from these acts, so that the reader is left to weigh liberation against its human cost.

Mukherjee's own polemical repudiation of the expatriate in favour of the immigrant, and her insistence that the shedding of the past is a triumph, shape the novel's rhetoric and, arguably, its blind spots. The vision of America as a space of infinite self-invention rests on an implicit contrast with a static, fatalistic India that the novel does little to complicate, and this contrast reproduces, in the register of celebration, the Orientalist opposition that Mohanty's critique of Western feminist scholarship identified. *The Holder of the World*, rewriting Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* across three centuries, and *Leave It to Me*, reworking the Electra myth into a narrative of vengeance, extend the preoccupation with the self remade through rupture into, respectively, the affirmative register of transhistorical hybridity and the destructive register of annihilation—marking the outer bounds of Mukherjee's imagination of reinvention. Mukherjee's heroines possess an agency Desai's and Deshpande's are largely denied—they act, move, and refashion themselves rather than suffering inwardly or negotiating in place—but that agency detaches the individual from the social, aestheticises the violence migration entails, and rests on a denigration of the Indian past that postcolonial feminism teaches us to distrust.

7. Discussion: Three Coexisting Strategies

The foregoing readings yield three distinct figures of the female self: Desai's *alienated* self, whose predicament is interiorised and whose resistance is inward and often self-destructive; Deshpande's *silenced* self, whose predicament is enacted in the social drama of speech and silence and whose resistance is the negotiated movement toward voice; and Mukherjee's *reinvented* self, whose predicament is the constraint of origin and whose resistance is the violent refashioning of identity across borders. The article's first substantive claim is that these must be read not as three stages of a single progress but as coexisting strategies, each disclosing what the others repress. It is tempting to arrange them as a developmental sequence—from the interiorised suffering of Desai, through the negotiated voice of Deshpande, to the externalised agency of Mukherjee—and much comparative criticism has implicitly done so. But such a sequence reproduces, in literary history, exactly the teleology that postcolonial feminism has taught us to distrust, in which the diasporic, agentive woman represents an advance upon the constrained, silent one, and migration is equated with emancipation (Mohanty). The comparison resists this. Mukherjee's diasporic freedom is purchased through a violence and an erasure of the social that the national novels, for all their constraint, do not exact; the "home" that is a psychic prison for Desai's Maya and a site of return and reckoning for Deshpande's Sumi is, for Mukherjee's Jasmine, merely something to be shed—and the novel's evasion of the cost of that shedding is itself revealing.

This reading intervenes in the liveliest debate in the Mukherjee criticism, between those who celebrate her heroines' agency as a genuinely emancipatory vision and those who read it as a capitulation to an

assimilationist mythology that erases the violence of migration (González and Oliva). The comparative frame adopted here suggests that the debate is wrongly posed as a choice. Jasmine's agency is real, and so is its cost, and the novel's ideological difficulty lies precisely in its reluctance to hold the two together. Set beside Deshpande's scrupulous accounting of what the negotiation of silence costs, and Desai's unflinching registration of the price of confinement, Mukherjee's evasion becomes legible as an evasion—not because her vision of agency is false, but because it is purchased by looking away from what agency destroys. The comparison, in other words, does not adjudicate between celebration and critique so much as diagnose the conditions under which each becomes possible, and it is this diagnostic yield that justifies reading the three novelists together rather than apart.

The differences are legible along several axes at once. On tradition and modernity, Desai's women are caught within tradition's interior, Deshpande's inhabit the gap between a modern education and an unreformed order, and Mukherjee's break with tradition altogether. On silence and voice, Desai's women are silent in the mode of the unsaid interior, Deshpande's enact the explicit drama of silence as both oppression and strategy, and Mukherjee's speak themselves into being. On marriage, it is for Desai an impossibility issuing in madness or death, for Deshpande an institution to be negotiated and often preserved, and for Mukherjee a bond to be serially shed. Crucially, these thematic differences track formal ones exactly: Desai's internal focalisation and saturated symbolism render the alienated interior; Deshpande's ironic first-person retrospection renders the negotiated silence; Mukherjee's fractured, present-tense parataxis renders the kinetic reinvention. In each case the portrayal of woman is inseparable from the form of her portrayal, and the comparison confirms that a criticism inattentive to focalisation, narrative time, and symbolic patterning forfeits much of what these novels disclose.

The article's second substantive claim concerns a limit the comparison makes visible. For all their differences, the three novelists share a striking commonality: their women are, with the partial and quickly transcended exception of Mukherjee's village-born Jasmine, overwhelmingly of the privileged classes—upper-caste, educated, propertied or professional. The labouring woman, the Dalit woman, the woman whose oppression is material before it is psychological, lies largely outside the range of all three (Chakravarti; Tharu and Lalita). This shared limitation is not a reason to dismiss these novelists but a reason to read them precisely: what they represent, with great power, is the predicament of a particular and privileged fraction of Indian womanhood, and the fuller representation of women across caste and class remains a task their fiction points toward but does not complete. To name this limit is to honour, rather than betray, the intersectional and postcolonial-feminist commitments that have guided the analysis (Sunder Rajan).

8. Conclusion

To read Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Bharati Mukherjee together is to be reminded that there is no single Indian woman and no single way of representing her. The alienated consciousness, the negotiated silence, and the reinvented self are not three points on a road from bondage to freedom but three distinct and serious answers to the shared question of how a woman may become a subject rather than remain an object within the structures that seek to define her. Each answer is partial, each is purchased at a price, and each illuminates the others; and all three, for all their power, are bounded by the privileged vantage from which they are written. This article has argued that the comparative, form-attentive, and intersectional reading of these novelists—across the institutional divide that ordinarily separates the national from the diasporic—yields a richer account of women's representation in Indian fiction than any

single-author or theme-bound study can provide, and that the typology of the alienated, silenced, and reinvented self offers one framework for understanding both the achievement of these writers and the fuller representation, across every line of caste and class and language, that remains to be carried forward.

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