

The Search for Identity: Women's Inner Conflicts in Shashi Deshpande's Selected Novels

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 18 Feb 2026; Received in revised form: 16 Mar 2026; Accepted: 20 Mar 2026; Available online: 24 Mar 2026</p> <p>©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— Shashi Deshpande, Search for Identity, Psychological Realism, Feminist Criticism, Silence, Domesticity, Self-Building, Indian English Fiction.</p>	<p><i>This paper explores the struggles and identity searches of female characters in the novels of Shashi Deshpande, one of the brightest modern authors writing in Indian English literature. Through the analysis of her significant works, such as <i>That Long Silence</i>, <i>Roots and Shadows</i>, and <i>The Binding Vine</i>, the study also considers <i>The Dark Holds No Terrors</i> and <i>Small Remedies</i>, making a total of five selected novels. The focus will be on how Deshpande represents the concept of the inner psyche and the silent sufferings that the middle-class female characters must endure as they juggle the societal pressures and the power of choice. The research is based on a qualitative approach based on feminist literary criticism and psychological realism, and deals with the chasm of tradition and modernity through which these characters are moving. Those results show that the home space and the meaning of the so-called long silence, which at first were the means of patriarchy's subjection, are transformed into a noetic space that enables an odyssey of self-Bildung and self-epiphanies. The focus on minutiae of everyday life, highlighted by Deshpande, reflects an arena of critical reclamation and empowerment through which women can create little individual spaces of resistance and move out of passive subjectivity onto the offensive agency. In conclusion, the discussion confirms that Deshpande made a contribution in shedding light in the depth of the psychologicality and the lifelong search of selfhood in a society bound by tradition.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande is commonly recognized as one of the brightest representatives of modern Indian English literature, especially with her sophisticated descriptions of the inner world and mental terrain of

Indian middle-class women (Lata, 2024; Sharma, 2021). Her literary reputation is supported by such awards as the Sahitya Akademi Award for *That Long Silence* in 1990 and Padma Shri in 2009 (Dickman, 1998; Sharma, 2021). In contrast to authors who pay

more attention to sociopolitical changes occurring outside the home, Deshpande's narratives explore the breakdown of communication, the silences, and the lies that fill the home and the institution of marriage (Gopal, 2009). She holds a unique niche among the modern female authors like Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri, who have incorporated deep introspection into the mental trauma of her characters (Kadam, 2022; King and Deshpande, 1988).

The quest for identity turns out to be the dominant theme throughout her work, as it demonstrates the great clash between fixed social values and individual assertion needs (Krishnaiah, 2021; Mondal, 2023). This search is also often represented as a fight to express oneself in a traditionally-constrained society that tends to require the silence of women (Paghdal & Vaghela, 2023; Yadav, 1999). The protagonist of the novel, Jaya, in novels like *That Long Silence*, is determined by this inner conflict, which she tries to balance between the roles of a housewife, mother, and a curtailed writer on the one hand and the duties of a woman living in society on the other hand (A & Christopher, 2024). Likewise, in the case of the work entitled *Roots and Shadows*, the author introduces the audience to the character of Indu, indicating the desire of the modern lady to be independent and claims that she requires an identity of her own, rather than her family-related definitions (Lata, 2024). Alongside these, novels such as *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *The Binding Vine*, and *Small Remedies* also portray women's struggles with silence, identity, and the pressures of tradition.

The work by Deshpande is defined as psychological realism, which has elaborated on frustrations and the silent sufferings of women (Paghdal & Vaghela, 2023; Panigrahi, 2025). Her characters are usually contemporary, educated women who are trapped in a chasm between tradition and modernity, who have to weigh the pressure of self-acculturation and the suffocating standards of patriarchal subjectification (Seoda & Sharma, 2025). Dwelling on the details of real life, Deshpande depicts how identities are brought into being through the limitations of the home (Sen et al., 2013).

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine how female leads experience a psychological journey of dealing with the conflict between tradition and personal freedom
2. To analyse how silence can be a form of patriarchal oppression and self-exploration
3. To assess the role of the domestic sphere as a space of reclaiming female agency
4. To discuss the shift in passivity and subjectivity into personal empowerment

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In line with the aims and objectives, this research paper answers the following research questions:

1. What does Shashi Deshpande do with her female characters to develop their psychological development in the context of tradition and modernity?
2. How does silence serve as a means of patriarchal domination and a means of self-realization?
3. What techniques are used to transform the domestic sphere as a location of resistance and identity in her novels?
4. What are the instances of negotiation of the transition of the protagonists in Deshpande to active agency?

IV. RESEARCH GAP

Although the theme of feminism is widely covered in the literature about Deshpande, the aspect of a closer analytical interest in the noetic space of silence as a location of cognitive growth needs to be discussed in detail (A & Christopher, 2024). The extent of silence that has been studied in the past is mostly unrelated, as it is understood as negative (Paghdal & Vaghela, 2023). The proposed study attempts to fill that gap, exploring silence as a place of reduction of mental clutter and Self-Building (A & Christopher, 2024; Seoda and Sharma, 2025). Also, the paper provides the combined study of the role of triviality of domestic life as both ethical and political signifiers beyond a mere description to a solid theoretical discussion of the psychological realism of Deshpande (Majumdar, 2005; Panigrahi, 2025).

V. LITERATURE REVIEW

The critical discourse about Deshpande is focused on her ability to outline the complex interiority of Indian women of the middle class (Lata, 2024). Her stories have been explored by academics using the prism of feminist literary criticism and postcolonial theory, among other theories (Afrin et al., 2022; Tharu, 2024).

5.1 Feminist Consciousness and Gender Construction.

Feminism can be used in the work of Deshpande as a strict pattern of explaining the difference between female sensibility and the male experience (Sharma, 2021; Trivedi, 2022). According to critics, her stories explore the psychosomatic, social, and cultural construction of femininity (Sharma, 2021). Suman Lata points out that feminist consciousness in the texts by Deshpande consists of a subtle sense of fear that is expressed through the negotiations of the characters in the texts between tradition and autonomy (Lata, 2024). This aligns with de Beauvoir's claim that one is not born but becomes a woman, a point Deshpande develops by presenting images of gender identity shaped by social conventions (Lata, 2024).

5.2 Inner Psyche and Psychological Realism.

The use of psychological realism to explore the inner soul is also one characteristic of the stylistic signature that Deshpande uses (Paghdal and Vaghela, 2023; Sharma, 2021). In such a way, she is able to express the silent afflictions and the clutter of the mind that were created by the mundane domesticities (A & Christopher, 2024; Paghdal and Vaghela, 2023). In her novels, researchers find the presence of an odyssey of becoming in which the protagonists, including Jaya, have their epiphanies during the negotiations between tradition and modernity (Seoda & Sharma, 2025). Her approach is often likened to the method of the author, Virginia Woolf, to define individual identity by using the so-called Stream of Consciousness (A & Christopher, 2024).

5.3 The Domestic Sphere and the Everyday

The home environment serves not only as the background but as the point of healing and empowerment (Sen et al., 2013). According to critics, identities are created by the subtlety of the ordinary, where women create small spaces of resistance of the individual (Sen et al., 2013). According to Saikat

multiple suggestions by Deshpande suggest that the emphatic attention of the banalities of domestic life is a serious signifier of cultural and ethical knowledge (Majumdar, 2005). As she listens to day-to-day disappointments, she illustrates the way empowerment may be achieved at the home front (Sen et al., 2013).

VI. METHODOLOGY

The research design of the study is qualitative, descriptive, and analytical to address the issue of internal conflicts and identity formation in the novels of Deshpande (Panigrahi, 2025; Sambharwal and Yadav, 2022).

6.1 Primary Text Selection

The study is based on a purposive sample of large novels:

- That Long Silence: The book investigates the notion of psychological realism and the Odyssey of the self-Bildung (Mahmud, 2022; Seoda and Sharma, 2025).
- Roots and Shadows: Examines the dilemma between personal independence and family demands (Lata, 2024; Sarkar, 2020).
- The Dark Holds No Terrors: Studies how childhood trauma and marital discord affect the female psyche.
- The Binding Vine: Explores the process of transition between silence and selfhood, the liberation of the female voice (Sharma, 2015; Thakur and Singh, 2025).
- Small Remedies: offers a complex exploration of feminine identity in the Indian environment of the patriarchal society (Subathra & Barvin, 2026).

6.2 Theoretical Framework

Two main theoretical perspectives have been used to analyze it:

- Feminist Literary Criticism: Used to reverse the psychosomatic construction of femininity and to evaluate how the agency is suppressed in the patriarchal subject (A & Sharma, 2025; Seoda and Sharma, 2025; Sharma, 2021).
- Psychological Realism: It is used to examine silent sufferings, mental and emotional

repressions (Paghdal & Vaghela, 2023; Panigrahi, 2025).

6.3 Analytical Approach

The study involves close reading and thematic analysis. Close reading involves critical examination of the narrative styles like the stream of consciousness and the epistemic territory of silence (A & Christopher, 2024; Gopal, 2009). There are similar themes in thematic analysis under which findings are categorised, such as the struggle to find a voice.

VII. RESULTS

7.1 Female Protagonist Psychological Trajectory

To answer the initial research question, the study shows that the protagonists in the works by Deshpande experience a complicated and non-linear mental development due to the inner struggle and socialization. Determined personalities like Jaya in that long silence and Indu in roots and shadows undergo a step-by-step transformation into confusion and suppression to self-awareness. This trajectory is marked by:

- Competent emotional disintegration due to competing roles.
- Stages of self-reflection that are caused by crisis.
- Repressed desires and identities eventually being identified.

Such results indicate that identity is not a priori but it is built by a process of perpetual negotiation between personal desires and social demands.

7.2 Hush as Repression and Narcissism

With regard to the second research question, the study defines silence as a two-fold phenomenon. To start with, silence is a tool that works as a device of patriarchal dominance, and it strengthens obedience and restraint of female expression in family and marriage. But it then turns into a contemplative room which aids in introspection. Instances include:

- Madison's silence allows her to face her psychological clutter.
- Isolations that result in deep self-discovery.

- Silence as an inner conversation as opposed to not talking.

Therefore, silence is not merely repressive but is rather liberating and allows cognitive and emotional change.

7.3 The Sphere of Domestic as a Place of Identity Construction.

To answer the third research question, the analysis has proved that home space is very much influential in developing and re-forming identity. A home environment is a place where women bargain with their individuality, though it is first described as restrictive. Key findings comprise:

- Daily routine situations that act as time-reflective moments and self-identification.
- Women establishing micro-resistance areas in domestic practices.
- Recreation of identity by not escaping but being involved in everyday life.

As a result, the domestic sphere is simultaneously not only a violent space but also a place of action and empowerment.

7.4 Passive subjectivity to Agency.

In line with the fourth research question, the research records a pattern of gradual development of passive acceptance to active self-assertion among the main characters of Deshpande. This is an internal shift and not an outright defiant one. The process involves:

- Identification with internalized patriarchal norms.
- Recovery of individual voice and narrative control.
- Relations without renunciation of relationships

In illustration, the main characters do not leave their roles in the family but transform them to suit individual freedom. This fact proves that agency of the works by Deshpande is reached not by conflict but by self-knowledge and bargaining.

7.5 Synthesis of Findings

The empirical findings, taken altogether, indicate that identity construction in the fiction of Deshpande is a multidimensional phenomenon that is produced by the psychological introspection, socio-cultural restrictions, and everyday experiences. The overall

results offer responses to the study questions by proving that: psychological development is progressive and antagonistic; silence is a restraint and a stimulus; domestic arenas allow resistance in indirect ways; agency is a consequence of the internal change. In this light, the findings are substantively supportive of the main thesis statement of the work which posits that Deshpande redefines female identity as a changing process of becoming something inside, and not outside, patriarchal structures.

VIII. DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to research the psychological and sociocultural aspects of identities with regard to the female protagonists of Shashi Deshpande. The results of the empirical work are consistent with the research questions that were put at the beginning.

8.1 Research Question 1: Psychological Trajectory

It can be seen that the main heroes of Deshpande undergo a slow psychological transformation that is accompanied by inner conflict, self-doubt, and self-realisation (Yadav and Rohitashwani, 2026). Such characters as Jaya and Indu demonstrate that the process of identity formation is non-linear and unilateral, however, recursive and caused by memory, repression, and reflection (Seoda & Sharma, 2025). This is a confirmation of the fact that the psychological pathway is deeply constituted by the influence of personal experience and socio-cultural conditioning.

8.2 Research Question 2: Silence Role

The research ascertains that silence is a dual construct. First, it actually acts as a system of patriarchal oppression, where females are stifled in their domestic and marital spheres. But at the same moment, it becomes a reflective noetic space, where it is possible to unveil oneself and be cognitively clear. This disputes earlier negative arguments that have exclusively viewed silence as oppression and underlined its subversive power (Mohammad, 2025).

8.3 Research Question 3: Domestic Sphere as Location of Agency

The results demonstrate that the home domain, which can be viewed as a confining space, is the location of identity redefinition. By interacting with commonplace experience, the protagonists of

Deshpande create the zones of resistance and self-identification (Yadav and Rohitashwani, 2026). Thus, the home setting ceases to be a place of enclosure and changes to being a place of bargaining and understatement power.

8.4 Research Question 4: Agency Transition

The act of passive subjectivity to active agency is apparent throughout the texts chosen. This change does not have the features of a dramatic rebellion, but of inner statement, self-perception, and role renewal. The main characters finally gain some agency that does not negate their social conditions, but does not completely deny them (McDonough, 2017).

IX. CONCLUSION

The paper has examined the complex processes of identity construction in the novels of Shashi Deshpande using feminist literary criticism and psychological realism. Through the answers to the research questions, the analysis confirms that the psychological dynamics of her main characters is the continuous bargaining between the expectation of the society and the ambition of the individual. The study confirms the fact that silence is not only a symbolic sign of oppression, but it also acts as an inhibitory element and a realm of introspection. Similarly, the home space turns out to be not only a place of restriction but also becomes a significant space of identity rebuilding and agency definition.

Moreover, the paper concludes that the main characters of Deshpande do not aspire to renounce their social surroundings radically; rather, they empower themselves through self-identification and indirect resistance. Their path of passive subjectivity becoming active agency is characterized by internal awakening and is not accompanied by external confrontation. In addressing the main research questions, this paper concludes that Deshpande's fiction remakes the definition of identity as an ongoing process of becoming, shaped by silence, mundane experiences, and the negotiation of personal and social realities. Her piece of work ends up confirming that, even under restraining systems, women are capable of creating significant areas of self-expression and freedom.

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