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Silence, Memory, and Emotional Alienation: A Psycho-Social Study of Women in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande and Shobhaa De

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Abstract

In the Indian English novel set in the present day, the three themes of silence, memory and emotional alienation are interrelated particularly in the depiction of the female experience in the family and the new urban environment. The present article offers a comparative psycho-social reading of selected novels by Shashi Deshpande and Shobhaa De, focusing on silence, memory, and emotional alienation. Drawing on repression, persona and relational identity, feminist criticism, it discusses women's abilities to communicate their distress and their ability to remember traumatic events and to maintain meaningful relationships and how social expectations affect this ability. It suggests that Deshpande has been nurturing a gap in emotion in the seemingly familial space of marriage and expected norms, stifling expression. De, on the other hand, presents similar conflicts within urban environments shaped by social status, public visibility, competition, and the commercialisation of relationships. There are of course no pure and simple domestic women here and no pure and simple modern women—both fictional worlds have men and women who have complex relationships of dependency, agency and vulnerability. The article argues that emotional self-recognition emerges through the reassessment of suppressed experiences, interpersonal power

relations, and expectations of intimacy rather than through verbal expression or social freedom alone.

Keywords: Silence, Memory, Emotional alienation, Psycho-social criticism, Female subjectivity

Introduction

The depiction of social constraints has been gradually replaced by the study and the effects of the social constraints on consciousness, memory and relationship with others in Indian English fiction. Financial stability, educational achievement and job status are not necessarily a measure of emotional wellbeing. Just as before, intimacy is not necessarily the same as the company of family, friends and associates. In the case of Shashi Deshpande and Shobhaa De, these differences in inner experience and social status are fruitful when looked at from a comparative perspective. The two writers portray radically different social worlds and circumstances, but both react to the social pressures that force women to manage their urges, guide their lives in public, and interpret their relationships. In Deshpande's fiction, the family serves as not only as a sense of belonging but as a framework in which gendered expectations are also reinforced. While battling with her own issues of marriage, motherhood and her own natural conclusions on what a woman's role should be, her characters are asking themselves questions concerning their own lives. These stories depict the significance of silence psychologically and socially. It can be the fear of conflict, being used to, and withdrawing intimacy, or the inability to communicate more complicated emotions in a socially acceptable manner. Recollection, then, is a display of how fears of the now are connected with past experiences. The seeming harmony/actual suffering dichotomy is at the core of *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows* and *The Binding Vine.*

Another set of pressures are highlighted in De's novels, namely pressures of public visibility involved with metropolitan life, social mobility, glamour, wealth, and sexual relationships. The opportunities for her characters to act and express themselves, though, are sometimes less available to the protagonists of Deshpande, who are in a domestic situation. But there may be chances to be viewed in the humiliation, dependence, coersion and active concern with others' views. In the search for recognition, the relationships involved are the ones where there is a power imbalance, social competition in *Socialite Evenings*, *Starry Nights*, *Sisters*, and *Strange Obsession*. The notion that sexual choice or public speech is evidence of emotional autonomy, therefore, is misleading.

The following is an article which asks three related questions. How does silence and social performance control women's emotional life? What does the memory show about the influences of the past on the present? Compare and contrast domestic and metropolitan alienation and focus on the differences between the two novelists. Its central argument is that the emotional estrangement is not only a matter of a conflict between tradition and modernity, but one of the quality of the recognition, trust and power of the relations. There is no single psychological type for all women in a novelist's novel, either, that is to say, by the comparative method.

This study is qualitative comparative textual analysis with focus on the interaction between the components of narrative voice with remembered experience, interpersonal conflict and social

expectation. It employs the concept of psycho-social to mean "felt emotions as experienced in relation to others". Its psychological jargon is interpretive, not diagnostic: For example, the anxieties, alienations, and clashing desires of fictional characters are not considered clinical conditions.

The concept of repression, as described by Freud, offers a framework to begin thinking about the ability to articulate something that may be difficult in the moment but is not remembered right away (Freud). As a rule it is not to be assumed, however, that all moments in literary silence should be taken as evidence for unconscious repression. Deliberate silences are reactions to unequal power or a threat to personal security. In *Two Essays* (and Man and His Symbols), Jung's ideas of persona and the negotiation of the less acknowledged parts of the self provide another vocabulary to reflect on the gap between the social and the challenging private experience. The concepts illuminate the novels only in the context of specific narrative situations; they do not assume that they explain all characters in the same way.

Feminist criticism adds to the analysis by situating subjectivity in gendered institutions and conventions. Other researchers have explored the link between gender oppression and psychological distress in the works of Bijendra Nath Das, who discusses how "othering", "violence" and "voicelessness" are interconnected aspects of women's distressful experience (168). These categories can be helpful to conceptualize the impact of patriarchy on women's emotional experience. Othering refuses to grant women equal recognition, violence endangers their physical and mental well-being, and voicelessness prevents them from being able to convey their suffering. These processes are linked to emotional alienation which undermines women's sense of self and connections to others. In the context of the present study these ideas are significant for the experience of Mira and Kalpana in the novels selected, but the implications of these ideas are relevant to other forms of genderised marginalisation that are represented in the novels selected. Horney's criticism of the psychological arguments which naturalize gender difference are relevant to any consideration of women's emotional reactions (Horney). Moi and Showalter emphasise the importance of examining women's literary representation without accepting patriarchal norms as neutral standards of identity. The present reading therefore explores the connection between speech and silence, and social power. A woman can refuse to speak because speaking has consequences; a woman can be articulate and confident in public speaking, but lack the ability to gain mutual recognition in intimate life.

The analysis is not a series of eight summaries of plots, but rather a themed analysis. Each author has four novels which offer contrasting but related situations. The comparison is based on the relationships of characters and the development of the stories and not on any claim to a similarity between the novelists.

Silence and Psychological Repression in Deshpande's Fiction

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya's personal crisis challenges her established understanding of marriage and domestic respectability. Allegations about her husband Mohan's professional conduct make the family's life unmanageable, and Jaya starts to look at the compromises she has been making and years of accommodation to her husband's life (Deshpande, *That Long Silence*). She is not mentioned as unable to speak in the novel. Instead, it is a comparison of different

experiences in owning language, versus feeling like you can use it without threatening an already established relationship. The character of silence that Jayas has is a socialised one, one that is appreciated in areas where marital harmony is valued and where women are expected to keep things in check. Jaya realizes how much courage it takes for women when she thinks of Mohan's mother's pain. Jaya recognises that "silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender" (Deshpande, *That Long Silence*, qtd. in Godara and Kaur). The link of silence to surrender makes the ideals of "feminine strength" paradoxical. External patience and perseverance may mask inner suffering and a lack of viable alternatives. Jaya realizes that this paradox is similar to her own marriage, in which silence is the norm. The experience of her represents the possibility of silence being an active process of self-preservation, as well as a by-product of socialization.

Jaya's reflections challenge the assumption that a stable domestic environment necessarily ensures emotional fulfilment. An outside view of the process of adjustment is often a gradual eroding of opposition and outrage. Her observation that she and Mohan have "snipped off bits of ourselves to keep the scales on an even keel" (Deshpande, *That Long Silence* 7) suggests that marital adjustment involves the gradual suppression of personal desires and individual differences. The image shows a balancing act, alluding to emotional compromises that go beneath the surface of a seemingly "good" relationship. As the sacrifices are offered in the mutual terms, the novel also raises the issue of the expectations that women and men have when they marry. As a writer she experiences further entanglements between silence and self-definition; writing can make sense of experiences, but it can also raise the question of what experiences have been learnt to be silenced. The present interrupts her typical, though ritualistic, lifestyle, and frustration from the past is now apparent. Instead of being a part of the story to be used to decorate, memory becomes the means through which Jaya comes to know of the discrepancy between herself and her socially acceptable self and her personal evaluations. When she is moving towards articulation it cannot be said that she articulates all or it is easy liberation. Narrative's significance is to rethink previously intuitive practices.

That does not always mean that achievement is synonymous with security in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. Saru (Sarita), as she is known, has a respectable job, but her marriage is not going so well and she has some anxieties about her personal life (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*). She returns to her father**'**s house, where she faces future problems and past situations. Her treatment in childhood and her relationship with her mother is in line with her self-perception. "Why are you still alive—Why didn't you die?" is a very saddening form of rejection by mother. The question is heavy on Sarita, because it has a connection with the loss of her brother, and her survival. This may relate to her later psychological problems, partly because her feelings of guilt that were un-resolved in childhood and the unequal love that the parents felt for her. The experiences of childhood may still impact the emotional dynamics and sense of self for women in adulthood, as Deshpande illustrates. Her childhood is not just what makes her an adult but is an integral part of who she is as an adult. Professional competence and the emotional vulnerability are intertwined in the inability to distinguish the successful modern woman from the traditional wife.

The concepts of intimacy and harm do not always align, and this is especially true when it comes to the marriage that is in the middle of Sarita's situation. The socially recognised institution of marriage can set up unequal expectations which can undermine an economic independence of a woman. The novel makes it essential that external agency is separated from the provision of safety, respect and communication in a relationship. Sarita's recollections are not simply about the way to comprehend all the present time conflicts, but they are a blueprint of storytelling to re-think previous feelings of rejection and obligation. An interpretation that is psycho-social, therefore, must attend to both the personal and the gendered aspect of the traditional wife. The concepts two characters reveal other, similar, ways of being silent. Jaya has been living a life in which she has sacrificed herself in order to find stability in relationships. Sarita's life reminds us of what happens when a non-professional relationship takes place. Both novels call into question the idea that the problems can only be evaluated by a woman's educational or occupational or family situation. Yet at the same time their strife caution against the notion of a passive woman – their introspections make the notion of adjustment itself a point of reflection.

Memory, Family, and the Recovery of Female Experience

Roots and Shadows follows Indu as she is brought back into her family which reignites memories that made her question her own identity before. The ancestral setting is not only a place but also it also a time. It has relationships, expectations and stories – where belonging is defined. Indu returns to it, and has to ponder the antithesis of independence and the continuities of family life. If she is supposed to be pulled back by memory, then memory doesn't pull her back. Reveals the unfulfilled situation of her freedom, duty, intimacy. Why Indu's situation is important is that the novel is not a simple choice between the demand to submit to tradition and to repudiate all family ties. Families are tightly knit, families are loving. The challenge is to be in subjection to their authority and not to their judgment. Remembering her experiences helps Indu to see that identity is formed through both opposition and attachment. The psycho-social view is the house reminds her of all that she has sacrificed, struggled against and all she did not understand. A link between personal reflection and the passing down and on of gendered expectations is thus created.

The Binding Vine expands on the insistent focus on memory to cross the boundaries of one woman's search for self-understanding. The death of Urmi's infant daughter shapes her response to the suffering of other women (Deshpande, *The Binding Vine*). Her finding of the poetry of her deceased mother-in-law Mira, opens up experiences hitherto hidden within marriage, and the violence experienced by Kalpana presents another oppositional scene to the silencing of women's pain. The narratives have been interwoven, and demonstrate how private pain can become public through recognition or memory, when it is forgotten or overlooked. The novel therefore is not a fully appropriate characterization as a story of personal tragedy. Her experience is not of the companionship of love but fear and emotional insecurity. She describes her marriage through the disturbing image of "a dark-clouded engulfing night" (Deshpande, *The Binding Vine* 66, qtd. in Pahuja). The darkness of the metaphor exhibits the threatening psychological setting in which Mira experiences her marital relation. Rather than a moment of emotional fulfillment, Deshpande demonstrates how marriage can be a source of fear, force and emotional lack. Mira's marriage is a prime example that in marriage, there is a power struggle that can result in emotional disconnection

and make sexual love a thing of the past. Her emotional isolation becomes apparent when she writes, "I give him the facts, nothing more, never my feelings" (qtd. in Das 172). Psychological difference between Mira and her husband is reflected in the difference between the factual communication and the emotional expression. She is talking to him, but she has not shared anything with him; it is not a thing of emotional security and understanding. Her silence thus becomes a means of protecting herself from unwanted intrusion. Despite the fact that there is communication, marriage cannot be considered an emotional connection, Deshpande has been able to establish. By Mira's journey, it is obvious that emotional repression can be psychological self-defence.

The written expression also can remain somewhere other than where it was produced by the writer and may have the potential to be known posthumously. These experiences of suffering cannot be kept in Mira's home, but can be written down as a form of capture within her marriage. It is when Urmi comes across this testimony that it is a reminder to acknowledge the bigger picture of women's voicelessness. A reading is the act of Urmi of another woman's words and brings together remembered or recorded suffering and ethical focus upon what is happening here and now. But, Kalpana's case also poses issues related to family and social systems' responses to sexual violence. The novel, in its events, suggests that when they are able to talk, women's voices can be stifled by others unwilling to listen to them. The intricacies of women's silence can also be viewed in Urvashi Butalia's writings in *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. She reflects on women's experiences and the challenges of uncovering erased histories. She observes, "I began to understand, gradually, that the silences of Partition are of many kinds. If, at one level, we are faced with a kind of historical silence, at another this is com pounded by a familial silence,. . ." (358).

The psychological significance of such suppression is emphasised by Bijendra Nath Das, who observes that "Voicelessness is the condition of traumatic wounding" (173). This was a reminder of what can happen to women when their experiences are silenced and that this adds to their emotional pain. It is a strong step away from emotional isolation to taking it from hidden anguish to written testimony. However, Deshpande does not consider articulation as a quick fix for trauma. Instead, the novel implies that the understanding of women's previously marginalised lived experience is a crucial step towards facing up to the social conditions that causes women's suffering. Memory in *The Binding Vine* is personal and relational, the first can exacerbate loss, the latter can be a displacement of loneliness in which suffering is lodged.

A comparative reading of *Roots and Shadows* and *The Binding Vine* broadens the significance of memory. In the first, the thinking-through of inherited conceptions of belonging is induced by Indu's memory. The latter is a one that has writing and testimony related to the suffering of other women. This comparison also helps avoid having a 'reflectional psychology'. Emotional experiences are mediated in a variety of ways, including in the context of the household, texts, generational relationships, and social reactions to violence. Remembering can open the door to change; but no new experience is sacred enough to assure that remembering automatically will generate healing.

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Emotional Alienation and Social Performance in De's Fiction

The issues of recognition and control resurface in a more overt form in the emotional conflicts between the metropole worlds as seen in De's novels. When Karuna ventures into the upper echelon society, she discovers how easily her own sense of self is thrown into disarray by her social standing and others' evaluations. Her tales of marriage, divorce and relationships reveal the difference in class and contentment. Karuna's dissatisfaction with her existing relationships reveals her growing awareness of emotional confinement. Her desire for personal autonomy becomes apparent when she declares, "I feel claustrophobic. I need to find myself" (De, *Socialite Evenings* 55). Claustrophobia is a statement of discontent with her environment on the one hand; on the other, it is the result of the pressure put on by relationships that restrict her sense of individuality. There are opportunities for social mobility and public recognition – Karuna has found these opportunities, but not always for emotional satisfaction. She is looking for selfhood because she has found that real-life relationships can be lacking in meaningful communication and personal freedom. De thus makes emotional alienation a condition that can continue even in the seemingly free metropolitan environments. Social identity is a continuous process of negotiation between the surround expectation of wealth, beauty, reputation and partnerships.

Carefully applied, Jung's concept of persona is applicable here. This act is very different from what is required for her emotional needs, as in her public act she must assert herself as a social being, and this may require her to do something she would not do if she were being social for her emotional needs (Jung, Man and His Symbols). But to say that it was all a sham is too simplistic. Along with performance, networks and opportunities are also available. The issue is, that the reciprocated intimacy does not always guarantee the recognition through social expression. Her acknowledgement that she and other women maintained their "own secret lives" (De, *Socialite Evenings* 99) suggests the existence of private emotional worlds inaccessible within their marital relationships. Metro visibility thus refutes the idea that a safe sense of identity is provided in metro visibility. It is now, Aasha Rani's turn to take the discussion to the entertainment scene, where she hopes to make it and her uneven career. It is a world where the body, and the public appearance, are most of the tools for spreading opportunity and power. The heroine is always dressed according to the demands she faces on her path to position and success in the professional world – demands that are required by those who have position and success in the professional world. Though a psycho-social reading must not be made a subject of either empowerment or degradation in terms of her sexuality. Perhaps the more pertinent question is whether the seeming free travel and close contact enables control over one's own options and relationships.

The novel complicates the language of choice, moves it into the context of exploitation and insecurity. Aasha Rani's experience of exploitation strengthens her determination to challenge unequal power relations. She is angry at man's domination and states "I will do to men what they try to do to me" (De, *Starry Nights* 8). It might appear as if there may be a resistance because of experiences in the past of humiliation and insecurity. But she is not free of mental scars of the exploitation because she is determined to change the situation. Rather it reveals the extent to which relationships of manipulation and unequal power have marred intimacy. De defines resistance as a psychological phenomenon which is a complex one, consisting of anger and vulnerability and a

demand for independence. Emotional dependency can be experienced along with social aspirations particularly when relationships are entangled with professional benefits. In this respect, the experience of Aasha Rani is different from Jaya's experience which is instructive. Jaya's learned silence brings in a domestic order, and the silence of Aasha Rani is more of public scrutiny and intimacy as a tool. In both cases, there is a restriction on expression of need but it manifests in different ways and effects.

In *Sisters*, Mikki Hiralal inherits responsibility for her father's troubled business empire and encounters a difficult relationship with her half-sister, Alisha. They do not have some kind of blanket statement that women are competitive or competitive by nature, as if it were their job. In between, there is a tension, which is defined by inheritance, legitimacy, economic power and family recognition. Alisha's resentment towards Mikki is partly due to the different recognition and material advantages of their father's family. The feeling of being left out is juxtaposed to Mikki's advantages. Her observation, "You have all the money, all the status, our father's name, his home" (De, *Sisters* 42) evokes an emotional suffering that is not separate from social legitimacy and economic inequality. One cannot say that it is Alisha's malice that is fueling her animosity. This is also about the consequences of lack of equality in the family. What you will observe is the resentment, insecurity and distance that can occur due to differences in sisters like material resources, familial identity etc. The novel is, then, a psycho-social analysis, however, that goes beyond romantic relationships. Although the family members are identical, the rights and recognition can also be different which may result in estrangement within the family. *Sisters* and *Roots and Shadows* is a comparison of the relationships with family and how they impact women's sense of belonging, recognition, and autonomy. Both texts pose the question of what it means to be recognised in a family in different situations of the story. Then there's the opportunity for Mikki and Alisha to be recognized and understood, and to overcome the emotional distance between them. Mikki's desire to make Alisha feel "loved and wanted" (De, *Sisters* 220) implies a change from the competition and animosity that occurs between their different family roles.

The story is brought a new twist, and a significant one at that, in *Strange Obsession*. A young model, whose name is gaining currency in the Indian film industry of Bombay, Amrita Aggarwal is caught up in the unwanted and ever-growing gaze of Minx. The initial dynamics of the relationship between Amrita and Minx provide a set of clues to the way that their relationship evolves into an unequal relationship over time. Minx comes across initially as being deferential, speaking to Amrita with the words "At your service, Your Highness" (De, *Strange Obsession* 6). Although Minx's initial remark appears playful, its significance becomes more troubling in light of her subsequent possessiveness and controlling behaviour. Her first presentation and subsequent actions are illustrative of the way in which interpersonal relationships can assume the appearance of psychological pressure under the guise of either love or admiration. This story is particularly poignant for emotional alienation as it is a story of personal freedom being threatened by obsession and coercion. The central issue is not same-sex desire itself but Minx's disregard for Amrita's autonomy, consent, and emotional boundaries.

It is also complicated to over read the Amrita story of urban freedom. Being seen and successful in the modelling industry makes her vulnerable in different ways that cannot be

conveyed with the language of glamour. *Strange Obsession* makes the comparative point of the article in this manner, since it demonstrates that emotional alienation can be caused not only by the lack of care or by set communications, but also by intrusive attachment. The fiction, then, represents a range of relational issues, including dependence on social status in *Socialite Evenings*, exploitation and ambition in *Starry Nights*, the struggle for familial recognition in *Sisters*, and obsession, coercion, and the violation of personal autonomy in *Strange Obsession*.

Comparative Discussion: Speech, Memory, and Recognition

Note that the difference between Deshpande and De is not so much a difference in method as it is a difference in emphasis. Deshpande**'**s central characters tend to ponder upon themselves through memory and introspection, whereas De's central characters deal with their identities as they are forced to be visible in the public sphere. But both novelists have divorced a character's action from the emotional state in which it is performed. The experience of being understood by Jaya's home serviceability, professional efficiency of Sarita and social visibility of Karuna are not easily determinable. There are more types of silence, too. Perhaps it is the historical rejection she faced in the rejection of her writing, Mira's poetry, or perhaps the social rejection of facing the violence, Kalpana has faced. Speech and lack of reciprocal understanding can occur simultaneously in De's narration. Exposure to the world's gaze and to private exploitation; surrounding family members with interest based on status or advantage. The comparison above serves as an example of why the social network is not a good measure of emotional attachment. It is the possibility of expressing, saying no, remembering and being heard without restrictions.

The themes of reconsideration of marriage, facing up to the past experiences of one's family, returning to one's ancestral context, and participation in women's testimony connect issues of the present with issues of the past in different ways. De's novels, however, are more preoccupied with the immediate issues of status, ambition, family, and attention-seeking. This gap must not be exaggerated as if the characters of De had no histories or even as if the characters of Deshpande did not live in the city, or even as if the modernity of the city did not exist. It identifies various priorities of the narration in the selected text(s). Emotional isolation needs to be communicated in a specific manner. Alienation is not a general process and there is not one general cause for each character's actions. For Jaya, withdrawal is related to marital expectations, for Sarita, distress is a cross with childhood relationships and married life and for Urmi, grief is a gateway to an understanding of the suffering of other women. Karuna experiences insecurity associated with social recognition; Aasha Rani encounters exploitation within the entertainment industry; Mikki and Alisha negotiate unequal familial recognition; and Amrita struggles against intrusive demands upon her autonomy. It is only after the differences remain that it can be justified to group them together under a common theme. Not one of these – not education, not employment, not sexual expression, not mobility, not wealth – can guarantee equality or emotional wellness for women by itself; each can provide women with more choices. Family ties do not negate agency, however. The issue is whether or not institutions and relationships enable women to give their own meaning to what is happening to them, to make their own decisions about it, and to be recognised as human beings, rather than as extensions of a role. Here, in this reading, the silence and the memory is not

a general psychological condition but a way to approach the (dis)assemblage of social freedom and intimate recognition.

Conclusion

The novels of Shashi Deshpande and Shobhaa De reveal that women's emotional life cannot be deduced from the fact of marriage, occupational success, publicity and apparent social independence. The domestic space is a space of accommodation that has an overlap of expectations of accommodation and emotional conflict in both *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. *Roots and Shadows* brings to light the multifaceted nature of family memory, and *The Binding Vine* is an exploration of personal loss, overlooked histories of women, and the moral character of witness. In these novels, memory plays a pivotal role in the reworking of identity as a way to reevaluate, but not to end suffering. All of De's *Socialite Evenings*, *Starry Nights*, *Sisters*, and *Strange Obsession* describe similar struggles in societies where they are hierarchical, aspirational, by birth, and manipulative of each other. Their female characters may be seen more prominently than their male counterparts, but their relation with them could not be a respectful and trustworthy one. The novels do not only reveal a binary opposition between domestic tradition and metropolitan modernity, but also the different implications of power in relation to communication, belonging, and autonomy. The psycho-social approach can help to explain the difference between being socially connected and being emotionally recognised. When others do not speak, it could be due to enforced adjustment, guarded self-protection or suppression of evidence or testimony; when they do speak, it may give them a sense of agency, but not necessarily an understanding. Memory can magnify the hurt and at the same time provide an opportunity for insightful self-reflection on what had been missed. The novels clearly indicate that there is a need to attend to the social circumstances in which women speak, remember, resist and form relationships in order for meaningful self-definition to take place. This psycho-social interpretation complements feminist approaches to gender inequality by examining its intimate and emotional consequences.

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