

## Understanding the Formation of Female Subjectivity in *That Long Silence*, *Difficult Daughters*, and *The God of Small Things*

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### Abstract

The representation of female subjectivity has become a significant thematic concern in contemporary Indian English fiction. Moving beyond earlier portrayals of women as passive figures confined within domestic spaces, many modern Indian novelists explore the psychological and social processes through which women construct a sense of identity within patriarchal societies. This paper examines the formation of female subjectivity in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Drawing upon feminist literary theory and postcolonial gender discourse, the study investigates how narrative voice, psychological interiority, and social critique enable these writers to articulate women's struggles for self-definition. Through close textual analysis, the paper argues that female subjectivity in these novels emerges not as a fixed state of autonomy but as a process of negotiation between tradition and self-assertion. The protagonists confront familial expectations, social norms, and patriarchal institutions that attempt to regulate women's identities. Yet through introspection, emotional resistance, and narrative articulation, they gradually redefine their positions within these structures. The study therefore demonstrates that Indian English fiction provides a literary space in which female subjectivity is continuously contested, reinterpreted, and reshaped.

**Keywords:** female subjectivity, Indian English fiction, feminist criticism, narrative voice, patriarchy, gender identity

### 1. Introduction

The emergence of female subjectivity represents one of the most significant developments in contemporary Indian English fiction. Since the late twentieth century, many women writers have increasingly foregrounded the psychological experiences, emotional conflicts, and social struggles of female characters negotiating patriarchal cultural structures. These narratives move beyond stereotypical representations of women as passive participants in domestic life and instead explore the complexities of women's inner worlds.

Subjectivity in literary discourse refers to the formation of the self as a conscious and reflective individual capable of interpreting social realities. Feminist literary criticism has repeatedly emphasized that women's voices have historically been marginalized in literary traditions dominated by male perspectives. Simone de Beauvoir famously argued that within patriarchal societies woman has been defined as "the Other," whose identity is constructed in relation to male authority rather than through autonomous self-definition (Beauvoir 6).

In the Indian context, the representation of female subjectivity is closely connected with broader transformations in social and cultural life. The expansion of women's education, the growth of feminist discourse, and increasing participation of women in public life have contributed to a heightened awareness of gender inequality in Indian society. These developments have influenced literary production, encouraging writers to explore women's experiences with greater psychological depth.

Scholars have observed that contemporary Indian women novelists often depict protagonists who struggle to reconcile traditional social expectations with personal aspirations. Such narratives reveal the tension between domestic responsibility, social conformity, and individual autonomy that shapes women's lives in modern India (Nayar 201). Rather than presenting straightforward narratives of liberation, these novels portray identity formation as a gradual and often painful process.

This paper examines the formation of female subjectivity in three important Indian English novels: Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Though differing in narrative style and historical setting, these novels share a concern with women's struggles for self-definition within patriarchal cultural contexts.

The study argues that female subjectivity in these texts emerges through three interconnected processes:

1. Recognition of patriarchal constraints
2. Development of introspective consciousness
3. Assertion of narrative voice as resistance

Through these processes, the novels illustrate how Indian English fiction contributes to the ongoing redefinition of women's identities.

## 2. Feminist Theories of Subjectivity

The concept of subjectivity occupies an important place in feminist theory. Early feminist scholars concentrated on exposing patriarchal representations of women in literature and society. Later theoretical developments explored how gender identities are produced through discourse, language, and social institutions.

Simone de Beauvoir's statement that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" remains fundamental for feminist discussions of identity formation (Beauvoir 267). Beauvoir argues that women's identities are shaped not by biological destiny but by cultural conditioning. Patriarchal social structures encourage women to internalize roles associated with obedience, passivity, and domesticity.

Judith Butler further complicated this understanding by suggesting that gender is performative rather than fixed. According to Butler, gender identities are produced through

repeated social practices that regulate behaviour and social expectations (Butler 191). From this perspective, subjectivity emerges through the negotiation of cultural norms.

In literary criticism, feminist scholars have emphasized the importance of narrative voice in representing women's experiences. Elaine Showalter's concept of gynocriticism calls for the study of women's writing as a distinct literary tradition that foregrounds female perspectives (Showalter 13).

Within postcolonial contexts, feminist theory has highlighted the intersection of gender with other social categories such as caste, class, and colonial history. Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that women's experiences in postcolonial societies cannot be understood solely through Western feminist frameworks; instead, they must be analysed within their specific cultural contexts (Mohanty 49).

Recent scholarship on Indian English fiction suggests that women novelists frequently portray female protagonists who negotiate rather than simply reject patriarchal traditions. Lau and Mendes observe that South Asian women's writing often depicts identity formation as a process of "contested subjectivity," in which women simultaneously inhabit and challenge cultural norms (Lau and Mendes 11).

These theoretical perspectives provide an important framework for analysing the representation of female subjectivity in Indian English novels.

### **3. Silence and Female Consciousness in *That Long Silence***

Shashi Deshpande's fiction is widely recognized for its subtle exploration of middle-class Indian women's psychological experiences. Her novels frequently portray women who struggle to reconcile personal identity with the expectations imposed by marriage and family.

*That Long Silence* presents a powerful narrative of female introspection. The novel centres on Jaya, a middle-class woman who begins to reassess her life during a period of crisis in her marriage.

One of the central motifs of the novel is silence. Jaya gradually realizes that throughout her married life she has suppressed her voice in order to maintain harmony within the household. Reflecting upon this realization, she observes: "I had learned it at last—no questions, no retorts. Only silence" (Deshpande 143).

This moment reveals the psychological internalization of patriarchal expectations. Jaya's silence is not simply imposed externally; it becomes an internalized survival strategy within the domestic sphere.

Deshpande portrays the emotional consequences of such silence through Jaya's introspective narration. The narrative allows readers access to her memories, doubts, and frustrations, thereby transforming her from a passive character into a reflective subject who interprets her own experiences.

Jaya also reflects critically upon the cultural idealization of marriage. At one point she recalls the common belief that a husband provides security and protection. Yet she recognizes the limitations of such assumptions when she observes that a husband may also cast “long shadows” over a woman’s individuality (Deshpande 32).

Through such reflections, the novel illustrates how female subjectivity develops through self-awareness and narrative articulation. Jaya’s decision to confront her silence ultimately represents an attempt to reclaim her voice.

#### **4. Female Identity and Social Negotiation in *Difficult Daughters***

Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* examines female subjectivity within the historical context of pre-independence India. The novel traces the life of Virmati, a young woman who struggles to pursue education and independence within a conservative Punjabi family.

Virmati’s desire for education immediately challenges traditional gender expectations. Her aspirations conflict with her family’s belief that a woman’s primary duty lies in marriage and domestic life.

Kapur portrays this conflict with psychological nuance. Virmati experiences both excitement and anxiety as she attempts to pursue academic opportunities. Her ambitions reflect the broader social changes occurring in colonial India, where education began to open new possibilities for women.

At the same time, Virmati’s emotional relationship with the married professor Harish complicates her quest for independence. Her attachment to him ultimately results in social isolation and familial conflict.

This complexity reveals the ambiguous nature of female subjectivity. Virmati’s actions challenge patriarchal expectations, yet they also demonstrate the emotional costs of resisting social conventions.

The narrative structure of the novel further reinforces this theme. The story is framed through the perspective of Virmati’s daughter Ida, who reconstructs her mother’s life after her death. This retrospective narration suggests that women’s identities are continually reinterpreted across generations.

Through this layered narrative, Kapur illustrates how female subjectivity emerges from a complex interplay between personal desire and social constraint.

#### **5. Fragmented Subjectivity in *The God of Small Things***

Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* offers a powerful exploration of female subjectivity within a society structured by caste hierarchy and patriarchal authority. The

character of Ammu embodies the struggles faced by women who attempt to assert their individuality within restrictive social systems.

As a divorced woman living in her parental home, Ammu occupies a vulnerable social position. Her lack of economic independence and social support exposes the precarious status of women in patriarchal societies.

Roy emphasizes the rigidity of social norms through the recurring concept of the “Love Laws,” which determine “who should be loved, and how. And how much” (Roy 33).

Ammu’s relationship with Velutha, an untouchable man, violates these social laws. Their love therefore becomes an act of resistance against both caste hierarchy and patriarchal authority.

Yet the consequences of this transgression are tragic. Reflecting on their situation, the narrator observes that Ammu and Velutha understood that “there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future” (Roy 340).

Roy’s narrative technique reinforces the theme of fragmented identity. The novel’s nonlinear structure, shifting perspectives, and poetic language capture the emotional and psychological complexities of characters whose lives are shaped by trauma and memory.

Through Ammu’s story, the novel illustrates how female subjectivity may emerge through acts of emotional defiance even within oppressive social contexts.

## 6. Narrative Voice and Women’s Experience

One of the most significant contributions of contemporary Indian English women’s writing is the emergence of narrative voice as a site of feminist resistance. By foregrounding female consciousness and interiority, these novels challenge the marginalization of women’s experiences within literary traditions.

Narrative techniques such as interior monologue, retrospective narration, and fragmented storytelling enable authors to represent the complexity of women’s inner lives.

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya’s introspective narration allows her to reinterpret her past experiences. In *Difficult Daughters*, Ida’s reconstruction of her mother’s life illustrates the intergenerational transmission of women’s memories. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy’s experimental narrative structure reflects the fractured nature of identity within hierarchical social systems.

Through these narrative strategies, Indian English fiction transforms women from silent objects into speaking subjects capable of articulating their experiences.

## 7. Conclusion

The representation of female subjectivity in contemporary Indian English fiction reflects broader transformations in both literary practice and social consciousness. Through the works of Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, and Arundhati Roy, Indian literature has developed new ways of exploring women's identities, struggles, and aspirations.

This study has demonstrated that female subjectivity in these novels emerges through a dynamic process of negotiation rather than simple emancipation. The protagonists confront patriarchal structures that attempt to regulate their identities, yet they also develop forms of resistance through reflection, emotional defiance, and narrative articulation.

By granting narrative voice to women's experiences, these novels challenge traditional representations of women as passive figures within literary narratives. Instead, they portray women as complex individuals capable of interpreting and reshaping their own lives.

Indian English fiction therefore provides a significant literary space where women's identities can be examined, contested, and reimagined.

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