

Between Fracture and Voice: Female Selfhood and the Negotiation of Modernity in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* and Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract: This article offers a comparative reading of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* and Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* through the connected ideas of female selfhood, marriage, narrative voice, and modernity. It argues that the movement from tradition to modernity in these novels is neither simple nor complete. Maya and Jaya are educated women who recognise the limits of prescribed domestic roles, yet they respond to those limits in sharply different ways. Desai presents selfhood as a fragile inward struggle. Maya's emotional needs are denied a language of mutual recognition, and her search for an autonomous self turns into psychological fracture. Deshpande, by contrast, presents selfhood as a difficult practice of remembering, writing, and speaking. Jaya's silence is not merely imposed from outside; it is also a habit she has learned in order to preserve marriage and social approval. Her recovery begins when she examines her own participation in that silence. Using comparative close reading, feminist narratology, and postcolonial feminist thought, the article shows that narrative form is central to each novel's idea of agency. Desai dramatises the cost of a self that cannot enter dialogue, while Deshpande imagines a partial but ethical reconstruction of the self through voice. Together, the novels question the belief that modernity automatically produces freedom.

Keywords: Female selfhood; tradition and modernity; feminist narratology; marriage and domesticity; psychological interiority; women's voice

Introduction: The search for selfhood is one of the central concerns of modern Indian English fiction. For women characters, however, the question "Who am I?" cannot be separated from other questions: Who am I expected to be as a daughter, wife, mother, or caregiver? What happens when personal desire does not fit the moral language of the family? Can a woman become an individual without being treated as selfish, disloyal, or emotionally unstable? Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande approach these questions with unusual seriousness. Their women are not presented as symbols of a single feminist ideal. They are flawed, wounded, intelligent, and often divided against themselves. Their struggles therefore reveal not only the pressure of patriarchy but also the emotional difficulty of changing habits that have been absorbed over many years.

This article compares Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* and Deshpande's *That Long Silence* because both novels place marriage at the centre of a woman's crisis of identity. Maya and Jaya belong to educated, urban, middle-class worlds. Neither is denied food, shelter, or formal respectability. Yet each experiences a deep loss of self within marriage. Their suffering cannot be explained only through visible oppression. It grows through emotional neglect, unequal expectations, the disciplining of female anger, and the absence of honest communication. The domestic home appears socially secure, but psychologically it becomes a place where a woman's interior life is either misunderstood or silenced.

The two novels differ in form and outcome. *Cry, the Peacock* moves through intense sensory impressions, recurring images, fear, memory, and an unstable first-person consciousness. Maya's mind becomes the main field of the narrative. The reader experiences the world through her heightened perception, but this intimacy does not provide a path towards recovery. Her selfhood becomes increasingly

isolated from shared reality. *That Long Silence* is also inward-looking, yet its first-person narration is retrospective and self-questioning. Jaya reconstructs her marriage, her writing, her motherhood, and the many women whose lives have taught her how silence operates. The act of narration becomes an ethical inquiry. She does not simply accuse others; she also asks how she has learned to hide behind the roles of wife and mother. The central argument of this study is that Desai and Deshpande offer two different models of female modernity. Desai presents modernity as psychological rupture: Maya recognises the poverty of a marriage without emotional reciprocity, but she has no stable social or linguistic space in which to transform that recognition into agency. Deshpande presents modernity as negotiated voice: Jaya does not escape the domestic world, but she begins to revise the terms on which she inhabits it. These models should not be reduced to pessimism and optimism. Maya's breakdown exposes the violence hidden beneath respectable marriage, while Jaya's self-criticism shows that speech alone is not liberation unless it is joined to responsibility and mutual listening.

The comparison also challenges a linear account of tradition and modernity. Tradition in these novels is not a fixed past, and modernity is not a clean break from it. Traditional ideals survive inside modern urban homes, educated marriages, professional ambitions, and intimate language. At the same time, the family is not represented only as a prison. It is also a field of attachment, dependency, memory, and moral obligation. The struggle for selfhood therefore takes place within relationships rather than outside them. This makes both novels relevant to postcolonial feminist criticism, which has repeatedly warned against treating all women as a single, undifferentiated category (Mohanty). The protagonists' class position gives them certain privileges, but it does not protect them from the emotional and symbolic power of gender.

The article addresses three questions. First, how do Desai and Deshpande use narrative form to represent the emergence or collapse of female selfhood? Second, how do marriage, domestic space, and gendered ideas of duty shape the protagonists' movement between tradition and modernity? Third, what kinds of agency become possible when a woman can neither return comfortably to inherited roles nor fully detach herself from intimate relationships? By answering these questions through close textual comparison, the article seeks to move beyond the familiar claim that Desai writes the psychological woman while Deshpande writes the social woman. That distinction is useful, but incomplete. Desai's psychology is socially produced, and Deshpande's social realism depends upon subtle psychological self-examination.

Critical context and research gap: Scholarship on Anita Desai has long emphasised psychological interiority, alienation, marital incompatibility, and the use of nature as an extension of consciousness. Meenakshi Mukherjee's account of the Indian English novel helped identify a movement away from broad social narration towards a more inward and formally self-conscious fiction. Later studies of Desai, including those by Usha Bande and Jasbir Jain, have examined the conflict between private desire and social expectation in her women characters. *Cry, the Peacock* is frequently read as the story of a hypersensitive woman trapped in a loveless marriage and haunted by an astrologer's prophecy. Such readings correctly recognise the importance of fear, emotional deprivation, and sensory imagery. Yet they sometimes treat Maya's "neurosis" as if it were a self-contained personal defect. A more careful reading must ask how her mental crisis is intensified by a marriage in which her feelings are repeatedly reduced to childishness or excess.

Recent criticism continues to describe Maya as an emerging modern woman whose desire for recognition conflicts with patriarchal domesticity (Singh; Meeran). This approach is valuable because it places her breakdown within a gendered social world. At the same time, it risks romanticising psychological collapse as rebellion. Maya's final acts cannot be celebrated as liberation. They are evidence of a world in which desire, fear, and anger have become disconnected from dialogue and ethical judgement. Gilbert and Gubar's influential account of the "madwoman" remains helpful for understanding how female anger is culturally pathologised, but it must be used with caution in the Indian context. Maya is neither only a victim nor a symbolic revolutionary. She is a woman whose suffering is real, whose perceptions are often acute, and whose capacity to act becomes catastrophically distorted.

Criticism on Shashi Deshpande has focused on silence, domestic inequality, female identity, and the difficult movement from self-negation to self-assertion. Sarla Palkar's discussion of breaking silence, and later feminist readings of *That Long Silence*, identify Jaya's narrative voice as the centre of the novel's politics. Kapoor and Singh extend this argument through feminist narratology, showing how first-person retrospection, flashback, and self-conscious storytelling make the narrator's mind the main site of the quest for selfhood. Sambharwal and Yadav similarly read Deshpande's protagonists as women whose identities change through sustained engagement with social and marital constraints.

This body of scholarship has established important differences between the two writers. Desai is usually associated with lyrical interiority, solitude, and psychic fracture; Deshpande with middle-class domestic realism, speech, and negotiated survival. The present study builds on this distinction but identifies three areas that need further attention.

First, existing comparative work often treats "tradition" and "modernity" as stable opposites. The traditional woman is described as silent and sacrificial, while the modern woman is described as independent and vocal. The novels themselves are more complicated. Maya is emotionally expressive but not socially effective. Jaya is educated and capable of writing, yet she has internalised the belief that marital peace requires self-censorship. Modernity therefore appears as an uneven condition in which education, urban life, and individuality coexist with inherited gender discipline.

Second, the formal differences between the novels are often noted but not fully connected to their ethical meanings. Narrative technique is not merely a stylistic feature. It determines what kind of self can be imagined. Maya's intensely subjective narration gives her pain a powerful presence, but it also narrows the world around her until other people appear distant or unreal. Jaya's retrospective narration allows contradiction, revision, and self-implication. She can recognise that she has been wronged while also examining the strategies by which she avoided conflict. This difference between enclosed consciousness and revisable narration is central to the novels' contrasting forms of agency.

Third, the category of selfhood itself requires clarification. Selfhood does not mean complete independence from others. A self is formed through memory, language, work, embodiment, and relationship. Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of woman as the socially produced "Other" remains useful because it shows how femininity is made through institutions and expectations rather than biology alone. Yet postcolonial feminist thinkers such as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and Chandra Talpade Mohanty remind us that the meanings of gender are shaped by culture, class, nation, and history. In these novels, the problem is not simply that the protagonists lack freedom. It is that they must discover forms of freedom that do not deny their relational lives.

The research gap, then, lies in the need for a comparative account that connects narrative form, marital language, emotional recognition, and postcolonial modernity. This article argues that *Cry, the Peacock* and *That Long Silence* do not merely offer two portraits of oppressed women. They stage two different answers to a harder question: what happens after a woman becomes conscious of the distance between her social role and her lived self? Maya's answer is a tragic severance from shared reality. Jaya's answer is incomplete but dialogic: she begins to speak, to write, and to accept that relationship must involve two active subjects rather than one voice and one silence.

Methodology and conceptual framework: The study uses qualitative comparative close reading. The primary texts are read alongside feminist narratology, postcolonial feminist criticism, and selected psychological concepts. The purpose is not to diagnose fictional characters as clinical cases. Instead, psychological language is used to understand how fear, repression, fantasy, memory, and emotional neglect are represented in narrative form. Karen Horney's account of inner conflict is useful here because it draws attention to the gap between the self a person feels compelled to perform and the needs that remain unacknowledged. In Maya's case, the socially acceptable role of the composed wife conflicts with an urgent need for affection, bodily intimacy, and emotional reassurance. In Jaya's case, the ideal of the pleasant, capable wife gradually separates her public identity from her suppressed anger and creative ambition.

The feminist narratological framework draws particularly on Susan Lanser's argument that narrative authority is shaped by gendered conditions of speech. Who is permitted to speak? Under what circumstances is a woman's account treated as reasonable, excessive, private, or shameful? These

questions are important in both novels. Maya speaks intensely, but her speech does not gain recognition within marriage. Jaya has the ability to write, but she modifies her voice to suit her husband's expectations and the safe conventions of middle-class respectability. The difference between having language and possessing authority becomes crucial.

The postcolonial dimension of the analysis is guided by Partha Chatterjee's discussion of the gendered separation between the public and domestic domains in nationalist modernity. The "home" is often imagined as the protected site of cultural authenticity, while the outside world is associated with material progress and change. Such a division places a special burden on women, who are expected to preserve moral continuity inside the family even when their education and urban experience expose them to new ideas of individuality. The novels show that the domestic sphere is not outside modernity. It is where modernity's contradictions are most intimate.

The comparative method proceeds through four linked categories: marriage as a structure of recognition; voice and silence as narrative practices; the body and domestic space as sites of conflict; and agency as either rupture or negotiation. The focus remains primarily on Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* and Jaya in *That Long Silence*. References to other women in the novels are used when they clarify the social patterns surrounding the protagonists.

All direct quotations are brief and are cited parenthetically according to the editions listed in the Works Cited. The analysis gives priority to the language and structure of the novels rather than imposing a single theoretical model upon them. This is important because neither Desai nor Deshpande presents a simple opposition between men and women. Gautama and Mohan are shaped by gendered expectations as well, though the costs of those expectations are not equally distributed. The aim is therefore interpretive rather than accusatory: to understand how unequal relationships damage the possibility of mutual recognition and how narrative can either reveal or repair that damage.

Marriage and the gendered architecture of selfhood

Marriage in both novels is more than a personal relationship. It is a social form that organises identity. Maya and Jaya are known through their husbands, their homes, and their ability to maintain domestic order. Yet the novels expose a difference between social stability and emotional belonging. A household may appear complete from the outside while remaining internally divided.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, the marriage between Maya and Gautama is marked by a severe difference in temperament. Maya is sensuous, imaginative, and emotionally demanding. Gautama is older, rational, professionally occupied, and committed to philosophical detachment. Difference alone does not destroy their marriage. The deeper problem is that difference is not met with curiosity. Gautama often interprets Maya's emotional needs as immaturity, while Maya experiences his calmness as abandonment. Their relationship lacks a shared language in which feeling and reason can correct each other.

The early death of Maya's pet dog reveals this failure of recognition. The event may seem small to Gautama, but for Maya it opens a larger wound of loneliness. She realises "How little he knew of my suffering" (Desai 9). The sentence is significant because it does not merely accuse him of cruelty. It identifies a failure of knowledge within intimacy. Gautama lives beside her without understanding the scale or meaning of her grief. His practical response to loss cannot answer her need to be seen. The scene establishes a pattern that continues throughout the novel: Maya's feelings become more intense because they are not received, and Gautama becomes more distant because her intensity appears unreasonable.

Maya's selfhood is therefore formed negatively. She knows herself through what the marriage does not provide: companionship, sexual reciprocity, shared imagination, and emotional safety. The problem is not simply that she wants romantic love. She wants confirmation that her interior life matters. When she later concludes that "there was no bond, no love" (Desai 108), the language reduces marriage to an empty social arrangement. Her perception may be shaped by fear and exaggeration, but the novel gives substantial evidence for the emotional distance she describes.

Gautama's philosophical language also has a gendered function. Detachment appears to him as wisdom, yet Maya experiences it as permission to ignore bodily and emotional need. His view that "lives are trivial and expendable" (Desai 20) is especially disturbing in a marriage haunted by a prophecy of

death. The statement turns abstract philosophy into intimate danger. It also reveals how universal ideas can become ethically empty when they are not tested against the vulnerability of another person. Maya does not need a theory of life; she needs a partner capable of recognising fear without ridicule.

That Long Silence begins from a different marital atmosphere. Jaya and Mohan have been married for seventeen years and have two children. Their home has the ordinary features of middle-class respectability. Yet Jaya's opening description of marriage as "a pair of bullocks yoked together" (Deshpande 7) unsettles the conventional image of companionship. The metaphor suggests shared movement without free choice. The pair carry a burden and remain connected, but the yoke determines direction. Marriage becomes labour, habit, and social necessity rather than emotional reciprocity.

Unlike Maya, Jaya has learned to regulate herself. Her silence is not the absence of thought; it is a method of survival. She studies Mohan's reactions, avoids subjects that may disturb him, and changes the tone of her writing when he disapproves. After marriage, the name Suhasini becomes an idealised version of femininity: calm, smiling, maternal, and competent (Deshpande 15-16). Jaya is not physically forced to become Suhasini, but the social rewards of being agreeable make the role powerful. She gradually participates in her own reduction.

This participation does not remove Mohan's responsibility. He expects his wife to support him, protect the family's respectability, and absorb discomfort without making his moral world unstable. When his professional misconduct threatens the family, he assumes Jaya will accompany him and share the consequences. Yet he has not treated her as an equal participant in the choices that produced the crisis. The marriage demands collective suffering without collective decision-making.

The contrast between Maya and Jaya is therefore not a simple contrast between rebellion and submission. Maya cannot suppress her needs, but she cannot translate them into constructive action. Jaya can suppress her needs so effectively that she becomes estranged from her own voice. Both women show how gendered marriage can distort selfhood in opposite directions: one through explosive isolation, the other through disciplined self-erasure.

At the same time, Deshpande gives marriage a possibility that Desai largely withholds. Jaya's relationship with Mohan is damaged, but not beyond language. The novel does not promise a harmonious reunion. It suggests that marriage can become ethical only when both partners abandon the comfort of fixed roles. Jaya must stop using silence as hidden resistance, and Mohan must learn that authority is not the same as responsibility. Selfhood here does not require the destruction of relationship; it requires its reconstruction.

Voice, silence, and narrative authority

The most important difference between the novels lies in the relation between consciousness and narration. Both protagonists are given access to language, but they do not possess the same kind of narrative authority.

Cry, the Peacock draws the reader into Maya's consciousness through sensory density, repetition, memory, and symbolic association. The external world is constantly transformed by her inner state. Colours become violent, sounds become prophetic, and natural images carry the pressure of desire and death. The peacock's cry gathers these meanings into a single image of erotic longing and mortality. Its call, "Lover, Lover ... I die, I die" (Desai 95), gives poetic shape to Maya's belief that love and death cannot be separated. She hears in nature a truth that Gautama refuses to hear in her.

This lyrical intensity gives Maya's pain dignity. It prevents the reader from dismissing her as merely irrational. Her mind is capable of fine perception, and her language reveals the emotional poverty around her. Yet the same narrative method shows the danger of a consciousness that has lost corrective dialogue. Images repeat until they appear inevitable. The astrologer's prophecy, the peacock, the moon, the roof, and the fear of the fourth year become parts of a closed symbolic system. Maya's world increasingly confirms what she already fears.

Her narration therefore produces presence without authority. The reader hears her, but within the story her speech changes little. Gautama does not understand her, and she does not develop a sustained relationship with another person who could help her interpret her fear. The issue is not that nobody speaks

to Maya. It is that conversation never becomes mutual understanding. She remains trapped between emotional urgency and social disbelief.

That Long Silence uses first-person narration differently. Jaya begins with the recognition that “Self-revelation is a cruel process” (Deshpande 1). The statement defines the novel’s method. Telling the truth about oneself requires more than exposing the faults of others. It requires the narrator to revisit scenes in which she compromised, judged, concealed, or failed to act. Jaya’s authority grows because she allows her earlier self to be questioned by her present understanding.

The narrative moves through memory rather than chronological sequence. This structure reflects the way selfhood is made: not as a single discovery but as a series of returns. Jaya remembers the lessons given by older women, the gendered meanings of names, the shame attached to female anger, the loss of her confidence as a writer, and the emotional distance within marriage. Each memory alters the meaning of the others. Silence is shown as a cultural inheritance passed from one generation of women to another.

The line “no questions, no retorts, only silence” (Deshpande 143) appears as the result of learning, not nature. Jaya has been trained to treat speech as danger. A girl who questions risks being labelled disobedient; a wife who argues risks being called unwomanly; a woman who expresses anger risks being declared unstable. The novel exposes this gendered vocabulary when Jaya reflects that a “woman can never be angry” (Deshpande 147). Anger is translated into pathology, while male anger is treated as authority or injury.

Jaya’s narration reverses this process. By naming the rule, she weakens it. She begins to understand that silence has never been neutral. At times it protected her from conflict, but it also allowed resentment to grow without accountability. Her silence has functioned as surrender, concealment, and punishment. This complexity prevents the novel from treating speech as automatically virtuous. A person may speak in order to dominate, and may remain silent in order to resist. The ethical question is whether communication makes the other person more fully present.

The figure of the woman writer sharpens this issue. Jaya’s creative work is not separate from her domestic identity. When Mohan reacts negatively to a story, she retreats into safer forms of writing. Her authorship becomes shaped by anticipated male judgement. Feminist narratology is useful here because it shows that authority is not merely the technical ability to narrate. It depends on whether a speaker believes her experience deserves form and public attention (Lanser). Jaya’s recovery of voice is therefore also a recovery of literary seriousness.

The novel ends with a resolve to “erase the silence” (Deshpande 192). The phrase does not mean that all conflict will disappear. It means that conflict must become speakable. Jaya’s selfhood remains relational: she imagines speaking to Mohan, listening to him, and accepting uncertainty. This is a modest ending, but its modesty is important. Deshpande does not replace the silent ideal wife with a fantasy of complete independence. She presents voice as an ongoing practice that must be repeated in ordinary life.

The comparison reveals two forms of inwardness. Maya’s inwardness is expressive but sealed; Jaya’s is retrospective and revisable. Maya’s narration intensifies the singular truth of pain, while Jaya’s narration tests memory against responsibility. In both cases, the reader is asked to take female experience seriously. But only Jaya’s form of narration creates a future tense. Her story can continue because it has become capable of dialogue.

The body, desire, and psychological fracture

The struggle for selfhood in these novels is not purely intellectual. It is experienced through the body. Female desire, illness, sexuality, motherhood, and physical appearance become sites where social expectations are either enforced or resisted.

Maya’s body is central to *Cry, the Peacock*. She is acutely aware of touch, colour, smell, heat, rain, and sound. Her sensory life is not decorative; it expresses a demand for fullness. She wants marriage to include physical and emotional intimacy. Gautama’s distance therefore appears not only as a difference in personality but as a denial of embodied recognition. Maya’s frustration is intensified because the cultural respectability of marriage hides the absence of companionship within it.

The novel does not present her desire as shameful. Instead, it shows how unacknowledged desire can become fused with fear. The peacock symbol joins sexuality and death. Maya sees desire as a struggle in which love wounds even as it promises union. Her longing for Gautama becomes inseparable from her terror of losing him or dying in his place. The body that seeks pleasure also becomes the body that anticipates destruction.

This fusion helps explain why Maya's modernity is unstable. She recognises herself as a desiring subject rather than a passive wife, but she lacks a social language in which that desire can be negotiated. Her independence is therefore largely imaginative. She can perceive the falseness of her marriage, yet she remains materially and emotionally enclosed within it. Her father's protective affection has also left her poorly prepared for frustration. This does not make her responsible for Gautama's neglect, but it complicates any attempt to turn her into a straightforward feminist heroine.

A psychological reading must therefore avoid two extremes. The first is to reduce Maya to illness and dismiss the social truth of her anger. The second is to treat violence as successful rebellion. Horney's account of inner conflict helps illuminate how a person may move between helpless dependence, aggressive hostility, and withdrawal when basic emotional security is absent. Maya displays all three movements. She desires total closeness, resents the person on whom she depends, and finally withdraws into a symbolic world that makes destructive action appear necessary.

The final description of Gautama as one who "never lived and never would" (Desai 172) shows the moral danger of this closed perception. Maya no longer sees him as a complex person. He becomes an abstraction: lifeless reason, emotional absence, and the obstacle named by prophecy. The act that follows is not liberation but the collapse of recognition. The self that demanded to be seen becomes incapable of seeing the other.

Jaya's body is less sensuously foregrounded, but it is equally shaped by gender. Her body is managed through clothing, appearance, motherhood, domestic labour, and the ideal of the smiling wife. The transformation from Jaya to Suhasini is partly visual. It produces a socially legible woman whose body confirms order and respectability. This legibility comes at a cost: the body becomes an image designed for others.

Deshpande also places Jaya among women whose bodily suffering is ignored. Illness, reproductive labour, exhaustion, and sexual vulnerability are often hidden because the family values women for their capacity to endure. These secondary stories widen the novel beyond one middle-class marriage. Jaya gradually understands that silence is sustained not only through words but through the normalisation of pain. A woman is praised for bearing what should have been questioned.

The body also shapes female anger. Patriarchal language frequently treats an angry woman as hysterical, unreasonable, or physically unstable. This translation of political or relational grievance into bodily disorder appears in both novels. Maya is pathologised because her emotion exceeds accepted feminine calm. Jaya learns to fear anger because it threatens her identity as a good wife. Desai shows the catastrophic result of anger without recognition; Deshpande shows the slow damage of anger without expression.

The contrast is important. Maya's body becomes the theatre of psychic crisis, while Jaya's body becomes the disciplined surface of domestic normality. One cannot contain feeling; the other contains it too well. In both cases, selfhood requires a different relationship to embodiment. A woman must be able to desire, grieve, become angry, and speak of pain without being reduced either to a body or to a disembodied ideal of sacrifice.

Myth, domestic space, and the problem of modernity

The transition from tradition to modernity is often represented through inherited myths and domestic spaces. Both writers question the cultural images through which women learn endurance, loyalty, and self-sacrifice.

In Indian middle-class life, mythic women such as Sita, Savitri, and Gandhari frequently function as moral reference points. Their stories are interpreted as examples of devotion and patience. The problem is not the myths themselves but the selective use of them to discipline contemporary women. Jaya recognises that she has metaphorically blindfolded herself, repeating the logic associated with Gandhari by refusing to see what would disturb marital order (Deshpande 147). This insight turns myth from a command into an object of criticism. She no longer asks how closely she can imitate an ideal wife; she asks what such imitation has cost.

Desai uses myth less directly but builds a powerful symbolic world around Maya and Gautama. Their names evoke illusion and detachment. Maya's sensuous attachment to life stands against Gautama's philosophical distance. Yet the novel refuses a simple moral choice between them. Maya's intense attachment becomes destructive, while Gautama's detachment becomes emotionally irresponsible. Modern selfhood cannot be built from either extreme. It requires a form of relation in which reason acknowledges feeling and feeling remains answerable to reality.

Domestic space also carries ideological meaning. In *Cry, the Peacock*, the house appears secure but produces isolation. Rooms, gardens, terraces, and night skies become extensions of Maya's mental state. The roof is especially significant because it joins enclosure and openness. It is part of the home, yet exposed to the sky. The final crisis occurs at this boundary, suggesting that Maya cannot find a liveable position either inside domestic order or outside it.

Nature offers her an alternative language. Birds, flowers, heat, and rain express what the household cannot contain. However, nature does not save her. It amplifies desire and fear until symbol and reality become difficult to separate. Desai therefore complicates the common idea that withdrawal into nature offers freedom from society. Solitude may protect the self, but prolonged isolation can also intensify its wounds.

In *That Long Silence*, the Dadar flat is more ordinary. Its small rooms hold memory, domestic labour, anxiety, and the temporary collapse of the family's public status. The flat removes Jaya and Mohan from the comfortable setting in which their marriage normally performs success. In this reduced space, the habits of the relationship become visible. Jaya's inward journey does not require a mountain, forest, or dramatic escape. It begins in a familiar room through the work of remembering.

The kitchen is especially important in Deshpande's domestic world. It is a place of repetitive labour, but also a place where women observe, think, and transmit social knowledge. The novel does not romanticise domesticity. It reveals how cooking and care can become compulsory signs of femininity. Yet it also recognises that ordinary spaces hold forms of intelligence that public culture often ignores. Jaya's modernity emerges not by pretending that domestic life is meaningless, but by refusing to let it define the whole of her being.

Chatterjee's account of nationalist modernity helps explain this tension. The home is often imagined as the moral interior of the nation, and women are made responsible for preserving its purity. Education is permitted so long as it strengthens rather than disrupts domestic virtue. Both Maya and Jaya reveal the contradiction of this arrangement. They are modern enough to possess inwardness, literacy, and personal desire, but traditional enough to be judged by their success in marriage.

The novels therefore resist a Westernised image of emancipation as simple individual departure. Maya's tragic withdrawal shows the danger of a self that has no sustaining social relation. Jaya's decision to remain is not necessarily conservative, because she no longer accepts the same terms. Modernity appears as the capacity to question inherited roles, but also to reconstruct relationships without denying interdependence.

This argument also prevents a simplistic use of the term "New Woman." The phrase can suggest a finished identity: educated, independent, assertive, and free. Maya and Jaya are better understood as transitional subjects. Their consciousness changes before their worlds are ready to change with them. They carry the language of duty and the desire for individuality at the same time. Their selfhood is therefore uneven, contradictory, and deeply human.

Two models of agency: rupture and negotiation

Agency is often understood as visible resistance: leaving a marriage, rejecting a role, speaking publicly, or choosing an independent life. The novels complicate this definition. They show that action can be dramatic without being liberating, and that modest changes in language can carry serious ethical force.

Maya acts decisively at the end of *Cry, the Peacock*, but her action cannot be called autonomous in a meaningful sense. It is shaped by prophecy, terror, emotional isolation, and a symbolic logic that has become absolute. The act breaks the marriage physically, yet it does not create a self capable of living beyond it. Her agency is therefore negative and terminal. It exposes the violence of her situation but cannot transform it.

This does not make the novel politically weak. On the contrary, its refusal to offer recovery forces the reader to confront the cost of emotional non-recognition. A society may provide legal marriage, wealth, education, and respectability while still failing to create conditions in which a woman's fear and desire can be heard. Maya's tragedy is not proof that women are naturally unstable. It is a warning about the damage produced when intense subjectivity is isolated, patronised, and left without language or support.

Jaya's agency is quieter. She does not leave the family, announce a complete new identity, or overcome all doubt. Her change occurs through interpretation. She recognises the roles she has performed, the ways she has censored her writing, and the uses of silence within her marriage. This recognition is an action because it alters the terms of future choice.

Her self-criticism is crucial. It would be easier for Jaya to make Mohan the sole cause of her unhappiness. The novel does not excuse his expectations, but it asks her to examine her own strategies. She has used silence to avoid risk, preserve an image, and sometimes punish without confrontation. By acknowledging this, she moves from victimhood towards responsibility. Agency becomes the ability to answer for one's choices without denying the pressures under which they were made.

Deshpande's model of negotiation should not be mistaken for compromise in the weak sense. Negotiation requires that both parties be recognised as subjects. Jaya's willingness to speak does not guarantee that Mohan will listen. The ending remains open because ethical relation cannot be completed by one person. What changes is her refusal to continue a marriage based upon unspoken assumptions.

The contrast between rupture and negotiation also appears in the writers' treatment of time. Maya's consciousness is dominated by the predicted fourth year of marriage. Time becomes a countdown toward a fixed event. The future feels already decided. Jaya's narration, by contrast, returns to the past in order to make the future less determined. Memory is painful, but it allows revision. She cannot change what has happened, yet she can change the story through which it governs her.

These temporal structures reveal different relations to modernity. Maya's modern self-experiences freedom as impossible because both prophecy and marriage appear closed. Jaya's modern self emerges when she understands identity as unfinished. The past has shaped her, but it does not have the final word. Selfhood becomes a practice rather than a possession. The novels also revise the meaning of survival. Maya cannot imagine survival within a relationship she experiences as empty. Jaya learns that survival without voice is also a form of diminishment. Her task is to make life possible without returning to the old silence. Deshpande's ending is therefore hopeful, but not comforting. It places responsibility on ordinary speech, which is difficult precisely because it lacks the dramatic clarity of escape. Taken together, the novels suggest that agency depends upon recognition, narrative, and relation. A person becomes an agent not simply by acting strongly, but by understanding the forces that shape action, accepting the reality of others, and creating language for future choice. Maya's tragedy shows what happens when these conditions fail. Jaya's unfinished awakening shows how they might begin.

Discussion: beyond the tradition–modernity binary

The comparative findings can be summarised through four propositions.

First, female selfhood in these novels is relational rather than purely individual. Maya and Jaya do not seek an abstract freedom from all bonds. They seek to exist within relationships without disappearing inside them. Maya's suffering grows because her marriage offers proximity without recognition. Jaya's

silence grows because the relationship rewards her capacity to disappear. The problem is not relation itself, but relation organised through inequality.

Second, modernity does not automatically produce agency. Both protagonists are educated, urban, and psychologically self-aware. These qualities allow them to perceive contradiction, but perception alone does not create freedom. Maya's heightened consciousness becomes destructive because it lacks social support and interpretive balance. Jaya's education and writing remain limited until she claims authority over her own account. Modernity therefore creates new forms of inwardness while leaving older gender expectations intact.

Third, narrative form shapes the ethical possibilities of the self. Desai's lyrical, enclosed interiority makes the reader feel the pressure of Maya's isolation. It is formally appropriate to a consciousness in which symbols have replaced dialogue. Deshpande's retrospective first-person narration creates a more open structure. Jaya can compare versions of herself, reinterpret the past, and imagine speech that has not yet occurred. Narrative is not simply how the story is told; it is the model through which each protagonist can or cannot change.

Fourth, the novels offer different but complementary critiques of patriarchy. Desai reveals the psychological consequences of emotional neglect and philosophical superiority within marriage. Deshpande reveals the ordinary social mechanisms that teach women to accept silence as virtue. One novel is organised around crisis, the other around habit. Crisis is easier to see, but habit may be more socially durable. Reading them together shows that gendered domination operates both through dramatic injury and through small, repeated accommodations.

The study also modifies the common distinction between Desai's "metaphysical" modernity and Deshpande's "sociological" modernity. Desai's work is not detached from social structures. Maya's psyche is shaped by age difference, marital hierarchy, childlessness, domestic isolation, and the cultural dismissal of female emotion. Likewise, Deshpande's social realism is not merely external. Jaya's transformation occurs through memory, guilt, anger, fear, and the painful rebuilding of narrative identity. The psychological and the social are not separate domains; they are two scales of the same gendered experience. The concept of dharma and self-truth can still illuminate the novels if used carefully. Social duty becomes harmful when it requires one person to sustain harmony by suppressing reality. Yet self-truth becomes equally dangerous when it is imagined as freedom from responsibility to others. Maya's tragedy lies partly in the collapse of this balance. Jaya's growth lies in seeking a form of truth that can enter conversation. The ethical self is neither self-sacrificing nor self-enclosed.

This has implications for the study of Indian women's writing more broadly. The protagonists should not be measured by whether they meet a predetermined standard of feminist success. Such a measure would reproduce the very problem the novels expose: the replacement of one ideal woman with another. A humanistic reading attends instead to the incomplete, contradictory, and situated character of change. Women may desire autonomy and attachment, speech and safety, continuity and transformation at the same time.

The comparison also demonstrates why the domestic novel remains politically important. The home is where large ideas become daily practices. Patriarchy appears not only in laws and institutions but in names, gestures, silences, jokes, expectations, and the unequal distribution of emotional labour. Desai and Deshpande make these details visible. They show that a society's idea of modernity must be judged not only by public progress, but by whether intimate relationships permit mutual dignity.

Finally, the study suggests that voice is necessary but not sufficient. Maya has intense expression without effective dialogue. Jaya moves towards dialogue because her narration includes self-questioning and the recognition of others. A voice becomes ethically transformative when it can speak pain without making pain the only truth. This is the deepest point of connection between the two novels. Both insist that female experience must be heard; they differ in imagining what hearing can make possible.

Conclusion: *Cry, the Peacock* and *That Long Silence* present the quest for female selfhood as a difficult movement through, rather than simply away from, family, marriage, memory, and cultural expectation.

Maya and Jaya recognise that the identity of the dutiful wife cannot contain the whole of their experience. Yet recognition leads them towards different outcomes. Maya's search for selfhood develops within a marriage that repeatedly fails to acknowledge her emotional and bodily life. Her intense inwardness exposes the poverty of a relationship governed by detachment, but it also becomes increasingly closed to revision. The prophecy of death, the cry of the peacock, and the emotional absence of Gautama merge into a symbolic world that leaves no space for another future. Her final action breaks the structure that confines her, but it also destroys the possibility of a liveable self. Desai's achievement lies in making this tragedy socially and emotionally intelligible without turning it into a moral lesson about female instability.

Jaya's journey begins from a different form of loss. She has not been overwhelmed by expression; she has been disciplined into silence. Her selfhood has been divided among the roles of wife, mother, and acceptable writer. Through retrospective narration, she discovers that silence has been both imposed and chosen. This recognition allows her to move beyond accusation towards responsibility. She does not recover an untouched, authentic self-hidden beneath social roles. She begins to create a more honest self through writing and the willingness to speak. The comparison shows that Desai represents modernity as fracture when inward freedom has no social form, while Deshpande represents it as negotiation when narrative voice creates the possibility of ethical relation. Neither novel imagines emancipation as complete separation from others. Both ask whether intimacy can exist without domination and whether individuality can grow without denying dependency. Their lasting importance lies in this refusal of easy answers. The modern woman is not simply the opposite of the traditional woman. She is a person living with inherited duties, new desires, unequal relationships, and an unfinished understanding of freedom. Maya and Jaya reveal two truths about that condition. A self that is never recognised may break. A self that remains silent may slowly disappear. Between fracture and silence lies the difficult work of voice: speaking, listening, revising, and learning to inhabit relationship without surrendering personhood.

Limitations and scope for further research

This article concentrates on two novels and two middle-class protagonists. Its conclusions should not be treated as representative of all Indian women's experience. Caste, region, religion, labour, sexuality, and economic precarity shape selfhood in ways that are only partly visible in these texts. Future comparative work could place Desai and Deshpande alongside Dalit feminist writing, queer Indian fiction, and narratives of working-class women in order to test how the relation between domesticity and modernity changes across social locations. A second area for further research is intergenerational memory. *That Long Silence* contains many women whose lives become part of Jaya's understanding, while Desai's fiction repeatedly returns to childhood, parental attachment, and inherited emotional patterns. A comparative study of mothers, daughters, and older women could show how silence and desire are transmitted across generations.

Further work could also examine male vulnerability. Gautama and Mohan benefit from patriarchal arrangements, but they are also limited by ideals of rationality, authority, and masculine self-control. Studying these limits would not reduce women's suffering; it would clarify how gender hierarchy damages the possibility of mutual intimacy. Finally, the two novels invite comparison with twenty-first-century narratives in which selfhood is shaped by migration, digital visibility, therapeutic language, and changing forms of marriage. Such research could explore whether the movement from silence to voice remains an adequate model of emancipation when contemporary women are increasingly required not only to speak, but to perform a public identity continuously.

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Declaration by Author (s): "I/We hereby declare that this manuscript is my/our original work, free from plagiarism, and that all sources and any use of Artificial Intelligence tools for content generation or editing have been fully disclosed and verified for accuracy." Dr. Surbhi Goswami & Dr Reenu