



Cover Page



ROOMS, ROLES AND REBELLIONS: SPATIAL METAPHORS OF FEMALE AGENCY IN SHASHI DESHPANDE AND ANITA DESAI

Ranjit Kumar Elamadurthi

Department of English

Vardhaman College of Engineering

Hyderabad, India

Abstract

This research examines how spatial metaphors shape representations of female agency and identity in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988) and Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980). It argues that domestic spaces like, rooms, houses and thresholds symbolically reflect women's psychological and social confinement within patriarchal systems. Both authors portray the house as a metaphor for self and society, yet their protagonists navigate agency differently. Jaya in *That Long Silence* turns inward using her apartment's liminal space to challenge imposed roles and reclaim her voice through writing. Conversely, Bim in *Clear Light of Day* reclaims the decaying family home, transforming it into a site of self-defined authority. The research shows rebellion as re-appropriating domestic space to build empowered female subjectivities.

Keywords: Indian Spatial Theory, Female Agency, Patriarchy, Domesticity, Feminism, Space.

Introduction

The domestic setting always had a function beyond that of a mere background acting as an ideological construct behind which, especially, stories of women are staged. In the Indian context, it is where the traditional model has so closely bound a woman within the definition of home; therefore, the study of domestic space acquires the significance of a crucial lens for studying female identity and agency. Shashi Deshpande's and Anita Desai's works both major figures in the Indian fiction in English are invested very much in that inner landscape. The psychological mapping of their female protagonists is meticulously done with the walls of the home acting as both sanctuary and prison for them say Dalmia and Nayar.

This research argues that Deshpande and Desai use spatial metaphors of rooms, houses, windows and thresholds as the principal narrative strategies to lay bare the restraints of patriarchal expectations and to highlight the slight and often internal rebellions against them. Drawing upon the theoretical apparatus of feminist geography and spatial theory, especially Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* and Gillian Rose's *Feminism and Geography* establish that space in these novels is not merely the backdrop but an actively produced and contested site of meaning.

A close reading of Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1989) and Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980) reveals a pivotal divergence in their representation of female agency. Agency of Jaya in Deshpande's narrative is sought through retreating into a liminal domestic space one of enforced silence that allows for introspection and writing which would ultimately enable her re-entry into the world on her own terms says Rao. As Sharma says, Desai's Bim, on the contrary, asserts agency by occupying and controlling the ancestral home while reclaiming it from its patriarchal legacy and constructing an independent identity within its walls. This comparative study thus not only deepens our understanding of female resistance but shows that the resistance may be vocal or silent, moving or stationary, but always requires a radical re-imagining of one's occupied space.

Review of Literature

Much of the scholarship on Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai highlights domesticity as a necessary locus for the understanding of female subjectivity and identity formation as well as for resistance. The critics have spoken of house in *That Long Silence* and *Clear Light of Day* increasingly as references to the sites of confinement, intergeneration conflict and memory, pointing to the interior as both constraint and archive for women's life experiences. Deshpande's studies usually refer to variables like silence, voice and marital space as strong indicators of female selfhood, whereas Essays on



Cover Page



Desai, build into the lyrical expression of domestic spaces as memory and melancholy repositories shaping female agency. In that regard, the present analysis is conceived in contact with three criss-crossing theoretical frames. This will draw from Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, regarding rooms, thresholds and corners that are approached as emotionally imbued spaces that structure consciousness. Further drawn into the analysis is the feminist spatial theory of Doreen Massey's space is socially constructed and gendered-where access, mobility and control are shown to be reflections of patriarchal power. Finally, by integrating postcolonial feminist criticism into the study, these spaces would accommodate caste, class and colonial legacies into Indian socio-cultural hierarchies, with resultant articulation of spaces as metaphorical of both subjugation and rebellion.

The Confining House and the Silent Room: Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

Through *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande inside the suffocating interiority of Jaya, a writer whose creative and emotional voice has been silenced by patriarchal ideals, first as dutiful Jaya and later compliant Mrs. Mohan. Spatial setting: more so to complement the psychological journey than to illustrate it. Jaya relocated with her husband into a small, temporary apartment in Bombay after Mohan had turbulent waters in his professional life, which becomes a metaphorical refuge from the larger, more socially defined space of her regular home. This move forces a physical and psychological retreat creating what Homi Bhabha would call a "liminal space" a threshold where the rules of normative domesticity are suspended and allows the possibility of transformation.

Deshpande's description of the apartment: "small", "makeshift" and "like a cage", which confines imprisonment but yet acts like a catalyst for her introspection. She will thus have to face the silence that she has internalized all her years. The rooms in the apartment act as symbolic chambers of memory, where Jaya revisits spaces that were formative in her childhood: her father's house, where she learned the first principles of female subordination and her marital home, where she came to efface her individuality in order to maintain domestic harmony as discussed by Mishra.

The narrow space recovered for the act of writing emerges as Jaya's primary agency. In her unsuccessful attempts to write her story, she writes herself back into existence: her writings transform the cell into something sacred. As Nayak says, her room's window operates as a classic liminal object; looking out from her confinement, she connects her internal turmoil with the external world, symbolizing both her yearning for connection and her emerging critical perspective. Jaya's rebellion is quiet, internal and intellectual. It is a rebellion of voice, fought in the silent room of her mind and apartment. She aims to destroy not only the house of patriarchy but to build a room of her own within it, from which she can speak.

Mastering the Ruin: Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* presents a different spatial dynamic which ranges from geological in scale to the corporeal setting of the sprawling, decayed Das family haveli in Old Delhi upon which the very drama is predicated. The house is neither a seasonal hideaway nor a transient stopping place; rather, it is a fixed locus of memory, inherited obligation and patriarchal authority, including the trauma of Partition. For Bimla (Bim), the eldest sister, the house is both burden and domain. Bim does not try to escape, unlike her sister Tara (or Raja). Her agency arises from almost stoic control over the domestic space. She became head of the household in every sense-she cared for the mentally-challenged brother Baba, looked after Aunt Mira, maintained the house and put up resistance so much so that even when Raja, upon legal merit, would be the one inheriting the house, Bim would still be the de facto occupant contesting displacement alongside him.

Absurdly, Tara created another name for herself overseas while Raja disappeared into Hyderabad. Bim? She is here. The non-poetic rebellion was precisely this to stay, to remain where all were expecting her to be put in eternal confinement. The complete denial of marriage and acceptance of teaching are to preserve the memories and slow the death of the home to constitute her attempt to reclamation of power. Desai uses the ruin of the house-more precisely, the beautifully overgrown garden, dusty rooms and oppressive heat as reflections of stagnation and broken desires. Old Delhi, the haveli, the garden, the well-everything becomes the metaphors for what is lost and what resists change.



Cover Page



Yet for Bim, the act of relating to that decay is regenerative rather than despairing. She does not erase the past instead she lives through the ruins of the house not through attempts at complete renovation. By way of her labor, presence and moral authority, Bim slowly reinscribes the house with her own sense of use. A path of marriage, of flight-such a choice would yield conformity but would not define Bim, who thus creates her identity: independent, rooted and sovereign in her own domain. Her agency is not in her leaving but is the act of her staying. In the acceptance of her life and history lies the identity of the clear light of day, a light denied to nostalgia or escape but granted to the constant, uncompromising presence of a decayed yet beloved home.

Comparative Analysis: Internal Retreat vs. Sovereign Occupation

In both the selected for the current research, the house stands as a central metaphor for the condition of women, with protagonists employing wildly different strategies for negotiating resistance. Jaya's space is transient and liminal: a temporary suspension from daily life, an active site of inward contemplation. By contrast, Bim's space is rooted, ancestral and permanent, reflective of her very identity. Jaya consummates her agency inwards, through contemplation and the act of writing a process of becoming; Bim's manifest her agency-aiding and abetting the emotional labor of just being in the very largest and most public arena of the house, home and society. Jaya determines her position within the patriarchal order and seeks a voice, while Bim subverts this patriarchal order by becoming the head of a family from within a structure designed to imprison her.

Nature and Space: Like any other single space, Jaya's space is temporary and liminal as she experiences it in Deshpande's narrative; an earlier period, a momentary withdrawal from ordinary structures of life. Here, she pauses suspended in between the familiar and the unknown. Neither inside nor outside her established world, it is this space that lets her imagine, let go of her daily demands, rethink values and reassess relationships. Whereas, Bim's universe however, is permanent and ancestral, standing true into history and place. It forms part of her identity and consists of landscapes and practices along with obligations that Bim inherited. But Jaya gets refuge in space, Bim cannot escape his space: ancestry and ground merely define her-don't give her options but foundations. The temporary retreat as a ground of becoming for Jaya and the inescapable belonging ground of being for Bim thus refer to the two authors who explore such paradoxically physical and metaphorical "spaces".

Form of Agency: Jaya's agency is found at the process oriented interior journey. Inwardly, it is achieved through self-contemplation, narrative reflection and more particularly, through the art of writing. The process of agency grows through the questioning of choices and reclaiming lost or suppressed parts of her-self. For her, the agency cannot yet be seen, but is developing consciousness and the awareness of constraints, which in turn translates them into themselves. Bim's agency, on the contrary, is state oriented and external; an exercise of power practically in administering her home and persistent emotional endurance. Bim does what ought to be done: she organizes, supports and controls. Her power lies in her being, that is, her presence and her steadfastness in place. While Jaya's agency is internal and formative, Bim's is performed by what she is and does in relation to her environment and social expectations.

Relationship to Patriarchy: Jaya's movement through life fiercely scrutinizes patriarchal structures which also includes her marriage. She becomes alert to her own complicity on how she has accepted or internalized norms and seeks to find her voice from within those constraints. Her quest is not to violently contrive the overthrow of patriarchy but to understand and resist its more subtle forms of domination, to redefine her selfhood even in relation to those who expect her silence. However, Bim occupies an entirely different strident space by choosing the role reserved for men: that of head of the household. Within patriarchy, she refuses to live: she claims practical functions and decision-making authority yet remains defined by the very system she is rebelling against. Bim, therefore, subverts patriarchal requirements not from outside but from within its walls, claiming authority by the virtue of responsibility and endurance. Deshpande and Desai together show that women's agency may be critical and self-reflective or assertive and embedded but in neither case is it ever monolithic.

These divergent trajectories underscore that female agency cannot be confined to a singular model. As explained by Rao, Shashi Deshpande portrays silence and withdrawal not as signs of passivity but as necessary stages that enable women to



Cover Page



regroup, reflect, and ultimately reclaim their voices. In contrast, Anita Desai envisions agency as rootedness, suggesting that strength emerges from an unwavering engagement with one's cultural and historical contexts; however conflict-ridden they may be argues Singh. Both writers demonstrate that women's empowerment may evolve either through introspective retreat or through steadfast attachment to place and history, affirming the multiplicity of female subjectivities.

Conclusion

In the novels of Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai, a deep understanding of the gendered politics around space in post-colonial India is provided. They make use of rich textual metaphors to show that the house is a site of oppression and at the same time, a potential site for liberation. In *That Long Silence*, the boxy apartment becomes a crucible for Jaya's rebirth, indicating that agency can begin in the quietest room of one's own mind. On the other hand, in *Clear Light of Day*, Bim's steadfast gaze transforms the dilapidated haveli from a prison of memory into a kingdom of self-reliance. Together, these textual depictions contest naive preconceptions of rebellion as agency through physical separation. They broaden the feminist imagination to include the victories of introspection, endurance and the radical act of claiming one's space-whether by writing it or ruling over it. The rooms, roles and rebellions between Deshpande and Desai remain testament to a long multi-faceted struggle for female self-definition within and against the frameworks of tradition.

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