



NEGOTIATING CONJUGAL SPACE: BODILY AUTONOMY AND MARITAL ALIENATION IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S 'INTRUSION' AND ALICE WALKER'S 'ROSELILY'

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative study of female subjugation and conjugal space in the patriarchal societies of two geographically distant lands; one is that of India, represented by Shashi Deshpande in 'The Intrusion' and the other one is of Afro-American context, represented by Alice Walker in 'Roselily'. The study particularly focuses on bodily autonomy and marital alienation in the marriages, shaped by the patriarchal structure portrayed in these two short stories. An important irony of this patriarchal control is that it ultimately alienates the men as well. Both husbands seek ownership and obedience, but by denying their wives bodily autonomy, they destroy any possibility of authentic intimacy. The paper also presents the ways in which women negotiate these situations. Through the comparative study of the short stories of these two writers, the paper presents the similarities and differences in the portrayal and the approaches of dealing with marriages and their struggle of having the inner voices, which are often suppressed and denied expression. The study shows that although the contexts are geographically, socially and culturally different, the situation and struggle of women are similar in certain respects.

Keywords: Alienation, Autonomy, Bodily Autonomy, Comparative Study, Conjugal Space, Feminism, Marital Alienation, Patriarchy

Introduction

'The intrusion' by Shashi Deshpande and 'Roselily' by Alice Walker are two short stories written miles apart and in vastly different cultural settings, mirror one another in the portrayal of women on the threshold of marriage. In both narratives, the female protagonists find themselves caught at the intersection of societal obligation, economic vulnerability, and institutionalized heteropatriarchy. In neither of the stories marriage has been presented as a joyful togetherness of two equals but as a trap. Marriage becomes the place where a woman loses the control over her body and choices. Instead of entering a companionship, she enters the loneliness and silence. By treating their brides as objects to be conquered rather than subjects to be known, men systematically destroy the woman's capacity for genuine vulnerability and emotional availability. Shashi Deshpande focusses on an Indian middle class arranged marriage in which the bride's husband thinks himself to be the owner of her body and sexual intimacy as the wedding gift which can neither be delayed nor denied. The story ends up in unrealised marital rape. On the other side of the world, Walker focuses on an Afro-American mother who gets married to a man from the North to escape grinding poverty, being aware of the fact that this act will throw her in the prison of strict religious rules.

By comparing these two stories through feminist ideas-especially Simone de Beauvoir's idea that woman is treated as the "Other," Adrienne Rich's critique of marriage as a compulsory institution, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of how race, class, and gender overlap-this paper analyzes three main questions:

1. How do patriarchal marriages snatch a woman's bodily autonomy?
2. How does the marital relationship create emotional isolation instead of intimacy?
3. How do these women resist the control with the help of their inner thoughts?

Materials and Methods

This paper uses a comparative literary analysis to study how marriage and bodily autonomy are portrayed in Shashi Deshpande's "The Intrusion" and Alice Walker's "Roselily." The primary texts are the two short stories themselves. To



analyze them, this study applies key feminist theories—specifically Simone de Beauvoir’s idea of the "Other," Adrienne Rich’s concept of compulsory marriage, and intersectional views from bell hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw. The method involves closely reading both stories to find similarities and differences in how the female characters experience patriarchal control, face emotional isolation, and quietly resist through their inner thoughts.

Results

Subjugation is universal: Despite geographical and cultural differences, patriarchal marriage functions as a system of control that strips women of bodily autonomy.

Mutual Marital Alienation: By treating their wives as objects and seeking absolute ownership, the husbands systematically destroy the possibility of authentic intimacy, which ultimately results in profound emotional alienation and isolation for the husbands as well.

Internal Resistance as the Sole Sanctuary: Because open rebellion is restricted by social and economic pressures, both protagonists preserve their agency through psychological resistance by using their inner thoughts.

Marriage as a System of Control

To understand the struggles of these two women, it is needed to look at key feminist ideas about marriage and power.

1. Simone de Beauvoir and the "Other"

French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir argued in her famous book, *The Second Sex* (1949), that in a patriarchal society, man is treated as the central human being (the "Subject"), and woman is defined only in relation to him (the "Other"). When a woman marries, society expects her to merge into her husband’s world. Her personal dreams, boundaries, and bodily independence are not important.

2. Adrienne Rich and Compulsory Marriage

In "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), Adrienne Rich argued that marriage is not always an open, free choice for women. Instead, it’s a cultural and economic pressure to push women into marriage. While men are taught that they have an inherent right to access women’s bodies, domestic labor, and emotional care.

3. Alice Walker, bell hooks, and Intersectionality

All women are affected by gender oppression but not in the same way. Theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality* to show that race, class, and gender work together to create unique hardships. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), bell hooks pointed out that for poor Black women, marriage is often tied directly to physical and financial survival. As Alice Walker shows in her own writings, a womanist perspective must look at how Black women struggle against both racial poverty and domestic control at the same time.

Spatial Claustrophobia and Bodily Violation in Shashi Deshpande’s “The Intrusion”

In “The Intrusion,” Deshpande tells the story of a newly married Indian woman who has gone on her honeymoon with her husband to a remote seaside fishing village. From the starting, the physical environment is presented hostile and uncomfortable:

- The rented room is dark, dusty, and smells of old sheets and bedbugs.
- It contains no personal warmth or familiarity.
- The isolation of the cottage cuts the bride off her support network.

This suffocating room represents the marriage itself. The bride wants to express her uneasiness in the room as well as in the marriage. She does not know her husband because their marriage was arranged by their families. She wants emotional



connection before physical intimacy; she wants them to talk and become friends first. However, the husband sees things completely differently. When she asks for time, he is irritated and dismissive:

"Know each other? What does this matter? Aren't we married now? And how will we start getting to know each other if you put on such a touch-me-not-tish air?" (Deshpande 38)

This quote exposes the core problem: the husband believes that a legal marriage certificate gives him complete, immediate ownership over his wife's body. He is not ready to understand the feelings of his wife. In traditional patriarchal thinking, a wife cannot refuse her husband.

Deshpande uses the natural world to mirror the bride's inner turmoil. The bride walks out onto the rocks by the sea to get away from him. But the sea is not calm; its waves crash violently against the shore. Later that night, exhausted from emotional stress, the bride falls asleep. She wakes up to a terrible realization:

"It was not the sea that was pounding my body, but he, my husband, who was forcing his body on mine." (Deshpande 42)
 She goes through marital rape while she is half-asleep. Deshpande intentionally titles the story "The Intrusion" because the act is a violent break-in, an invasion of the woman's personal boundaries. Afterward, the husband simply rolls over and goes to sleep, untroubled and satisfied, feeling the rape as his right. The bride is left in the dark, feeling broken and completely alienated from her own body. Deshpande strips away the romantic image of Indian marriage to reveal that without mutual consent, the marital bed becomes a scene of violence.

Trading Freedom for Security in Alice Walker's "Roselily"

In Alice Walker's "Roselily," the loss of freedom does not come from a sudden physical attack, but from an unequal social bargain which is done by herself, on her own choice, knowing the consequences.

Roselily is an unmarried mother of four living in Panther Burn, Mississippi. Her daily life is exhausted by backbreaking, low-wage work at a cotton sewing plant. Her new husband is a Black Muslim man from Chicago who represents clean clothes, sober living, and financial support. He offers a chance to pull her children out of southern poverty.

The story has a unique and powerful structure. Walker alternates between lines of the traditional Christian wedding ceremony spoken out loud by the preacher (*"Dearly Beloved," "to have and to hold," "in sickness and in health"*) and the secret, unspoken thoughts moving through Roselily's mind. This creates a sharp contrast between what the public sees—a happy, respectable wedding—and what the bride actually feels inside.

As she stands at the altar with Mississippi mud clinging to the hem of her wedding dress, Roselily understands that this security comes at a terrible price:

"She thinks of ropes, chains, handcuffs, his religion. A lifetime of black and white. Of veils. Covered head." (Walker 4)
 Walker intentionally uses words like "ropes," "chains," and "handcuffs" to remind the reader of slavery. Roselily is escaping white economic exploitation in the fields and factories, but she is entering a household where her husband will control her every move. Under his religious rules:

1. She will have to stay indoors and remain hidden.
2. She must cover her hair and body with dark veils.
3. She will sit behind the men in religious meetings.
4. She will have to forget her own heritage, her southern roots, and her Christian memories.



The husband promises that she will be able to "rest" and will not have to work outside the home anymore. But Roselily realizes that this "rest" means a lifetime prison. As the wedding ends, her husband takes her arm, and his touch feels like *"the clasp of an iron gate"* closing her inside (Walker 8). Inside her own mind, she feels a rising panic:

"Something strains upward behind her eyes. She thinks of the something as a rat trapped, cornered, scurrying to and fro in her head, peering through the windows of her eyes." (Walker 7)

This "trapped rat" represents her natural desire for real freedom. Roselily enters marriage not out of romantic love, but out of necessity. She sacrifices her personal autonomy so her children can have a better future.

Comparison: Similarities and Differences

1. Similarities

- **Objectification:** In both stories, the wives are not seen as equals. In Deshpande's story, the husband treats his wife's body as something he has the right to use. In Walker's story, the husband expects Roselily to become a modest, obedient wife who fits his religious ideals.
- **Marital Alienation:** Both women feel deeply lonely next to their husbands. They have thoughts going on in their minds but they cannot speak their minds openly. The husband in "The Intrusion" is indifferent to his wife's tears, while the groom in "Roselily" looks down on her past and her community.
- **Marriage as a Transaction:** In both cultures, marriage acts as a contract not an emotional union, a contract in which women are considered inferior. In India, it is a social duty arranged by families while in America, it is an economic survival strategy.
- **The Stolen Pace of Time (Men Rush, Women Need Time):** In The Intrusion, the husband refuses to wait for mutual trust and violently rushes into physical intimacy on the very first night. In Roselily, the rushed wedding traps the bride into a future where all her daily time and life choices are permanently dictated by her husband without giving her time to adopt them on her own choice.

2. Differences

- **The Nature of Oppression:** Deshpande focuses on immediate physical violation (marital rape) within a middle-class Indian home. Walker focuses on intersectional oppression—how poverty, race, and gender force a poor Black woman into ideological confinement.
- **The Setting:** Deshpande's story takes place in the private confinement of a bedroom, while Walker's story takes place in the public space of a wedding ceremony.

Negotiating Resistance: The Sanctuary of Interiority

None of the protagonists fights openly against the wrongs happening to them because loud rebellion is practically impossible because society gives all the legal, economic, and physical power to men. Instead, both women fight back in the only space they still own: **their inner minds**.

- **In Deshpande's Story:** The bride resists by refusing to accept the husband's behavior as normal or acceptable. Culturally, an Indian wife is taught to consider her husband as a master and to accept, happily whatever he does as her duty. The protagonist completely rejects this idea. In her mind, she identifies his act clearly as an attack. Her silent anger and disgust are acts of psychological resistance.
- **In Walker's Story:** Roselily resists through honest self-awareness. She is not interested in the romantic promises of the wedding ceremony because she is selling herself for the security of her children. While everyone around her thinks she is lucky, she privately counts the true cost of her new life. By keeping her doubts, memories, and fears alive inside her head, she protects her true self from being completely erased by her husband's dogma.



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Conclusion

A comparative examination of Shashi Deshpande's "The Intrusion" and Alice Walker's "Roselily" shows that patriarchal marriage across different cultures often works in the same fundamental way, it treats women's bodies and lives as resources for men to manage. Both stories show that the threshold of marriage can be a terrifying border where a woman is forced to give up her freedom. The stories show how the **conjugal space**-the realm of marriage-often becomes a place of entrapment rather than mutual love. Despite belonging to very different cultures, both stories demonstrate how patriarchal marriages strip women of their **bodily autonomy**:

- In "**The Intrusion**," the bride loses control over her own body through physical violation, as her husband treats sex as an automatic marital right not a shared choice based on consent.
- In "**Roselily**," the bride gives up her physical freedom, personal identity, and habits to live under strict domestic and religious rules of wearing veils and staying confined, in exchange for economic survival.

Because their husbands see them as possessions rather than equal human beings, both protagonists suffer from profound **marital alienation**. They didn't get warmth and support but loneliness in their marriages. Finally, both stories show how women attempt to **negotiate** this oppressive conjugal space. Unable to openly rebel due to social and financial pressures, both retreat permanently to their minds making the victory of the husbands' a hollow one. The male dominance and ignorance of feelings inevitably result in emotional alienation for the oppressor too. When read side by side, both Deshpande and Walker expose a profound irony: the patriarchal drive for absolute possession of a woman's body and identity ultimately renders true intimacy impossible.

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