



Shashi Deshpande's Representation of Community, Culture and Women: Sara Aboobacker and B. T. Lalitha Naik

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Abstract

Indian women's writing provides an important account of the relationship between gender, community and culture. The present paper examines the representation of women in the writings of Shashi Deshpande, Sara Aboobacker and B. T. Lalitha Naik. These writers belong to different linguistic, religious and social backgrounds, but their works share a concern with women's identity, domestic authority, marriage, cultural expectations and social marginalisation. Shashi Deshpande mainly portrays educated, urban, middle-class women who struggle against silence and emotional subordination within marriage. Sara Aboobacker represents South Indian Muslim women affected by patriarchal interpretations of religious and community practices. B. T. Lalitha Naik connects women's experiences with rural life, labour, community traditions and social exclusion. The study employs a qualitative, comparative and feminist textual approach. Representative works such as *That Long Silence*, *Breaking Ties* and *Gathi* are examined to understand how women negotiate family duties and cultural expectations. The paper concludes that community provides identity and belonging but becomes restrictive when its continuity depends upon women's obedience. The three writers represent women not simply as victims but as individuals capable of reflection, negotiation and resistance.

Keywords: community, culture, women, patriarchy, identity, resistance, Indian literature.

1. Introduction

Literature represents not only individual emotions but also the social and cultural environment in which individuals live. Literary works reveal how religion, caste, class, family, language and community influence personal identity. Women's writing is especially significant because it brings domestic

experiences, marital relationships, motherhood, emotional labour and gender discrimination into public discussion.

Traditional representations of Indian women often presented them as obedient daughters, devoted wives and self-sacrificing mothers. Women were expected to preserve family stability and cultural honour, even when such expectations restricted their education, independence and self-expression. Indian women writers challenged these idealised images by examining the psychological and material consequences of female submission.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the major Indian novelists writing in English. Her fiction focuses particularly on educated, middle-class women negotiating marriage, family responsibilities and individual identity. Her novel *That Long Silence*, published in India by Penguin Books in 1989, received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990. It portrays Jaya, a writer who gradually recognises how marital and cultural expectations have contributed to her prolonged silence.

Sara Aboobacker represents the experiences of South Indian Muslim women, particularly those situated within the cultural environment of coastal Karnataka and Kerala. Her narratives explore marriage, divorce, purdah, religious interpretation and women's multiple identities. Scholarly analysis of her writing observes that her women experience local forms of inequality while also confronting broader questions related to Muslim women's rights.

B. T. Lalitha Naik is associated with Kannada literature and socially committed writing. Her novel *Gathi* was published in Kannada by Asha Sahithya Prakashana. The work forms part of a literary tradition concerned with marginalised communities, social inequality and women's experiences.

The three writers represent different social locations. Deshpande concentrates on urban middle-class domestic life, Aboobacker foregrounds Muslim women within religious and community structures, and Lalitha Naik engages with women affected by rural marginality and unequal social relations. Their writings demonstrate that Indian women do not experience patriarchy uniformly. Class, religion, community and access to education shape both the form of oppression and the possibility of resistance.

2. Review of Literature

Early feminist scholarship provided the theoretical foundation for analysing women's representation in literature. Beauvoir (1949/2011) argued that society constructs woman as the subordinate "Other." Her work demonstrated that femininity is not determined solely by biology but is produced through social training and cultural expectations. Millett (1970) described patriarchy as a political system operating through the family, religion, education and literature.

Showalter (1977) emphasised the importance of examining women's writing as an independent literary tradition. She argued that women writers create distinctive literary expressions by representing experiences frequently neglected in male-dominated literature. These early studies are relevant to Deshpande, Aboobacker and Lalitha Naik because their works foreground women's domestic, emotional and cultural experiences.

Indian feminist scholarship expanded these arguments by recognising that gender cannot be separated from caste, class, religion and colonial history. Sangari and Vaid (1989) examined how gender relations were shaped by colonialism, social reform and nationalist ideology. Tharu and Lalita (1991) recovered women's literary voices from different Indian languages and demonstrated the diversity of Indian women's writing.

Sandhu (1991) studied changing images of women in Shashi Deshpande's fiction. The study observed that Deshpande's female protagonists experience conflict between personal aspirations and conventional family responsibilities. Deshpande's own critical essays later explained the significance of marginality, gender and authorship in her literary practice (Deshpande, 2003).

Forbes (1996) examined Indian women's participation in social, educational and political change. Her study demonstrated that cultural traditions could provide women with social identity while also restricting their public and personal freedom. Rege (2006) subsequently argued that women from marginalised communities experience the combined influence of gender, caste, class and social exclusion.

Ayshath, Raihanah and Hashim (2016) analysed Sara Aboobacker's representation of South Indian Muslim women. They found that Aboobacker's female characters possess multiple identities and

experience complex relationships with religion, community and multicultural society. Their study also cautioned against treating all Muslim women as a homogeneous category.

Existing studies have largely examined the three writers separately. Limited comparative attention has been given to the ways in which they connect women's identity with different forms of community and cultural authority. The present study addresses this gap through a comparative feminist reading.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the representation of women, community and culture in the writings of the three authors.
2. To analyse the influence of family and patriarchal traditions on women's identity.
3. To compare women's experiences across middle-class, Muslim and socially marginalised communities.
4. To identify the forms of silence, negotiation and resistance represented by the writers.

4. Research Methodology

The study follows a qualitative, descriptive and comparative research design. It applies feminist literary criticism and an intersectional approach to the representative writings of Shashi Deshpande, Sara Aboobacker and B. T. Lalitha Naik.

The principal texts considered are:

- Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*
- Sara Aboobacker's *Breaking Ties*
- B. T. Lalitha Naik's *Gathi*

The analysis is organised around marriage, domestic authority, cultural identity, community control, economic dependence, silence and female resistance. The fictional characters are treated as literary representations rather than direct descriptions of all women belonging to particular communities.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Community and Silence in Shashi Deshpande

In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande portrays the life of Jaya, an educated middle-class woman who is a wife, mother and unsuccessful writer. Her husband's professional crisis forces the family to move temporarily into a small flat, where Jaya begins to reconsider her marriage and past experiences.

Jaya's silence is not imposed through direct physical force. It develops through cultural conditioning. She has learned that a good wife should avoid disagreement, control her anger and protect the emotional stability of her family. Consequently, she modifies her behaviour and writing to satisfy her husband's expectations.

Deshpande shows that modern education does not automatically liberate women. Jaya is educated and capable of writing, yet she lacks the confidence to express herself independently. Her identity has become dependent upon her position as Mohan's wife and the mother of their children.

Jaya eventually recognises that she has participated in maintaining her silence. This recognition does not remove the influence of patriarchy, but it gives her an opportunity to recover her voice. Deshpande therefore represents female liberation as a gradual process of self-examination rather than sudden separation from marriage and family.

5.2 Culture and Religious Interpretation in Sara Aboobacker

Sara Aboobacker's *Breaking Ties* examines the position of women within a South Indian Muslim community. The female protagonist experiences restrictions related to marriage, divorce, education and family honour. Her decisions are largely controlled by male family members and community authorities.

Aboobacker distinguishes between religious faith and patriarchal interpretation. Her criticism is directed towards the unequal use of religious and customary practices rather than towards religious identity itself. The power to interpret religious rules remains largely in male hands, allowing men to present their personal authority as religious obligation.

Aboobacker also demonstrates that women may participate in preserving patriarchal customs. Older women frequently advise younger women to remain patient and obedient because they have internalised

similar expectations. Patriarchy therefore operates as a broader cultural system rather than only through the actions of individual men.

The woman's questioning of unjust customs represents an important form of agency. She may not immediately possess the economic or social resources required to transform her situation, but her awareness challenges the belief that inequality is natural. Aboobacker's characters consequently reveal the varied identities and challenges of Muslim women rather than presenting them as a uniform social category.

5.3 Community and Marginality in B. T. Lalitha Naik

B. T. Lalitha Naik's writing emerges from the context of Kannada social literature and communities that have experienced economic and cultural marginalisation. Her novel *Gathi* can be read as an exploration of the relationship between individual destiny, social position and the possibility of change.

In Lalitha Naik's literary world, women's oppression is linked with material conditions. Women undertake domestic and productive labour, but their contributions do not necessarily give them authority within the family or community. Poverty and lack of education further reduce their capacity to challenge unequal customs.

Community traditions offer collective identity and emotional security, particularly to people excluded from dominant social structures. However, Lalitha Naik does not treat every inherited practice as unquestionable. Her writing suggests that cultural identity can be protected without preserving gender discrimination.

Female agency is represented through labour, endurance, awareness and participation in social change. Resistance is not always dramatic. Refusing humiliation, questioning a customary practice or supporting another woman can also become meaningful challenges to patriarchal authority.

5.4 Comparative Perspective

The three writers represent community as both supportive and restrictive. Community gives women family connections, cultural memory and a sense of identity. At the same time, women are expected to preserve community honour through obedience, adjustment and sacrifice.

Their representations differ according to social context. Deshpande concentrates on the psychological condition of an educated urban woman. Aboobacker examines patriarchal authority within Muslim family and community structures. Lalitha Naik connects women's experiences with social marginality, economic hardship and collective cultural identity.

Silence is a common theme in all three writers. Jaya's silence results from middle-class marital expectations. Aboobacker's women are silenced by family honour and unequal religious interpretation. Lalitha Naik's marginalised women may remain silent because of economic dependence and limited institutional support.

Nevertheless, the writers do not represent women only as helpless victims. Their female characters observe their circumstances, question authority and seek self-respect. Their resistance may appear through speech, education, work, self-awareness or refusal to accept injustice.

6. Major Findings

The study finds that community and culture have a dual function in women's lives. They provide belonging and cultural identity but can also regulate women's choices. Patriarchal authority operates through marriage, family reputation, religious interpretation and economic dependence.

The nature of female oppression differs according to social location. Deshpande's middle-class women experience emotional and psychological suppression; Aboobacker's women confront gendered interpretations of religious and customary authority; Lalitha Naik's women face the combined effects of patriarchy and social marginalisation.

The study also finds that silence does not always indicate agreement. It may result from fear, economic insecurity or the absence of social support. Education, economic independence and critical awareness are therefore important conditions for female autonomy.

7. Conclusion

Shashi Deshpande, Sara Aboobacker and B. T. Lalitha Naik make important contributions to the literary representation of Indian women. Their writings reveal that women's experiences are shaped by community, religion, class, culture and economic conditions.

Deshpande portrays the internal struggle of women who appear socially modern but remain restricted by marital expectations. Aboobacker exposes the patriarchal use of community and religious authority while preserving the cultural specificity of Muslim women's experiences. Lalitha Naik connects gender inequality with marginality, poverty, labour and cultural identity.

The writers do not argue for the complete rejection of family or community. Instead, they call for the transformation of unequal relationships within these structures. Their works suggest that cultural continuity cannot be ethically maintained through women's silence and subordination. Genuine community development requires women's dignity, participation and freedom of expression.

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