

**NARRATIVE STRATEGIES AS FEMINIST RESISTANCE:  
A STUDY OF PERSONAL AND POLITICAL SELF IN THE  
NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE AND NAYANTARA SAHGAL**  
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**ABSTRACT:**

This article examines how narrative strategies function as forms of feminist resistance in select novels of Shashi Deshpande and Nayantara Sahgal. Focusing on *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* by Deshpande, and *Rich Like Us* and *Storm in Chandigarh* by Sahgal, the study explores how women protagonists negotiate personal identity within oppressive domestic, social, and political structures. Drawing on feminist and postcolonial theoretical perspectives, the article argues that narrative techniques such as silence, memory, interior monologue, psychological realism, and political contextualization enable women to articulate both personal and political selfhood. The selected novels demonstrate that women's private experiences are deeply embedded in broader power structures, thereby challenging the traditional separation between the personal and the political in Indian English fiction.

**KEYWORDS:**

Feminist Resistance, Narrative Strategies, Personal Self, Political Self, Indian English Fiction.

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## 1. Introduction

Indian English fiction by women writers has consistently explored issues of gender, identity, and resistance within patriarchal social systems. From the post-Independence period onwards, women novelists have used fiction as a means to articulate female experiences that were traditionally marginalized in literary discourse. Among these writers, Shashi Deshpande and Nayantara Sahgal occupy a significant place for their sustained engagement with women's search for selfhood at the intersection of personal life and political reality.

Shashi Deshpande's novels primarily focus on the inner lives of middle-class Indian women, exposing the emotional silences, psychological conflicts, and unspoken compromises that shape their existence within marriage and family. Works such as *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* foreground women's interiority through first-person narration, memory, and introspection. These narrative strategies reveal how personal suffering is not merely individual but produced by deeply embedded patriarchal norms. Deshpande's women do not always rebel openly; rather, their resistance emerges through reflection, awareness, and the gradual recovery of voice.

In contrast, Nayantara Sahgal situates women's experiences within explicit political and historical contexts. Her novels *Rich Like Us* and *Storm in Chandigarh* explore how national politics, ideological conflict, and power structures influence personal relationships and female identity. Sahgal's women characters confront political realities directly, and their search for selfhood is articulated through ethical choice and political consciousness. By linking private emotions with public events, Sahgal challenges the conventional separation between domestic life and political power.

This article argues that the narrative strategies employed by Deshpande and Sahgal function as subtle yet powerful forms of feminist resistance. Silence, memory, psychological realism, and

political contextualization are not merely stylistic devices but tools through which women articulate personal and political selfhood. By comparatively reading the selected novels, the study demonstrates that women's personal struggles are inseparable from broader social and political forces, reaffirming the feminist assertion that the personal is inherently political.

## **2. Feminist and Theoretical Framework**

The present study is grounded in feminist literary theory and postcolonial feminist thought, which together provide an effective framework for examining women's search for personal and political self in Indian English fiction. Feminist criticism challenges the male-centered literary canon and foregrounds women's experiences, voices, and subjectivities as legitimate areas of inquiry. Central to feminist theory is the understanding that gender identity is socially constructed and sustained through cultural, ideological, and institutional practices.

Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" underscores the socially conditioned nature of female identity. Her concept of woman as the 'Other' helps explain the psychological marginalization experienced by women who are compelled to define themselves in relation to male authority. This idea is particularly relevant to the novels of Shashi Deshpande, where women internalize expectations of silence, sacrifice, and submission.

Elaine Showalter's theory of gynocriticism further informs this study by emphasizing the importance of women's writing as an expression of female experience. Gynocriticism focuses on themes such as domesticity, silence, memory, and identity, which are central to Deshpande's narrative world. By privileging women's interiority and emotional realism, Deshpande's novels align with feminist efforts to reclaim women's private experiences as politically significant.

Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine* also provides a useful lens, as it highlights narrative forms that resist linear, authoritative structures traditionally associated with masculine discourse. Fragmentation, introspection, and non-linearity—evident in Deshpande's novels—reflect women's fractured subjectivity under patriarchal constraints.

Postcolonial feminist theory, particularly as articulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, extends feminist analysis by situating women's experiences within broader political and historical contexts. Spivak's concern with women's agency within dominant power structures is especially relevant to Nayantara Sahgal's fiction, which foregrounds the interaction between individual conscience and state authority. Feminist political theory further reinforces the inseparability of the personal and the political, a central premise of this article.

### **3. Narrative Strategies and the Search for Personal and Political Self: A Critical Reading**

Narrative strategies in the selected novels serve as crucial instruments for articulating women's resistance and self-definition. Feminist critics argue that narrative form is never neutral; it reflects ideological positions and power relations. In the works of Deshpande and Sahgal, techniques such as silence, memory, interior monologue, psychological realism, and political contextualization enable women to question imposed identities and assert agency within restrictive social systems.

#### **3.1 That Long Silence: Silence and Narrative Self-Recovery**

In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande employs first-person narration and retrospective memory to explore the suppressed identity of Jaya. Silence functions both thematically and structurally, symbolizing the emotional muteness imposed on women within marriage. Jaya's fragmented recollections reveal years of compromise and adjustment, illustrating how silence operates as a mechanism of patriarchal control.

From a feminist perspective, silence represents internalized oppression, as described by Kate Millett, where domination persists through psychological conditioning. However, Deshpande transforms silence into a site of resistance by allowing Jaya to narrate her experiences. The act of storytelling becomes an assertion of agency, enabling Jaya to reclaim her personal self. The novel thus demonstrates that domestic silence is deeply political, rooted in gendered power relations.

### **3.2 The Dark Holds No Terrors: Psychological Realism and Inner Resistance**

The Dark Holds No Terrors foregrounds psychological realism and non-linear narration to depict Sarita's struggle for selfhood. Through interior monologue and memory, Deshpande exposes the fear and trauma experienced by Saru within marriage. Her professional success as a doctor disrupts traditional gender hierarchies, resulting in emotional and sexual violence that reflects patriarchal anxiety over female autonomy.

Drawing on feminist psychoanalytic insights, Saru's fear is presented not as individual weakness but as socially produced trauma. The narrative's inward movement allows her to confront repressed memories and recognize the structural origins of her suffering. Feminist resistance in the novel is subtle and introspective, emphasizing self-awareness as a prerequisite for reclaiming personal identity. The narrative politicizes private pain by revealing marriage as an institution embedded in unequal power relations.

### **3.3 Rich Like Us: Political Realism and Ethical Selfhood**

Nayantara Sahgal's Rich Like Us employs political realism to examine women's identity within the authoritarian context of the Emergency. The narrative situates personal experience within national politics, highlighting the impact of state power on individual conscience. Sonali, a civil servant, represents the emergence of political self through ethical resistance rather than overt rebellion.

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, Sonali's refusal to compromise her moral values reflects agency within restrictive political structures. Her withdrawal from corrupt institutions signifies resistance through integrity. Sahgal's narrative strategy foregrounds ethical choice as a form of feminist resistance, illustrating how women's political self emerges through engagement with power and ideology.

### **3.4 Storm in Chandigarh: Personal Conflict within Political Context**

In *Storm in Chandigarh*, Sahgal intertwines personal relationships with political instability to explore women's search for autonomy. The storm functions as a metaphor for emotional and political turmoil, reflecting Rashmi's inner conflict within a restrictive marital structure. Her dissatisfaction is portrayed as a response to systemic inequality rather than personal failure.

Liberal feminist ideals of autonomy and self-determination inform Rashmi's growing self-awareness. Sahgal challenges the separation between private and public spheres by showing how political ideologies shape domestic relationships. Through political metaphor and contextual narration, the novel asserts that women's personal struggles are inseparable from broader social and political forces.

### **3.5 Comparative Perspective**

A comparative reading reveals that Deshpande's inward, memory-driven narratives emphasize consciousness-raising within domestic spaces, while Sahgal's politically grounded narratives foreground ethical and ideological resistance in the public sphere. Despite their differing narrative strategies, both writers employ narrative form as a feminist tool to articulate women's resistance and self-definition. Their novels collectively affirm that the search for personal self is intrinsically linked to political awareness and social structures.

#### 4. Conclusion

The novels of Shashi Deshpande and Nayantara Sahgal demonstrate how narrative strategies function as subtle yet powerful forms of feminist resistance in Indian English fiction. By foregrounding women's subjective experiences and ethical dilemmas, these narratives challenge patriarchal and political structures that marginalize female voices. The study affirms that women's personal struggles are deeply political and that narrative form plays a crucial role in articulating women's search for identity and autonomy. Through silence, memory, psychological realism, and political engagement, Deshpande and Sahgal redefine storytelling as a space for feminist resistance and self-assertion.

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