

**Eco Feminism and self-Identity in the works of Gita Mehta
and Shashi Deshpande**

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Abstract:

This paper explores the intricate intersections of eco-feminism and female self-identity in the literary works of Gita Mehta and Shashi Deshpande, two of India's most compelling contemporary women writers. Both authors foreground women's lived experiences within socio-cultural and ecological frameworks, revealing how the subjugation of women parallels the exploitation of nature. Drawing upon the theoretical foundations of eco-feminist thought as articulated by scholars like Vandana Shiva and Carolyn Merchant, the study investigates how Mehta and Deshpande portray women's struggles for autonomy, harmony, and self-realisation amid patriarchal and environmental degradation. Through close textual analysis of Mehta's works such as *River Sutra* and *Karma Cola*, and Deshpande's novels, including *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, this paper examines how the protagonists' quests for identity are intertwined with ecological consciousness and cultural renewal. The narrative spaces created by these writers offer a critique of modernisation, consumerism, and gender hierarchies while simultaneously envisioning a restorative connection between women, nature, and spirituality. Ultimately, the study asserts that Mehta and Deshpande employ eco-feminist perspectives not merely as environmental discourse but as a transformative paradigm for redefining female subjectivity, asserting the interdependence between self, society, and the natural world. Their works invite readers to reconsider both ecological balance and women's liberation as mutually reinforcing processes essential to human and planetary survival.

Keywords: Eco-feminism, self-identity, Gita Mehta, Shashi Deshpande, Patriarchy, Nature, Female subjectivity

Introduction:

In contemporary literary studies, the intersection of feminism and ecology has emerged as one of the most dynamic and ethically charged areas of inquiry, known as eco-feminism. This interdisciplinary field arises from the recognition that the oppression of

women and the exploitation of nature are rooted in the same patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial ideologies that privilege domination, hierarchy, and control over interdependence and care. Eco-feminism therefore challenges dualistic worldviews that place man over woman, culture over nature, and reason over emotion, proposing instead a holistic understanding of life in which human and non-human forms of existence are interconnected. By situating gender politics within ecological consciousness, eco-feminism becomes both a theoretical and activist movement that seeks to heal the ruptures between self, society, and the environment.

The philosophical foundation of eco-feminism can be traced to the works of thinkers such as Carolyn Merchant, Vandana Shiva, Ariel Salleh, and Maria Mies, who collectively emphasise that environmental degradation and gender oppression are not isolated phenomena but are deeply intertwined crises of modernity. Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980) exposed how the rise of mechanistic science in the seventeenth century transformed the perception of nature from a living organism to a machine, an inert entity to be mastered and exploited. Similarly, Vandana Shiva, in *Staying Alive* (1988), foregrounds the role of women in sustaining ecological balance through traditional knowledge systems and criticises the capitalist-patriarchal paradigm that commodifies both nature and women's labour. Ariel Salleh's concept of "embodied materialism" further deepens this understanding by linking women's bodily experiences to the cycles of nature, arguing that ecological sustainability and gender justice are mutually reinforcing.

Within the Indian context, eco-feminism acquires unique and multifaceted dimensions shaped by the country's indigenous spiritual philosophies, agrarian traditions, and postcolonial realities. Unlike the Western eco-feminist discourse, which often focuses on industrial capitalism and techno-centrism, Indian eco-feminism is grounded in cultural practices, mythological narratives, and a deep reverence for the sacredness of the natural world. The Chipko Movement of the 1970s, led primarily by rural women, exemplifies how environmental activism in India often overlaps with feminist resistance. Figures such as Vandana Shiva and Bina Agarwal have drawn attention to the ways women's roles as custodians of biodiversity and local resources position them at the forefront of ecological and social change. The eco-feminist framework in India thus becomes not merely a theoretical stance but also a lived experience where environmental, spiritual, and gendered dimensions converge.

Indian women writers, drawing upon these cultural and ecological inheritances, have increasingly engaged with themes that link the degradation of nature to the marginalization of women. Their writings frequently weave together local myths, indigenous epistemologies, and ecological ethics to portray women's struggle for autonomy and harmony within patriarchal and postcolonial structures. In this regard, the novels of Gita Mehta and Shashi Deshpande provide fertile ground for eco-feminist analysis. Although their thematic

concerns differ Mehta focusing on the intersection of spirituality, modernity, and ecology, and Deshpande emphasizing women's psychological conflicts and resistance, their works share a profound engagement with the interconnectedness of self, society, and nature.

Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* (1993) and *Karma Cola* (1979) examine the ways in which modernity and globalisation reshape India's spiritual and ecological landscapes. Through the river motif in *A River Sutra*, Mehta constructs a symbolic geography where nature becomes both a witness to and participant in human transformation. The river serves not merely as a physical setting but as a metaphorical conduit of stories, identities, and spiritual renewal, reflecting eco-feminist ideals of interconnectedness and cyclical regeneration. Her exploration of India's encounter with Western modernity also critiques the commodification of spirituality and the alienation of individuals from their natural and cultural roots.

In contrast, Shashi Deshpande's novels particularly *That Long Silence* (1988) and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) delve into the intimate terrains of women's consciousness, mapping the intersections between domestic confinement, psychological fragmentation, and the quest for selfhood. Deshpande's protagonists inhabit urban, middle-class spaces where patriarchal values manifest through emotional, social, and bodily control. Yet her narrative strategies subtly evoke ecological metaphors silence, darkness, rivers, and rain to suggest a deeper connection between women's inner struggles and the rhythms of the natural world. Through acts of introspection and resistance, Deshpande's women reclaim not only their voices but also an elemental sense of belonging to life itself. While her fiction may not explicitly engage with environmental activism, its underlying eco-feminist resonance lies in its vision of healing, renewal, and balance between self and surroundings.

Despite their critical acclaim, the works of Gita Mehta and Shashi Deshpande have not been extensively examined through the lens of eco-feminism. Most scholarly analyses of Mehta focus on her critique of Western exoticism or her representation of Indian spirituality, while studies on Deshpande largely address her feminist realism and psychological insight. However, a closer reading reveals that both authors, in distinct yet complementary ways, interrogate patriarchal paradigms that alienate women from their bodies, emotions, and environments. By foregrounding the relationship between inner renewal and ecological consciousness, they reimagine female selfhood as inherently relational and symbiotic. Through their female protagonists, Mehta and Deshpande illustrate that the journey toward self-realisation parallels a restoration of harmony between humanity and nature. This convergence of ecological awareness and feminist consciousness forms the ethical and imaginative core of eco-feminist discourse. In their narratives, nature is not an inert backdrop but a living presence that mirrors the characters' emotional landscapes. The act of reconnecting with nature becomes an act of reclaiming agency, healing trauma, and redefining identity. Thus, the eco-feminist perspective not only enriches the reading of their

works but also illuminates how literary expression can serve as a form of ecological and feminist intervention.

This study, therefore, aims to explore how Gita Mehta and Shashi Deshpande employ eco-feminist perspectives to redefine female selfhood in relation to nature, spirituality, and social transformation. It seeks to investigate how narrative structures, symbols, and character arcs articulate a deep awareness of the interdependence between personal liberation and ecological balance. The paper will also consider how the authors engage with indigenous and cultural paradigms of nature, contrasting them with the alienation produced by modernity and patriarchy. In doing so, the research hopes to contribute to a broader understanding of Indian eco-feminist literature, positioning Mehta and Deshpande within a continuum of women writers who negotiate the complex interfaces of gender, ecology, and identity. By examining how these authors employ storytelling as a mode of ecological and feminist critique, the study underscores literature's capacity to envision alternative modes of being ones that affirm care, reciprocity, and harmony as foundational to both human and environmental flourishing. Both Gita Mehta and Shashi Deshpande remain highly relevant in today's modern society because their works explore themes that continue to shape our world. Gita Mehta, through books like *Karma Cola* and *A River Sutra*, examines the complex relationship between India and the West, exposing how spirituality and culture are often commercialised and misunderstood. In an age where yoga, meditation, and "Eastern wisdom" are global commodities, Mehta's critique of cultural appropriation and her portrayal of India's multifaceted identity still resonate strongly. Her exploration of globalisation, modernity, and tradition reflects the ongoing struggle of individuals and nations to balance progress with authenticity. Similarly, Shashi Deshpande's writings, such as *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, continue to speak powerfully to the experiences of women in contemporary society. Her portrayal of educated, middle-class Indian women confronting patriarchy, marital expectations, and the quest for selfhood mirrors the dilemmas many women face today, even in so-called modern settings. Deshpande's focus on women's inner lives and their search for autonomy makes her work timeless, as gender equality and personal freedom remain unfinished goals. Together, both writers highlight the enduring tensions between tradition and change, self and society, and identity and modernity, the issues that are as urgent in the 21st century as they were when these authors first wrote about them.

Reflections and Interpretations

Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* intricately weaves together a series of narratives centred around the sacred Narmada River, serving as both a literal and metaphorical thread, a *sutra* connecting diverse tales of love, loss, and spiritual awakening. The river itself becomes a living symbol of feminine divinity, resilience, and transformation. It becomes a powerful metaphor for life itself, flowing continuously, cleansing, connecting, and bearing witness to human suffering and transcendence. Themes of spiritual rebirth, renunciation, sensuality, and identity run throughout the narrative, blending myth, folklore, and contemporary reality.

Central to these intertwined stories is the exploration of female characters' quests for self-identification within a patriarchal society that often marginalises and confines them. Through their relationships with the river and the challenges they face, these women navigate complex paths toward autonomy, spiritual fulfilment, and self-realisation. The novel is framed through the perspective of a retired government official who seeks peace and detachment from worldly life by becoming the manager of a rest house near the river. However, his retreat into solitude is gradually interrupted by encounters with travellers, pilgrims, and wanderers, each with a unique story of love, loss, faith, and redemption. Through these interconnected tales, Mehta explores India's cultural diversity, spiritual traditions, and the universal quest for meaning.

In the first tale of the courtesan's daughter, Mehta presents a complex portrait of a young woman whose journey from victimhood to self-identification unfolds through an unconventional path. Initially introduced as a helpless figure abducted by Rahul Singh, a feared bandit, she seems destined to be another casualty of male violence and systemic oppression. However, Mehta subverts these expectations by revealing a profound transformation in their relationship. Rather than reinforcing the stereotype of female submission, the narrative evolves into one of mutual respect and emotional intimacy. Rahul Singh, once feared for his brutality, emerges as a figure capable of empathy and care, offering the courtesan's daughter emotional refuge and unconditional acceptance, qualities she had been denied by society at large. "With him, I was not afraid. For the first time, someone listened when I spoke" (Mehta,1994). This moment signifies her first experience of being seen as a full person rather than as an object. In finding love and dignity in her relationship with Rahul, the daughter transcends the stigma of her lineage. "You think I am just a bandit's whore," she says, "but I am the daughter of a courtesan. I know what it is to be bought and sold" (165). As Neelam Srivastava observes, "Mehta's portrayal of the courtesan's daughter reflects a subtle critique of social hierarchies, revealing how marginalised women reclaim agency even in seemingly disempowering situations" (Srivastava,1984). The Narmada River serves here as both a literal and symbolic site of transformation a place where identities can be washed clean and rewritten. "It was the river that made us safe. No one would dare desecrate the banks of the Narmada" (169), she explains, suggesting the river's role as sanctuary and spiritual womb. As Rukhaya M. K. notes, "The river is a liminal space where women, in particular, undergo a process of spiritual and existential regeneration" (Rukhaya,2016). Far from romanticising the abduction, Mehta uses this unexpected love story to highlight the irony that a woman finds more respect in the company of an outlaw than in the 'civilised' society that ostracised her. Her story challenges essentialist views of female virtue and repositions her as an active agent in her own destiny.

Another poignant narrative in *A River Sutra* is that of the musician's daughter, a young woman whose extraordinary musical gift is overshadowed by her physical appearance. Despite her unparalleled talent as a classical singer, she is subjected to social

cruelty, especially from a male student who had promised marriage in exchange for her father's musical instruction. His eventual betrayal, motivated not by lack of affection but by her appearance, reveals the insidious ways beauty standards devalue women's inner worth and abilities. The betrayal "did not break her heart," her father insists, "but her spirit" (85). This distinction is crucial: the daughter's suffering is not from romantic loss, but from the deep humiliation of being rejected not as a person, but as an image that failed to conform. Despite this devastating experience, the musician's daughter does not become embittered. Instead, she withdraws into a world of music a space where she can exist beyond the gaze of others and speak through an art form that demands nothing of her appearance. "She sang only at night now," her father explains, "as though she wanted no one to see her but the moon" (86). Here, Mehta uses lyrical imagery to underscore the symbolic role of music as both a refuge and a reconstitution of self. The daughter's retreat into music is not an act of surrender but a rechannelling of identity through aesthetic and spiritual devotion. As Sarmila Banerjee notes, "The musician's daughter offers one of Mehta's most compelling portrayals of silent resistance, where creative practice becomes an autonomous mode of self-identification outside patriarchal structures" (Banerjee, 1919). Her silence both literal and metaphorical, becomes an act of defiance against a world that has tried to erase her value. Music becomes a language of power and endurance, a means through which she defines herself without relying on male validation.

Uma is another female character who stands out in *A River Sutra* as a profound testament to spiritual rebirth and self-discovery. Originally rescued from a life marked by exploitation and marginalisation, she is taken under the care of a Naga Baba, a wandering ascetic associated with the sacred Narmada River. This encounter marks a turning point in her life, as she is given a new name Uma and introduced to spiritual practices rooted in devotion, renunciation, and inner transformation. The act of renaming signifies not only a change in identity but a symbolic rebirth. "She was no longer the girl the world had discarded," the narrator reflects, "but a woman who sang songs that touched the hearts of many" (203). Her new life as a minstrel, performing devotional songs, imbues her existence with meaning and agency previously denied. Through the lens of spiritual practice, she transcends the scars of her past and claims a renewed sense of dignity. Mehta uses Uma's transformation to emphasise how spiritual devotion can serve as a vehicle for female empowerment. Her songs become a form of expression that connects her intimately to the sacred geography of the Narmada, allowing her to craft an identity that is both personal and communal. As critic Srivastava asserts, "Uma's journey illustrates the power of spiritual spaces and rituals to provide marginalised women with new forms of self-definition and social respect" (101). Moreover, Uma's narrative challenges conventional assumptions about women's roles in religious traditions. Rather than being passive recipients of spiritual knowledge, women like her actively shape and embody devotional culture. As scholar Anjali Menon articulates, "The Narmada in Mehta's narrative embodies the intertwined oppression and sanctity of both women and the environment, calling for an ethical recognition of their

intrinsic worth” (Menon,1918). By elevating the river as a sacred, feminine force, Mehta critiques the patriarchal structures that commodify and harm both women and nature, advocating instead for reverence and coexistence. Moreover, the river’s enduring presence amidst change offers a hopeful metaphor for empowerment. Like the Narmada, the women in *A River Sutra* navigate their paths with strength and grace, constantly reshaping their identities while rooted in traditions of resilience. As Rukhaya emphasises, “The river is a liminal space where life and identity are in flux, yet there is a persistent undercurrent of strength that sustains” (Rukhaya, 2016). Thus, the Narmada emerges not just as a backdrop but as an active spiritual force guiding the quest for selfhood and liberation.

Gita Mehta’s another most profound novel *Karma Cola* (1979) stands as a trenchant satire on the commodification of Indian spirituality in the global marketplace. Beneath its humour and narrative irony, the text engages deeply with ecofeminist concerns, particularly the interconnected subjugation of women and nature under patriarchal and capitalist ideologies. Mehta exposes how the Western pursuit of spiritual enlightenment often reproduces the same structures of domination it seeks to escape. Her critique extends beyond cultural appropriation to a broader interrogation of modernity’s alienation from both ecological and ethical values. Ecofeminism, as a theoretical framework, offers a compelling lens through which *Karma Cola* can be read. It recognises that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature stem from a shared logic of domination rooted in the patriarchal desire to control, consume, and objectify. Vandana Shiva argues that the patriarchal capitalist worldview, founded on mechanistic and dualistic thought, privileges hierarchy and control over reciprocity and balance. According to Shiva, both women and nature are victims of the same extractive logic that drives modern economies and epistemologies. (Shiva,1989). In *Karma Cola*, Mehta dramatizes this dynamic through the figure of India itself a feminised, mystical landscape subjected to consumption by Western seekers. Her narrative suggests that the spiritual colonization of India mirrors the ecological and gendered exploitation that ecofeminists critique: the impulse to extract value without understanding, to dominate rather than to coexist. Mehta’s portrayal of Western spiritual tourists reveals the deep hypocrisy of cultural exchange in a postcolonial, consumerist world. The Western pilgrims’ desire for “instant enlightenment” mirrors what Shiva identifies as the capitalist mentality of speed, efficiency, and productivity values antithetical to the slow, cyclical rhythms of ecological and spiritual life. India, in *Karma Cola*, becomes a stage upon which this desire plays out. It is represented simultaneously as maternal and mysterious, nurturing yet available for consumption. The Western gaze transforms India into what Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls an “imagined geography,” where the East is feminised, passive, and open to penetration, mirroring colonial discourses that equate exploration of land with conquest of the female body. (Mohanty,1984). Mehta exposes the complicity between this colonial gaze and modern consumerism, showing how spirituality itself becomes a marketable commodity in global culture. The female figures in *Karma Cola*, both Indian and Western, embody the fragmented subjectivities produced by these intersecting systems of power. They are caught between

tradition and modernity, East and West, self and other. Characters such as Susan, Miranda, and the unnamed German girl embody the Western feminist's search for liberation from materialism and patriarchal constraint, yet their experiences reveal the persistence of oppression in both cultural contexts. Their journeys to India, undertaken in search of self-discovery, ultimately expose how patriarchal structures adapt and persist within seemingly liberatory spaces. Often manipulated by self-proclaimed gurus and pseudo-spiritual movements, these women exemplify Carolyn Merchant's claim that the mechanistic worldview of modernity "objectifies both nature and woman as resources to be used and controlled." (Merchant, 1990). Through these portrayals, Mehta underscores that the Western quest for enlightenment is not merely spiritual but also ideological and it reproduces the same binaries that ecofeminism seeks to dismantle: reason over emotion, man over woman, culture over nature. In Mehta's depiction, India becomes a feminized terrain, mystical and fertile yet vulnerable to commodification. This imagery recalls what Gayatri Spivak describes as the "subaltern feminine" position simultaneously idealized and silenced. (Spivak, 1999). The Western fascination with Indian spirituality parallels the patriarchal fetishisation of womanhood: both are revered as symbols of purity and wisdom yet stripped of agency and reduced to objects of consumption.

The irony of *Karma Cola* lies in the pilgrims' inability to recognise that their spiritual journey replicates the very structures of domination they seek to transcend. Their disconnection from their inner selves mirrors humanity's broader alienation from the natural world. They mistake external performances of spirituality rituals, costumes, and gurus for genuine inner transformation. This illusion reflects Ariel Salleh's ecofeminist insight that authentic self-realisation cannot be achieved through domination or escapism but only through relational understanding and ecological harmony. Salleh emphasises that selfhood, like the ecosystem, is sustained through interdependence. (Salleh, 1997) Mehta's Western women, however, pursue individual salvation detached from context or community, and thus their quests are doomed to failure. The near absence of Indian women's voices in *Karma Cola* further intensifies this critique. Mehta deliberately marginalises them, revealing how both patriarchy and colonial modernity erase the lived realities of women while celebrating abstract ideals of the "feminine." This narrative silence is itself an ecofeminist statement: just as the environment is romanticized in theory but exploited in practice, Indian women are exalted as symbols of wisdom or endurance while excluded from power and discourse. The novel's silence becomes an indictment of global patriarchy, exposing the moral vacuum behind the rhetoric of liberation and spiritual enlightenment. Moreover, Mehta's satire exposes how consumerism infiltrates even the most sacred realms of human experience. The Western pilgrims' attempts to appropriate Indian spirituality reflect what Vandana Shiva terms "cultural mono-cropping" the global homogenization of values and practices that destroys both ecological and cultural diversity. In this process, spiritual traditions are uprooted from their indigenous contexts and repackaged for mass consumption. Mehta's irony targets this phenomenon, revealing that the Western appetite for "authentic" spirituality

functions much like ecological exploitation: it depletes the very source it seeks to draw from. By transforming spirituality into a product, modernity renders the sacred profane, and the quest for selfhood becomes yet another act of consumption. At the same time, *Karma Cola* does not merely condemn the West; it also holds a mirror to India's complicity in this commodification. Mehta critiques the emergence of false gurus and self-styled mystics who exploit both Western naivety and Indian spirituality for profit. This internal critique aligns with the ecofeminist call for self-reflection and accountability. Just as ecological sustainability requires ethical stewardship rather than exploitation, spiritual authenticity demands humility, awareness, and reciprocity. Mehta's portrayal of corrupt gurus and deluded seekers thus functions as an allegory for a world that has lost touch with its moral and ecological roots. The novel also articulates a profound psychological dimension to this ecological critique. The Western women's longing for wholeness and authenticity can be read as a symptom of modern civilisation's spiritual emptiness a condition that ecofeminists identify as stemming from the separation of self and nature. Their journeys to India signify a subconscious yearning to reconnect with the feminine, the intuitive, and the organic. Yet, as Mehta's irony reveals, such reconnection cannot occur through superficial appropriation. True healing, both ecological and personal, requires empathy, self-awareness, and respect for difference. As Shiva reminds us, "The recovery of the feminine principle is not a romantic return to the past, but a re-visioning of the future based on diversity, interdependence, and sustainability." (Shiva,1989). Mehta's *Karma Cola* thus anticipates this ecofeminist re-visioning: a call to restore balance between humanity, gender, and the environment through ethical and spiritual renewal. In portraying failed quests for spiritual fulfilment, Mehta suggests that modernity's crisis is not merely cultural but ontological. The characters' alienation reflects a world severed from its ecological and spiritual foundations. Their disillusionment stands as a metaphor for the broader human condition estranged from nature, divorced from empathy, and trapped in cycles of consumption and emptiness. Mehta's ecofeminist vision proposes that genuine self-realization emerges not through escape but through connection: an integration of the inner and outer worlds, the personal and the planetary. Ultimately, *Karma Cola* exemplifies how satire can serve as a vehicle for ecological and feminist critique. By weaving humour with philosophical insight, Mehta dismantles the illusions of both Western modernity and Eastern mysticism. Her work resonates with ecofeminist ethics, advocating for an awareness that is at once spiritual and ecological, personal and collective. The novel implies that to heal the fractured bond between humanity and nature and between women and their own bodies and society must cultivate empathy, respect, and interconnectedness. In this sense, Mehta's *Karma Cola* transcends its immediate cultural context to articulate a universal message: the liberation of women, the restoration of nature, and the recovery of spiritual authenticity are inseparable. The novel's closing irony that those seeking enlightenment perpetuate the very exploitation they denounce serves as a reminder that true wisdom lies not in conquest or consumption but in communion. Mehta's ecofeminist vision thus redefines selfhood as relational rather than autonomous, ethical rather than acquisitive. Her satire becomes a form of moral ecology,

urging readers to recognise that the survival of the planet, the dignity of women, and the integrity of the spirit depend on the same principle of balance.

Shashi Deshpande however, on the other hand, in her novel *That Long Silence* conveys us a bitter consciousness of how “other” and alien such an image is, and indeed voice the same concern as that expressed by Josephine Donovan in the following excerpt: “Women in literature written by men are for the most part seen as Other, as objects of interest only in so far as they serve or detract from the goals of the male protagonist. Such literature is alien from a female point of view because it denies her essential selfhood” (Donovan,1997). Set in contemporary urban India, the novel portrays the silence, repression, and struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society. Through her female protagonist Jaya’s introspection, Deshpande highlights the conflict between tradition and self-expression, making the story a profound exploration of a woman’s search for voice and meaning. In literature written by women which insists on a female point of view, as in Shashi Deshpande’s real world, and in Jaya’s fictional world, there is an indignation that women in the real as well as the fictional world should be constrained to conform to a male ideal of womanhood. The novel begins to comprehend the idea of “an angry woman”. Such an idea shatters his world, habituated as he is to the silent women of his childhood and youth. That his mother preserves her silence in the face of extreme provocation enhances her image in his eyes, and he expresses his admiration: “God, she was tough. Women in those days were tough” (Deshpande, 1988). Jaya is able to gauge in concrete terms the vastness of the chasm between the two conflicting male and female points of view when she says, “He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire, but I saw despair. I saw a despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender. I’m a woman and I can understand her better, he’s a man and he can’t” (Deshpande, 36-37). Using Jaya as her mouthpiece, Shashi Deshpande is able to bring a woman’s understanding and sympathy to interrogating stereotypical images of women that a patriarchal society insists on thrusting upon an unsuspecting populace. Very relevant at this juncture is yet another quotation from Josephine Donovan. When speaking for the western tradition, she says: “Much of our literature in fact depends upon a series of fixed images of women, stereotypes. Female stereotypes symbolise either the spiritual or the material, good or evil, Mary or Eve” (Donovan,1997). The eastern tradition in India too, advocates a similar dichotomy Sita or Apsara. While Sita is placed on a pedestal and worshipped, Apsara is dreamed about as she lures and entices. One is a deity, the other a fantasy. Ideal images of women as projected by the mythological figures of Sita, Savitri, Draupadi, and Gandhari are held up as epitomes of perfection to be emulated by the mass of womankind. Importantly, all these images of women suffer silently, but do not speak. Thus, silence becomes a commendable virtue, and speech a crime. Jaya’s journey from silence to speech enables her to rebel against the clamping control of the straitjacket imposed by mythological images of women. Her resort to writing is all the more impactful since it is situated against the backdrop of a series of silent Sitas who people her immediate environment, and also mirror the truth

of the real world. Reflecting an Indian reality, writing by women, as represented by Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, makes an attempt to show how women outgrow the status of "object".

Interestingly, the novel also serves admirably well as raw material to test the veracity of Annette Kolodny's tentative claims of what could constitute the characteristic features of women's writing. Speaking from the vantage point of her experience of contemporary Canadian and American authors, she is able to identify "certain demonstrable repetitions of particular thematic concerns, image patterns and stylistic devices among these authors" (Kolodny, 2000). She contends that: "women writers repeatedly invest their female characters with 'reflexive perceptions', a habit of mind that, itself, becomes a repeated stylistic device as character after character is depicted discovering herself, or finding some part of herself in activities she has not planned, or in situations she cannot fully comprehend." (79) Kolodny of course, finds her examples in Margaret Atwood and Sylvia Plath. What is remarkable is that *That Long Silence*, though so vastly disparate in terms of socio-cultural milieu, also displays similar examples of "reflexive perceptions". At one point, Shashi Deshpande dwells at length over a dream sequence that jolts Jaya out of her complacency: "The realisation that I am alone overwhelms me. Worse, I do not know where I am, where I have to go and how I can find him. The disorientation is total. I continue to lie there paralysed, aphasic . . . we will never be able to make it." (Deshpande 1980). *That Long Silence* explodes the stereotype of a silent suffering Sita. Further, the novel lovingly lingers over such explosions, thereby making "inversion" a regular feature of the narration. The insistence on "inversion" also contributes, in turn, to the tone of irony that pervades the entire novel. Jaya's prime concern as narrator is to articulate the huge lacuna between the ideal and the real. The image of a loving wife and mother is perhaps the most revered and the most worshipped in Indian society. As Sangeeta Dutta points out: "Indian culture is deeply informed by the myth that motherhood is a woman's inevitable destiny and happiness can come only through it. With Sita and Savitri as predominant models of reference, Indian women are expected to be pure and faithful as wives and self-effacing, loving, and giving as mothers" (Dutta, 2016). In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande presents a nuanced and powerful exploration of a woman's quest for identity within the stifling structures of a patriarchal, middle-class Indian society. She reflects on this learned silence from the outset of the novel: "I had learnt it at last, no questions, no retorts, only silence" (Deshpande, 1980). This admission reveals how silence has become a coping mechanism, a way to maintain harmony in her marriage and conform to the ideal of the 'good woman' who never challenges male authority. Deshpande critiques how such conditioning deprives women of a sense of individual selfhood. Jaya acknowledges, "I had been so well trained to look for approval, to look for praise, that I had never learned to live without it" (1980), pointing to the internalisation of patriarchal values that make female identity dependent on male validation. Thus, *That Long Silence* marks a quiet yet powerful turning point in the protagonist Jaya's life. After years of living in silence, conforming to the expectations of being a dutiful wife

and mother, Jaya comes to a critical realisation about her own identity. She begins to see that her silence has been a form of submission to a patriarchal system that has denied her individuality and voice. Though she does not take any drastic external actions, the novel ends with her internal resolve to break free from that silence. She decides to stop pretending and to confront her life with honesty and self-awareness. Her decision to start writing again becomes symbolic of reclaiming her agency and narrative. The ending is open-ended, emphasizing that the journey to self-discovery is ongoing, but it offers hope and suggests the beginning of personal transformation. Ultimately, it reinforces the novel's central theme: that finding one's voice is the first step towards true identity and freedom.

Moreover, in another novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Shashi Deshpande powerfully illustrates the existential struggle and identity crisis of Sarita (commonly called Saru), an urban, middle-class, educated woman who embodies the complexities of modern Indian womanhood. She is not only a dedicated wife and mother but also a successful medical professional, representing the emerging class of working women in post-colonial India. However, despite her outward success and financial independence, she remains entrapped within the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures of Indian society, which continue to define and confine women's roles and identities. The tension between Saru's public accomplishments and her private oppression serves as the central conflict of the novel. This conflict is best understood through the lens of Erik Erikson's concept of an 'identity crisis,' which he describes as a crucial phase of deep analysis, self-reflection, and exploration of various possible identities before arriving at a coherent sense of self. Saru's journey mirrors this psychological crisis as she finds herself constantly negotiating between the roles imposed upon her and her own suppressed desires for autonomy and individuality. Deshpande's depiction of Saru's internal struggle can be further illuminated through ecofeminist theoretical perspectives, which examine the interconnected oppressions of women and nature within patriarchal societies. Ecofeminism, as articulated by theorists such as Val Plumwood, critiques the persistent cultural patterns that associate women and nature with passivity, subservience, and utility essentially positioning both as resources to be controlled, exploited, and devalued. Ecofeminism fundamentally operates within the realm of identity politics, seeking to expose and challenge the essentialist notions that bind women and nature to rigid, inferior roles. It advocates for a reimagining of identity that recognizes the intrinsic worth of both women and the natural world beyond their instrumental value to patriarchal economies and societies. In this context, the identity paradigms explored in the novel resonate with ecofeminist concerns. Women, like nature, are essential to the growth and sustenance of human civilisation, yet they are systematically denied agency and participation in shaping the world. Their identities are reduced to culturally sanctioned roles such as mothers, nurturers, and caregivers that serve the interests of male-dominated power structures. As Val Plumwood and other ecofeminist scholars emphasise, ecofeminism is engaged in an ongoing struggle to deconstruct these essentialist myths and to create spaces for women's voices and identities that resist patriarchal categorisation. Deshpande's

narrative aligns with this feminist ecological critique by portraying Saru as a woman who is not only silenced and oppressed by her immediate domestic environment but also by the larger socio-political ideologies that shape her existence. Central to ecofeminist thought is the belief that reclaiming and redefining identity is both a means and an end in the pursuit of liberation. Carolyn Merchant underscores this transformative potential when she argues that “the creation of new codes through which we perceive or act or challenge the world will subsequently change the dominant and oppressive hegemonic political and cultural formations” (Merchant,1990). This idea highlights the necessity of rewriting the symbolic systems and social narratives that sustain inequality. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru’s personal crisis is emblematic of this broader need for systemic change. Her inability to reconcile her roles as doctor, wife, and mother stems not from individual failure but from the structural contradictions inherent in patriarchal society. The culmination of Saru’s inner turmoil finds expression in a powerful and revealing speech she delivers at a women’s college, where she critiques the socially constructed gender binaries and essentialist beliefs that continue to govern women’s lives. Speaking from her own lived experience, she exposes the contradictions and impossibilities that women face in the pursuit of happiness and fulfilment: “Whatever you would do, you won’t be happy, not really, until you get married and have children. That’s what they tell us. And we have to believe them because no one has proved it wrong till now. But if you want to be happily married, there’s one thing you have to remember...A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he is an M.A, you should be a B.A. If he’s 5’4” tall, you shouldn’t be more than 5’3” tall. If he’s earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred ninety-nine rupees. That’s the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage. Don’t ever try to reverse the doctor-nurse, executive-secretary, principal-teacher role. It can be traumatic, disastrous... He’ll suffer, you will suffer and so will the children.” (Deshpande,1988) Through this bitterly ironic speech, Saru articulates the deeply ingrained societal codes that subordinate women and enforce conformity to patriarchal ideals.

Deshpande’s portrayal of her female character reflects a broader commentary on the condition of women in contemporary Indian society. Despite advancements in education and modernisation, women continue to be oppressed, both physically and psychologically. The growing instances of sexual violence and the ongoing exploitation of women and nature indicate that real transformation remains elusive. Even in post-modern India, patriarchal attitudes prevail, leaving women vulnerable to abuse and discrimination. Deshpande, like other Indian women writers, interrogates these deep-seated ideologies that perpetuate women’s subordination, suggesting that men still fail to recognise the intrinsic value of women and nature both seen as exploitable rather than worthy of protection and respect whether it is in western culture or in India. Saru’s marriage is emblematic of this systemic oppression. Her reflections on Virginia Woolf’s assertion that women need “a room of their own” underline her growing awareness of the necessity for personal space and autonomy. She recognizes that neither she nor her mother ever truly possessed such freedom: “But

neither she nor I have that thing 'a room of our own'" (136). This deprivation symbolizes the broader denial of agency to women in patriarchal societies. Malti Agrawal's critique of patriarchy further deepens this analysis by highlighting how women often become complicit in their own subjugation, perpetuating cruelty against other women rather than solely suffering under male oppression. Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist theory argues that modern development is, in essence, "mal-development", a destructive domination of the feminine principle by masculine forces (Shiva, 1989). Shiva calls for the empowerment of women, particularly in the Global South, to counteract environmental degradation and restore ecological balance. However, ecofeminism is not without its detractors. Bronwyn James challenges the assumption that women are inherently closer to nature, cautioning against essentialist views. Deshpande's novel invites a nuanced examination of the interconnectedness between human and non-human worlds, gender dynamics, and ecological consciousness throughout.

Conclusions

Thus, eco-feminism in the writings of Gita Mehta and Shashi Deshpande reveals the profound interconnections between the feminine self, nature, and the socio-cultural environment. Both authors, though distinct in narrative technique and thematic orientation, expose how the subjugation of women mirrors the degradation of nature under patriarchal, capitalist, and modernist paradigms. Through their literary visions, Mehta and Deshpande reassert the need to reimagine the relationship between gender and ecology not as separate concerns but as intertwined dimensions of existence. Gita Mehta explores eco-feminism through spiritual and cultural trajectories deeply rooted in Indian philosophy. In her works, nature, especially the river that emerges as a potent metaphor for the feminine principle nurturing yet resilient, fluid yet enduring. The river becomes a living embodiment of continuity, transformation, and renewal, symbolising both ecological and emotional sustenance. Her characters attain self-realisation by reconnecting with nature and rediscovering the spiritual essence of Indian traditions, affirming the holistic belief in the unity of life. Mehta's narrative thus positions the feminine as a spiritual force capable of restoring balance between humanity and the natural world, offering an alternative to the alienation bred by materialism and modernity. In contrast, Shashi Deshpande internalises eco-feminism within the domestic and psychological spheres, revealing how women's struggles for identity and autonomy are bound to their relationship with space, silence, and emotional landscapes. Her protagonists resist patriarchal confinement by confronting their fears, questioning societal roles, and reclaiming their voices within seemingly ordinary settings. Deshpande's eco-feminist sensibility lies in her recognition that healing begins within the self and that emotional renewal parallels ecological restoration. By transforming silence into speech and passivity into self-awareness, her women characters embody a quiet but powerful resistance against structures that sever human beings from the rhythms of nature and from their own inner vitality.

Together, Mehta and Deshpande redefine womanhood as a site of regeneration and resistance. Their works suggest that healing the fractured bond between women and nature also signifies healing the self from social alienation, psychological fragmentation, and spiritual emptiness. In their narratives, the feminine becomes both a metaphor and an agent of renewal, bridging the divide between body and spirit, self and environment, individual and collective existence. Ultimately, eco-feminism in their writings emerges not only as a critical lens but also as a transformative philosophy a call to restore harmony between humanity and the environment, and between the inner and outer worlds of women's lives. By linking personal liberation with ecological consciousness, Mehta and Deshpande envision a form of selfhood that transcends binaries and celebrates interconnectedness. Their literary contributions reaffirm that the path toward gender justice and environmental balance is inseparable, each nurturing the other in the continuous cycle of life and renewal.

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