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Urban Middle-Class Women and Feminist Consciousness: Shashi Deshpande vs Arundhati Roy

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Abstract

The emergence of feminist consciousness in Indian English literature has been significantly shaped by the representation of urban middle-class women, whose lives embody the tensions between tradition, modernity, and socio-political transformation. This paper undertakes a comparative study of Shashi Deshpande and Arundhati Roy, two influential voices whose works interrogate the structures of patriarchy and foreground women's struggles for autonomy. Shashi Deshpande, through novels such as *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, employs a realist mode to depict the psychological interiority of women negotiating silence, guilt, and selfhood within the confines of domesticity. Her protagonists often represent the "everyday woman" of urban India, caught between familial duty and personal aspiration, thereby articulating feminist consciousness as a gradual awakening within the private sphere. In contrast, Arundhati Roy, particularly in *The God of Small Things*, situates female subjectivity within broader socio-political and ecological frameworks, linking women's oppression to caste hierarchies, state violence, and global capitalism. Roy's experimental narrative style and radical politics expand the scope of feminist discourse beyond domestic spaces, presenting feminist consciousness as inseparable from questions of justice, resistance, and collective survival.

By juxtaposing Deshpande's psychological realism with Roy's political radicalism, the paper highlights both convergences and divergences in their feminist visions. While both writers foreground the agency of urban middle-class women, Deshpande emphasizes the subtle negotiations of identity within patriarchal households, whereas Roy situates women's struggles within larger structures of power and inequality. This comparative analysis demonstrates how Indian English literature reflects the multiplicity of feminist consciousness—ranging from the intimate and personal to the structural and political—thereby enriching global feminist thought. Ultimately, the study argues that Deshpande and Roy, through their distinct literary strategies, contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how urban middle-class women in India articulate resistance, negotiate identity, and redefine the contours of feminist discourse in a rapidly changing society.

Keywords: Feminist Consciousness; Urban Middle-Class Women; Shashi Deshpande; Arundhati Roy; Indian English Literature; Gender; Patriarchy; Identity; Resistance



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Introduction

The trajectory of Indian English literature has been profoundly shaped by the representation of women, particularly those belonging to the urban middle class, whose lives embody the contradictions of modernity, tradition, and socio-political transformation. The urban middle-class woman occupies a unique position in Indian society: she is educated, often economically independent, and exposed to global discourses of feminism, yet simultaneously bound by the expectations of family, community, and patriarchal structures. This duality makes her a compelling subject for literary exploration, as her struggles reflect both the universal dimensions of women's oppression and the specific cultural contexts of Indian society.

Within this framework, Shashi Deshpande and Arundhati Roy emerge as two significant voices whose works interrogate the complexities of female subjectivity and feminist consciousness. Although they differ in narrative style, ideological orientation, and thematic focus, both writers foreground the lived realities of women negotiating identity, autonomy, and resistance. Deshpande, often described as a realist chronicler of women's lives, focuses on the psychological interiority of urban middle-class women. Her protagonists are frequently caught in the web of domesticity, silence, and guilt, yet they gradually awaken to feminist consciousness through self-reflection and subtle acts of resistance. Novels such as *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* exemplify her commitment to portraying the "ordinary" woman whose struggles are deeply embedded in the private sphere of family and marriage. In contrast, Arundhati Roy adopts a more radical and experimental approach. Her landmark novel *The God of Small Things* situates female subjectivity within broader socio-political structures, linking women's oppression to caste hierarchies, state violence, and ecological degradation. Roy's feminist consciousness is not confined to the domestic sphere but extends to questions of justice, resistance, and collective survival. Her narrative style—marked by fragmentation, intertextuality, and lyrical intensity—reflects the disruptive potential of feminist thought, challenging both literary conventions and social norms. Roy's later political essays further expand her feminist vision, situating women's struggles within global contexts of capitalism, militarism, and environmental crisis.

The comparative study of Deshpande and Roy thus offers valuable insights into the multiplicity of feminist consciousness in Indian English literature. While Deshpande emphasizes the gradual awakening of women within patriarchal households, Roy situates female subjectivity within larger structures of power and inequality. Together, they demonstrate that feminist consciousness in India is not monolithic but diverse, ranging from the intimate and psychological to the structural and political. This paper seeks to analyze how urban middle-class women are represented in the works of Shashi Deshpande and Arundhati Roy, and how these representations contribute to the articulation of feminist consciousness. It will explore the continuities and divergences in their feminist visions, situating them within the broader trajectory of Indian English literature and global



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feminist thought. By juxtaposing Deshpande's domestic realism with Roy's political radicalism, the study aims to demonstrate how literature reflects the complex negotiations of identity, autonomy, and resistance that define the lives of urban middle-class women in contemporary India.

Shashi Deshpande: Domestic Realism and Feminist Consciousness

Shashi Deshpande has long been recognized as one of the most significant voices in Indian English literature for her nuanced portrayal of urban middle-class women. Her fiction is marked by a realist aesthetic that foregrounds the psychological interiority of women negotiating the contradictions of tradition and modernity. Unlike writers who situate female subjectivity within overtly political or historical frameworks, Deshpande's narratives focus on the intimate spaces of family, marriage, and domestic life, thereby revealing how patriarchy operates most insidiously in the private sphere. Through restrained prose and subtle characterization, she captures the silences, compromises, and quiet resistances that define the lives of middle-class women in urban India.

In *That Long Silence* (1988), Deshpande presents Jaya, a middle-class housewife whose life epitomizes the entrapments of domesticity. Jaya's silence becomes both a symptom of her oppression and a strategy of survival. The novel dramatizes the ways in which patriarchal structures demand female compliance, reducing women to passive bearers of tradition. Yet Jaya's gradual awakening to her own desires and frustrations signals the emergence of feminist consciousness. Her recognition that silence perpetuates her subjugation marks a turning point, suggesting that feminist resistance often begins with self-awareness rather than overt rebellion. Deshpande's narrative strategy—marked by introspection and psychological realism—underscores the subtle yet profound ways in which women negotiate identity within patriarchal households.

Similarly, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) explores the psychological trauma of Sarita, a successful doctor whose professional achievements are undermined by her husband's insecurity and violence. The novel highlights the paradox of urban middle-class women who, despite education and economic independence, remain vulnerable to patriarchal domination within marriage. Sarita's struggle reflects the contradictions of modern Indian society, where women's public empowerment coexists with private subjugation. Deshpande's portrayal of marital violence is not sensationalized but rendered with psychological depth, emphasizing the emotional scars that accompany physical abuse. By situating feminist consciousness within the domestic sphere, Deshpande reveals that the home itself can be a site of oppression, where patriarchal power is exercised most intimately.

A recurring motif in Deshpande's fiction is the tension between tradition and modernity. Her protagonists are often educated, urban women who aspire to autonomy yet remain bound by familial duty and cultural expectations. This tension reflects the broader condition of the Indian middle class, which embraces modernity in education and profession but clings to traditional



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gender roles in domestic life. Deshpande's feminist consciousness emerges from this contradiction, as her characters struggle to reconcile personal aspirations with societal expectations. Their journeys toward selfhood are marked by guilt, compromise, and ambivalence, underscoring the complexity of feminist resistance in contexts where tradition and modernity coexist uneasily. Language and silence play a crucial role in Deshpande's feminist vision. Her protagonists often find themselves unable to articulate their frustrations, resorting instead to silence as a means of coping with oppression. Yet silence in her fiction is never absolute; it is a space of reflection, a prelude to resistance. Jaya's silence in *That Long Silence* evolves into a recognition of its complicity in her subjugation, while Sarita's silence in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* reflects her struggle to confront marital violence. Deshpande's restrained prose mirrors this silence, capturing the emotional nuances of women's lives without resorting to melodrama. In this way, her narrative style itself becomes a feminist strategy, foregrounding the subtleties of oppression and resistance.

Deshpande's feminist consciousness is thus characterized by its realism, psychological depth, and focus on the everyday lives of urban middle-class women. She does not romanticize rebellion or portray her protagonists as heroic figures; instead, she emphasizes the gradual, often painful process of self-awareness and negotiation. Her fiction demonstrates that feminist resistance can emerge from the most ordinary contexts—from silence, introspection, and the recognition of one's own desires. By situating feminist consciousness within the domestic sphere, Deshpande enriches Indian English literature with a nuanced portrayal of women's struggles, highlighting the ways in which patriarchy operates not only in public institutions but also in the intimate spaces of family and marriage.

Arundhati Roy: Radical Politics and Feminist Consciousness

Arundhati Roy occupies a distinctive place in Indian English literature as a writer whose feminist consciousness is inseparable from her radical politics and experimental narrative style. Unlike Shashi Deshpande, who foregrounds the psychological interiority of urban middle-class women within domestic spaces, Roy situates female subjectivity within broader socio-political, ecological, and cultural frameworks. Her work demonstrates that women's oppression cannot be understood in isolation from structures of caste, class, religion, and state power. By linking the personal to the political, Roy expands the scope of feminist discourse, presenting women not merely as victims of patriarchal households but as agents negotiating systemic violence and global inequalities. Her landmark novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) exemplifies this radical vision. Set in Kerala, the novel explores the intertwined lives of Ammu, Rahel, and Estha, whose experiences reveal the intersections of gender, caste, and politics. Ammu, an urban middle-class woman estranged from her family, embodies the contradictions of feminist consciousness in a society that punishes female autonomy. Her relationship with Velutha, a Dalit man, becomes a transgressive act that challenges



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both caste hierarchies and patriarchal norms. The violent consequences of this relationship underscore the systemic nature of oppression, where women's desires are policed not only by family but also by society at large. Roy's feminist vision here is radical: she refuses to confine women's struggles to the domestic sphere, instead situating them within the larger structures of caste and state violence.

Roy's narrative style itself reflects her feminist politics. *The God of Small Things* disrupts conventional linear storytelling through fragmentation, repetition, and lyrical intensity. This stylistic experimentation mirrors the disruptive potential of feminist thought, challenging literary conventions that often silence or marginalize women's voices. By refusing to adhere to traditional narrative structures, Roy creates space for alternative forms of storytelling that foreground marginalized perspectives. Her prose, rich with intertextuality and sensory detail, captures the complexity of female subjectivity in ways that resist simplification. Beyond her fiction, Roy's political essays further expand her feminist consciousness. In works such as *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2001) and *Listening to Grasshoppers* (2009), she critiques global capitalism, militarism, and ecological destruction, linking these structures to the oppression of marginalized communities, including women. Roy's feminism is thus inseparable from her activism; she situates women's struggles within global contexts of exploitation and resistance. For her, feminist consciousness is not merely about individual autonomy but about collective survival in the face of systemic violence. This broader vision distinguishes her from writers like Deshpande, whose focus remains primarily on the domestic and psychological dimensions of women's lives.

Roy's portrayal of urban middle-class women is particularly significant. Ammu, though educated and urban, remains vulnerable to patriarchal control and societal judgment. Her struggles highlight the paradox of middle-class women in India, who, despite access to education and modernity, remain constrained by cultural expectations and systemic inequalities. Roy's feminist consciousness emerges from this paradox, emphasizing that women's oppression cannot be reduced to individual circumstances but must be understood within intersecting structures of power. Language plays a crucial role in Roy's feminist vision. Her prose often destabilizes conventional grammar and syntax, reflecting the fractured realities of her characters. This linguistic experimentation becomes a feminist strategy, challenging the authority of dominant discourses and creating space for marginalized voices. In *The God of Small Things*, the playful manipulation of English reflects both the hybridity of postcolonial identity and the subversive potential of feminist storytelling. Roy demonstrates that language itself can be a site of resistance, where women articulate their subjectivity in ways that defy patriarchal and colonial norms.

Roy's feminist consciousness is thus characterized by its radicalism, political engagement, and stylistic experimentation. She refuses to confine women's struggles to the private sphere, instead situating them within broader structures of caste, class, and global capitalism. Her fiction and



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essays together articulate a vision of feminism that is both local and global, personal and political. By linking the intimate experiences of women to systemic structures of oppression, Roy expands the scope of feminist discourse, demonstrating that the struggle for women's autonomy is inseparable from broader struggles for justice and equality.

Comparative Analysis: Shashi Deshpande vs Arundhati Roy

The juxtaposition of Shashi Deshpande and Arundhati Roy reveals the multiplicity of feminist consciousness in Indian English literature. Both writers foreground the struggles of urban middle-class women, yet they approach these struggles through markedly different narrative strategies, thematic concerns, and ideological orientations. Their works demonstrate that feminist discourse in India is not monolithic but diverse, encompassing psychological realism, domestic entrapment, radical politics, and structural critique. Deshpande's feminist vision is rooted in domestic realism. Her protagonists—Jaya in *That Long Silence*, Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, and others—embody the contradictions of urban middle-class women who are educated and modern yet constrained by patriarchal expectations within the household. Deshpande emphasizes the psychological interiority of these women, portraying their silence, guilt, and gradual awakening to selfhood. Her feminist consciousness emerges from the intimate spaces of family and marriage, where oppression is subtle but pervasive. Resistance in her fiction is often quiet, introspective, and incremental, reflecting the lived realities of women negotiating identity within patriarchal households.

Roy, by contrast, situates feminist consciousness within broader socio-political and ecological frameworks. Ammu in *The God of Small Things* exemplifies the paradox of urban middle-class women who, despite education and autonomy, remain vulnerable to systemic oppression. Her relationship with Velutha challenges both caste and patriarchal norms, highlighting the intersectionality of gender, caste, and class. Roy's feminist vision is radical, linking women's struggles to larger structures of inequality, including caste hierarchies, state violence, and global capitalism. Her narrative style—fragmented, lyrical, and experimental—mirrors the disruptive potential of feminist thought, challenging literary conventions and foregrounding marginalized voices. The differences between Deshpande and Roy can be understood in terms of scope and strategy. Deshpande's focus is primarily on the private sphere, where feminist consciousness emerges through psychological introspection and domestic negotiation. Roy, on the other hand, expands the scope of feminist discourse to include public and political spheres, situating women's struggles within systemic structures of power. While Deshpande portrays the "ordinary woman" whose resistance is subtle and personal, Roy presents women as agents of radical transgression whose struggles resonate with broader questions of justice and survival.

Yet despite these differences, there are important continuities between the two writers. Both foreground the agency of urban middle-class women, challenging patriarchal norms and



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articulating feminist consciousness in contexts where tradition and modernity coexist uneasily. Both highlight the paradox of middle-class women in India, who, despite education and exposure to modernity, remain constrained by cultural expectations and systemic inequalities. Both also emphasize the role of language and silence in shaping female subjectivity, though they deploy these motifs differently—Deshpande through restrained prose and psychological realism, Roy through linguistic experimentation and narrative disruption. Together, Deshpande and Roy demonstrate that feminist consciousness in Indian English literature is multifaceted, encompassing both the intimate and the structural, the psychological and the political. Their works reveal that the struggles of urban middle-class women cannot be reduced to a single narrative but must be understood in relation to both domestic entrapments and systemic inequalities. By situating their protagonists in different contexts—Deshpande in the household, Roy in the broader socio-political landscape—they enrich feminist discourse, offering complementary perspectives on the complexities of women's lives in contemporary India.

Ultimately, the comparative analysis underscores the diversity of feminist thought in Indian English literature. Deshpande's realism and Roy's radicalism represent two distinct but equally significant modes of articulating feminist consciousness. Together, they highlight the need for a pluralistic understanding of feminism, one that acknowledges both the subtle negotiations of identity within domestic spaces and the radical challenges to systemic structures of power. In this way, their works contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive vision of feminist consciousness, situating the struggles of urban middle-class women within both personal and political dimensions of resistance.

Conclusion

The comparative study of Shashi Deshpande and Arundhati Roy underscores the diversity and richness of feminist consciousness in Indian English literature. Both writers foreground the struggles of urban middle-class women, yet they articulate these struggles through distinct narrative strategies and ideological orientations. Together, they demonstrate that feminist discourse in India is multifaceted, encompassing the intimate negotiations of identity within domestic spaces and the radical challenges to systemic structures of power. Shashi Deshpande's fiction is marked by its psychological realism and focus on the domestic sphere. Her protagonists embody the contradictions of urban middle-class women who, despite education and exposure to modernity, remain constrained by patriarchal expectations within family and marriage. Deshpande's feminist consciousness emerges gradually, through silence, introspection, and subtle acts of resistance. Her narratives highlight the ways in which patriarchy operates most insidiously in the private sphere, shaping women's identities through guilt, compromise, and emotional entrapment. By portraying the "ordinary woman" whose resistance is quiet but profound,



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Deshpande enriches feminist discourse with a nuanced understanding of how autonomy is negotiated within the intimate spaces of everyday life.

Arundhati Roy, in contrast, situates feminist consciousness within broader socio-political and ecological frameworks. Her fiction and essays link women's struggles to caste hierarchies, state violence, and global capitalism, thereby expanding the scope of feminist discourse beyond domestic entrapments. Ammu in *The God of Small Things* exemplifies the paradox of urban middle-class women who, despite education and autonomy, remain vulnerable to systemic oppression. Roy's feminist vision is radical, emphasizing that women's oppression cannot be understood in isolation but must be analyzed in relation to intersecting structures of power. Her experimental narrative style mirrors the disruptive potential of feminist thought, challenging literary conventions and foregrounding marginalized voices. The differences between Deshpande and Roy highlight the multiplicity of feminist consciousness in Indian English literature. Deshpande emphasizes the psychological and domestic dimensions of women's struggles, while Roy situates female subjectivity within structural and political contexts. Yet both writers converge in their commitment to foregrounding women's agency and challenging patriarchal norms. Both reveal the paradox of urban middle-class women in India, who, despite access to education and modernity, remain constrained by cultural expectations and systemic inequalities. Both also emphasize the role of language and silence in shaping female subjectivity, though they deploy these motifs differently—Deshpande through restrained prose and psychological realism, Roy through linguistic experimentation and narrative disruption.

This comparative analysis demonstrates that feminist consciousness in Indian English literature is not monolithic but diverse, reflecting the complexities of women's lives in contemporary India. Deshpande and Roy together enrich feminist discourse by offering complementary perspectives: one rooted in the intimate negotiations of identity within domestic spaces, the other in the radical challenges to systemic structures of power. Their works reveal that the struggles of urban middle-class women cannot be reduced to a single narrative but must be understood in relation to both personal and political dimensions of resistance. Ultimately, the study argues that Deshpande and Roy, through their distinct literary strategies, contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive vision of feminist consciousness. Deshpande's realism and Roy's radicalism represent two significant modes of articulating feminist thought, highlighting the need for a pluralistic understanding of feminism in India. Their works situate the struggles of urban middle-class women within both local and global contexts, demonstrating that feminist consciousness is shaped not only by domestic entrapments but also by systemic inequalities and global transformations.

By foregrounding the complexities of women's lives, Deshpande and Roy underscore the enduring significance of literature in articulating feminist consciousness. Their narratives remind us that the struggle for women's autonomy is inseparable from broader questions of identity, justice, and



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cultural continuity. In this sense, their works are not only contributions to Indian English literature but also to global feminist thought, offering insights into the universal human condition of negotiating selfhood, belonging, and resistance in a rapidly changing world.

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