



Voicing The Silenced: Care Ethics And Intersectional Identity In The Feminist Reimaginings Of Jaya And Sita

Manju Kumari^{1*}, Prof. (Dr.) Amar Kumar Nayak²

^{1*}Research Scholar, Department of English, Arunachal University of Studies Email: manjukumari199312@gmail.com

²Professor, Research Supervisor, Department of English, Arunachal University of Studies Email: amarnayak.eng@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper presents a comparative study of care ethics and Intersectionality in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019). Both novels explore the emotional and moral dimensions of caregiving within patriarchal contexts. Sita's roles as daughter, wife, and mother in *The Forest of Enchantments* reveal the undervaluation of care labor and the ethical weight of empathy and compassion. In contrast, *That Long Silence* portrays Jaya's internal conflict between personal aspirations and traditional caregiving expectations, exposing the psychological toll of gendered roles. By applying Intersectionality, this study examines how the protagonists' identities shaped by gender, class, and familial roles inform their caregiving experiences. Care ethics provides a lens to understand the relational and moral significance of their actions. Through this dual framework, the paper highlights how both authors challenge patriarchal norms and advocate for a deeper recognition of care labor and women's resilience in literature.

Keywords: Care ethics, Intersectionality, Indian English fiction, Patriarchy, Women's narratives

Introduction:

The representation of women in Indian English literature reflects the evolving socio-cultural landscape of India. During the Vedic period, women held equal status with men and contributed to intellectual and artistic domains. Hymn composers like Lopa Mudra and Maitreyi exemplified this parity. However, the Upanishadic era marked a decline in women's autonomy, with education restricted to domestic skills and decision-making authority withheld. The *Manusmriti* codified patriarchal norms, enforcing practices such as child marriage and sati, and severely limiting women's freedoms (Brahmane, 2014; Dasgupta, 2015).

Literature mirrored these shifts, often portraying women as either divine or demonic. Mythological figures like Manthara and Surpanakha were cast as villains, reinforcing gendered stereotypes. Even within domestic spaces, women internalized and perpetuated patriarchal norms under the guise of tradition. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (1949) underscores the constructed nature of gender roles and the societal forces that shape female identity.

Care ethics, rooted in the philosophy of fostering relationships and nurturing interdependence, provides a touching background for examining the characters' struggles and resilience in both novels. Deshpande's novel delves into the internal conflicts and societal pressures faced by Jaya, a middle-class housewife, as she struggles to understand and define her own identity and duty. In contrast, Divakaruni's work reimagines the epic *Ramayana* from Sita's perspective, highlighting her emotional and ethical dilemmas within the context of mythological grandeur. Through care ethics, the research will analyze both authors portray the moral and emotional landscapes of their female protagonists, emphasizing the significance of empathy, compassion, and relationality.

Intersectionality, a concept introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw, emphasizes the interconnectedness of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, which create overlapping systems of discrimination or disadvantage. By applying this framework, the paper will uncover the multi-layered experiences of Jaya and Sita, considering how their identities as women intersect with other social dimensions. Deshpande and Divakaruni's narratives reveal the complexities of navigating patriarchal structures, cultural expectations, and personal aspirations, offering a rich tapestry of voices that reflect the diverse realities of Indian womanhood.

This paper examines caregiving roles in *That Long Silence* and *The Forest of Enchantments* through the lenses of care ethics and Intersectionality. Jaya and Sita embody complex intersections of gender, class, and familial duty. Their narratives reveal how caregiving, often undervalued and emotionally taxing, becomes a site of ethical struggle and self-realization. By analyzing these texts, the study aims to illuminate the moral significance of care labor and the nuanced ways in which intersecting identities shape women's experiences.

Review of Literature:

Kimberle Crenshaw's concept of Intersectionality (1989, 1991) provides a framework for understanding how overlapping identities such as gender, race, and class create unique experiences of marginalization. This approach has become central to feminist theory and social justice discourse.

V. Jeya Santhi (2012) interprets Jaya's journey in *That Long Silence* as one of self-actualization. After years of marital silence, Jaya rejects the metaphor of "two bullocks yoked together," symbolizing her break from patriarchal expectations (Deshpande, 1988, p. 7). Santhi highlights the psychological toll of domestic roles and the transformative power of self-awareness.

Manju (2014) explores Jaya's suppression and eventual self-realization, emphasizing the impact of traditional upbringing and societal norms on her identity. The study emphasizes the importance of self-assertion in reclaiming agency within patriarchal structures.

Seema Rani (2017) focuses on education as a tool for empowerment in *That Long Silence*. Her analysis reveals how intellectual growth fosters emotional resilience and autonomy, enabling women to challenge gender norms.

Rimah Saleh Alyahya (2019) examines Sudha Murthy's protagonists, drawing parallels to Deshpande and Divakaruni. Alyahya emphasizes the ethical dimensions of care and the societal challenges faced by women in relational roles.

S. Narmadha (2020) analyzes *The Forest of Enchantments* as a feminist retelling of the Ramayana. She highlights Sita's evolution from a passive figure to a self-aware woman who challenges patriarchal expectations.

Daisy Rajbongshi (2023) introduces deep ecologism into the analysis of Divakaruni's novel, linking Sita's spiritual connection with nature to broader ecological and feminist concerns.

Anjali P and Sonia Chellirian (2023) apply cultural feminism to explore sidelined characters like Surpanakha and Mandodari, arguing that Divakaruni's retelling restores their agency and challenges traditional portrayals.

Pranjal Kapoor et al. (2024) examine ecofeminism in *The Forest of Enchantments*, contrasting Eastern and Western perspectives. They highlight Sita's bond with the forest as a site of liberation and self-discovery, reinforcing the intersection of ecology and gender.

Objective(s):

The primary objective of this research is to conduct a comparative analysis of Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* through the dual lenses of care ethics and Intersectionality. Specifically, the study aims to:

- i. Examine how caregiving roles are portrayed and problematized in both novels.
- ii. Analyze the emotional and ethical dimensions of care labor within patriarchal contexts.
- iii. Explore how intersecting identities such as gender, class, and familial roles shape the protagonists' experiences.
- iv. Highlight the ways in which both authors challenge traditional narratives and advocate for recognition of women's emotional labor and autonomy.

Research Question(s):

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* portray caregiving as an ethical and emotional labor within patriarchal societies?
2. In what ways do the protagonists' intersecting identities such as gender, class, and familial roles shape their caregiving experiences and moral decisions?
3. How does the application of care ethics illuminate the emotional resilience and ethical agency of Jaya and Sita in their respective narratives?
4. To what extent do these novels challenge traditional representations of women and advocate for a deeper recognition of care labor in Indian English literature?

Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in literary analysis. It draws upon the frameworks of care ethics and Intersectionality to examine the emotional, ethical, and relational dimensions of female protagonists in *That Long Silence* and *The Forest of Enchantments*. The research involves close reading of the texts, supported by secondary sources including journal articles, feminist theory, and psychoanalytic criticism. By analyzing narrative structure, character development, and thematic elements, the study explores how caregiving roles are shaped by intersecting identities such as gender, class, and familial position. The methodology prioritizes contextual sensitivity and theoretical depth, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the protagonists' moral struggles and societal constraints.

Analysis:

That Long Silence showcases the emotional and relational struggles of Jaya, the protagonist, who is constantly suppressed by societal and familial expectations. Since childhood, Jaya's life has been dominated by the elders in her home, urging her to prioritize feminine beauty and behavior over personal aspirations. This suppression of her true self and desires exemplifies the lack of empathy and care that should be central to ethical relationships. Her experiences highlight the importance of nurturing one's individuality and emotional well-being, which care ethics advocates for.

Intersectionality further illuminates Jaya's plight, as her identity is shaped by multiple intersecting social factors, including gender and societal roles. As a woman in a patriarchal society, Jaya is subjected to roles that demand submission and weakness, reinforcing her marginalization. Additionally, the novel touches upon racism among women, adding another layer to the intersectional analysis. Jaya's intelligence and precocity are stifled by constant instructions and expectations, leading to an unstable relationship with her husband, Mohan. The Intersectionality of her gender and societal roles creates unique pressures that impact her emotional and relational well-being.

Jaya's eventual pursuit of independence through writing represents her struggle against these intersecting oppressions. As she begins to assert her identity and contribute economically to her family, Mohan's feelings of inferiority and jealousy surface. This dynamic accentuates the complexities of intersecting identities and the emotional challenges they bring. By examining Jaya's experiences through the lenses of care ethics and Intersectionality, we gain unfathomable understanding of her struggles and resilience in a patriarchal society.

The novel also shows sanctimony in the behaviors of Mr. Kamat, when he tries to explain the reason of Jaya and Mohan's decaying relationship. Both the characters play equal role in destroying their relationship but as a woman Jaya is put under the blame for all the consequences. Nobody tries to explain Mohan, for he is a man and he is superior according to the society. Ultimately, Jaya starts believing that she needs to follow the feminine laws of conduct; she is the one playing the role who needs to stay indoors looking after the family, cooking and of a well cultured woman of Indian society.

Hence, in *That Long Silence*, Deshpande presents Jaya as a woman caught between societal expectations and personal aspirations. Her silence symbolizes the emotional suppression imposed by patriarchal norms. Jaya's caregiving is not merely physical but deeply psychological; she absorbs the emotional burdens of her family while sacrificing her own desires. Her anxious-preoccupied attachment style, shaped by childhood experiences and marital dynamics, reveals the psychological toll of caregiving without reciprocity. The metaphor of "two bullocks yoked together" (Deshpande, 1988, p. 7) is rejected by Jaya as she begins to assert her individuality.

The Forest of Enchantments is a feminist retelling of the ancient Indian epic, the Ramayana, from Sita's perspective. Divakaruni's narrative reimagines the mythological tale, focusing on Sita's experiences as a daughter, wife, and mother. The novel emphasizes the emotional and physical labor involved in caregiving and emphasizes the moral importance of empathy, compassion, and interpersonal relationships. By bringing Sita's voice to the forefront, Divakaruni challenges traditional patriarchal narratives and highlights the undervaluation of care labor in ancient Indian society.

In contrast, *That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande is set in contemporary India and portrays the life of Jaya, a middle-class woman who copes with the demands of caregiving within a modern patriarchal framework. Jaya's struggles to reconcile her individual ambitions with external expectations reveal the psychological and emotional toll of care labor. Deshpande's narrative delves into the internal conflicts and societal pressures that shape Jaya's experiences, offering a nuanced portrayal of the complexities of caregiving in a modern context.

Sita, in *The Forest of Enchantments*, embodies a different but equally complex caregiving role. Her love for Lava and Kusha, her empathy for marginalized women, and her moral decisions reflect a deep commitment to care ethics. Sita's intersectional identity as queen, wife, mother, and woman creates layered challenges. Her rejection by Rama and her final return to the earth are acts of moral agency, resisting patriarchal expectations while affirming her ethical stance.

Another example is Sita's compassion towards the marginalized characters in the story, such as the women in the Ashoka grove and the citizens of Ayodhya. Sita's empathy for their suffering and her efforts to alleviate their pain reflect her ethical orientation towards care and compassion. This contrasts sharply with the consistently rigid and judgmental attitudes of the male characters, marked by greater authority and assertiveness.

Sita's identity is shaped by multiple intersecting factors, including her gender, status as a queen, and her role as a mother. These intersecting identities create unique challenges and struggles for Sita. For instance, her gender subjects her to the strict expectations and limitations imposed on women in her society. As a queen, she is expected to embody the ideal of purity and virtue, which leads to her public humiliation and abandonment by Rama. Sita's role as a mother adds another layer of complexity to her experiences. Her separation from her sons and her eventual decision to leave them in the care of the sage Valmiki demonstrate the intersecting pressures and expectations she faces. These intersecting identities highlight the limitations of understanding Sita's experiences through a single-axis framework.

Intersectionality also sheds light on the experiences of other female characters in the novel. Characters like Surpanakha and Mandodari, who are often vilified in traditional retellings of the Ramayana, are portrayed with greater nuance and empathy in *The Forest of Enchantments*. Their stories reveal how intersecting identities create unique forms of marginalization and oppression.

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, care ethics emphasizes the importance of empathy and compassion in moral decision-making, while Intersectionality highlights the complex ways in which multiple identities intersect to create unique experiences. Sita's character embodies both frameworks. Her actions are guided by care ethics, as seen in her compassion towards others and her commitment to nurturing relationships. At the same time, her experiences are shaped by the intersecting pressures of gender, status, and motherhood. This combined structure allows us to appreciate the complexity of Sita's character and the moral dilemmas she faces; such as, Sita's decision to leave Rama and raise her sons in the forest can be understood through both care ethics and Intersectionality. From a care ethics perspective, this decision is motivated by her desire to protect and nurture her sons in a safe and loving environment. From an intersectional perspective, this decision reflects her rejection of the oppressive expectations and limitations imposed on her as a woman and a queen.

Besides, the combined framework of care ethics and Intersectionality helps us understand the moral significance of Sita's final act of returning to the earth. This act can be seen as a powerful assertion of her agency and autonomy, rejecting the

oppressive norms and expectations that have constrained her throughout her life. At the same time, it reflects her deep empathy and compassion for her sons and the people of Ayodhya, as she seeks to protect them from further suffering. Both protagonists navigate caregiving as a moral and emotional terrain. Jaya's internal monologue and Sita's mythic voice converge in their shared struggle for recognition and autonomy. Through care ethics, their actions gain moral weight; through Intersectionality, their experiences are contextualized within broader systems of oppression. From a care ethics perspective, Shashi Deshpande's work highlights the emotional and relational burdens borne by her female characters. These women, subjected to lifelong ordeals simply for being born female, embody the pain, compromise, fear, and suppression that define their existence. Deshpande's narratives often center on the dynamics of care within familial relationships, where daughters, wives, sisters, and mothers are shackled by societal expectations. The empathy and relational care these women exhibit contrast sharply with the despondency and hopelessness that shadow their lives, illuminating their resilience and capacity for nurturing even amid challenging circumstances.

Results:

The comparative analysis reveals that both *That Long Silence* and *The Forest of Enchantments* portray caregiving as a site of moral complexity and emotional labor. While Jaya's caregiving unfolds within the constraints of middle-class modernity, Sita's is mythologized yet no less burdened by patriarchal expectations. The contrast reveals how care-labor across time and genre, remains a site of both suppression and resistance. Through the dual lenses of care ethics and Intersectionality, both authors foreground the protagonists' moral agency while situating their struggles within overlapping systems of gender, class, and familial expectation.

Discussion:

The findings emphasize the significance of care ethics and Intersectionality in understanding women's experiences in literature. Jaya's anxious-preoccupied attachment style and emotional silencing reveal how caregiving roles can suppress individuality and reinforce patriarchal norms. Her journey toward self-expression through writing becomes an act of resistance and self-care. Sita's compassion and moral clarity, even in the face of abandonment and societal judgment, exemplify the ethical depth of caregiving. Her final act of returning to the earth is both a rejection of patriarchal constraints and a gesture of empathy toward her children and society.

Intersectionality reveals how the protagonists' identities as women, caregivers, and individuals within specific cultural contexts shape their experiences and ethical choices. The novels demonstrate that caregiving is not merely a domestic duty but a site of moral struggle, emotional resilience, and social critique. By foregrounding care ethics and Intersectionality, Deshpande and Divakaruni offer a richer, more empathetic portrayal of women's lives, challenging reductive stereotypes and advocating for systemic change.

Conclusion:

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* offer profound insights into the emotional and ethical dimensions of caregiving within patriarchal societies. Through the contexts of care ethics and Intersectionality, this study reveals how Jaya and Sita navigate complex identities and moral dilemmas. Their narratives challenge traditional gender roles, highlight the undervaluation of emotional labor, and advocate for empathy, autonomy, and recognition. By centering women's voices and experiences, both authors contribute to a more inclusive and ethically attuned literary discourse. The study affirms that caregiving, when viewed through these lenses, becomes a powerful site of resistance, transformation, and ethical agency.

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