

# Comparative Study of Gender Politics and Silenced Voices in *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and *That Long Silence* by Sashi Deshpande

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**Abstract** - Women's experiences have been shaped by systems of power that include identity, voicelessness that limit autonomy across and beyond the cultures. This paper presents a comparative feminist analysis of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*. This study focuses on the representation of women's silence, subjugation, and quest for self-identity within patriarchal societies from the perspective of Postmodern Feminism. Drawing on Postmodern Feminist thinkers such as Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva, the study explores these texts within the discourse of identity politics and resistance, highlighting how self-realisation emerges through the disruption of patriarchal language and by reclaiming their suppressed voice. In both the novels the authors examine how gendered oppression operates through familial, social, and cultural structures that restrict women's voice and choice. In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison portrays the tragic struggle against internalised racism, sexual exploitation, and societal ideals of beauty that deny self-worth through the character Pecola Breedlove. Similarly, in *That Long Silence*, Deshpande's protagonist Jaya confronts the constraints of marriage and domestic expectations, wherein silence becomes the symptoms of repression and a potential space for introspection. Despite their different cultural contexts, Morrison and Deshpande converge in their critique of patriarchal domination and in their portrayal of women's gradual movement toward self-awareness and articulation. The study highlights how both novels expose the psychological, emotional, and social dimensions of female oppression while affirming the transformative power of voice and self-realisation.

**Keywords:** Feminist criticism, Patriarchy, Comparative literature.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Across cultures, women have always occupied paradoxical positions, celebrated as powerful symbols

on one hand and subjected to oppression and silence on the other. While modernity has enabled the discourse of empowerment, women continue to face systemic marginalization rooted in patriarchy, gender politics, and socio-cultural hierarchies. The late twentieth century marked a significant shift in literature, with women writers beginning to articulate the psychological and social realities of female subjugation that had long been ignored. Writers like Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood, and Elaine Showalter in the West, and Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Arundhati Roy in India, explored the nuanced experiences of women trapped between societal expectations and personal desires.

This study undertakes a comparative exploration of gender politics and silenced voices in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* through the combined theoretical perspectives of Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler. Drawing from Kristeva's notions of abjection, the semiotic and symbolic order, and the subject-in-process, alongside Butler's theory of gender performativity, the paper examines how the protagonists As Butler writes, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance" (*Gender Trouble* 33). Likewise, Kristeva maintains that "The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I" (*Powers of Horror* 1). By aligning Kristeva's psychoanalytic feminism with Butler's poststructuralist critique, this study uncovers that women's silence in these narratives is not mere passivity but a culturally enforced performance, a learned survival mechanism that both sustains and challenges oppressive systems.

Pecola and Jaya are socially and linguistically constructed within patriarchal frameworks that dictate womanhood and silence dissent. Both authors reveal how identity and agency are formed not as fixed essences but as continuous negotiations between internal emotions and external social scripts. By aligning Kristeva's psychoanalytic feminism with Butler's poststructuralist critique, this study reveals that women's silence in these narratives is not mere passivity but a culturally enforced performance, a learned survival mechanism that both sustains and challenges oppressive systems. The paper thus aims to uncover how Toni Morrison and Shashi Deshpande expose, resist, and redefine the politics of gender and voice through their female protagonists, situating their works within a broader feminist discourse that transcends geographical, racial, and cultural boundaries.

## II. TONI MORRISON'S PECOLA AND THE POLITICS OF ABJECTION

*The Bluest Eye*, narrates the story of a young girl Pecola. She, in the story, is a dark skinned girl and the one who longs for beauty and blue eyes. In the views of Pecola, the society loves and respects fair skinned girls. She often admits that she's not worthy of love even from her own parents. The story is narrated from Claudia, Pecola's sister's perspective. The story line unfolds the events and incidents that go in favour of Pecola's beliefs, where she finds another girl with fair skin falling in love with the guy she was interested in. Her own mother fails to protect Pecola from her father who sexually assaults and impregnates her. These incidents shatter Pecola and strengthen her inferiority feelings towards the society., though Pecola has the voice to expose herself, she accepts the hard things that are happening around her and remains silent and mute. She was never given a chance to validate her points and even when she had chances she was accused and victimised. The consistent desire of Pecola to have a blue eye indicates how strong she believes in beauty emerging from fair skin and beautiful eyes. And also the storyline narrates her economic state of being in poverty which adds more impact to her inferior feelings. Even her sisters say, "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she

herself would be different" (Morrison 46).

Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist of the novel, has a desire for blue eyes which represents the internalisation of white beauty standards, a process of abjection through which the self is defined by rejecting its own racial and gendered identity. Kristeva defines abjection as that which "disturbs identity, system, order" and "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (*Powers of Horror* 4). Pecola becomes the object of her community, symbolically expelled to maintain collective purity. Her blackness and poverty mark her as the "other," both within White America and within her own community that mirrors those racist ideals. Morrison writes, "All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed" (*The Bluest Eye* 205). This metaphor of absorption captures Kristeva's view of the object as that which the community rejects yet depends upon for its coherence.

Pecola's yearning for blue eyes, "If those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (*The Bluest Eye* 46) manifests her internalized abjection, where her subjectivity collapses under the symbolic order of White patriarchy. According to Kristeva, the entry into the symbolic metaphor involves the repression of the semiotic, the maternal, and the bodily. Pecola's body becomes the site of this repression: her sexual abuse by her father, Cholly, represents the violent assertion of patriarchal control that annihilates her subjectivity. Her madness, the only means of escape, embodies Kristeva's subject-in-process, a fragmented self oscillating between meaning and loss. Pecola's delusional dialogue with her imaginary friend marks her attempt to reclaim the semiotic rhythm of voice and emotion, though the symbolic world has already exiled her.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity complements Kristeva's psychoanalytic lens by exposing the constructed nature of identity in Toni Morrison's novel. Butler argues that "gender is not something one is, it is something one does" (*Gender Trouble* 25). Pecola's mother, Pauline, performs the role of the "good Christian woman" by serving a white household, thereby reinforcing the dominant social narrative of White virtue and Black subservience. Pauline's imitation of White femininity, her adoration of the blonde actress Jean Harlow and her own self-hatred, illustrates Butler's concept of performative repetition, where women sustain their subjugation by

reiterating oppressive ideals. Toni Morrison writes, “She was never able after her education in the movies to look at a face and not assign it some category of prettiness” (*The Bluest Eye* 122). Pauline’s desire to belong to the White symbolic order leads her to abandon her maternal connection with Pecola, enacting Kristeva’s notion of the abject mother, the rejected source of both life and contamination. Pecola’s mother, Pauline, mirrors Butler’s performativity in her emulation of White femininity. “She was never able after her education in the movies to look at a face and not assign it some category of prettiness” (Morrison 122). Pauline’s imitation of white domestic ideals reflects Butler’s concept of gender as “an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (*Gender Trouble* 191). Pauline’s worship of whiteness leads her to neglect her maternal bond, echoing Kristeva’s “abject mother”—the rejected origin of life. In Morrison’s narrative, the linguistic fragmentation and polyphonic voices reflect the Kristevan semiotic—the pre-symbolic space where rhythm, sound, and emotion subvert patriarchal language. Claudia, the child narrator, serves as the semiotic voice of empathy and resistance. Through Claudia’s lament—“We tried to see her without looking at her, and never, never went near” (*The Bluest Eye* 205), Morrison reintroduces emotion and rhythm into narrative form, allowing the suppressed to speak. Thus, Morrison’s use of fractured language becomes a feminist act, disrupting the patriarchal symbolic with the maternal semiotic.

As Carolyn Denard notes, “Morrison gives voice to those whom history and culture have rendered invisible” (*Toni Morrison: Conversations* 18). This mirrors Kristeva’s assertion that the semiotic language “revolts against its own stasis” (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 27). Thus, Pecola’s story becomes both a critique of social abjection and a tragic song of silenced subjectivity.

### III. SHASHI DESHPANDE’S JAYA AND THE PERFORMATIVITY OF SILENCE

In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande explores a similar psychic landscape, though situated within the Indian patriarchal domestic space. Jaya, a middle-class housewife and writer, embodies what Kristeva would describe as a “subject-in-process”, a woman

negotiating between her internal desires and external constraints. Her life revolves around her husband Mohan’s expectations, societal conventions, and her own complicated silence: “I had learned long ago to keep quiet, to hold myself within limits, to be invisible” (*That Long Silence* 23). Jaya’s invisibility reflects the symbolic order of patriarchy, where women are defined by submission and restraint.

Butler’s theory of performativity clarifies Jaya’s entrapment. Her gendered behavior, cooking, pleasing, and yielding, is a performance repeated daily to maintain her social identity as a “good wife.” Butler asserts that “the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts” (*Gender Trouble* 179). Jaya’s realization that her entire identity is constructed through these performances marks her awakening. She begins to question: “What have I achieved by silence? Nothing ever changes except me” (*That Long Silence* 143). Her silence, once a shield of survival, becomes the symbol of her alienation.

Kristeva’s concept of abjection also operates in Jaya’s psyche, though in a subtler, internalized form. Her sense of guilt, self-censorship, and repression of creative expression illustrate the psychic expulsion of the abject self, the part that resists conformity. Kristeva’s concept of abjection also manifests subtly in Jaya’s guilt and repression. She suppresses her writerly self to conform to patriarchal expectations, experiencing what Kristeva calls “a vortex of summons and repulsion which places the one haunted by it literally beside himself” (*Powers of Horror* 1). Deshpande’s narrative oscillates between past and present, mirroring Jaya’s fragmented consciousness. Her eventual act of writing becomes the reemergence of the semiotic, the rhythm of memory and emotion breaking through the patriarchal symbolic order. “I am telling myself the story of my life. I must tell it, otherwise it will not be mine” (*That Long Silence* 120). Through storytelling, Jaya reclaims agency over her narrative, aligning with Kristeva’s belief that language can be a site of revolt and rebirth.

Deshpande’s engagement with Butler’s concept of performativity is equally nuanced. By unmasking the repetitive acts of domesticity as socially scripted performances, Deshpande exposes how patriarchy sustains itself through normalization. When Jaya finally disrupts her silence, she performs a subversion of gendered expectation, an act of re-signification that

Butler describes as central to feminist resistance. The ending, where Jaya resolves to “move on,” is less a declaration of independence than a Kristevan acknowledgment of identity’s fluidity, an ongoing process rather than a fixed state. Meenakshi Mukherjee observes that Deshpande’s women “negotiate their identities within the cracks of social expectations” (*The Twice Born Fiction* 112). Jaya’s silence thus evolves from repression into introspection, a transformative process akin to Kristeva’s “semiotic revolt”, where language becomes a space for re-birth.

#### IV.COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: KRISTEVA’S AND BUTLER’S FEMINIST THEORIES IN TONI MORRISON AND SHASHI DESHPANDE

Toni Morrison and Shashi Deshpande, though writing in vastly different socio-cultural contexts, converge in their exploration of female subjectivity and oppression through silence, fragmentation, and abjection. Using the theoretical frameworks of Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler both writers are analysed as they articulate the complex negotiation of identity in women’s lives where gender, language, and social power intertwine. Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic concepts of abjection, semiotic chora, and the subject-in-process, alongside Butler’s notions of gender performativity and the constructed nature of identity, illuminate how Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Deshpande’s *That Long Silence* (1988) deconstruct the mechanisms of female subjugation.

#### V.INTERSECTIONS: LANGUAGE, SILENCE, AND THE FEMININE SELF

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola’s silence mirrors cultural annihilation. Morrison’s narrator Claudia laments, “We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us” (Morrison 205). This dynamic exemplifies Kristeva’s notion that “The abject is not an absence of cleanliness, but what disturbs identity, system, order” (*Powers of Horror* 4). Pecola’s madness exposes the boundaries of social purity. In contrast, Deshpande’s Jaya embodies what Butler calls “the re-signification of gender norms through repetition with a difference” (*Bodies That Matter* 15). Her final decision to speak, however tentatively,

challenges her prescribed silence. “To achieve anything, I must first break that long silence” (Deshpande 192).

Both Morrison and Deshpande situate language and silence as battlegrounds for female subjectivity. For Kristeva, silence can be both a symptom of repression and a space of resistance, a “threshold between the symbolic and the semiotic” (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 27). Pecola’s silence becomes pathological, a total collapse into abjection, whereas Jaya’s silence evolves into a reflective tool, a means to recover voice. Morrison’s community enforces silence through exclusion; Deshpande’s patriarchy does so through normalization. Yet both authors illuminate how silence, when transformed into speech, can become a radical act of reclamation.

Judith Butler’s performative theory underscores this transformation. When Jaya begins to write, she re-enacts gender, but now with agency, turning performance into defiance. Similarly, Claudia’s narration in *The Bluest Eye* reclaims storytelling from the patriarchal lens, rearticulating Black womanhood as a site of empathy and resistance. Both authors exemplify Butler’s argument that “agency is the repetition of acts that, through variation, expose the illusion of essential identity” (*Bodies That Matter* 15). Through Kristeva and Butler, Morrison and Deshpande reimagine female subjectivity as fluid, fractured, and performative. Their protagonists, Pecola and Jaya embody the painful yet transformative process of negotiating identity within oppressive symbolic structures. Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* exposes how racialized patriarchy leads to psychic disintegration, while Deshpande’s *That Long Silence* portrays the subtler violence of domestic conformity. Both authors transform silence into a site of articulation, demonstrating that the path to selfhood lies not in rejecting the symbolic entirely but in disrupting it from within.

In Kristeva’s terms, both novels stage the drama of the subject-in-process where the abject and the semiotic re-enter language to destabilize the patriarchal order. In Butler’s view, both women’s acts of narration are performative re-inscriptions that reveal the constructed nature of identity. Morrison and Deshpande thus converge in their feminist vision: that liberation lies in recognizing the fluidity of the self, the mutability of language, and the transformative potential of the act of speaking.

Morrison's community enforces abjection through collective judgment; Deshpande's patriarchy normalizes silence. Yet both suggest that redemption lies in language. Butler's assertion that "Agency is to be located within the possibilities opened up in reiterative performance" (*Excitable Speech* 15) encapsulates both protagonists' subtle acts of defiance. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty writes, "The everyday lived experiences of women form the most powerful grounds for feminist theory" ("Under Western Eyes" 70). Morrison and Deshpande transform these lived silences into narrative empowerment.

## VI.LITERATURE REVIEW

The dialogue between literature and feminist theory has long been enriched by the critical contributions of Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva. Their theories, though emerging from different intellectual traditions, that is Butler from poststructuralism and Kristeva from psychoanalysis, both interrogate the processes through which gender and identity are constructed, performed, and constrained within patriarchal discourse. Scholars across literary and cultural studies have employed their frameworks to reinterpret women's narratives not merely as reflections of oppression, but as complex negotiations of selfhood, power, and expression.

Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982) and *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) provides foundational insights into how subjectivity is formed through the interplay between the semiotic (the emotional, maternal, and pre-linguistic drives) and the symbolic (the structured order of language and culture). According to Kristeva, women often occupy an ambivalent space in this dynamic, embodying both abjection and creativity. Scholars such as Elizabeth Grosz and Toril Moi expanded Kristeva's ideas, applying abjection to women's alienation in literature. Pecola's yearning for blue eyes, for instance, enacts this psychic abjection, mirroring Grosz's claim that "the feminine is constructed as the excluded, the unrepresentable within phallogocentric discourse" (*Volatile Bodies* 83).

Within this context, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* becomes an illustration of Kristeva's theory where Pecola Breedlove's yearning for blue eyes symbolizes her desire to enter the symbolic order of White beauty and cultural legitimacy, a desire that ultimately results in her abjection.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) revolutionized feminist thought by asserting that gender is not an innate truth but a "performative" construct—an identity continuously produced through acts, language, and repetition. Butler's theory has since been pivotal in literary studies, particularly in exploring how female characters navigate and subvert rigid social scripts. Critics such as Sara Salih and Hélène Cixous have observed that women's literature often demonstrates resistance through "performative disobedience," where silence, irony, or bodily expression undermine patriarchal codes. In Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, Jaya's withdrawal and self-narration can be read as performative acts that reconstitute her subjectivity beyond marital and societal confines.

A comparative framework that combines Butler's performativity and Kristeva's psychoanalytic feminism has been explored by scholars such as Julia Kristeva herself in *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* (1996), and later by Judith Butler (1997), who emphasizes that women's voices often oscillate between silence and speech, repression and revelation. In this view, Pecola's muteness and Jaya's self-dialogue become two ends of the same spectrum of female articulation, the former representing psychic collapse under cultural hegemony, and the latter suggesting reconstitution through reflective narrative. Recent critical engagements also highlight the significance of intersectionality in feminist analysis, as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). Scholars like Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and Bell Hooks (1984) argue that gender oppression is inseparable from race, class, and cultural identity. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality (1989) and Bell Hooks' notion that "Patriarchy has no gender" (*Feminist Theory* 121) situate Morrison's and Deshpande's protagonists within racial and cultural hierarchies that reinforce gender oppression.

Morrison's portrayal of Pecola thus intersects race and gender as mutually reinforcing axes of subjugation, while Deshpande situates her protagonist within the intersections of gender, class, and tradition. Both authors, though from distinct cultural geographies, articulate the silenced voices of women navigating systemic hierarchies, thereby reinforcing the transnational dimension of feminist literary discourse.

Through the convergence of Butler's and Kristeva's

theories, previous scholarship has illuminated the textual and psychological mechanisms by which women negotiate silence, identity, and resistance. This theoretical synthesis provides the foundation for the present study, which examines *The Bluest Eye* and *That Long Silence* comparatively to understand how the female subject articulates identity within the confines of patriarchal language, cultural marginalisation, and social expectation.

## VII.FURTHER SCOPE FOR THE STUDY

The current study, grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva, opens multiple directions for future exploration. While this research focuses on the negotiation of gender identity and silenced voices in *The Bluest Eye* and *That Long Silence* subsequent studies may extend these frameworks to new intersections of theory and literature. One such promising trajectory lies in the relationship between feminism and ecology, where women's subjugation parallels the exploitation of nature. Kristeva's notion of the abject entities cast out by the symbolic order that can be metaphorically applied to the degradation of the natural world, suggesting an ecofeminist reading where women and the environment share spaces of marginalization and renewal.

Further research could also extend Butler's idea of performative identity to explore how women's resistance functions within postmodern cultural spaces. As gender and power relations continue to evolve, Butler's emphasis on performativity provides a framework for understanding how women reimagine selfhood in a world increasingly mediated by social expectations and technology. Such studies may examine contemporary narratives both Western and Indian through the dual lenses of language and embodiment, highlighting how female characters construct meaning through fragmented realities.

The comparative model used here can be expanded to include cross-cultural or transnational feminist dialogues, analyzing writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Arundhati Roy, or Alice Walker, who similarly explore female silence, resistance, and the politics of identity. These future explorations could employ Butler's critique of heteronormative discourse alongside Kristeva's semiotic disruption to investigate how narrative voice, memory, and language challenge

hegemonic systems of representation.

Moreover, this study may lead to postmodern feminist analyses of narrative form, considering how fragmentation, multiplicity, and subjectivity reflect the instability of meaning itself. In this sense, Morrison's and Deshpande's narrative structures already anticipate postmodern preoccupations with voice, identity, and reality. By integrating Kristeva's idea of intertextuality and Butler's deconstruction of gender norms, future studies can further assess how literature acts as both a mirror and a critique of the social imagination.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a larger academic conversation on how literature articulates the lived realities of women in different cultural settings. Extending the study beyond Morrison and Deshpande promises a richer understanding of the feminine psyche and the enduring struggle for autonomy and expression, a struggle that remains central to feminist criticism, even in postmodern and postcolonial contexts.

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