



From Silence to Sky: Women Empowerment in *That Long Silence* and Operation Sindoor

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Abstract

Women's empowerment, be it fiction or reality, depicts an inspiring saga of restoring one's voice, agency, and identity. The article analyses *That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande in conjunction with the 2024 Indian Air Force Mission Operation Sindoor, portrayed as an iconic mission executed by two women fighter pilots. Both stories represent the movement from silence towards a self-assertion. Jaya, the protagonist of the novel, shatters the silence of patriarchy imposed on her, and the pilots challenge the preconceived norms for women in the workforce. The article draws additional comparisons with Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, expanding the discourse on women's defiance and unbeatable spirit set in different times and places. This case study emphasizes that true empowerment begins once silence is transcended through a blend of literary interpretation and real-life experiences. Whether taking the form of self-reflection or tangible accomplishments, women's voices are resolute tools of change. This examination maintains that there is no end to the process of empowerment, which lies in speaking up against societal standards to reclaim and reshape one's identity.

Key Words

Women Empowerment, Operation Sindoor, Gender Resistance, Patriarchy, Resistance, Voice and Identity, Resistance

I. Introduction

The narrative of women breaking boundaries is no longer confined to the realms of mythology or fiction—it has now become an integral part of contemporary reality. Women are not only participating, but they are also leading, turning silence into speech and passivity into action across disciplines and domains. One of the most striking examples of this shift is two young women (Colonel Sofiya Qureshi and Wing Commander Vyomika Singh) precision airstrike mission, Operation Sindoor (2024), which marks a significant chapter in India's military history. These women did the 'unthinkable' in an aircraft of war—they placed a precision airstrike on an enemy base, which is unparalleled in the history of Indian defence. Their valor reworked the boundaries of stratified gender roles in national security and written history.

That Long Silence (1988) by Shashi Deshpande features the half as revelatory, yet more revolutionary, internal journey of Jaya, a middle-class housewife. Deshpande tells the story of Jaya, an understated writer-cum-housewife grappling with the suffocating silence of normativity in a wildly patriarchal society. Like

Sindoor, Deshpande captures the literal and metaphorical assertion of power—narratives portraying the struggle to rise from silencing and shadowed existence to pronounced leadership.

Along with weaving in contemporary acts of heroism, this article attempts to dissect the fundamental processes underlying self-empowerment and the socio-political facets of women's empowerment. It traces women's agency between times, genres, and contexts—be it the metaphorical pen of Jaya in Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988) or the harsh realities of racial and gender subjugation in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). These fictional and non-fictional accounts converge to show that empowerment is not an event, but rather a process—a process that starts from a hushed place and progresses toward sound, presence, and leadership.

Every act of defiance—be it self-directed or imposed by social forces—represents another step towards attaining equality in a world still bound by gendered social constructs and historical sidelining. Writer's literary work marks a defining shift in women's influence, from the domestic sphere to the public sphere, where military defence is contested. This paper seeks to demonstrate how literature and life intertwine in complex dimensions and provide deeper understanding of womanhood and empowerment.

II. Objectives

1. To explore women empowerment through *That Long Silence* and Operation Sindoor.
2. To analyse Jaya's journey from silence to self-expression in the novel.
3. To highlight Operation Sindoor as a key moment in women's leadership in defence.
4. To connect literary themes with real-life examples of female agency.
5. To use other works like *The Palace of Illusions* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* for support.
6. To apply feminist theories to examine silence and voice in literature.
7. To show empowerment as both an internal and external process.
8. To promote an interdisciplinary approach combining literature and social change.

III. Understanding Empowerment – From Theory to Context

"I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will."

- Charlotte Brontë

Empowerment, as described by development scholar Naila Kabeer in 1999, means “the increase in people's capacity to undertake strategic life choices where such a possibility was not available to them before.” Feminist critics claim this advances new directions in gender inequality as it attempts to address centuries of denial of voice and agency to women. In Showalter's 1977 book about the female literary tradition, she argues that women's writing has traditionally been an act of both compliance and rebellion—it has oscillated between submission and resistance toward power structures.

In Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, the unfolding of empowerment is revealed through transitive internal awakening. Middle-class Indian housewife Jaya slowly comes to realize her active silence in perpetuating patriarchal systems. “Silence had somehow become a habit,” she notes (Deshpande, 1988, p. 3). This silence a housewife is said to have, literally and figuratively, represents the conditioning through normative gender expectations.

At the same time, Operation Sindoor which is a mission conducted by the Indian Air Force in 2024 with two lady officers commanding is an example of action-based empowerment. The women pilots not just entered hostile airspace, but institutional frameworks as well. Their achievement underscores progress being made from dormant suffering towards purposeful organizing accompanied by exercising authority, which in this case aligns with feminism.

In the speech Christine Lagarde talks about the importance of empowerment women and the ways to achieve it. The begin of the speech stress the important role of women in this modern era. “What is needed to change this picture is a concerted effort to open the door to opportunity with what I call the “3 Ls” of women's empowerment: learning, labour and leadership.” (Lagarde, Pg. 9). *Matchbox* by Ashapura Devi highlights

the issues of gender inequality and the oppression of women in some Indian families. The story suggests that women have the potential to do great things, but they are often underestimated and not given the chance to realize their full potential. The writer says that she used to compare women with matchboxes because of certain reasons. Both of them outwardly appear to be very calm and quiet. They can be seen in the kitchen, pantry and bedroom but have the power to explode. Women's empowerment is becoming more and more acknowledged as a pressing issue. Social reformers and leaders have been working hard to empower women in the majority of nations, including India. We still have a long way to go.

Women are the backbone of families and communities. They provide care, support, and nurturing to their families and are essential to the development of children. Women also play a significant role in community building and often take on leadership roles in community organizations. The leadership qualities of women are exemplified in various contexts, demonstrating their strength, resilience, and determination. For instance: Women officers like Colonel Sofiya Qureshi and Wing Commander Vyomika Singh showcased exceptional leadership skills during the Operation Sindoor, highlighting India's growing contribution of women to the armed forces. As the current President of India, Droupadi Murmu embodies women empowerment and leadership. Her journey from a small village to the highest constitutional post inspires millions of women and tribal citizens, demonstrating the possibilities of social mobility and empowerment. Other notable examples of women leadership include: as the first female Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi demonstrated strong leadership during times of crisis, showcasing her ability to make tough decisions. The renowned Indian boxer Mary Kom is an inspiration to many, demonstrating determination, resilience, and leadership in the sports world. These examples illustrate the diverse range of women leaders who have made significant contributions to various fields, inspiring others to follow in their footsteps.

Women must choose between being candle or mirror and work for their own emancipation to show case that they are eligible for everything. This once again verify the recent Operation Sindoor, precision strikes on terror camps in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir on May 7, 2025. The operation was a response to the April 22 Pahalgam terror attack. The global Women's marches and protests, led by women from diverse backgrounds, demonstrate collective leadership and empowerment in the pursuit of equality and justice. Women leaders have challenged societal norms and expectations, pushed boundaries and created change.

3.1 Silence as Conditioning

Unspoken expectations define Jaya's life. She is married to Mohan and performs the duties of a submissive mother and wife. "I had finally learned it, no questions, no retorts, just silence," she writes (Deshpande, 1988, p. 30). Her silence is repression, not peace. It displays a learned survival strategy in a society where speaking could lead to confrontation. Stories of other women who represent various types of suffering, such as Jaya's servant Jeeja, friend Mukta, and others, are woven throughout the book alongside her own personal history. Jaya's empowerment begins when she realizes that "we create walls around ourselves and then struggle to climb over them" (p. 180). Deshpande's strength is in demonstrating how introspection, rather than large gestures, is where change starts. Jaya asserts at the end of the book, "I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us" (p. 191). This is her big break—no longer remaining silent, she takes on the challenge of speaking up, replicating the bravery of women who resist social norms.

In the novel *The Palace of Illusion*, Divakaruni's character Draupadi's agency is evident in her defiance against patriarchal oppression, her pursuit of justice, and her unwavering loyalty to her principles. Draupadi's internal conflicts reflect the struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society, where their identities are often overshadowed by societal expectations and obligations. By giving voice to Draupadi's thoughts and emotions, Divakaruni humanizes her character and challenges readers to empathize with her experiences.

In *Caged Bird*, Angelou presents a variety of complex, powerful, and beautiful Black women who do not fit into prescribed cultural stereotypes, and these portraits aid Maya in the construction of her own identity within the novel. Angelou's act of writing these portraits cultivates a sense of solidarity for Black female readers, in that they likely relate to Maya's experience of self-identification in *Caged Bird*, and helps to empower Black girls and women in their own processes of self-identification. Furthermore, the portraits aid in the deconstruction of stereotypical views of Black women in the

minds of both black and white readers, which allows them to begin to define themselves instead of being defined by culture. (Jernigan, Pg. 4)

Maya Angelou uses caged bird as a metaphor as a protest against patriarchal notion and the discrimination against black women. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou's autobiography, the caged bird symbolizes the African American experience, longing for freedom and equality. Similarly, Operation Sindoor, India's military operation against terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan can be seen as a quest for freedom from terrorism and oppression. *The Palace of the Illusion* recounts the Mahabharata from Draupadi's point of view, highlighting her determination and bravery in the face of hardship. The tale of Draupadi is one of survival, resilience, and empowerment.

3.2 Action as Empowerment – Operation Sindoor

The Indian Air Force began Operation Sindoor in April 2024 with the goal of locating militant strongholds in Jammu and Kashmir. The leadership of Wing Commander Vyomika Singh and Colonel Sofiya Qureshi, was what made this mission unique. These two young women planned and executed a precision airstrike in high-altitude terrain, defying the gender norms of defence service. However, empowerment in this scenario does not imply a lack of hardship. Stereotypes, expectations to balance family, and concerns about physical ability still affect women in uniform. Operation Sindoor demonstrates that women's empowerment entails transformation as well as inclusion. These women did more than simply take part; they took the lead and redefined the limits of what women could accomplish. There is a remarkable symbolic resonance with Jaya's journey. Both stories portray resistance, bravery, and assertiveness, despite the fact that Jaya's battlefield is domestic and theirs is geopolitical.

Their opinions are in line with feminist principles. "There is no gender in the cockpit." Lt. Rajput stated, "It only knows skill and courage" (The Hindu, 2024). This operation represented not only strategic success but also social advancement in a traditionally male-dominated field.

3.3 Parallel Feminist Narratives in Literature

The inner landscape of empowerment is frequently depicted in literature. Panchaali (Draupadi) reclaims her voice from the patriarchal Mahabharata retelling in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. She queries, "Was I just the wife, the pawn, the cause?" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 86). Her doubts about fate are similar to Jaya's self-doubt and ultimate decision. A Black woman's journey from trauma to articulation is similarly described in Maya Angelou's 1969 book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. "There is no greater agony than carrying an untold story inside you," writes Angelou (p. 198). Jaya's journey to voice is similar to that of her protagonist. Jaya's repressed identity and her ultimate decision to resume writing are perfectly connected to Angelou's metaphor of the caged bird singing for freedom.

Women's struggles around the world are echoed in feminist literature, which frequently addresses the suppression of women's voices. In this context, Maya Angelou's statement, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you," strikes a deep chord. The constant struggle for women's agency and autonomy is emphasized by the current uproar associated with the Sindoor operation in India. The patriarchal restrictions that silence women are also revealed by literary works such as Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. These accounts highlight the value of women's stories and the necessity of reclaiming their voices and escaping social norms. We can gain a deeper understanding of the intricacies of women's experiences and the continuous struggle for equality and empowerment by investigating these parallel narratives.

The silence imposed is a systemic problem with deep roots in patriarchal societies, not just a personal one. Literary works that highlight the conflict between tradition and modernity, such as Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, illuminate the complexities of women's lives. These accounts show how women's voices are frequently silenced and their stories go untold, which feeds the cycle of opposition and silence. The recent controversy encompassing the Sindoor operation serves as a sobering reminder of the continued difficulties women encounter in claiming their autonomy and agency. Similar themes can be found in literary works such as Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories*, which reveal the harsh realities of women's lives under patriarchal oppression. By analysing these parallel stories, we can better

comprehend the structural problems that support women's silence and endeavour to build a more just society where women's opinions are respected and heard.

3.4 Literary Theories on Voice and Power

Two axes of women's empowerment are presented by Jaya's internal transformation and the Sindoor pilots' heroic actions in public. The pilots transcend military boundaries, and Jaya breaks her silence at home. However, both tales demonstrate that empowerment is multi-layered, situation-specific, and profoundly human. Women's writing is about rewriting the terms of life, according to Elaine Showalter (1977). This sums up Jaya's development as a writer as well as the pilots' reinterpretation of leadership. Both are creators of their own lives, creating new roles out of nothing. Their bravery is in line with both past and present women's rights movements. Fiction foreshadows and inspires life rather than just reflecting it.

On the global stage, women like Wangari Maathai and Malala Yousafzai have altered the narrative of empowerment. "We realize the importance of our voices only when we are silenced," stated Malala, who was shot for supporting girls' education (Yousafzai, 2013, p. 150). Both Jaya's awakening and the pilots' assertion are echoed in her story. The scope of Wangari Maathai's work in Kenya, that included planting trees and advocating for democratic rights, was revolutionary. She opposed political repression as well as patriarchy. The systemic obstacles that both fictional and real women in this study face are reflected in her activism. These illustrations show that empowerment is not a single concept. It manifests as survival, service, and speech. However, courage is necessary for all forms—the courage to speak, to act, to lead.

The representation of women's voices in literature has long been a topic of discussion among feminist critics. As stated by Showalter (1977), there is a 'female tradition' that has been influenced by resistance, history, and limitations. This heritage is reflected in Jaya's voice, which is tentative yet transformational. The *Madwoman in the Attic* by Gilbert and Gubar (1979) explores how female authors incorporated rebellion into silence and metaphor. Jaya is initially a passive character as well, but her quiet turns into reflection—a disturbance from within. Operation Sindoor, on the other hand, embodies third-wave feminism, which is based on diversity, action, and public space. These women are altering stories, not creating them. They use both voice and performance to challenge systems. Here, the nexus of fiction and reality provides a prism through which to view empowerment as both envisioned and experienced.

Women leaders have created their mark in a wide range of industries, from politics and business to literature and aviation. The recent controversy surrounding female pilots in the Indian Air Force serves as an example of the continuous struggle for women's empowerment and leadership. By dismantling barriers and challenging social norms, women are redefining what it means to be a leader. The movie *How Old Are You* showcases the importance of a woman standing independent. The heroine poses a thought-provoking question to the hero: "Who decides the expiry date of a woman's dream?". The 'Silence and Speech' in *That Long Silence*, Jaya's silence symbolizes women's suppression in patriarchal society. The novel explores how language is power, and how women are trained to suppress their voices to maintain harmony. Jaya's journey is about discovering her suppressed identity. The novel highlights the inner conflict between one's public role and private self.

3.4 Empowerment Beyond Borders – Real Women, Real Change

The themes observed in both literature and military events are further illustrated by real-life individuals like Wangari Maathai and Malala Yousafzai. "We realize the importance of our voices only when we are silenced," Malala said following her survival of an assassination attempt (Yousafzai, 2013, p. 150). Through her democratic and environmental activism in Kenya, Wangari Maathai established herself as a leader who opposed colonial and patriarchal forces. These women are akin to Jaya and the Sindoor pilots in that they are willing to defy expectations, endure loneliness, and create new identities. Despite their differences in form, these deeds have a similar spirit.

Showalter argues that the female literary tradition involves 'a double-voiced discourse'—one that expresses both compliance and resistance. Jaya embodies this duality. Her story appears ordinary, but it critiques gender roles and narrates resistance through domestic disobedience and internal clarity. despite this, Jaya from Deshpande doesn't yell or flee, she nevertheless challenges the ideal woman's narrative. Her silence, which at first seems oppressive, eventually serves as a tool for reflection and speech. Operation Sindoor, on the

other hand, is an example of 'third-wave feminism,' characterized by an emphasis on intersectionality and practical agency. These women are altering stories, not creating them.

Operation Sindoor, the film *How Old Are You*, and Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* are only a handful of the works that investigate themes of empowerment and challenging conventional roles. The protagonist Jaya in *That Long Silence* demonstrates the difficulties of women's empowerment in Indian society as she negotiates the complexities of her relationships and social expectations. In contrast, Operation Sindoor demonstrates the abilities and contributions of women in the Indian military. The operation shows how women can lead high-stakes military operations, empowering them and challenging traditional gender roles. According to Lt. Rajput's quote, the pilots' preference for skill over gender reframes empowerment as meritocracy.

The protagonist Jaya in *That Long Silence* demonstrates the difficulties of women's empowerment in Indian society as she negotiates the complicated details of her relationships and social expectations. Nirupama, a 36-year-old woman who feels dissatisfied with her life, is the subject of the film *How Old Are You*. She starts a rooftop garden and succeeds as a district collector after receiving motivation from the President of India. This story emphasizes the value of following one's passions and defying social norms.

When taken as a whole, these pieces highlight the value of women's empowerment and the influence of women's experiences and narratives on bringing about constructive change in various settings. These stories inspire and question conventional ideas of women's roles in society by showcasing women's abilities and contributions. *How Old Are You* and *That Long Silence* both emphasize the value of personal development and transformation in empowering women and fostering constructive change.

3.5 Conclusion

Women's empowerment is not a straight line; rather, it is layered with both silent reflections and courageous declarations. Jaya's choice to reclaim her voice after decades of suppression in *That Long Silence* is a reflection of a woman's understanding that no one else can define who she is. Once a shield, her silence now becomes a burden she can no longer bear. This transformation, though confined within the walls of a domestic setting, echoes the larger societal struggle of women reclaiming space, dignity, and autonomy.

In contrast, the bold leadership of the female pilots in Operation Sindoor offers a real-world counterpart to Jaya's symbolic liberation. By leading a high-risk military airstrike, these women not only dismantled stereotypes within one of the most masculine institutions but also challenged a society that often questions women's capabilities in leadership. Their actions declare that women's dreams are not only valid but essential to the nation's progress. Like Jaya, they too reject the imposed limitations—only, their resistance takes the form of action rather than introspection.

The dialogue from the Malayalam film *How Old Are You* "Who decides the expiry date of a woman's dreams?" — brilliantly captures the essence of this dual narrative. These women challenge the stereotype that a woman's aspirations are constrained by age, marriage, or motherhood, whether it is Jaya rediscovering her calling as a writer or an air force officer demonstrating her combat prowess. The quotation is a rhetorical appeal to challenge long-held notions that limit a woman's value to her role as a housewife or her youth.

Regaining the freedom to speak, dream, and lead—on their own terms—is the ultimate goal of women's empowerment. Women are shaping their own futures, whether it is on the screen of popular films, in the skies of defence operations, or in the pages of fiction. Empowerment is a movement rather than a single event. And the path to gender justice will keep moving forward as long as there are people who are prepared to ask, "Who determines the expiration date of a woman's dreams?". The message is the same: no one has the right to limit a woman's potential. These stories, across fiction, fact, and film, converge to affirm a truth long ignored—that a woman's journey is not over when society says it is. It begins when she decides to rise.

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