



Breaking the Silence: Female Voice and Resistance in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract

Indian English literature has persistently occupied with the silencing of women within patriarchal structures; particularly in the domestic sphere. Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* stands as a landmark feminist narrative that focuses the psychological introspection of an educated, middle-class Indian woman negotiating marriage, motherhood, and selfhood. This paper examines how silence operates both as a mechanism of oppression and as a space of potential resistance in the novel. Through the protagonist Jaya's gradual reclamation of voice, Deshpande critiques patriarchal expectations that normalize female self-erasure. And also explores themes of silence, voice, marital power, gendered identity, and narrative self-assertion. Further it projects that *That Long Silence* transforms silence from passive endurance into an active site of feminist resistance, ultimately affirming the necessity of female articulation for personal and social transformation.

Keywords: Awakening, Silence, Female voice, Resistance, Feminism, Patriarchy, Dominance, Psychological Conflict.

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most prominent writers of Indian English fiction who exposes the contemporary middle class Indian woman's struggles through her well narrated fictions interwoven with the familial and individual's emotions, which carry the spectrum of the society and its frame work. She has to be considered as one of the writers who brought about a major shift in the tradition of Indian English fiction. All of her novels are about women's struggle for life and survival in contemporary India. Her novels abound in women characters struggling to define their identity in a world that is predominantly patriarchal. G.S. Amur says: "woman's struggle, in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and, most important of all, as human being, is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer and this appears in all her important stories" (Legacy, 10).

Most of Shashi Deshpande's novels place women at the centre of their narrative and examine the female protagonist's struggle for personal fulfilment amid social and emotional constraints. Through this journey, Deshpande reveals the many forms of humiliation and suffering that women routinely endure, ranging from everyday verbal disparagement to more severe forms of sexual domination. By portraying the socialisation of the girl child beginning within the family, her fiction also uncovers the subtle ideological forces that shape and regulate female identity. The strength of Deshpande's writing lies in this sustained exploration, made more compelling through a narrative perspective that is predominantly female, allowing women's experiences to be articulated from within rather than observed from the outside. The female characters in Shashi Deshpande's novels represent a wide spectrum, ranging from those who willingly accept conventional roles as daughters, wives, and mothers to those who aspire to identities that allow greater freedom, individuality, and self-expression.

Feminism examines the historical processes through which authority and dominance have largely been assigned to men, resulting in the systematic marginalisation of women. It highlights the way fixed and traditional assumptions about gender roles shape social institutions and everyday practices, leading to stereotyping and unequal power structures. At its core, feminism challenges patriarchal dominance and questions the social systems that sustain male superiority. Feminist writing, therefore, aims to reclaim and reconstruct women's experiences by challenging and overturning established patriarchal values and narratives.

Reflecting real social conditions, several female characters in her fiction themselves uphold traditional patriarchal values, revealing how deeply such norms are internalised. Deshpande's objective is not to portray idealised or heroic women but to represent them realistically, with all their limitations and conflicts. Her novels vividly depict the psychological struggles of women confined within domestic spaces. Through her fiction, Deshpande presents the predicament of the Indian woman caught between the restrictive expectations of tradition, which prescribe rigid gender roles, and the influence of modernity that urges women to seek self-expression, independence, and a distinct identity. Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* focuses on the pervasive silence that shapes the life of the Indian woman within a patriarchal society.

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* occupies a significant position within this literary tradition. Published in 1988 and awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in the year 1991. Shashi Deshpande's fiction consistently revisits the theme of women trapped in unsatisfying marriages who re-examine their lives in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of themselves and their reality. This thematic concern is clearly reflected in *That Long Silence*. The novel explores the inner life of Jaya, a middle-class, educated woman who confronts the emotional stagnation of her marriage during a period of crisis. Through Jaya's introspective narrative, Deshpande exposes how silence is cultivated within marriage as a tool to maintain patriarchal harmony. The novel examines not only the social imposition of silence, but also women's complicity in sustaining it.

The novel focuses on Jaya, a woman who struggles to assert her dignity within a male-dominated social order. After her marriage with Mohan, Jaya consciously suppresses her individuality and attempts to conform to the patriarchal image of the ideal wife, allowing her identity to be overshadowed by that of her husband. Mohan, driven by ambition and material success, compromises his moral values and becomes involved in corrupt practices. His acceptance of bribes results, a formal enquiry. To avoid public disgrace, the couple move from their comfortable Churchgate residence to Jaya's modest flat in Dadar. This change exposes Mohan's dependence on status and wealth, leading to his gradual emotional decline. In contrast, the crisis becomes a catalyst for Jaya's inner growth. Thus, *That Long Silence* ultimately chronicles Jaya's journey towards self-realisation and emotional strength.

The metaphor of silence has long been associated with women's experiences under patriarchy, functioning as both an imposed condition and an internalized survival strategy. In Indian society, where marriage and family are often positioned as a woman's primary identity markers, silence becomes a socially sanctioned virtue. Women are expected to endure, adjust, and remain voiceless in the face of emotional neglect, marital inequality, and psychological suppression. Indian English women writers have consistently challenged this silencing, articulating female subjectivity through narratives of introspection and resistance.

This paper seeks to explore how *That Long Silence* dramatizes the tension between silence and speech, submission and resistance. It argues that Deshpande redefines resistance not through overt rebellion but through the act of self-articulation. Jaya's journey from silence to speech symbolizes a feminist awakening that challenges traditional gender roles and asserts female agency. By analyzing silence as both constraint and catalyst, this study highlights the novel's contribution to feminist discourse in Indian English literature.

Silence as Patriarchal Conditioning

From childhood, Jaya is conditioned to believe that silence ensures harmony. She recalls being taught that "a husband is like a sheltering tree," (32) reinforcing the idea that a woman's security lies in submission. This metaphor encapsulates patriarchal ideology, where women are expected to depend on male authority and suppress their own desires.

Marriage becomes the primary site where silence is enforced. Jaya consciously moulds herself to fit her husband Mohan's expectations, admitting; "I had learnt it at last – no questions, no retorts. Only silence. 'I gave up my writing because of you,' I said to Mohan." (130) Silence here functions as emotional labour, requiring Jaya to manage conflict by erasing her own voice. Mohan's discomfort with confrontation further reinforces this dynamic, as Jaya realizes that; 'I've allowed you to have your way in most things, I never came in your way when you wanted to help your family, I let you do what you wanted...' 'Except when it inconvenienced you.' (110)

This conditioning is not imposed through overt violence but through subtle emotional manipulation and social norms. Jaya internalizes silence as a strategy for survival, demonstrating how patriarchy operates most effectively when its values are normalized.

Marriage, Power, and Female Erasure

Deshpande presents marriage as an institution that prioritizes male stability over female fulfilment. She reflects bitterly; "I was angry, not so much for myself, as for Rati. I didn't want those pearls, I had never hankered after jewellery myself; and even if I had, the association of these with other-*ajji* would have spoilt them for me." (104) Jaya's aspirations as a writer are gradually sidelined to preserve domestic peace. This erasure of identity illustrates how women's individuality is subsumed within marital roles.

Mohan's professional ambitions dictate the emotional atmosphere of the household, leaving little space for Jaya's expression. When Jaya's writing threatens to disrupt this balance, she chooses silence and states; "I had been silent. And, looking at his stricken face, I had been convinced I had done him wrong. And I had stopped writing after that." (131) This decision underscores how silence becomes a form of self-censorship, reinforcing patriarchal power structures.

Silence as Psychological Conflict

While silence initially appears as submission, Deshpande complicates this notion by portraying it as a space of psychological conflict. Jaya's silence is not empty but filled with suppressed emotions and unarticulated grievances. She confesses; "I had shaped myself so resolutely to his desires all these years, yet what was I left with now? Nothing. Just emptiness and silence... They had deserted me, all of them." (132) This internalization of conflict reveals the emotional cost of prolonged silence.

The novel's narrative structure mirrors this psychological tension. The fragmented, introspective style reflects Jaya's struggle to piece together her identity. Silence becomes both a prison and a mirror, forcing Jaya to confront the dissonance between her public compliance and private resentment.

The Awakening of Voice

The turning point in the novel occurs when Jaya recognizes the destructive consequences of her silence. She acknowledges; "there was a terrifying sense of emptiness in me. I felt then that I had not known till that moment what death, what his death, really meant. Blankness. Nothingness." (63) This realization marks the beginning of her resistance.

Unlike traditional feminist narratives that emphasize external rebellion, Deshpande situates resistance within self-recognition. Jaya's decision to speak is not dramatic but deliberate. She resolves; "I'm not afraid any more. The panic has gone. I'm Mohan's wife, I had thought, and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife. Now I know that kind of a fragmentation is not possible." (173) This declaration signifies a reclaiming of agency, where voice becomes an assertion of selfhood rather than a challenge to marital stability. She expresses her conflict about the meaning of the message which she received from Mohan; 'All well'. Jaya's inner voice resolves; "We don't change overnight. It's possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know now it is this: life has always to be made possible." (174)

Narrative Voice as Feminist Resistance

The act of narration itself is a form of resistance. By telling her story, Jaya reclaims authority over her experiences. As she states; "I had thrust my story at him. 'Read it,' I had said, 'read it and tell me what's wrong with it.'" (133) The first-person narrative allows her to reinterpret her past, exposing the subtle mechanisms of oppression that shaped her silence. Shashi Deshpande's emphasis on storytelling aligns with feminist assertions that personal narratives challenge dominant discourses. Jaya's voice disrupts the idealized image of the self-sacrificing wife, offering instead a nuanced portrayal of emotional struggle and self-discovery.

Conclusion

That Long Silence presents silence as a complex and evolving metaphor within women's lives. While initially functioning as a tool of patriarchal control, silence ultimately becomes the ground from which resistance emerges. Through Jaya's journey from submission to self-articulation, Shashi Deshpande underscores the transformative power of voice.

The novel challenges the cultural valorisation of female silence, revealing its psychological costs and ethical implications. By emphasizing the necessity of speech for self-realization, *That Long Silence* affirms feminist resistance as an inward awakening that precedes social change. In breaking her silence, Jaya not only reclaims her identity but also asserts the enduring relevance of women's voices in redefining relationships, literature, and society.

References

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