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Breaking the Boundaries of Silence: Feminist Conflict and Self-Realization in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
That Long Silence; Feminism; Patriarchy; Silence; Identity Crisis; Female Subjectivity; Gender Conflict; Self-Realization; Indian English Fiction	Shashi Deshpande's <i>That Long Silence</i> explores the inner world of the contemporary Indian woman who struggles to balance tradition and individuality within a patriarchal framework. The novel reflects the silent conflict of Jaya, an educated and introspective woman, who finds herself torn between her roles as a wife, mother, and writer. Deshpande uses Jaya's journey to expose the psychological and emotional dilemmas that middle-class women face while navigating between their personal aspirations and the expectations imposed by society. The narrative, told in the first person, reveals the protagonist's gradual awakening to her suppressed identity and her realization that silence is both her shield and her prison. The novel's stream-of-consciousness technique and use of irony lend authenticity to Jaya's voice, highlighting her transformation from passive acceptance to quiet assertion. Deshpande's portrayal goes beyond mere feminist protest; it is an exploration of the universal human need for self-definition and communication. <i>That Long Silence</i> thus becomes a powerful study of the feminist dilemma the tension between compliance and rebellion that defines the experience of modern Indian women.

Introduction

Feminist literary criticism, which emerged during the 1960s alongside the feminist movement advocating for women's equal rights, has progressively gained prominence and intellectual validation over the years. In India as well, female authors have stepped forward to articulate their feminist perspectives and critique the patriarchal social order. They assert that gender is not merely a biological distinction but rather a socially constructed concept. As Simone de Beauvoir

famously observes, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." A woman, therefore, is often portrayed as submissive, subjugated, and silenced within society.

Jaya, the central character in *That Long Silence*, defies this notion of being "born a woman." It is the social conventions tied to marriage that mould her into one. As the novel states, "She was a child who used to get angry very soon. But after her marriage she tolerated her anger. She realised that to Mohan anger made a woman 'unwomanly.'"

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(83) This transformative process of “becoming a woman” is strikingly illustrated through Jaya’s life. At birth, her father names her “Jaya,” signifying victory, but post-marriage she is renamed “Suhasini,” meaning “a soft smiling, placid motherly woman.” (16) The two names stand as symbolic opposites the former embodying individuality and assertion, while the latter epitomizes compliance and traditional femininity. Jaya’s upbringing was affectionate and protective. While she received a modern, Western education that shaped her into an aspiring writer, her parents also instilled in her the ideals of mythological Hindu women such as Sita, Savitri, and Draupadi. She was conditioned to believe that “a husband is like a sheltering tree.” (32) Over time, she internalizes that within a male-dominated society, a woman’s identity is relational she exists only as someone’s daughter, wife, or mother, never as an autonomous being. This dual consciousness captures the paradox of the modern Indian woman, torn between tradition and self-realization. She faces two distinct paths: to continue fulfilling conventional familial roles, or to assert her independence as an equal partner in society. However, her deep-rooted conditioning and fear of insecurity prevent her from abandoning the traditional mould completely. Centuries of dependence have rendered women hesitant to pursue self-sufficiency. This psychological conflict constitutes the core of *That Long Silence*, encapsulating what may be called a “feminist dilemma.”

Despite being a writer, Jaya remains silent a silence born of this inner tension between her creative self

and her domestic identity. The artist within her yearns for expression, but the dutiful housewife imposes silence. Ultimately, the domestic persona prevails, leaving her trapped in introspection and stagnation. This paralysis adversely affects her writing career, as her publishers reject her work for lacking emotional intensity. Her husband’s indifference adds to her disillusionment: “I have given up my writing because of you.” She further reflects, “I had known then that it hadn’t mattered to Mohan that I had written a good story, a story about a couple, a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body. For Mohan it had mattered that people might think the couple was us, that the man him.” (144)

Caught in this emotional gridlock, Jaya fails to achieve either rebellion or ideal conformity. Deshpande’s heroines typically lack the audacity to openly resist male domination. They embody transitional figures of modern womanhood conflicted, self-aware, yet bound by social expectations. Characters such as Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Indu in *Roots and Shadows*, and Jaya in *That Long Silence* all grapple with identity crises, self-doubt, and indecision. Indu questions whether in her efforts to please her husband, “she had become fluid, with no shape, no form of her own.” (15)

Jaya resents the confining domestic role imposed upon her and is exhausted by the monotony of household life. Yet, unlike Sarita who defies her mother’s authority to study medicine, challenges caste barriers through marriage, and even transgresses social boundaries for her career Jaya lacks the same defiance. Though intellectually

capable and artistically talented, her husband Mohan fails to appreciate or support her individuality. His emotional withdrawal and passive disapproval silence her. He does not resort to aggression; instead, he displays emotional hurt, which compels her submission: "Perhaps, if Mohan had been angry, if he had shouted, perhaps I would have fought him and gone on. But he had only shown me his hurt. And I had not been able to counter that. I had relinquished them instead, all those stories... because I had been scared scared of hurting Mohan." (144)

Despite her disapproval of Mohan's unethical professional conduct, she continues to conform, accompanying him through his frequent relocations. Gradually, she resigns herself to the conventional role of a dutiful wife. What Mohan perceives as "strength" in women enduring domestic suffering, Jaya recognizes as hopeless resignation: "I saw a despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender." (36) Consequently, she adopts the philosophy that both husband and wife "are yoked together, so better to go the same direction, as to go to different directions will be painful." (10)

Deshpande metaphorically captures middle-class marital life through powerful animal imagery. She likens the couple to "a pair of bullocks yoked together," symbolizing mechanical coexistence devoid of emotional connection: "A pair of bullocks yoked together... A man and a woman married for seventeen years. A couple with two children. A family somewhat like the one caught and preserved for posterity by the advertising

visuals I so loved. But the reality was only this. We were two persons. A man. A woman." (8) The "bullock" image highlights the dehumanized routine of marriage stripped of affection, reducing the sacred bond to lifeless duty.

Through recurring metaphors such as "a pair of bullocks" and "a sheltering tree," Deshpande critiques the condition of middle-class Indian wives, replacing the age-old ideals of Sita and Savitri with stark, unromantic symbols of subservience like "a worm crawling into a hole." As Jaya admits, "No, what have I to do with these mythical women? I can't fool myself. The truth is simpler. Two bullocks yoked together."

However, unlike Sarabjit Sandhu's view that Jaya epitomizes a "typical Indian woman," she, in fact, represents women of all social strata who adopt an ambivalent stance toward marriage. Yet, Jaya's statement "Because no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman?" (147) seems flawed, as anger among women, particularly wives, is neither rare nor socially extinct. Many women express frustration within marriage, though often through indirect or manipulative means rather than open defiance. Deshpande's narrative, therefore, provides an aerial perspective on marital dynamics, acknowledging that both partners make compromises for the sake of stability.

The discord between Jaya and Mohan stems largely from incompatibility and emotional miscommunication. Despite seventeen years of marriage, they remain strangers in essence coexisting without true companionship. Jaya's inner turmoil and existential anxiety are poignantly expressed when she confesses: "Middle class.

Bourgeoisie. Upper-caste. Distanced from real life. Scared of writing. Scared of failing. Oh God, I had thought, I can't take any more." (148)

Jaya attempts to fulfill her duties as Mohan's wife and as the mother of Rahul and Rati, striving to embody the roles expected of her within the traditional framework of family life. However, her emotional world collapses when Mohan, in a fit of anger, abruptly leaves home, abandoning her in isolation. She is overwhelmed with guilt, believing she has failed in her role as a wife and been rejected by her husband: "I'll tell you what's wrong ... All these years I thought I was Mohan's wife, now he tells me I was never that, not really. What am I going to do? What shall I do if he doesn't come back? (185)

This intense dependence on the symbolic 'sheltering tree' and her inability to confront the harshness of reality make Jaya a silent sufferer. When the family relocates to their small, modest flat in Dadar during the inquiry against Mohan, Jaya recollects her marital intimacy with a tone that is both gently ironic and matter-of-fact:

Jaya reflects on the silence that dominates her relationship with Mohan, particularly regarding physical intimacy. She acknowledges that the topic of sex was never discussed between them, as though the experience was erased each time after it happened; it never existed in words. Despite her initial belief that first there's love, then there's sex," her marriage teaches her the painful truth that the sequence can easily reverse. Her realization exposes the emotional void within a relationship that lacks communication and genuine affection. Her reflection raises a psychological question

regarding Mohan's emotional immaturity, suggesting that even the Oedipus complex fails to explain his coldness. Ultimately, she sums up her relationship with Mohan in deeply disillusioned terms: "Nothing, Nothing between us. But after his death, nothing between me and Mohan either. We lived together but there had been only emptiness between us." (185)

Unable to resolve her internal conflict, Jaya resorts to silence as a means of survival within her marriage. Yet, this silence widens the emotional chasm between husband and wife. Mohan continues to ask questions, but Jaya cannot summon the words to respond. Veena Sheshadri insightfully remarks on Jaya's self-imposed muteness:

One ends up by wondering whether Jaya has imposed the long silence on herself not out of a sense of duty or to emulate the ideal Hindu woman of the ages gone by, but in order to camouflage the streaks of ugliness within her. (94)

Nevertheless, Shashi Deshpande's portrayal of silence in the novel transcends Jaya's individual condition. The narrative also reflects "the despair and resignation of women like Mohan's mother, Jaya's servant, Jaya's mentally disturbed cousin, Kusum. It also deals with Mohan's silence which is the silence of a man who speaks but can find no one to listen to him."

Eventually, Jaya resolves to end her prolonged silence through writing about her life and family. Yet, she fails to carry out this resolution. Her determination falters when Rahul returns and

Mohan promises to come back home on Friday morning. At that moment, she realizes the essential truth that “life has always to be made possible.”

Deshpande intentionally portrays Mohan as a morally weak, emotionally detached, and intellectually limited man dishonest in both his profession and family life. In contrast, she elevates Jaya as an intelligent, perceptive, and adaptable woman who constantly compromises to maintain domestic harmony. Jaya, though submissive outwardly, is aware of the emotional distance between herself and her children and yearns to return to a sense of belonging. She perceives Mohan as “a sad bewildered man,” a person resigned to fate and incapable of meaningful change. To describe her own role as a wife, Jaya draws a striking comparison with Gandhari, the mythological queen who blindfolded herself to share her husband's blindness: “If Gandhari... could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly; I did not want to know anything...” (61)

This comparison highlights the tragic irony of her life a self-imposed blindness in the name of loyalty. It raises the question of whether Mohan himself is psychologically abnormal, incapable of building a fulfilling marital relationship. Such mutual misjudgment each partner believing themselves to be the wronged ideal lies at the heart of their failed marriage. Both Jaya and Mohan share equal responsibility for their emotional collapse. They lack empathy, communication, and mutual understanding.

It is also uncertain where Jaya truly belongs within the traditional mould of the submissive Indian

woman or as a symbol of modern feminist consciousness. Perhaps Deshpande's intention is to suggest that rebellion has already taken root within the consciousness of contemporary Indian women. However, these women are still hesitant to express their defiance openly. Jaya's image thus signifies that her silence is on the verge of breaking. The novel underscores how modern professional identities among women remain subordinate to traditional familial roles.

That Long Silence (1988), which earned Shashi Deshpande the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990, is written in the first-person narrative form, lending authenticity and intimacy to the protagonist's voice. However, this narrative choice at times compromises objectivity, giving the story a deeply subjective tone. Structured as a series of reminiscences, the novel intertwines Jaya's reflections on her childhood and marital life, employing flashback and stream-of-consciousness techniques to depict the psychological transitions of women in a patriarchal world. Similar to Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*, Deshpande's fiction explores the reconciliation between modernity and tradition. Her heroines question societal norms at first but eventually attempt often unsuccessfully to reconcile with them. They strive for balance but fail to achieve the synthesis that Rama Mehta's Geeta attains in *Inside the Haveli*. Yet, both authors share an appreciation for enduring familial values.

In an interview, Deshpande asserts:

It's necessary for women to live within relationships. But if the rules are rigidly laid that as a wife or

mother you do this no further, then one becomes unhappy. This is what I have tried to convey in my writing. What I don't agree with is the idealization of motherhood... (13-14)

Although her central concern remains the exploration of female consciousness, Deshpande aspires to move beyond gendered narratives: "I desire to come to a stage where I can write about human beings and not about women or men." (14) Ultimately, *That Long Silence* stands as a realistic portrayal of the psychological predicament of Indian middle-class women, caught between traditional values and feminist aspirations.

Influenced by Western feminist thought yet rooted in Indian ethos, the novel reflects the conflict between the urge for emancipation and the comfort of conformity, articulated through Shashi Deshpande's simple yet profoundly expressive Indian English.

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