

Breaking the Long Silence: Feminist Self-Assertion in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande, one of India's foremost English-language women writers, articulates a moderate yet powerful feminist vision that exposes the patriarchal constraints shaping middle-class Indian women's lives. This paper examines Deshpande's feminist perspectives through her award-winning novel *That Long Silence* (1989), analyzing how the protagonist Jaya's journey from self-negation to self-assertion critiques entrenched gender norms. Deshpande describes herself as "a feminist rather than a feminist writer," refusing to propagate an "ism" while realistically portraying women's oppression. Through Jaya's introspection during her husband's crisis, the novel reveals how silence functions as both a mechanism of patriarchal control and a space for emerging consciousness.

1. Introduction

Shashi Deshpande occupies a distinctive position in Indian feminist literature. Unlike militant feminists, she believes "we are all part of society, and we need a family" while simultaneously challenging patriarchal structures. Her novels depict "the suffering, misery, and conflict of the advanced, instructing Indian women". *That Long Silence*, which won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990, stands as her most significant feminist work, offering "a realistic portrayal of the life of a middle-class Indian woman". This paper argues that Deshpande uses Jaya's narrative to demonstrate how educated Indian women navigate false consciousness and achieve self-assertion through breaking patriarchal silence.

Deshpande's Feminist Philosophy

Deshpande's feminism is characterized by nuance and realism rather than ideological dogma. She states: "I say I'm a feminist, but I don't write to propagate an ism". Her approach aligns with Judith Butler's assertion that feminism "reasserts the difference between male and female genders" while refusing to reduce women to mere symbols of oppression.

The novel centers on **Jaya**, a bright, curious girl born into a middle-class family whose qualities are deemed "unladylike by mainstream society". Her grandmother teaches her that "civilized and cultured girls are skilled at cooking, cleaning, and household labor," early conditioning her toward domestic submission. As Jaya matures, she becomes "keenly aware that people do not like it when she expresses

herself or her individuality," learning to suppress herself in what she calls "the long silence" stretching from childhood to middle age.

The Name Symbolism

Jaya's name transformation encapsulates feminist themes of identity erasure:

- **Jaya:** Given by her father, meaning "victory"
- **Suhasini:** Created by her husband, signifying "a domestic ordinary woman whose all wishes are related to her family not for herself"

This renaming represents the patriarchal imposition of domestic identity over individual identity, marking "the journey of Jaya from self negation to self assertion".

Patriarchal Suppression Mechanisms

Deshpande portrays multiple mechanisms through which patriarchy enforces women's silence:

1. **Child-rearing practices:** "Since childhood girls are taught to suppress their feelings in order to fit in the frame of ideal woman created by society"
2. **Marital dynamics:** After marriage, Jaya "becomes voiceless in order to remain happy in conjugal life"
3. **Educational limitations:** Despite being educated, women "remain silent against the injustices that have befallen her"
4. **False consciousness:** Women live in "false consciousness in which females are living and thinking themselves unnecessary and unrequired"

Feminist Analysis of Key Themes

Silence as Patriarchal Control

The "long silence" functions as both literal and metaphorical oppression. Jaya recognizes that "the long silence has stifled communication and openness in her family, making it difficult to support her husband and vice versa". This silence is not voluntary but imposed: "Not being able to say or write what she feels like saying or writing, she is forced to write what patriarchal society wants to read or hear".

As a writer, Jaya should exercise "thinking and analytical skills to show the problems and contradictions in society," but family and societal pressures prevent this authentic expression. The novel demonstrates that "even though she is educated, she remains silent against the injustices".

Intergenerational Pattern of Oppression

Deshpande shows how women's silence spans generations. Not only Jaya but "her mother, grandmother, cousin Kusum, her widowed neighbor Mukta, and the women in general—have also maintained silence for centuries". Jaya recognizes that "Kusum's abusive husband and her own distant one have very different flaws but that they stem from the same cultural expectations of the way men should treat women".

This intergenerational pattern reveals that "the story is not actually the story of Jaya but the ninety percent of Indian woman are living of the same standard of Jaya". Urbanization and education alone "cannot work basically for women liberation".

Self-Assertion Through Introspection

The novel's feminist resolution emerges through Jaya's introspection during her husband Nitin's crisis. When forced to reflect on their relationship, Jaya "finds herself in a dilemma about what to do and what not to do". Through this introspection, "Jaya, the representative of modern women, comes out of her victimization and crisis and breaks her long silence".

The journey culminates in Jaya learning "to play the part of a subservient woman, while retaining a sense of individuality". She writes in her free time despite having "failed to" achieve literary success, maintaining her creative identity. Her consciousness allows her to assert "self identity" in contrast to other women's acceptance of oppression.

"Self-Assertion Through Awareness"

The novel's central feminist message is that "self assertion can be acquired by doing a lot of efforts in the field of awareness". Deshpande demonstrates that liberation requires conscious rejection of patriarchal norms rather than passive acceptance. The theme represents "a request in silence to break silence which is a boundary or a mirror or a trend, a sigh or a mark which has been shown by male dominating society to the secondary sex (females)".

Critical Reception and Feminist Significance

Critics recognize *That Long Silence* as documenting "the journey of Jaya the protagonist from patriarchal suppression towards self-realization". The novel's feminist significance lies in its exploration of "the thematic elements of the 'identity quest' and the profound significance of 'silence' within the narrative". Deshpande's approach distinguishes her from more confrontational feminist writers. She portrays women who "really assert themselves or somewhere in their assertion process conform to endurance", capturing the complexity of actual feminist resistance rather than idealized rebellion.

Conclusion

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* exemplifies liberal feminist literature that challenges patriarchy through realistic portrayal rather than militant protest. Through Jaya's transformation from self-negation to self-assertion, Deshpande demonstrates that breaking patriarchal silence requires conscious awareness and courage. The novel's enduring significance lies in its identification with "ninety percent of Indian woman" who live similar conditions. Deshpande's feminist vision—refusing to propagate an "ism" while exposing gender oppression—offers a nuanced critique of how educated middle-class Indian women navigate patriarchal constraints. The "long silence" that spans generations can only be broken through introspection, awareness, and the courageous assertion of individual identity against societal expectations.

References

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