



# The Quest for Identity: A Feminist Analysis of Shashi Deshpande's Novel *That Long Silence*

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Received: 11 Sep 2023; Received in revised form: 14 Oct 2023; Accepted: 22 Oct 2023; Available online: 31 Oct 2023

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**Abstract**— Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence*, published in 1988, emerges as a pivotal work within the landscape of Indian literature, particularly in the context of women's writing. Through the lens of its compelling narrative and the intricately developed character of Jaya, the novel delves into the complexities of the female experience in contemporary India. This paper seeks to explore the thematic elements of the 'identity quest' and the profound significance of 'silence' within the narrative. By tracing Jaya's journey in her pursuit of self-discovery and agency amidst societal expectations, this analysis uncovers Deshpande's multi-faceted approach to feminism. The concept of 'silence' emerges as a potent motif, reflecting the intricate dynamics of gender roles and repression. Ultimately, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of Shashi Deshpande's literary contributions and her significant role in shaping feminist discourse within Indian literature.



**Keywords**— Identity Quest, Feminism, Silence.

## INTRODUCTION

Feminism took its shape in the early twentieth century; it is an "organised activity on behalf of women's rights and interests". Feminism examines women's struggle against the 'malecreated ideologies' and their socio-political and economic status in society and advocates equal freedom of self-expression for women. Writers like Virginia Woolf and Simon De Beauvoir are universally recognised for their contributions to feminist writings. In India, Feminist writing appeared in three phases: first-generation feminist writers depicted the traditional outlook of women who were marginalised by society when India was still colonised, the second phase of writings represented the women who were 'all set for change', the third generation feminist writers during the much later part of the twentieth century exhibited the inner sight of 'female psych' and 'female-experience'.

Women in India have contributed to fiction writing to a great extent, and among those writers Anita Desai, Ismat Chughtai, Arundhati Roy, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Nair, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, and Shashi Deshpande are most celebrated novelists. At the heart of their literary endeavors lies a profound exploration of the fundamental

dilemmas and conflicts that have plagued Indian women throughout history. Their novels serve as windows into the multifaceted experiences of women, their voices rising above the cacophony of a traditionally patriarchal society. Foremost among their themes is the relentless scrutiny of women's subjugation and the often harrowing predicaments they find themselves ensnared within. In the earlier works of these remarkable writers, we encounter the traditional image of Indian women, ensconced in roles defined by centuries of tradition and societal expectations. However, as time unfurled, so too did the narratives of Indian women in literature. The portrayal of women evolved, shedding the veneer of convention to reveal a more realistic and pragmatic depiction. These writers, unafraid to tackle the complexities of contemporary life, provided a literary space for women's experiences to be authentically explored. Through their narratives, readers are invited to traverse the intricate web of family, relationships, identity, and societal change, witnessing the struggles, triumphs, and resilience of Indian women. In the words of these celebrated novelists, the literary landscape of Indian fiction is enriched with diverse perspectives and a profound understanding of the

human condition. They have not only illuminated the struggles of Indian women but have also contributed significantly to the broader discourse on gender, identity, and social change. Their narratives stand as enduring testaments to the resilience and aspirations of Indian women, bridging the gap between tradition and modernity, and inviting readers to contemplate the multifaceted nature of womanhood in India.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most influential Indian writers in English. She has written many short stories and nine novels: *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980), *If I Die Today* (1982), *Come Up and Be Dead* (1983), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1989), *The Binding Vine* (1992), *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Small Remedies* (2000), *Moving On* (2004) and four books for children *Summer Adventure*, *The Hidden Treasure*, *The Only Witness*, *The Narayanpur Incident*. Her novel deals with the "middle-class Indian women who represent the overwhelming majority of Indian women and are struggling to adjust in it rather than get free from the traditional world". She has been called a 'feminist' for portraying women as 'they are'. Her works serve as a poignant mirror to the profound challenges faced by women, particularly those hailing from middle-class urban backgrounds. In this juxtaposition of tradition and modernity, Deshpande's narratives resonate with a resounding authenticity. Her protagonists emerge as emblematic figures, emblematic of the struggles faced by countless women. Trapped within the confines of their socially prescribed roles as wives, mothers, and daughters, they grapple with a profound sense of entrapment. Yet, beneath the weight of tradition and societal expectations, a profound quest for identity pulses within them. Their stories become a searching, a journey, a quest for selfdiscovery. Her narratives are a profound exploration of the chaos that simmers beneath the veneer of domesticity. In her evocative prose, she lays bare the disillusionment that festers in the crucible of matrimony, the frustration that emerges from the incongruity between societal norms and individual aspirations. Her novels become a canvas upon which the unspoken desires and unmet aspirations of her characters are vividly painted. The dichotomy her characters face, the tension between tradition and the pursuit of personal identity in their changing worlds, resonates with readers as a universal and timeless dilemma. In the realm of Shashi Deshpande's literary exploration, the complexities of womanhood unfurl in all their intricacy. Through her incisive storytelling and empathetic characterizations, she unveils the layers of human experience that often remain concealed, offering readers a profound glimpse into the inner worlds of her protagonists.

#### Identity Quest in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

*That Long Silence* is the fifth novel of Deshpande, published in 1988; in 1992, Deshpande won the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for this novel. This novel illustrates the story of a failed writer, Jaya, who revisits her past and undergoes a journey of 'self-revelation'. *That Long Silence* (1988), typical of Shashi Deshpande's fiction, delineates the private despair of a woman behind the facade of a happy married life. The construction of characters like Vanitamami, Aiji, Mai, and Jija helps her to unveil the 'patriarchal' mindset within the women of the society.

Jaya's quest for identity is the predominant theme of the novel. Her name, Jaya (victorious), renamed Suhasini ("soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman" (p.15)) by her husband, argues over the very existence of an individual. She suppressed her emotional self in order to treat her husband as a "sheltering tree" (p.167). She starts imitating the mythical women, like Sita, who followed her husband to exile; she goes after Mohan to their suburban Dadar flat because of his corrupt practices in his office; and there she revisits her past, and the novel's plot unfolds to the reader. Her introspection discerns that she has lost her power over herself in the seventeen years of their marriage. Her novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980) deals with the same theme of gender identity; it represents the 'post-modern dilemma' of a woman (Saru) who is a victim of 'marital rape'; she is torn out into 'two selves'.

'Silence' is one of the recurring metaphors in Deshpande's novels. In *That Long Silence* (1988), 'silence' is used as a 'weapon' against patriarchy. It also resembles the passive attitude of the females of Indian society. Indu, in *Roots and Shadows* (1983), says about her not-so-good relationship with her husband, "I am passive. And unresponsive. I'm still and dead." As A.N.Dwivedi observes, 'In *That Long Silence*', 'silence' denotes lack of communication, frigidity of feeling, and want of understanding and compassion. Being devoid of emotion in real life, Jaya's short stories become emotionless and puerile." At the end of the novel Deshpande gives the resolution that Jaya will break her long-kept silence metaphorically she will obtain her long given authority over herself.

"Matrimony is often regarded in India as the summum bonum of women's life", points out R.S. Pathak, but for Deshpande, it is no longer a 'sacrament'. The sole purpose behind marriage is the continuation of generation; in *Roots and Shadows*, Indu observes, "What was marriage after all, but two people brought together after a cold-blooded bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce so that the generation might continue" (p.3). "A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*, p.124), the realistic depiction of the 'husband-wife equation' where a wife becomes the shadow of her husband. The same

portrayal of marriage is recounted in *That Long Silence* (1988) as well; Jaya sees both of them as "A pair of bullocks yoked together". Through the protagonist's consciousness, Deshpande asserts the true idea behind marriage; not only are the females suffering in her novels but the male characters are also frustrated because of their assigned role in marriage by society.

Shashi Deshpande is an extensively celebrated feminist writer, but her idea behind feminism resembles Simone De Beauvoir. She says in an interview with Geetha Gangadharan, "I am a feminist in the sense that, I think, we need to have a world which we should recognise as a place for all of us human beings" (Indian Communicator, 20 November 1994). London's Virgo Press later published *That Long Silence* and directly contributed to this proclamation. Jaya's search for self and her quest for identity is the central argument of the novel. She introspects on her married life, which puts her in a dilemma; A.N. Dwivedi points out that "the predicament of Jaya of *That Long Silence* (1988), who is presented as torn 'self' between what she was before marriage and what she is after it... hers is an alienated 'self by all means". Identity quest is the chief motif of Deshpande's fiction, including her short stories; G.S. Amur comments that "Women's struggle, in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important of all, as a human being is Shashi Deshpande's major concerns a creative writer, and this appears in all her important stories."

'Silence' in Deshpande's novel symbolises women's silence in Indian society. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terror* says, "Silence had been a habit for us" (199); Jaya's 'silence' is typical of the silence of 'entire womanhood'. Her silence is not only the lack of communication, but it is her surrender; she "had learnt it at last- no question, no retorts. Only silence" (143). Through this theme, Deshpande recounts the compact female psych, Jaya's following her husband Mohan to their suburb Dadar flat, explicates her submission in marriage. Jaya has given her 17 years to create an ideal home like the advertisements in cinemas as they are "the illusion of happiness", but her husband doesn't like them. Through her male characters, Deshpande abruptly points out the idealisation of women's submission (silence) before their husbands; Jaya says Mohan "saw strength in the woman's suffering silently" (36). However, the silence of Mohan's mother is perceived differently by Jaya; she knows her silence was not her strength but rather "... that silence was the only weapon" (36). Nearing all the female characters of Deshpande are victims of silence, Mohan's sister Vimala never complained about her ovarian tumour. She was destroyed by it, "She shank into a coma and died a week later, her silence intact". Throughout *That Long Silence*, this metaphor 'silence' played a significant role next

to the protagonist. Not only Jaya but the other female characters of the novel- Jija, Ajji, Vanitamami, and Naina of them are somehow subject to 'silence'.

Jaya is a 'convent-educated girl'. She has a sense of being 'extra ordinary'. Her father encouraged her to be independent, but after his death, her mother and family pushed her to marry. She is now supposed to be an ideal wife. The image of archetypes of Sita, Gandhari and Maitreyee are part of her unconscious self. In the later part, we see her role changing; like Gandhari, she unthinkingly follows her husband to their Dadar flat after his corrupt practices in his office. Nevertheless, it is her conscious self that haunts her. Her ego is replaced by her husband's happiness, "Be good to Mohan, Jaya,' Dada had advised me when I was leaving Ambegaon after our wedding." (139). Saru's self is torn apart because of the death of her brother; her mother blames her for his drowning; she says, "You killed your brother... why didn't you die?" (173). They are suffering from 'ego-inflation' because of the preference for a male child. Jaya is disappointed after knowing that Ai has given that flat to her son, and Nilima is continuously mentally harassed by her grandmother.

Jaya lives in a patriarchal house where women do not belong to a 'family tree' rather they are part of their husband's house. For Jaya, this loss of place in the family tree represents the loss of her identity. Her husband is the only one who can shelter her. She left her writing because of him, and her writing was her identity. She has become 'Mohan's wife, Rahul's and Rati's mother'; she confines herself to what she is not. She fails in her traditionally assigned role; she is Jaya (victorious), though her husband would never accept it; for him, she is an exhibitionist. He does not like Jaya's writing about their story and restricts her writing, which ends up giving up her gift, which is her real identity apart from the traditional one. Saru's husband is jealous of her because she is 'not only the bringer of bread but butter'. Jaya and Saru are shown to be escapist, but they are emerging their selves. Saru is a character in 'conflict'; she completes her identity by returning to her 'inner space'. Indu in *Roots and Shadow* portrays the 'inner struggle' of a female artist who wants to express herself. Jaya has a disoriented self; as a child, she used to get angry very soon, but for Mohan, anger makes a woman unwomanly' and to please him, she exhibits whatever he wants her to. 'Anger' is a metaphor for self-expression and frustration. In Adesh Pal's view, "In Jaya's case, expression of anger is not a direct outburst as it is with Saru and Indu. Her first and only outburst with Mohan, soon after her marriage, results in days of Mohan's silence. Since then, she has adopted the silence stratagem and withdraws under it. She turns the direction of her anger or herself, and her anger becomes self-destructive".

Although Jaya's suffering is not as painful as Saru's, Saru Deshpande portrays the condition of women suffering from physical harassment, while in *That Long Silence*, it is Jaya's psyche that she is dealing with. For Deshpande, this whole course of suffering throughout life is worse than killing at birth; Jaya says, "All those agonies... for days I had been unable to get it out of my mind. But now I wonder whether it wasn't more merciful, that swift ending of agony once and for all, than this prolonging of it for years and years." (53).

The retrospection is widely used in Deshpande's novels; in *That Long Silence*, Jaya revisits her past, giving the novel an 'integrative structure'. Her relationship with Kamat is an essential aspect of her process of self-identification. She compares herself with Kusum, her cousin, who is somewhat mad and ends her life by jumping in well. The ghosts of her ancestors, Kamat and Kusum, come alive before her, representing her independent conscious self, which she was deliberately crushing up. The novel is interwoven with different techniques; as R S Pathak rightly observes, "The novelist also uses some devices of the stream of consciousness-technique novels like a flashback, 'light of memory', interior monologue and so on to probe into the psyche of her characters. Jaya says at the end of *That Long Silence*: "All this I have written- it's like one of those multi-coloured patchwork quilts that kakis make for any new baby in the family".

"I named you Jaya. Jaya for victory," her father's words inspired her, but her concept about herself started fading after his demise. She is in a continuous dilemma: her father's death, leaving her Saptgiri house, then her arranged marriage- she is facing them all without uttering a word. In due course, she creates a place of her own; she only breaks her silence with Kamat, her neighbour. She talks about her tragic events, marriage, and stories. She has a secret intimacy with this man. Kamat is not good-looking like Mohan, but she feels an ease with him that she never felt with Mohan. His 'gift of casual, physical contact' and their intimate relationship were enough for her to forget her monotonous life. Kamat is not the typical patriarchal mindset man; he never talks down to her like Mohan, and he sees her as equal to man for him: "The relation of man to woman is the most natural of one person to another". It was Kamat with whom she responded to sexual relationships, but most importantly, he is her only friend. When he dies, she is again psychologically alone; she does not stay with Kamat for the last time. His death, like her father's death, deludes her.

There was a time when Jaya was emotionally dependent upon her husband. When he left her, she continuously panicked about what she would do without him. Jaya is a character in progress; she was raised as an individual but

was later capitulated by societal customs. She is in utter confusion, and she always needed a man to encourage her- first, it was her father. After his death, her brother Dinkar was one whom she was dependent on because she married Mohan, and then she completely dissolved herself before her 'sheltering tree'.

## CONCLUSION

Deshpande has not solely blamed the men folk of the society for the sinking of women's confidence; women like Jaya want to live in their 'safe hole' and become the object of domestic violence. In *The Dark, Holds No Terror* (1980), Saru is a well-earning Doctor, but she is afraid of 'the dark'- the novel's metaphor which is linked with 'panic and sensation'. She has become the prey of 'marital rape' because of the envy of her husband. Deshpande is more of a realist than a romanticist; she writes what is there. Like other women, Saru is continuously subjugated by the domination of her low-profile, jealous husband. Though Deshpande is a realist for the sake of her readers, she gives solutions to these problems, and for her, the only solution is to 'break the silence'. At the end of *That Long Silence*, she quoted from the Bhagwadgita, "Yathechchasi tatha kuru", which means "... Do as you desire!" (192). Women have to analyse their subjugation; for people like Jaya, the complications are in their consciousness. The moment they want to free themselves up, they can; however, this process is not easy. At the beginning of novel, Jaya asserts that "Self-revelation is a cruel process" (1), but "we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything, I know now it is this: life always has to be made possible." (193).

Deshpande's novels cannot be read in isolation; one must go deep into a woman's eyes to understand her agony and Deshpande's novels. For Elaine Showalter, there are three phrases forming the feminist aspect in work: "limitation, protest, and self-discovery", and Deshpande's novels are structured in these phrases. However, this protest may be within their psychic landscapes. Her novels are character-based; it is her character that helps the plot, not vice-versa. The plots are resolved within the surroundings of her female protagonist.

Deshpande is not a typical feminist, she doesn't want her books to be considered as women's writing, she says, "When you deal with just my work then take me as an individual writer and deal accordingly. Don't call it women's writing or feminist writing. Today we have women writing about women, for women. These works are being published by women, criticised by women, read by women and studied in the Women's Studies Departments and so on. I hate this 'women's lib' separating women's

writing It is just self-defeating” (Indian Communicator, 20 November, 1994).

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