



A Study of Women's Voices in the Select Work of Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* at the Backdrop of Feminism

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Abstract— This research paper scrutinizes the multifaceted challenges experienced by contemporary Indian women as depicted in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*. Set within a rigidly dogmatic, patriarchal society, the study analyzes the identity crisis faced by women who are constantly sandwiched between the demands of tradition and the aspirations of modernity. The paper examines how societal conditioning denies female agency and reduces women to mere appendages of their husbands. Ultimately, this analysis argues that breaking the "long silence" is a crucial political and personal act of resistance, enabling the female protagonist to achieve self-actualization and redefine her existence on her own terms.

Keywords— Feminism, novel, women, patriarchy, silence, identity, resistance.

I. INTRODUCTION

Theory At The Backdrop Of The Study *Western Feminism*

Feminism first emerged in modern Europe. In the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, Enlightenment ideas of freedom, equality, and democracy spread widely among people. After the French bourgeois revolution and the influence of Enlightenment thought, women began to raise the banner of liberation. Thus, the feminist movement in the West began to take shape.

The Development Of The Western Feminist Movement

Feminism represents women's efforts to attain social, political, and economic rights and achieve gender equality. As both an ideology and a movement, it has evolved through different stages of history with the progress of society.

First Wave Of Feminism

Western feminism originated from Enlightenment ideals and the French Revolution, which emphasized reason, natural rights, freedom, and equality. These ideas awakened women's self-consciousness, giving rise to the early feminist movement. The First Industrial Revolution drastically changed people's lives and social structures, encouraging women to participate more actively in social production. These experiences led them to question their social status and values.

By the early 20th century, women had begun organizing large-scale movements demanding equal political and economic rights with men, marking the first peak of the feminist struggle.

Second Wave Of Feminism

The 1960s and 1970s marked the beginning of the second wave of feminism. Following the Great Depression and the two World Wars, societies around the world began reconstruction. During this time, Western feminists sought to create independent spaces for women, realizing that complete liberation required rejecting male-dominated values and dismantling patriarchal systems. They understood that achieving true equality involved challenging not only political and economic discrimination but also deep-rooted social ideologies. This phase represented a broader and more radical approach to gender equality.

Third Wave Of Feminism

After the 1980s, Western feminism shifted from mass activism to deeper academic and cultural analysis. Feminists began to explore gender inequality through the lens of postmodernism and cultural studies. The focus moved from economic and political equality to issues of cultural identity and diversity. Feminists emphasized differences among women themselves and sought to construct a pluralistic discourse that acknowledged these variations. This approach aimed to weaken patriarchal influences and expand feminist thought beyond the earlier waves.

Feminism In India

In India, feminism has been viewed more as a practical movement than a theoretical one. Unlike in the West, feminist discourse in India developed through social reform and national struggle rather than through distinct ideological frameworks.

II. DEFINING FEMINISM IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Pre-colonial social structures and women's roles show that Indian feminism evolved differently from Western feminism.



Colonial interpretations of “Indian culture” and the idealization of womanhood through reform movements led to feminism being expressed through nationalism rather than as a separate ideology. Indian women’s issues differ from Western concerns because of historical and cultural contexts. Religion integrated the idea of women as “powerful” into patriarchy, giving them traditional spaces of influence. In contrast to Western individualism, Indian identity is seen as part of a collective, emphasizing cooperation and self-restraint for communal harmony. Indian feminists have strived to shape feminism in their own context, avoiding blind imitation of Western ideas. Women in India navigate patriarchal hierarchies based on age, caste, kinship, and marital status. Yet, certain communities such as the Nairs of Kerala, some Maratha clans, and Bengali families display matriarchal traits, while Sikh culture tends to be more gender-neutral. Given India’s diversity, multiple patriarchies and feminisms coexist. Indian feminism changes with time, culture, and consciousness. The commonly accepted definition of feminism in India is an awareness of women’s oppression in society, home, and work, along with conscious efforts by both women and men to challenge and change this situation. It rejects fixed notions of femininity and masculinity as biologically determined and strives for equality through redefinition. In India, patriarchy is only one of many hierarchies. Male reformers also played key roles in abolishing social evils, showing that gender oppression is complex. Moreover, women often face hierarchical differences among themselves based on caste and family positions. Hindu mythology also depicts women as powerful and complementary to male deities, reflecting diverse representations of femininity.

III. CONCLUSION

Some argue that feminism is outdated—necessary a century ago when women lacked voting rights or property ownership, but irrelevant today. However, feminism remains essential. Modern women have more opportunities, yet inequality persists. Young women today may pursue big dreams, but they still face harassment, insecurity, and societal pressure to conform to beauty standards. Despite great progress, women are still underrepresented in leadership, underpaid compared to men, and their reproductive rights continue to be challenged. The U.S. has yet to elect a woman President or Vice President. True equality means not only having opportunities but also safety, respect, and autonomy. Feminism continues to be vital until women everywhere can live freely and equally in all aspects of life.

Analysing Shashi Deshpande’s That Long Silence:

“I will have to speak, to listen; I will have to erase the silence between us.” Deshpande, Shashi. Pg.192

Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence* is a powerful feminist novel that looks into the personal world of an Indian woman caught between tradition, marriage, and her search for identity. The novel is narrated by Jaya, an educated middle-class woman who looks back on her life during a period of emotional crisis in her marriage. The story does not follow a fast-external action; instead, it unfolds through memories, reflections, and self-questioning, revealing the psychological reality of women who deal with these quiet struggles.

IV. DETAILED PLOT SUMMARY

The novel opens when Jaya and her spouse Mohan temporarily move into a small flat in Dadar after Mohan faces professional trouble due to allegations of financial irregularities. This sudden displacement creates emotional distance between them and pushes Jaya into deep introspection. Alone with her thoughts, Jaya begins to examine her marriage, her place as a partner and mother, and the long silence that has defined her life. She realizes that her silence was not accidental but learned — shaped by social expectations that teach women to adjust, endure, and suppress their voices to maintain harmony.

Through memories of her childhood and married life, Jaya reflects on how she gradually lost her individuality. Her original name, Jaya (meaning victory), is replaced by Suhasini, a name symbolizing a soft, smiling, submissive wife. Her ambition to become a writer is discouraged, especially when her writing expresses anger or truth. Mohan prefers her to write harmless stories that do not disturb social norms, reinforcing the idea that a woman’s voice should never challenge authority. Their marriage thus becomes emotionally distant, built more on silence than communication.

The novel also presents the lives of other women characters to show that Jaya’s struggle is not unique. Her grandmother Ajji, a shaven widow, represents the earlier generation of women who accepted suffering as fate and lived in total silence. Mukta, the widowed neighbour, lives a life frozen by grief and routine, symbolizing emotional stagnation. Working-class women like Jeeja and Nayana endure marital injustice, economic hardship, and gender discrimination without protest, showing how patriarchy affects women across class boundaries. Together, these women form a collective portrait of suppressed female existence.



As Jaya reflects on these lives, she understands that silence has been passed down through generations as a survival strategy for women. However, she also realizes that this silence has caused emotional damage, loneliness, and loss of self. Near the end of the novel, Jaya reaches an important moment of self-realization. She chooses not to rebel dramatically or leave her marriage, but she decides that she can no longer remain silent. Her resolution to speak and listen signifies a psychological transformation — the beginning of reclaiming her voice and identity.

In conclusion, *That Long Silence* is not merely an account of one woman's marriage but a deep exploration of women's silence in a patriarchal society. Through Jaya's introspection and the experiences of other women, Shashi Deshpande highlights how silence shapes female lives and how breaking it becomes an act of self-assertion. The novel concludes optimistically, indicating that change begins when a woman dares to speak — even if softly — against the long silence imposed on her.

V. ANALYSING WOMEN'S VOICES

• *Jaya / Suhasini – The Protagonist*

Jaya, who becomes Suhasini after her marriage, is the central figure and narrative voice of *That Long Silence*, and through her story, Shashi Deshpande explores the complex emotional, psychological, and social struggles of educated, middle-class Indian women confined within traditional roles. Though Jaya begins life as an outspoken, inquisitive girl — her father names her Jaya, meaning “victory” — over the years, she learns to internalize societal expectations that silence her assertiveness and shape her identity around her relationships with others rather than herself.

As a partner, parent, daughter-in-law, she performs her roles dutifully but finds she has lost touch with her own desires, aspirations, and selfhood: she questions repeatedly “To know what you want ... I have been denied that” and realizes she has lived more for roles assigned by society than for herself.

Her marriage to Mohan, though socially respectable and comfortable, is marked by emotional distance and communication gaps. She follows Mohan's wishes, often suppressing her voice to maintain harmony in the family, and her writing — once a source of expression — is discouraged when it mirrors lived reality.

The name change from Jaya to Suhasini signifies this transformation: Mohan wants a placid, smiling, motherly woman — someone who copes and accommodates — and Jaya gradually becomes that outward persona, even as internally she senses the loss of her former self.

Through introspection and memory, she confronts the silence she has lived with — recognizing that it wasn't just the absence of speech, but a deeply internalized surrender shaped by patriarchal conditioning and fear of conflict. This silence mirrors the broader cultural silence about women's identity: in her family, women's names and achievements are often excluded from histories or defined only through male relations.

Jaya's journey is thus a feminist narrative of self-discovery: she moves from passive acceptance and suppressed identity toward an awakening in which she begins to question, articulate, and reclaim her individuality. Her story highlights that ending the “long silence” is not a quick reaction but a slow, often painful process of recognizing one's own voice, valuing it, and asserting it against the expectations of tradition and patriarchy.

• *Ajji – The Grandmother*

Ajji, Jaya's grandmother, symbolizes the earlier generation of women shaped by rigid patriarchy and silence. Her life story reflects a traditional lived reality in which a woman's hopes, agency, and identity are subsumed under societal expectations. Ajji lives in self-imposed austerity following her husband's death, wearing simple clothes, occupying a bare room, and sleeping on the floor — a visual representation of how tradition has denied her comfort and voice. Her acceptance of these conditions demonstrates both a quiet endurance and an internalized belief that such sacrifices are natural for women, meaning that she never articulates her own needs or desires.

Jaya often reflects on how Ajji taught her not to ask too many doubts because it would be “very uncomfortable” for her in her husband's house, highlighting how older women inculcate silence as a survival strategy in younger generations. Ajji's life, marked by the absence of material possessions and emotional expression, embodies the idea that women's identities and stories often disappear within patriarchal family structures unless questioned and challenged.

• *Mukta – The Widowed Neighbor*

Mukta is a widowed woman who lives near Jaya's flat and serves as another contrast to Jaya's situation. Unlike Jaya, who is struggling within a marriage, Mukta's struggle derives from loss and isolation after her husband's death, reflecting how women's lives can be defined by their relationships with men. Although educated and self-aware, Mukta's routine reflects a life stilled by grief, social expectations, and silent endurance; she keeps to her routines and outward observances, but her inner life remains largely unspoken.



Her widowhood becomes a form of social marginalization in which traditional expectations leave her both visible and invisible: visible in ritual observance, but invisible in her emotional complexity and individuality. Mukta Deshpande demonstrates that women's silence is not only a marital issue but also a societal one, lingering even where the primary relationship (marriage) has ended.

• *Jeeja – The Working-Class Woman*

Jeeja, one of the domestic workers in Jaya's household, represents women from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds whose struggles focus more on coping within patriarchal norms than emotional introspection. Her story is marked by personal loss and social expectations: unable to have children, she experiences her husband taking a second wife — a decision she does not overtly resist. This silence is not born of contentment but of structural constraints that limit her choices. Jeeja's endurance highlights how patriarchy operates across classes: while middle-class women like Jaya may struggle with identity and self-expression, working-class women wrestle with immediate material and relational vulnerabilities. Jeeja's compliance is shaped by economic dependency and the traditional expectations that require women to absorb hardship without complaint. In this way, her character broadens the novel's critique of silence as a socially enforced condition for women across class lines.

• *Vanita Mami*

Vanita Mami is Jaya's maternal aunt — a woman rooted in traditional beliefs about womanhood, marriage, and motherhood. She performs religious rituals and fasts in the hope of having children, which she views as central to a woman's identity in society. Her greatest struggle is infertility — she "had failed in her life-bearing purpose" and becomes ill, symbolizing a life trapped by societal expectations about womanhood. Vanitamami represents women whose sense of self is shaped by traditional cultural roles (especially revolving around fertility). Deshpande uses her to critique how deeply society equates a woman's worth with childbearing. Her tragic life challenges the assumption that motherhood is always fulfilling.

• *Kusum*

Kusum is Jaya's distant relative who has suffered a mental breakdown and later dies by suicide (in some critical interpretations). She never finds stability or support in the patriarchal family structure. Her struggle reflects the psychological toll of patriarchal oppression — constant neglect, lack of support, and societal pressures that deny her identity. Kusum's breakdown shows how unspoken suffering can destroy a woman when she has no voice.

Kusum functions as a cautionary mirror for Jaya. Jaya often measures her own frustrations against Kusum's fate, learning how silence and suppressed desires can lead a woman to collapse inwardly. Kusum's life becomes a stark example of what can happen when a woman's struggles are ignored.

• *Nayana*

Nayana is among the women Jaya sees around her — usually shown as a pregnant woman repeatedly hoping for a male child and enduring hardship in her home. She symbolizes women bound by expectations of producing sons and the physical strain of repeated pregnancies. Her life shows how deep cultural norms about gender shape women's identities and bodies. Nayana's repeated pregnancies and silent endurance highlight how women's roles are narrowly defined by societal wishes for sons, even at personal cost. She deepens the novel's critique of how tradition shapes women's lives more than personal aspiration.

• *Vimala*

Vimala is Mohan's sister. Though not a central character, she appears as another example of someone whose life is influenced by tradition and expectations. Vimala carries out traditional rituals (like Mangala Gouri Puja for marital bliss) but tragically never has children. Still, her life makes it clear that even strict adherence to cultural norms does not guarantee fulfillment or happiness. Vimala's presence underscores the novel's theme: traditional roles and rituals do not necessarily fulfill a woman's emotional or personal needs. Her story supports the narrative's deeper critique of how cultural expectations can silence a woman's true self.

• *Other Female Figures* : Other minor but significant women in the narrative — such as Tara, Manda, Mohan's silent mother, elderly relatives, widows and various women in the neighborhood — together represent the wider reality of women living within rigid patriarchal norms: Tara is shown suffering from an abusive husband yet embodies resistance to social expectations rather than silent acceptance, and Manda and other neighbors reflect the quiet oppression and lack of autonomy that ordinary married and working-class women face, where cultural pressures confine them to domestic roles and unspoken endurance; together, these figures show how women "willingly or unwillingly... get into the track" of traditional roles, are held back from expressing their individual desires, and often continue their lives in depression or muted suffering because deviation from social expectations is seen as unacceptable, reinforcing the novel's critique of how silence and suppression shape women's identities across different classes and ages.



VI. FEMINIST AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

In the novel *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande explains how women in a traditional setup are expected to follow and put others first, especially in their roles within the home and family. The main character, Jaya, struggles with her thoughts, feelings, and dreams, but she rarely speaks them out loud. This silence represents how many women don't get a chance to express themselves freely because of social pressure and gender roles. Psychologically, the story shows Jaya's inner conflict—she feels trapped, confused, and unhappy because she can't reveal her true self to others. Over time, she begins to understand her own identity and begins to search for her voice, which reflects the feminist belief that women deserve equal space to think, feel, speak, and make choices for themselves.

VII. CONCLUSION

In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande skillfully presents the silent struggles of women within a male-dominated society and examines how societal conditioning shapes their identities and relationships. Using the protagonist Jaya, the novel reveals the psychological and emotional turmoil experienced by many middle-class Indian women who suppress their desires and voices so that they can fit into traditional roles as wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. Jaya's long silence is not merely a lack of speech but a representation of the deeper oppression that patriarchal norms impose, forcing women to stay silent in the face of emotional conflict and unfulfilled aspirations. Her journey from internalized silence towards self-assertion and self-awareness reflects the broader "identity crisis" of women who struggle to discover who they are beyond the socially assigned roles, such as wives and caregivers.

The novel also portrays other female characters whose lives reflect varied dimensions of female experience under patriarchy. Characters like Ajji, Mukta, Jeeja, and Nayana illustrate how silence and subordination manifest differently across generations and social classes—from resigned endurance and emotional isolation to survival amid economic hardship.

These women's stories show that the struggle for voice and identity is not restricted to one individual but is a collective pattern of female existence shaped by cultural expectations. Through their experiences, Deshpande highlights that women's silence can be both oppressive and, at times, a space of introspection that eventually leads to self-realization.

Overall, *That Long Silence* functions as a powerful feminist critique of how traditional Indian culture shapes women's lives—often silencing them not through explicit violence but through subtle expectations of obedience, sacrifice, and emotional restraint. The novel finally indicates that breaking this silence—whether through self-expression, introspection, or a reassessment of one's roles—is an essential step toward reclaiming identity, autonomy, and dignity. Thus, Jaya's personal evolution becomes symbolic of a broader movement toward female empowerment and self-recognition despite the pressure of patriarchal norms.

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