

Breaking the Silence : Gender, Identity and Marital Disharmony in Shahi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

Mrs.Dhanalakshmi T^{1,*}, Dr.Mohamed Haneef S²

¹Reg. No.241111902023, Full-time Ph.D Research Scholar, Research Department of English, Sadakathullah Appa College (Autonomous), Rahmath Nagar, Tirunelveli- 627011 (Affiliated to) Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli- 627012, India., India

²Associate Professor & Head, Research Department of English, Sadakathullah Appa College (Autonomous), Rahmath Nagar, Tirunelveli- 627011 (Affiliated to) Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli- 627012, India., India

*Corresponding author / தொடர்பு ஆசிரியர்: Mrs.Dhanalakshmi T — tamilseminar12@gmail.com

Abstract

That long silence seeks to represent the plight of women especially Jaya Kulkarni , the main protagonist in a given social structure, attempting to rigorously scrutinize the portrayed gender roles that impose social norms, expectations and traditions on the grounds of gender discrimination. The research paper presents Jaya's submissive revolt against the constant psychological pressure of male superiority and social conventions. It is submissive because finally she accepts the traditional principle silence and surrendering believing that life has always to be made possible. Deshpande showcase her artistic brilliance that unlocks the complex human relationships wherein women's arduous lives are exposed with the writer's insightful meanings. This research paper focuses to expose Jaya's inner turmoil and trauma as she seeks to create her own unique identity in the society. She struggles to get solace as most of her questions remained unanswered. But with the passing of time she realizes her own fate.

Keywords / திறவுச் சொற்கள்: Discrimination; plight; submissive revolt; turmoil; trauma.

How to cite / மேற்கோள் காட்டும் முறை: T, M., & S, D. H. (2026). Breaking the Silence : Gender, Identity and Marital Disharmony in Shahi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*. Tamilmanam International Research Journal of Tamil Studies, 20(01), Volume 2, –.

Indian English literature has attained immense popularity and widespread recognition. It is no longer regarded as a sub-standard variety of English. Several prestigious international awards have been bagged by its highly talented authors. Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Aravind Adiga have all earned the most coveted booker prize. R.N. Tagore, V.S. Naipaul have both been honoured with the literary world's most glorious award, the Nobel prize for literature.

Shashi Deshpande is a winner of the Sahitya Akademi award for *That Long Silence* (1989). She has emerged as a writer possessing deep insight into the female psyche. Focusing on the marital relation she seeks to expose the tradition by which a woman is trained to play her subservient role in the family. Her novels reveal the patriarchal traditions and uneasiness of the modern Indian woman in being a part of them. She uses social reality as it is experienced by women. Her heroines rebel against the traditional way of life and patriarchal values. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya is not only silent but also the sufferer. Her 'silence' is socio-psychic in nature. She is an object of utmost sympathy. The novel goes on to determine the personality of Jaya through her long trials social, economic, political, psychological, spiritual and religious.

There is no strong female voice against patriarchy rather only psychological conflicts were depicted. She revolts, but in silence. Jaya is presented not as a woman who has a desire to revolt but the one who reconciles her helplessness. Jaya realized:

A woman can never get angry. She can only be neurotic, hysterical and frustrated. There is no room for despair, either. There is only order and routine today. I have to change. She sheets tomorrow, shrubs the bathrooms the day after, and clean the fridge (147-148)

Jaya reflects on how women are conditioned to suppressed their true feelings, conform to domestic routines and endure marital discord in complete silence rather than express legitimate rage or discomfort. Deshpande portrays the reality as it is. In this regard, she says: “My characters take their own ways. I have heard people saying we should have strong woman characters. But my writing has to do with women and how they are....” (Vishwanath-1987:12).

Feminism (a movement) gives an expression to the suppressed voice of women since long ago. Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal and Kamala Markandeya are the chief exponents of Feminism. It started in India late in the 1970's. It existed in spirit long before even the Western feminist movement had begun. Few women writers took the trouble of writing their pleas and issues those days. The feminist thought and feminist movements in the west have had some influence on the women's movements in developing countries like India. Yet feminism as it exists today in India has gone beyond its western counterpart. Uma Narayan (1997) has rightly remarked “Third World feminism is not a mindless mimicking of ‘western agendas’ in one clear and simple sense Indian feminism is clearly a response to the issues specifically confronting many Indian women”(Weedon-1999: 13). The Indian women's struggle for emancipation could not mimic its western counterpart. In the Indian context, several feminists have realized that the subject of women's emancipation in India should not be reduced to the contradictions between man and woman.

Female protagonists in Deshpande's novels stand apart from that of their male counterparts in the writings of many contemporary women writers. Sandwiched between tradition and modernity, illusion and reality and the mask and the face, they lead a life of restlessness.

The title of the novel, *That Long Silence*, suggests the failure to communicate and assert one's own self. When one read the epigraph from the speech of Elizabeth Robins he will find that this silence refers to the reticence of a female character. In Deshpande's *That Long Silence* we can see the belated rebellion of Jaya after seventeen years of her married life. During her solitude, Jaya undertakes a stay towards her own self. She seeks her individual identity, which seems to be lost somewhere during such a long years of marriage.

Novels of Deshpande abound in female quest for identity. Her novels are usually narrated by female protagonists who strive to find out their own selves throughout the novels. They succeed to do this through their writing to reach a resolution in their lives. No doubt, they are haunted by the memories of past and feel a kind of worthlessness, but towards the end they realize their selves. Women do face a void, a vacuum in their lives. They appear to be successful externally, but they seem to lack direction and feel a sense of futility.

Deshpande got success in her representation of real life experience through *That Long Silence*. She realistically depicts the inner conflict through Jaya, who suffered from the beginning to end craving for the quest of the self and identity. She realized the frustration, alienation and over all emotional traumas she had undergone with her adolescent dreams being utterly shattered. Initially, after her marriage, she is apparently a satisfied spouse married to a responsible man of social status. For some time all went well and Jaya adjusted herself in new environment according to the wishes of her husband. She had absorbed herself in the family folds completely and was no more aggressive and inquisitive but now, she was a docile, meek, passive, nervous and dependent upon her husband for sustenance and existence. Mohan (Jaya's husband) was a man of orthodox view and he gave her not much freedom. In the novel, there lies the smell of frustration in married life of Jaya, who failed to be closer to her husband mentally and emotionally. Despite her marriage to Mohan and becoming a mother of two

children, she suffered from isolation. Her husband could not understand her emotional self. She leads the life of silent indignation gifted by her husband.

The novel traces how Jaya gradually emerges as a confident individual fully in control of herself and refuses to be led by trap of the family. The protagonist of the novel rejects the image of traditional women like Sita, Savitri and Draupadi. Instead she prefers the image of a pair of the bullock to describe a married couple. Deshpande uses an appropriate image of a crawling worm into the hole, to describe the state of Jaya, a budding writer, doomed to dwindle into a stereotyped Indian home-maker: “Oh God! I had thought I can't take any more even a worm has a hole it can crawl into.”(148).

Thus, at the end of the novel, Jaya's self-realization was brought out very skillfully. A woman wants home and family not at the cost of her identity. She wants liberty to implement her talent and respect which family members should give her. When she is denied to have liberty and identity, she possesses the ability to revolt against bindings. *That Long Silence*, thus, teaches women to fight the silence and express themselves. Woman according to Deshpande can be understood better when they are pampered and showered with affection. As their hearts are tender they deserve tender love.

Jaya's character in *That Long Silence*

Deshpande describes the woeful plight of Jaya through the image of a woman crawling into a hole. Unsecured and suffocated, Jaya feels distance from real life. She is scared of writing, scared of failing. She is unable to face the challenge and wants to retreat back to her safe family life. *That Long Silence* concentrates on an important theme, that is, on gender differentiation and valorizing of the male categories, along with the silence and surrender to which a woman is subjected in our society.

The Novelist has woven the tragic tales of Jaya's relations with Mohan and her acquaintances into the texture of the novel. Jaya speaks of interdependence of love and sex. She speaks out her mind, “First there's love, then there's sex that was how I had always imagined it to be. But after having with Mohan I had realized that it could so easily be the other way round.”

Mohan had crushed both the woman and the writer in Jaya as he neither loved nor encouraged her. Her silence is responsible for the misery and slavery. Her mental agony is so adverse that her desire for articulation fails. Jaya resolves to break that long silence by putting down on a paper all which she had suppressed in her seventeen years silence that long silence which had reduced herself in fragments:

I am not afraid any more. The panic has gone. I am 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 fragmentation is of possible. The child, hands in pocket, has been with me through the years, she is with me still. (191).

For this research article, I endeavored to analyze the different aspects of feminism and its concept. It is also examined on the post-modern feminist approaches. The methodology of the research paper is chiefly based on the comparison of the western feminism with the eastern concept of feminism (Third World feminism)—Indian feminism which is apparently a response to the issues specifically confronting many Indian women. A brief analysis has also been done to find the women's compatibility with their male counterpart in terms of the different equalities like economic, social and political.

The reading of Deshpande's *That Long Silence* has revealed that woman's position and status had little changed since India's independence. Their plight remained nearly the same. However, it should not be judged from the western suppressed women. The character of Jaya has succeeded to portray that patriarchy is still prevalent in our Indian society. To subdue

patriarchy, the women have to undergo and face different challenges and issues in the society. Hence, we get a new woman in *That Long Silence* in the form of Jaya. She is new not because she is silent and submissive, but because she has compromised herself with her surrounding and fate (Nayak 2011).

The present paper is prepared with an avowed objective: to textually and contextually study the present day Indian English Literature, especially fiction. A stereotyped house wife initially nervous and seeking masculine support all the time thinks that she also has contributed to her victimization and that she has to fight her own battle and work out her own destiny.

Deshpande has unleashed a scathing blow to the patriarchal set up and ushered a novel chapter of women liberation in any sphere of life. It is not the circumstances that contribute to the negation of women right but that even their own women folk are polarizing their dig at the emancipation of women. The novel seeks to probe deeper in those subaltern tendencies which ruined the vital of our society.

The female protagonists of Deshpande evince sufficient vigor and courage to question the oppressive role of society, religion and culture, but yet they refrain from taking the paths suggested by the Western feminists. They rather seek to find their own paths. Indian feminism as reflected in the Indian fiction is a unique phenomenon that has to be valued on its own scale and should not be weighed against the scales of the western feminist literature. Shashi objectifies new female subjective experiences with a gynocentric vision. She reflects on the problems and concerns of the middle class Indian women.

Deshpande concludes that Jaya's rebellious nature is not the solution to the problems of life rather it complicates the things around her. The last sentence of *That Long Silence* explicitly shows that human happiness consists in harmonizing the opposites of life. In Deshpande's novels, men give up easily and go on to fresh fields but women fight on and do emerge victorious after most battles who want to achieve individuation and authentic self-identity without changing the culture and tradition of the society. They may be weak and even be oppressed but they have the will power to rise up like a phoenix out of its own ashes. Deshpande makes an authentic plea to free the female psyche from the conventional male control. The success of the novelist lies in her representation of real experiences. She realistically depicts the inner conflicts of Jaya and her quest for the self identity. Thus, this paper attempts to depict how the attitudes and behaviour of women differs according to the society she belongs to.

துணைநூற் பட்டியல் (References)

1. Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*. Penguin Books. 1989.
2. Dwivedi O.P. *A Spectrum of Indian English Literature*, JAPSS, 2009.
3. http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/124894.That_Long_Silence. Press, Inc, ISBN 978-0-557-47470-7
<http://journal.vpweb.com/spectrumopdwivedi.html>
4. Nayak, Abhilash. "Making of the New Woman in Shashi Deshpande's Novels." *The*
5. *Criterion: International Journal in English*, vol.1, no.3, 2011, pp. 1-10, www.the-criterion.com/V2/n3/Abhilash.pdf
6. Narayan Uma. *Dislocating, Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World*
7. *Feminism*. Routledge, 1997.
8. Vishwanath V. "Interview with Deshpande". *A Woman's World-Literature Alive*, vol. 1,
9. no. 3, 1987, pp.
10. Weedon, Chris. *Feminism, Theory and the Politics of Difference*. Oxford:Blackwell.