



## THE SILENT STRUGGLE “THE LONG SILENCE” FEMINISM AND IDENTITY IN THE NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

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### Abstract

*Indian feminist author Shashi Deshpande's fifth novel, That Long Silence (1989), won the Sahitya Akademi Award, given by the Indian Academy of Arts and Letters to outstanding works written in any of India's twenty-four major languages in 1990. Shashi Deshpande's novels are a powerful exploration of feminism and identity in the Indian context. Her works, such as "Roots and Shadows," "That Long Silence," and "Dark Holds No Terrors," delve into the complexities of women's lives, highlighting their struggles for autonomy, self-expression, and identity.*

### Introduction

Shashi Deshpande is one of the eminent novelists of contemporary Indian literature in English. Western readers align her with Anita Desai. Indeed, both writers' work centres around women's lives in modern Indian society. However, only Deshpande lives and writes in India, and she explicitly addresses Indian readers, not the international marketplace.

Deshpande was born in 1936, in Dharwad. She is the younger daughter of the Sanskrit scholar, novelist, actor and dramatist R. V. Jagirdar (1904-1984) and his wife Sharda Arya. Under the name of Adya Rangacharya, and also under the pseudonym of Shriranga, he published a huge literary oeuvre that includes translations of Sanskrit plays. He enjoyed great success and fame, his work has become part of the national Indian heritage.

Deshpande grew up in a family that belonged to the upper middle class, and so does her own family. She was given the typical education at a British convent school, moved on to Bombay University and studied economics and political science, took a second degree, in law, in Bangalore, had her first job with a lawyer, then a law reporter. Finally – she was by then married, with two sons, she added a degree in journalism (1969-1970), and topped that with a Master of Art.

In 1962 she marries Dharendra H. Deshpande, a medical doctor. The couple settles in Bombay (later Mumbai), where her husband takes up work as a pathologist at G. S. Medical College. In 1968 they go to stay in London for a year. In 1970 they move on to Bangalore where they settle for good. Their son Raghu will live there too, until his early death in 2017. Their son Vikram lives in the US.

Writing did not come to Deshpande as a conscious decision. She had two children, no career, she "got restless with being just a housewife and mother". In England she felt isolated, with no friends, and her husband away all day. On their return to India her husband encouraged her to write about this experience. 1972 saw her first short story, "The Legacy", many more were to follow. Her father advised publication, otherwise the stories would get lost.



Thus began a career that would make her a name in India and beyond. Her father had taught her Sanskrit, she also speaks Marathi and Kannada, is well versed in the huge realm of Indian mythology, which she reads “against the grain”, from her own, feminist position. But she writes in English. Her English schooling, and her reading that has taken her through the better part of English literary history, will add to the subtexts of her own texts. The web of her main text, however, is woven from Indian women's lives, their day-to-day living deeply impregnated by religious, social, and political traditions, and gender relations determined by male power structures. Her – to date – eleven novels, children's books, two long stories, and many short stories rest on the complexities of tradition and modernity, a tradition that does not go unquestioned in Deshpande's work.

Deshpande creates figures that take her readers through the social strata of urban society, but her interest comes to centre more and more on women of the middle and upper middle classes; well-educated women who fight for their own space, for their place in the family and in their social and their cultural setting. This setting is the backdrop to her stories, action remains private, even with rape which is, after all, private only to a certain degree. With her first published novel, *The Dark Holds no Terrors* (1986), she introduces this painful topic that had already been there, as marital rape, in one of her early stories, “The Intrusion”, later follows it up in *The Binding Vine* (1992) and in *Shadow Play* (2013).

Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* (1988) of which she says that it is her most autobiographical one, makes silencing, by the family and by society, its main topic. It is, as she has said, a loud shriek of despair. The main figure, however, manages to break the silence and to speak out, achieving agency. The novel had come out in English, in Britain, but was translated into Hindi, Marathi and Kannada. Which shows, not only the impact of the linguistic diversity of the subcontinent, but also the status Deshpande has by then achieved.

The themes and topics, the cultural contexts of her novels seem to reflect Deshpande's own family and its cultural setting. There is literature, Indian myths, traditional Indian music, medicine, an intimate or at least a close relationship to her father, all of this being part of the fabric of *A Matter of Time* (1999), *Small Remedies* (2000), *Moving On* (2004) and, most directly, of *Strangers to Ourselves* (2015). Deshpande's novels are family novels. Family, in their generational enfolding, in their ramifications, is the groundwork of the novels. Its intricacies, by the way, are more easily understood if readers – in particular Western readers - take to paper and pencil and draw a family tree. The complexities of this groundwork are not just family complexities, they are also the complexities of memory, and it is this that women shape as it has shaped them, that they experience and that they leave behind, through divorce or through separation.

Women, in Deshpande's texts, are not simply victims, of circumstance, of family, of society. Over the decades that Deshpande's work embraces, they have come to stand out as self-assured, self-empowered, articulate personalities. They leave behind limits and limitations, hurt themselves against and cross barriers and conventional norms. The female figure in *In the*



*Country of Deceit* (2008) enters into a relationship with a married man. There are men who rape women, who are despots, but also remarkable men – lovers, husbands, fathers.

### **That Long Silence**

Deshpande's work *That Long Silence* tackles the subject of women's struggle and tolerance in the face of societal and familial situations. Deshpande presents Jaya as the main character of her novel *That Long Silence* who comes from a middle- class family and has a number of issues.

Shashi Deshpande's novels, particularly "*That Long Silence*," explore the silencing and struggle for identity faced by Indian women within patriarchal structures. Her works highlight the constraints of societal expectations and the quiet endurance of women in the face of male dominance. While Deshpande doesn't explicitly label her work as feminist, she portrays the plight of Indian women navigating traditional roles and the quest for self-discovery.

### **Deshpande's Portrayal of Women:**

- Complex Characters: Deshpande's female characters are multidimensional, grappling with internal conflicts, societal expectations, and personal aspirations.
- Inner World: Her novels explore the inner world of women, revealing their thoughts, emotions, and desires, and providing a nuanced understanding of their experiences.
- Empowerment: Deshpande's works emphasize the importance of women's empowerment, encouraging readers to question societal norms and advocate for gender equality.

### **Elaboration:**

- **The "Silent Struggle":**

Deshpande's novels often feature female protagonists who are trapped in traditional roles and expected to silently endure societal pressures, as seen in "*That Long Silence*".

- **Feminist Themes:**

### **Her works explore themes like:**

- **Quest for Identity:** The protagonist's struggle to define herself outside of societal expectations, particularly within marriage and family.
- **Patriarchal Structures:** The constraints imposed on women by a male-dominated society, where men hold power and women are relegated to supporting roles.
- **Gender Roles:** The societal expectations placed on women, including their roles as wives, mothers, and daughters, and the limitations these roles impose on their individual autonomy.



- The Silent Endurance: The tendency of women to endure suffering and oppression without speaking out or seeking change, as depicted in the title "That Long Silence".

- **Deshpande's Perspective:**

While she doesn't explicitly label her work as feminist, Deshpande acknowledges the impact of patriarchal structures on women's lives and explores the challenges they face in asserting their individuality and finding a voice.

- **Examples in "That Long Silence":**

- Jaya, the protagonist, grapples with her own identity and her relationship with her husband, Manohar, who is a man with a strong sense of entitlement.
- The novel explores the subtle forms of oppression and gender differentiation that exist within the family and society.
- Jaya's struggle to assert herself within the family and her eventual decision to speak up after years of silence represent the quest for self-discovery and autonomy.

- **Overall Impact:**

Deshpande's novels offer a nuanced portrayal of Indian women's lives, highlighting their struggles and aspirations within patriarchal societies and contributing to the broader conversation about feminism and identity.

### **"That Long Silence": Negotiating Patriarchy and Autonomy**

Gender is redefined and feminist consciousness is examined in Shashi Deshpande's novel "That Long Silence" through the negotiation of patriarchy and autonomy. Deshpande explores the intricacies of patriarchal systems, the pursuit of independence, and the transformational potential of feminist consciousness via the protagonist's journey. We will uncover the deep investigation of gender dynamics and feminist ideas inside Deshpande's literary landscapes by looking at the protagonist's challenges and victories.

In the book, Shashi Deshpande tells a gripping story that questions gender norms, explores how patriarchy is negotiated, and emphasizes the desire for independence. Deshpande's examination of redesigned gender roles provides important insights into the nuances of women's experiences in a patriarchal culture when viewed through the prism of feminist consciousness.

The book chronicles Jaya's quest to regain her independence by challenging the patriarchal systems in both her marriage and society. Her experiences offer a forum for examining feminist consciousness and rethinking conventional gender norms.

Jaya's resolve to defy social norms and claim her autonomy is a reflection of her negotiating patriarchy. "I have discovered my voice... I will not be silenced," she exclaims. This illustrates



Jaya's deliberate attempt to create her own voice and identity while resisting the limitations of patriarchal conventions.

Deshpande addresses the rethinking of gender norms through Jaya's pursuit of independence. Jaya's quest for self-expression and personal fulfillment is a manifestation of feminist consciousness since she challenges the constricting restrictions that are placed on women. "I have to be myself," she muses. In a society that wants me to be someone else, I must figure out how to be myself." Deshpande raises crucial themes regarding the structure of gendered selfhood and the role of women in society in her portrayal of Jaya," writes Uma Parameswaran. This insight emphasizes how the novel challenges the conventional narratives surrounding gender and autonomy, thereby contributing to the feminist discourse.

According to literary scholar Sharmila Rege, "Deshpande's text is a place of feminist consciousness... through the narrator Jaya, she begins to question patriarchy and articulate her own subjectivity." This statement emphasizes the novel's transformational potential. This acknowledgment highlights how the book empowers women to rethink their roles and identities while also questioning patriarchal conventions.

*"I refuse to be molded. I refuse to be shaped. I refuse to be quieted. Jaya's resolve to overcome patriarchal norms demonstrates her defiance of social norms and her dedication to regaining her independence and agency.*

*Shashi Deshpande deftly reimagines gender roles and examines feminist consciousness in "That Long Silence" by balancing autonomy and patriarchy. The book questions gender stereotypes, gives women the confidence to question social norms, and fights for their rights.*

## Conclusion

"That Long Silence" is a powerful exploration of the complexities of women's lives in India, delving into themes of identity, marriage, family, and self-discovery. Through the protagonist Jaya's journey, Deshpande sheds light on the societal expectations and patriarchal norms that shape women's experiences. "That Long Silence" has had a significant impact on Indian literature, contributing to the feminist literary movement and inspiring discussions about women's rights and empowerment. The novel's exploration of themes and its powerful portrayal of women's experiences continue to resonate with readers, making it a timeless classic in Indian literature.

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