



QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S THAT LONG SILENCE

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Introduction

Shashi Deshpande is a contemporary Indian writer with a wide range of literary works. The writer is well known for novels such as 'The Dark Holds No Terrors' (1980), 'That Long Silence' (1988), and 'The Binding Vine' (1993), among others yet, her most popular novel is 'That Long Silence.' The writer's topics tend to center on the exploration of women's identities. 'That Long Silence' concerns a woman's identity in a society dominated by men, a society with historically higher status and status of men. The novel is an exploration of those issues, as a woman learns to make her own identity despite the oppression of society (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015). The novel portrays a woman whose identity is based primarily on those around her, leaving her with no true identity of her own. The woman follows a journey to find her own identity, which leads to the novel's dominant themes of silence, escape, self-assertion, and freedom. That Long Silence fits within the writer's broader oeuvre as well as the tradition, between the 1980s and 1990s, of women writers who productively considered the struggle for female identity in India—the struggle under observation in 'That Long Silence.'

Overview of Shashi Deshpande's Works

Shashi Deshpande's literary output comprises six novels, two collections of short stories and several non-fictional texts such as book reviews and essays. Since 1978, when the Doordarshan Prize-winning novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* was published, the author has placed a recurring emphasis on the implications of women's writing and on the issue of women searching for an independent identity in contemporary India (G Ranvirkar, 2012). An early work such as *That Long Silence*, in which the protagonist leaves a career in favour of domesticity, is revisited in novels such as *The Binding Vine* (1992) and *A Matter of Time* (1996). The conclusion reached in the latter text suggests that "a woman's yearning for identity and independence" necessarily takes precedence over other issues. The degree to which subjects such as effected gender or the second-generation dilemma can inform a feminist reading case study of the post-colonial

writer may be questioned. However, it is undeniable that the work of the author stands out as a contribution to a wider discourse socially codified as metropolitan (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015).

Contextual Background of That Long Silence

That Long Silence (), a novel by Indian writer Shashi Deshpande, was published in 1988. It has been examined within a range of theoretical approaches. Various literary and theoretical studies have focused on a Feminist perspective. Deshpande noted that she wished to write a novel about silence, not only the literal kind but also the figurative silence that many women experience when their voice is denied or stifled. The author emphasises the complex nature of women in the present age and the dilemmas they encounter in shaping their identity.

Themes of Identity in Literature

Cultural identity is the identity or feeling of belonging to a group. It is part of a person's self-conception and self-perception and is related to nationality,

ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality or any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture. Cultural identity is often used synonymously with cultural consciousness or awareness. The concept is also found in the work of anthropologists, as well as among other social scientists, including psychologists, sociologists, and cultural theorists. Cultural Identity theory draws on the work of academic ideologies such as Post-structuralism, Post-colonialism, Psychoanalysis, Social constructionism and Feminist Politics.

Gender identity is the personal sense of one's own gender. It is usually gender-specific, people who identify as men or women may simply refer to their gender identity as their gender. Gender identity can correlate with assigned sex at birth, or can differ from it. Transgender people are people whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex at birth. The term cisgender usually refers to people whose gender identity aligns with their assigned sex. Gender identity can be expressed within a binary model of male or female, or outside of that model. The formation of gender identity can be influenced by genetic and hormonal factors, environmental factors, social conditioning and an individual sense of identity. Personal identity describes the unique numerical identity of a person in the aspects of their life. An important part of personal identity is self-identity, or the recognition of one's potential and qualities as an individual, especially in relation to social context. The alternatives to self-identity or self-concept are the personalSelf, Personality, Character—as described by William James in his book *Principals of Psychology* and individualism.

Cultural Identity

In Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988), the protagonist, Jaya, navigates the complexities of cultural identity. She confronts the constraints imposed by Indian tradition and struggles with the assimilation of Western values and lifestyles. Set against a backdrop of rapidly changing global attitudes toward women, Jaya's dilemmas unfold within a society that assigns women the duty of

keeping family and culture intact. Cultural identity is understood as a group concept influenced by history, geography, language, aesthetics, values, and political systems (Jain, 2011). Jaya longs for a life defined by personal choice and independence rather than submission to societal norms.

Gender Identity

A woman's identity in Deshpande's novels depends on her economic independence, job satisfaction, marital security and above all, relationship with her children. One's identity is the self as one's known. Female identity assumes a great significance in the second half of the twentieth century and Shashi Deshpande examines the question of gender identity in her novel *That Long Silence*. Women's stereotypical roles, their loss of identity in marriage and patriarchal society are examined in her novels. Dr Manju Bakshi points out, "Deshpande's novels are concerned with the problems of women and the question of survival and identity." A similar position is voiced by S G Ranvirkar, who states, "Each of her novels essentially traces a woman's struggle to assert and protect her identity when the centre of her identity – marriage chances and changes or when the identity is lost due to conventional attitude to which she has been subjected." The novel *That Long Silence* probes the ambivalent role of women by which a woman forgets her own identity and gets submerged in her husband's identity. A middle-class Indian woman, the protagonist Jaya spends long years of confinement within the four walls of the house, acting as a dutiful daughter-in-law, a caring mother and a submissive housewife. Women's identity is invariably tied down with their marriage. Marriage brings with it the displaced self. The woman is forced to wear a mask, play a role and lead a life void of identity. Society expects a woman to fulfill certain duties for perpetuation of the family. A husband is given the status of God who consumes the entire being of the woman. The woman's place is only in the kitchen and any groping outside the house is like poking into hell. The disintegration of the self in search of identity seems inevitable

in the life of Jaya, the protagonist of *That Long Silence* (G Ranvirkar, 2012).

Personal Identity

The cultural context of any group that an individual is part of influences the kind of identity that he or she seeks. A person who is biologically a male, for example, occupies an entirely different role in society than one who is biologically a female; before the twentieth century, it would have never occurred to a woman to break away from the family, her home, to make a life of her own – or even to think of herself in that manner. Her identity can be viewed from two perspectives. She can be considered as a woman proud of her biological identity, and she can take a maternal and familial outlook, which leads her to make her life fulfilling and happy within the parameters laid down by society. These are her role identities. The situation faced by a woman who seeks to claim her right to express her individual identity is marked with conflict, rebellion, and frustration.

The sense of identity is a complex issue. From the moment a child receives his or her name and begins to utter the first first word, the idea of individuality dawns. Then society induces the child to develop certain roles, namely the family role, the social role, the gender role, the cultural role, and even the economic role. Gradually, the individual understands the need to develop the job role as well. Apart from having the name and the body, the sense of one's own self emanates from the many other things that surround an individual. They may be cultural, social, or economic; they can be considered tangible aspects that relate to the sense of identity. The fact that even wealth and a title are also characteristics of one's individuality confirms the importance of these external physical and social aspects in the perception of the sense of self.

The Protagonist: Jaya

Jaya — wife, mother, daughter-in-law, daughter, sister, friend — is on the brink of acceptance that marriage signifies silence (Roselezam Wan Yahya, 2003). Seven years have passed since she ceased writing, silencing her aspirations as a writer. Sixteen years of marriage have accumulated within the house that

shelters her husband, children, and her unvoiced self, while her biological mother lives alone elsewhere. A guest's indifferent remark, "Is this your house?" underscores the unrecognition of her belonging, reflecting her own doubts about occupying a space she never chose. Born as the only daughter to a strict, forty-year-old father, Jaya's experience of a woman's life is encapsulated in her own. Her dilemma arises from two conflicting positions: she must articulate herself and conform to her societal role; she cannot find refuge under patriarchal "protection" that shores up the man's position, yet must maintain conventional filial and marital submission. Jaya's inability to assimilate into the role of a submissive wife highlights the complex, ambiguous, and violent nature of the silence imposed by marriage. Marriage, while conferring a status of "woman," simultaneously holds the power to annihilate that very identity.

Supporting Characters

The supporting characters in *That Long Silence* embody various aspects of Jaya's identity, revealing the space she is expected to occupy by both her family and society. Of the numerous figures in the novel, three stand out as particularly influential upon Jaya's insight of selfhood: Jaya's husband—the professional archetype; the domestic help—the traditional archetype; and a friend—the new kind of woman who, presumably, provides a foil and source of inspiration. Reading the novel in a similar light exposes the multiple facets of Jaya's self-conception as well as the directions that her subsequent quest for identity might take. In the final textual appraisals of Jaya, few characters receive the depth of characterization accorded to these three, underscoring their representativeness. From Jaya's husband, who embodies the role of the conventional professional male, to the domestic help, who reflects traditional expectations of women, and finally to a friend who represents emerging female autonomy, these characters collectively illustrate the constraints and possibilities surrounding Jaya's search for self-definition in contemporary urban Indian society (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015).

Narrative Techniques

Narrative techniques are devices that a writer uses in storytelling to emphasize ideas and to appeal to the reader's interest. Shashi Deshpande employs different narrative techniques in *That Long Silence*. She uses silence as a thematic device and narration in the form of stream of consciousness to show the identity struggle of Jaya and the influence of other characters on her consciousness. The title is an expression of the protagonist's suppressed desire and forced compulsory silence. Jaya breaks the silence during a crisis, brought about by her husband's heart attack and its consequences. These events shake the very foundation of her scrambled life and she undertakes a process of self-rediscovery and expression that proves to be cathartic and liberating.

The stream of consciousness narration leads the reader into the muddy bogs of Jaya's mind and thoughts. She is a lost person, full of confusion and misgivings, a non-entity despite repeated affirmations to the contrary. She is trapped between social obligation and repression and personal desires and freedom. When she converges on her own self, realisation dawns and she resolves to survive, perhaps even bloom with new strength. The world of the house is a suffocating world which women are expected to accept and not question. The house therefore becomes a symbol of imprisonment and personality stagnation.

Use of Silence

Narration in *That Long Silence* is marked by silence. Jaya (the protagonist) is in the process of shedding the silence she had long clothed herself in and giving voice to what had been censored all along. The narrative emerges from the silence that contained and coiled itself in Jaya as a defence. The author utilises the narration to speak with the suppressed voices of silence, in an effort to listen to their quiet desperation. The reticence in the narrative is, however, precisely the silence out of which the words leap and emerge declaring its very presence. These extensive silences facilitate the gestation of the ideas that go on to find expression in the narrative. The bulk of the work

concentrates on the tensions of that silent state, employs the language of silence, and enunciates its bare essentials. Jaya often mourns the loss of those silences and the imprisonment of solitude (J. Bibbee, 2003). The 'long silence' is a reference to the silence of the many women who have lived through patriarchal rule, seldom speaking out. The book investigates women's lives, their silence, sufferings, and their acceptance of social conditions, sometimes expressed in silence and other times in words. Jaya must negotiate her identity through the silence that accompanies articulation. She is caught between conflicting alternatives. Deshpande's narratives enact characters who articulate with difficulty, often through fragmented, indirect, unsubstantial language, only to discover that what cannot be articulated is in fact their defining experience.

Symbolism in *That Long Silence*

Symbolism reflects how ordinary objects and events evoke extraordinary meanings within a particular cultural context. In *That Long Silence*, the house is redefined from a symbol of domesticity and comfort to one of entrapment and confinement, mirroring the predicament of contemporary women who find the home to be a protective yet oppressive space that limits their identity and scope of life. The house, therefore, mirrors the predicament of many women unable to articulate their predicament under patriarchal control. Silence embodies conflicting feelings and actions; it signifies not only a repression that denies the self a voice but also enables the self to assert itself in daring ways. The mode of 'that long silence' also draws upon the rich tradition of philosophical and literary perspectives, encompassing both the burden of silencing and the strength derived from it. Silence permits a subject to emerge as such, to speak and be understood. Between the two modes of silence—as the most eloquent statement or active resistance against enforced roles—lies the ambivalence that both dismembers and preserves the self when the act of naming threatens to destroy it (J. Bibbee, 2003).

Silence as a Motif

Silence constitutes a leitmotiv in *That Long Silence*. The *silence* that Jaya experiences encompass thoughts, feelings and words, permeating her relationships and permeating much of the exposition. The long years of silence have taught her to suppress outbursts of sorrow and anger, resulting in speech that is measured, cautious and dispassionate (Katherine Dulaney, 2008). Deshpande's use of silence asserts itself both thematically and by virtue of a narrative style largely dominated by interior monologue and stream-of-consciousness. The restrained tone suggests an inner state of conflict, with the wordless fracture of self having no direct linguistic equivalent: the experience is communicated indirectly, through visual imagery and physical sensations. It is the flexibility of silence that allows it to function in these multiple modes simultaneously. Feminist theory commonly equates women's silence with their oppression, and Jaya's silence reflects the extent to which her life is circumscribed by various external pressures. Yet in its Buddhist derivative it denotes the potentiality of creative stillness, a state of readiness in which the self can confront its limitations and crystallize new possibilities. *That Long Silence* thus embodies a tension between the negative connotations of silence and its latent generative power.

Societal Expectations and Individual Desires

The contrast between societal expectations and an individual's desires constitutes a conflict that runs throughout *That Long Silence*. The division between the personal and the public sphere restricts the options available to Jaya and other Indian women and complicates the effort required to define a "self." "The [ideal] relationship between a wife and her husband is of a totally different nature altogether" (Sankar and Neelakandan, 2018), and the language, behaviours and attitudes appropriate to any specific situation will vary according to the agency that the individual chooses to inhabit. Increasingly Jaya begins to seek out the possibilities inherent "in arresting the

outward flow of the river of things" (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015). Society's expectation has come to encompass that of silence, and "to break it is to violate a tradition, to shake the society of which one is a part."

The Impact of Marriage on Identity

That Long Silence offers a feminist depiction of a traditional married Indian woman's identity crisis. It highlights the oppressive forces in a woman's life even as it exemplifies the constraints imposed by a traditional society on her quest for identity. In the opening scene of the novel, Jaya and her husband, Manohar, settle in Bangalore for a posting he has received from the Bombay office of the Export Institute. With the movement to yet another city, Jaya is confronted by the age-old question of who she is and what have been her achievements since she got married twenty years before. Jaya had worked briefly as a journalist before her marriage; but the family, driven by Manohar's promptings, decided that she should come home and "grow into her role as a good wife and mother". Over the next twenty years, Jaya loses herself in her role as steadfast wife. She is repeatedly silenced both by the family and the society and genuine selfhood lies submerged.

Conflict between Tradition and Modernity

The theme of identity—cultural, personal, and gender—dominates Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988), a key literary text that explores the condition of Indian women (SK, 2018). The novel exposes the tension affecting the formation of identity within competing traditional and modern values during an epoch of significant socio-cultural change.

The slow transformation of Indian society, and the concomitant modification of social and family structures, clearly affects the process of identity formation. Women find themselves constrained by social expectations, caught between external roles and internal desires. This crisis of identity emerges as a central concern in Deshpande's work, invested with a complexity that avoids simple oppositions, such as dutiful/mother/self-centred. Jaya's struggle, set against a milieu of changing cultural mores,

indicates the challenges raised to traditional modes of identification.

The Role of Memory in Identity Formation

Memory and its influence on identity are central to most creative and performing arts. Jaya, the principal character in Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence*, frequently refers to her memories and appears unable to ignore the role of the past in shaping her character. Most of her life is recounted in the past tense despite the narration being in the present tense. *That Long Silence* presents several ideas about memory and its links with identity, precisely because the narrative style and the main plot emerge from Jaya's memories.

The importance of memory in the growth and development of identity is acknowledged by both psychologists and novelists. Contemporary psychologists emphasise the importance of memory in creating and continuing feelings of identity during all phases of human life: from infancy to childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. Contemporary novelists accentuate the fact that memory is an essential feature of the novel. Susan Suleiman notes: "Indeed all narrative plots depend upon the invention of memory or the recreation of past events". It is therefore inevitable that Jaya should have recourse to her memory for material and at the same time be convinced of its importance in shaping identity. Jaya comprehends the complexities of human identity, affirming that no individual is composed solely of organised and assorted parts but has "areas of tension, patches that never quite join, seams unfinished, the whole a sort of flexible tapestry: appearance, experience, inherited compulsions and needs, memories and desires".

The Journey Towards Self-Realization

Memory takes Jaya back on a journey of introspection and self-evaluation. It is during those recollections that she best knows herself and finally accepts what she is, a woman labelled "a good man's wife". Bridging the gap between what has been and what is, between the past and the present, memory

reveals the true self. Hence when Jaya is planning the assassination of her husband, she meets her friend Nilima at the hospital. They have just barely survived motherhood, the chattering and joking that follow are a sign of relief. Then the silence engulfs them, and as panic settles around the start of the war, memories flood her mind, memories that almost reveal the nightmare past of an evacuation during World War II, when many residents and hospital inhabitants were unaware of the seriousness of the situation. The men and women had fled their homes, and the children had been evacuated to the countryside, leaving the mother behind. She was never forgiven for having refused to join her four children in hiding; for having refused to leave her husband in his hour of need. For Jaya, too, it was the beginning of a long silence: the long silence before she, driven by frustration, decides to kill her husband.

Influence of Feminist Literature

The influence of feminist literature, such as that of Virginia Woolf, has been often acknowledged by Shashi Deshpande in her quest for identity. Untying the 'long silence' is crucial for the creative expression of the self. Jaya's silence is a betrayal of her identity as a woman and as a writer, and her need for self-expression remains dissatisfied. *The Long Silence* deals explicitly and innovatively with the writer's quest for identity and purpose.

The creative urge of the individual intact, *The Long Silence* comments directly on Jaya's search for her true self, her identity, role, and place in society. Jaya's identity-blindness is a handicap for self-recognition and self-acceptance. The Search for Identity is a fundamental issue in the Development of the Individual during the Twentieth Century. The prolonged absence of identity leads to silence and alienation, which are pervasive themes in *The Long Silence*.

The Evolution of Jaya's Character

The evolution of Jaya, the protagonist of *That Long Silence*, is central to the novel. Jaya is not an isolated case, but rather a symbol of a universal phenomenon. Her responding to the voice of that phenomenon is the secret

of her intelligibility and her interest. She is Dr. Ahmed's complement and much more. She is an interesting case study in the formation of identity. Since she cannot identify herself with the role she is expected to play, she attempts to construct a world for herself; she realizes the futility of that attempt and the hollowness of all roles. It is, therefore, not surprising that Jaya rebels against the role of the subservient wife and unable to come to terms with what the role demands of her. Jaya's problem is the problem of identity in the sense of a consistent and integrated personality.

During those long years of silence the cracks appeared and deepened in Jaya's consciousness. The silence, conscious or unconscious, was a mask behind which she dissolved her true self. Yet, the silence has not been absolute; it has been interspersed with interior cries of anguish and despair. Coming down from the state of internecine struggle she [Jaya] now realizes that, perhaps, she has been blaming everybody — her father, mother, Sarojini, and even herself. But this is the time when the silence has suddenly become audible and she is, therefore, forced to listen to it.

Conclusion

In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande explores the protracted silence of a woman functioning in a man-centric society, where societal conventions enforce silence on victims of abuse. Jaya, the protagonist, experiences a breakdown after years of such enforced silence, igniting a quest for self-definition (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015). The novel exemplifies one voice in the broader discussion of female selfhood and autonomy that has evolved since the post-colonial phase in India. More and more Indian writers of the Earth utilize their work to examine and often challenge the paradigms within which identity is constructed, significantly expanding both the forum provided for such discussions and its conceptual parameters.

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