

Generational Mutes: Literary Gerontology of Mother-Daughter Silences in Indian Fiction in the Context of *That Long Silence* (1989) By Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract

*In this article, we look at how women in a patriarchal Indian culture have dealt with and passed on the many facets of silence. The study delves into the ways in which women's silence may be both a tool of oppression and a subtle form of resistance, placing it within the framework of literary gerontology and feminist literary criticism. This study examines *That Long Silence* textually in order to provide light on Jaya's internal challenges as she attempts to find her own identity while navigating traditional gender roles as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. Specifically, the study delves into the ways in which mother-daughter relationships serve to internalise and perpetuate patriarchal values, leading to generational disputes, emotional distancing, and the maintenance of silence as a cultural norm. This study draws on Shashi Deshpande's previous work to highlight the recursive cycle of female subjugation and the impact of social and cultural conditioning on women's subjectivity. Meanwhile, it highlights how women can progressively gain self-awareness, articulation, and empowerment through the power of silence and its transforming potential. According to the research, women in modern Indian literature are able to reimagine their identities through the transformation of silence, which has been a site of oppression throughout history, into a space of resistance and self-discovery.*

Keywords

Feminism, Literary Gerontology, Silence, Patriarchy, Identity Crisis, Gender Roles.

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Introduction

Many contemporary Indian women writers strive to portray the female psyche in its whole, reflecting the views of feminists who have long been active in the country. Writings by Indian women writers advocate for women's liberation and equal rights. Many modern feminist authors who have made significant contributions to Indian English literature—including Shashi Deshpande, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kamla Das, Namita Gokhale, Kamla Markandey, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapur, Indira Goswami, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, along with migrated writers Jumpha Laheri and Bharti Mukherji—focus on these issues. In addition, the central focus of these works is to denounce and shed light on the many ways in which men oppress women. The identity crisis is a fundamental subject that feminist writers address. The challenge that Indian women writers confront is how to express their unique perspectives on femininity in their work while still adhering to established norms. Shashi Deshpande mostly depicts women's lives and their struggles within the framework of contemporary Indian society. These women strive to be themselves as women and as human beings, yet they are unable to completely defy societal conventions that are traditionally patriarchal. Deshpande's protagonists have a keen awareness of their surroundings and use it to their advantage as they try to carve out a place, however tiny, for themselves in the constrained context of Indian culture.

As a woman, Shashi Deshpande embodies the lived reality of half the world's population. There is a lot of pressure on Indian women to conform to certain roles: submissive daughter, virginal wife, and selfless mother. The sole role assigned to women is to fulfil the roles of a decent daughter, wife, and mother. People often say that a husband and wife are soul mates. However, men tend to think they are better than women, so they fail to make an effort to connect emotionally with their wives, listen to what they have to say, or follow their wishes.

Shashi Deshpande and The Representation of Women's Psyche

Many women's mental health issues stem from the traumatic experience of being an unloved and unwanted child. *The Dark Holds No Terror* is an affecting depiction of a woman's struggle for survival in the world, especially when seen through the lens of feminism and women's psychological issues. From an early age on, Saru experiences psychological trauma as a result of her mother's gender discrimination (the most common form of abuse in India) and her treatment of Saru as an afterthought in the family. Saru also feels responsible for her brother's death, a feeling that is intensified by her mother's question, "Why didn't you die?" How come he's dead while you're still here? (34) causes Saru to despise her mother. Even educated women like Saru, who falls prey to her husband Manohar, are expected to submit to their

spouses in Indian society, as marriage is seen as a sacred connection for women. In male-egoism, Saru quietly suffers like a shackled animal at her husband's hands, has sexual disappointment, and longs for intellectual and sexual freedom as she rises in social status and becomes the primary breadwinner for the family.

One of Sarita's greatest strengths is the way she examines herself, comes to terms with her guilt, and then sets out to find her own identity. In trying circumstances, this introspection helps her see things more clearly and makes judgements that are easier to follow. Saru achieves all that an educated woman is capable of, including getting a medical degree against opposition, marrying outside her cast, and more. Thus, she is not afraid of the dark. Any woman in society can relate to the trauma that Saru experiences in the story. The novel's allegorical title, "That Long Silence," alludes to the plight of Indian women—a fate marked by quiet. The novel's protagonist, Jaya, falls prey to the patriarchal society of her day, and Shashi Deshpande achieved this by drawing on her own life experiences. The influence of her family on Jaya's life plans began at an early age. She vacillates between her two identities as Jaya, whose name means triumph in Hindi, and Suhasini, whose name means "soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman" in English, the name her husband bestowed upon her (16) In the first, male chauvinism is subtle; in the second, it is overt; and in the third, submission. As a result of her husband Mohan's efforts to steer her life in a certain direction, Jaya is unable to exercise her autonomy and falls prey to the patriarchal system's stifling influence. These may have been the catalysts that caused Jaya to experience a psychiatric breakdown and resort to complete silence. Through Jaya's voice, Shashi Deshpande suggests that Indian marriage is coercive and that wives are bound to their husbands via the metaphor "A pair of bullocks yoked together" (7). Jaya feels distressed and starts enquiring about her inner self under the stimulating conditions.

Silence, Identity, and Patriarchy In *That Long Silence*

Indian author Shashi Deshpande's feminist 1988 book *That Long Silence* depicts the female protagonist Jaya (Suhasini) and other female characters' fight for equality in a patriarchal society in contemporary India, whether that society is upper middle class or lower working class. To fill "that silence" with wants and inner satisfaction so that women might enjoy life to the fullest in our patriarchal society is the courageous attempt of the novelist in *That Long quiet*. This research is an effort to shed light on the problems that women in the androcentric Indian middle class face, particularly the internal struggles that these women endure. Shashi Deshpande, an author, has battled patriarchy for generations in an effort to reveal the hidden feelings of female characters like Jaya. Over the course of the book, Shashi Deshpande has emphasised on the effects of marriage on Indian women.

Readers of *That Long Silence* meet Jaya, a woman in modern India who must negotiate a complex web of household responsibilities, societal norms, and her own ambitions. The story takes readers on a journey with Jaya as she navigates the complexities of a patriarchal culture while juggling the roles of wife, mother, and individual. The majority of women face and fail to overcome obstacles in the job for many reasons, just like Jaya's character does when it comes to males. After giving it some thought, Jaya decides to remain silent when given an opportunity to get out of her jam. Feminist philosophy forms the basis of this book. Through Jaya's self-reflection, the story seeks to understand how modern women break free from mental blocks and put an end to long stretches of solitude. As the story progresses, viewers observe Jaya's path to self-actualization, which is interspersed with periods of reflection and defiance against repressive conventions. Deshpande expertly depicts the tense dynamics that emerge from Jaya's competing wants and expectations in her relationships, especially with her husband and children.

Feminist Discourse and Gender Role Conflict in The Novel

The goal of the literary and social movement known as feminism is to confront and eliminate the structural oppressions that women experience in today's society. Feminism is a major theme in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, impacting the storyline, characters, and message as a whole. Through deep character development, sophisticated narrative and critical analysis of cultural conventions gives a comprehensive and multifaceted picture of feminism in the Indian setting. Feminism in *That Long Silence* can be better understood by looking at the novel in its historical and social setting. In late 20th-century India, a period of tremendous social and economic upheaval, the events of the novel take place. Patriarchal attitudes and gender norms, especially within families and communities, remained powerful forces despite urban areas' modernisation and economic expansion.

The Difficulty and Restriction Women Experience in This Setting Patriarchal systems make it so that "the man climbing gingerly, almost on tiptoe, the woman walking with the steadiness of familiarity" (Deshpande 7), limiting women's freedom of choice and agency. In this story, our heroine Jaya has a hard time balancing her personal goals and aspirations with the expectations put on her by society as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. Examining gender norms and expectations is essential to the feminist discourse in *That Long Silence*. In her work, Deshpande challenges long-held ideas about what it means to be a man and a woman, shedding light on the social construction and enforcement of gender norms. The conflict between conformity and personal choice is personified by Jaya. "It's small, sharp and clear, like your face" (Deshpande 14), she says, describing how she manages the

responsibilities of being a wife, mother, and woman. The battle between staying at home and striking out on one's own is at the heart of the story (Deshpande 57). The demands of her roles as a wife and mother clash with Jaya's desires for independence and self-actualization. Deshpande draws attention to the ways in which women are conventionally expected to put their personal ambitions and autonomy on the back burner in favour of their responsibilities within the home. In spite of patriarchal conventions' limitations, *That Long Silence* honours strong female characters who take charge of their lives. "You were right where you were all among" (Deshpande 124), and Jaya's path to self-discovery and assertiveness is a tribute to the courage and endurance of women. The significance of women standing up for themselves and their voices, even in oppressive environments, is highlighted by Deshpande's story. Despite everything that this book has to offer in terms of difficulties. "Listened to the two girls talking and laughing in the kitchen" (Deshpande 177), Deshpande adds, is another way she stresses the significance of women standing together and being sisters. Characters' connections with other women provide them with courage, resilience, and support, demonstrating the transformative potential of solidarity and understanding in the struggle against sexism and transphobia.

Generational Silences: A Gerontological Perspective on Mother–Daughter Relationships

As the protagonist struggles to find her place in family and society, Shashi Deshpande depicts the inner turmoil of a woman who is at odds with both her environment and herself. Because of the strained dynamic between mother and daughter, a psychological imbalance has developed. While investigating the problems faced by her female protagonists, Deshpande has noticed that occasionally female characters bring about problems for other female characters. A mother tries to pass on the lessons she has learned about the gender gap while living in a war-like environment. What a mother goes through in terms of hardship is something that each person must decide for themselves. Being a woman is challenging enough; one must strive for inner calm, physical attractiveness, and self-respect. The importance of the mother-daughter relationship in shaping a woman's identity, social standing, and family dynamics has been reemphasised by the Second Wave Feminists. The representation of female relationships and their voices has been a demand from feminists. A voice has broken through the stillness, shedding light on the joys and sorrows, challenges and misunderstandings that cloud our perception of motherhood and daughterhood, "a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, pre-verbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other." According to Rich (19)

The difficult dynamics between Deshpande's female protagonists and their mothers are a common source of conflict in her works. An important factor in the development of Saru's neurotic condition is her mother in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. Her mother has a soft spot for Saru, and she blames him for Dhruva's drowning and subsequent death. As her mom said, "Why didn't you die?" How come he's dead while you're still here? (35) The devastating impact of these comments on Saru's mind causes her to become defiant and goes against people's intentions. She eventually goes to medical school and marries despite her mother's wishes. Mother and daughter love to injure each other and take pleasure in doing so. Even after Saru's mother passes away, the distance between them grows even wider, and they never reconcile. *A Matter of Time* depicts Kalyani's dreadful life as a consequence of a comparable type of conflicted relationship with Manorma. To ensure that her estate remains in the family, Manorma forces Kalyani to marry Shripati, her maternal uncle, and halts her schooling because she distrusts her. In *Moving On*, we see Vasu's defiant behaviour as she refuses to listen to her mother's desires and instead marries Shyam, despite Manjari's disruptive behaviour. The generational divide that has emerged as a result of industrialisation and urbanisation has had a negative impact on mother-daughter relationships. Most of Deshpande's characters have come of age and are well-educated; they disagree with the elders' divisive opinions. Vanitha Mami's comments about how a husband is like a sheltering tree and how "without the tree, you are dangerously uprooted and vulnerable..." "infuriate and upset *The Long Silence's* protagonist, Jaya. (TLS 32). Once again, the established order is shown in *Roots and Shadows*. Despite being a victim of sexism and oppression herself, the novel's mother figure Akka takes it out on the other women in her household. Indu was chatting with a boy in the library's quiet area when she scolded him. Along with discouraging Naren's mom from pursuing music, she says:

What an odd man to teach music to! Take a seat and serenade them complete strangers! Are you referring to those ladies? Is our family like that? Isn't it sufficient that you perform a couple of aarti songs and devotional songs? A girl from a respectable home doesn't require any additional information. (Radial 50)

When it comes to the family's female members, Akka is quite strict. She instills in Indu the belief that a woman should never say her husband's name because it would shorten his life expectancy. In these brief depictions of mothers, Deshpande not only emphasises the reasons for the estrangement between them and their daughters, who do not comprehend the socioeconomic circumstances in which the mothers find themselves, but she also subtly shows how the mothers suffer from the agony of their own helpless suppression of desires and ambitions for their daughters.

First, their daughters reject them for being mothers, and second, strangely, their daughters reject them for being mothers. By drawing parallels to the patriarchal system, in which even educated modern women face pressure to conform to traditional gender roles as mothers while simultaneously pursuing economic autonomy, Deshpande enriches her depiction of the mother-daughter bond.

Conclusion

Silence among women is not a byproduct of passivity or insignificance, but rather a patriarchal response that has been passed down through generations. This paper analyses *That Long Silence* from a critical perspective to show how, in middle-class Indian society in particular, silence is both a weapon of oppression and a place of internal negotiation.

Conforming to established gender roles—those of a faithful wife, selfless mother, and submissive daughter-in-law—reflects the psychological strain on Jaya's path. She exemplifies a societal trend in which women internalise suppression in order to keep the peace in the home by being silent for an extended period of time. But this quiet is more than just giving in; it's thoughtful, multi-layered, and even defiant at times. As Jaya begins to break out of her imposed silence and tentatively assert her voice and individuality, the narrative eventually highlights the potential for change. This study sheds light on the importance of mother-daughter interactions as conduits for the patriarchal value system's transmission from one generation to the next, according to literary gerontologists. Because of the ways in which they have been conditioned by society and culture, mothers frequently unwittingly participate in the oppressive system that they were born into. *That Long Silence* and Deshpande's other works illustrate the cyclical nature of suppression and silence through the tensions, misunderstandings, and emotional distances between mothers and daughters. Concurrently, these connections hold the promise of revelation, reinterpretation, and, ultimately, the breaking of passed-down silences.

In addition, the analysis highlights that feminist awareness in Deshpande's work arises not only through overt defiance but also through contemplation, self-awareness, and covert defiance. A woman's existential struggle revolves around the conflicting demands of modernity and tradition, of reliance and autonomy, of silence and expression. Breaking these ingrained habits of silence requires female solidarity and shared experiences, according to the study. The study concludes by stating unequivocally that "generational mutes" are not static realities but rather dynamic states. Silence has served as a control mechanism for a long time, yet it also holds the seeds of expression and transformation. A powerful addition to feminist discourse, Deshpande's narrative encourages modern women to break free from silence and

take back control of their lives by expressing repressed feelings and challenging long-held conventions.

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