

From Silence to Self-Assertion: Female Agency in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* explores female agency through Jaya, an educated middle-class woman who is simultaneously a wife, mother, and writer. Her autonomy is gradually restricted by the expectations of marriage, domestic responsibility, and socially prescribed femininity. Rather than presenting emancipation as an abrupt rejection of patriarchy, the novel depicts it as a gradual psychological process in which Jaya moves from self-silencing towards self-recognition and the possibility of speaking for herself. The crisis in Mohan's professional life, followed by the couple's temporary return to their old Dadar flat, creates the conditions for Jaya to reassess her past and confront the compromises that have shaped her identity. Through memories of marriage, motherhood, suppressed anger, creative self-censorship, and relationships with other women, she recognises how deeply patriarchal values have influenced her understanding of herself. This paper argues that female agency in the novel develops through self-interpretation, resistance to internalised roles, and the recovery of language in both speech and writing. Deshpande neither portrays Jaya as a powerless victim nor idealises her as a straightforward feminist rebel. Instead, Jaya's emerging agency lies in refusing to preserve domestic harmony at the cost of self-erasure and in reclaiming the authority to interpret, express, and reshape her own life. Her transformation remains incomplete, suggesting that meaningful agency can develop within constraint rather than beyond it.

Keywords: Female agency, silence, self-assertion, patriarchy, identity, marriage, writing, Shashi Deshpande

Introduction

That Long Silence is a novel by Shashi Deshpande that examines gendered power within the ordinary settings of marriage, family, and middle-class domestic existence. At the centre of the novel is Jaya, an educated woman who is simultaneously a wife, mother, and writer. Over the course of her married life, Jaya gradually teaches herself to suppress disagreement, anger, personal needs, and her creative impulse in order to maintain domestic harmony. Her silence is therefore not simply the result of an external command imposed upon her; it develops through

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a long process of adjustment, accommodation, and self-restraint. The novel consequently raises an important question of female agency: how does a woman who is capable of thinking and speaking become accustomed to silence, and how can she learn again to interpret her experience, make choices, and assert herself?

This concern with articulation is also illuminated by Deshpande's own reflections on writing. She explains that the novel emerged from questions that she had not previously been able to articulate, while her essays repeatedly examine the pressures placed upon women who write from within socially prescribed roles. These reflections are closely connected with Jaya's experience as a woman whose personal identity and creative expression are shaped by the expectations surrounding marriage, motherhood, and respectable middle-class femininity. Similarly, critical writing on Deshpande has often focused on the conflict between patriarchal conditioning, female identity, marital adjustment, and the search for selfhood (*Listen to Me* 180–81; *Writing from the Margin*; Reddy; Yadav and Rohit Ashwani). Such readings are valuable because they identify the social structures within which Jaya's silence develops. However, her journey cannot be reduced to a simple movement from oppression to liberation. Her silence is socially produced, but it is also maintained through patterns of accommodation that she gradually learns to recognise and question.

The present paper focuses on the articulation of female agency in *That Long Silence* and argues that this agency unfolds through three related processes: self-interpretation, resistance, and articulation. Jaya's movement towards agency begins when she starts questioning the taken-for-granted ideas that have governed her understanding of marriage, motherhood, duty, and womanhood. Through reflection, she begins to reinterpret experiences that she had earlier accepted without sufficient examination. This process of self-interpretation allows her to recognise the emotional cost of conformity and to understand how deeply patriarchal expectations have influenced her behaviour and self-perception.

The second dimension of Jaya's agency is resistance. As she revisits her past, she becomes increasingly aware of her hidden anger, dissatisfaction, and earlier acts of rebellion. These memories reveal that she has never been completely passive, even when she appeared outwardly compliant. Her resistance is often uncertain, fragmented, and incomplete, yet it remains significant because it challenges the assumption that agency must always take the form of open confrontation. Jaya's growing awareness enables her to distinguish between adjustment made through choice and accommodation produced by fear, expectation, or emotional dependence.

The third dimension is articulation, particularly through speech and writing. Jaya gradually recognises that reclaiming her voice requires not only speaking to others but also recovering the ability to represent her own experience. In this sense, Deshpande does not present her either as a helpless victim or as a simplistic feminist rebel. Instead, Jaya emerges as a complex subject whose agency develops through reflection, resistance, and the recovery of language.

This argument is reinforced by the novel's first-person narrative structure. The interaction between the present crisis and remembered experience allows earlier events to acquire new meanings as Jaya's consciousness develops. Feminist narratology is especially useful in

understanding this process because it draws attention to the relationship between gender, narrative authority, and the right to speak. Through retrospective narration, Jaya becomes an interpreter of her own marital history rather than remaining the silent participant she appeared to be in the past (Lanser, "Toward a Feminist Narratology"; Lanser, *Fictions of Authority*). The novel therefore presents female agency not as a single act of rebellion but as an uneven and continuing struggle involving the recognition of constraint, resistance to internalised roles, and the gradual reclamation of both personal and narrative voice.

Silence, Patriarchal Conditioning, and the Loss of Self

Jaya's silence develops gradually rather than through a single act of domination. Her upbringing, social expectations, marital responsibilities, and fear of conflict progressively teach her to adjust herself to the role expected of a wife. This process becomes clear when Jaya's identity before marriage is compared with the identity she adopts afterwards. Her father encourages her to think of herself as capable and distinctive, and even her name carries an assurance of strength: "Jaya for victory" (Deshpande 156). Marriage, however, introduces another identity. Mohan calls her "Suhasini," a name Jaya associates with the image of a soft, smiling, placid, and motherly woman who manages her home efficiently and cares for her family (15–16). The contrast between Jaya and Suhasini symbolises the gradual replacement of an individual identity by an idealised model of wifehood.

Yet Jaya never completely loses awareness of the difference between these two selves. Her ability to distinguish Jaya from Suhasini shows that her sense of individuality remains present beneath conformity. In retrospect, she recognises Suhasini as a role that she has learned to perform. Marriage becomes the primary space in which this role is produced and sustained. Jaya describes herself and Mohan as "a pair of bullocks yoked together," a metaphor that exposes the restrictive structure of their relationship. The pair must move in the same direction because resistance would make the yoke painful. In similar fashion, disagreement within the marriage is repeatedly avoided in order to preserve stability. Jaya eventually recognises that both partners have "snipped off bits" of themselves to maintain the relationship, although the cost of compromise is unequal. Mohan's professional ambitions largely determine the direction of family life, while Jaya assumes responsibility for domestic order and emotional stability.

This pattern is reinforced by the social advice surrounding her. Women are repeatedly instructed to adjust successfully to marriage and to treat its preservation as their primary responsibility. Vanita mami describes the husband as a "sheltering tree" and suggests that a woman without a husband becomes vulnerable (Deshpande 137). Such advice presents accommodation as a source of security, but it also encourages women to accept dependence and suppress dissatisfaction. Deshpande importantly shows that patriarchal expectations are not transmitted only by men. Mothers, grandmothers, female relatives, and other women also repeat ideas of obedience, sacrifice, endurance, and domestic responsibility. Patriarchy survives partly because its assumptions become normalised within family life and are presented as practical wisdom rather than explicit domination.

Within marriage, Jaya increasingly learns that her education and abilities are acceptable only when they remain compatible with Mohan's expectations. Her independence becomes

uncomfortable when it challenges his authority or self-image. One of the clearest examples of this process concerns anger. During an early marital disagreement, Jaya realises that Mohan sees female anger as inappropriate because anger “makes a woman unwomanly.” His memory of his own mother, who supposedly never behaved rudely towards her husband, further strengthens this ideal of feminine restraint. Jaya therefore learns to control her temper and metaphorically to “tame it on a leash.”

The suppression of anger is important because anger represents judgement. To become angry is to recognise that a situation is unjust, painful, or unacceptable. By disciplining her anger, Jaya gradually weakens her ability to question the terms of her marriage. Her later question to Kamat, “Have you ever heard of an angry young woman?”, reveals her awareness that society grants men greater freedom to express anger while expecting women to remain controlled. Silence consequently becomes habitual. Jaya frequently knows what she wants to say but chooses not to speak because she fears hurting Mohan or disturbing domestic peace. Even her laughter must be controlled when it threatens his seriousness or authority. Her behaviour increasingly becomes organised around protecting her husband’s sense of self.

The emotional distance between Jaya and Mohan also appears in their marital intimacy. Jaya observes, “But we were never together – only our bodies were.” Physical closeness has not produced genuine communication. Their marriage continues outwardly, but many of their most significant feelings remain unspoken. The absence of communication exposes the difference between marital stability and emotional companionship. The couple may fulfil the expected form of marriage while remaining separated by silence.

Domestic responsibility further contributes to Jaya’s loss of self. When she later reads her diaries, she discovers that they contain detailed accounts of everyday family life but reveal very little about her emotional experience. She imagines them under the title “The Diaries of a Sane Housewife.” The phrase is significant because the apparent sanity of domestic routine conceals frustration, exhaustion, anger, and dissatisfaction. The diaries record household order while excluding the inner life of the woman maintaining it. They therefore demonstrate how completely Jaya has absorbed herself into the roles of wife and mother while pushing her own emotional needs to the margins.

The experiences of other women in the novel deepen this pattern of silence. Mohan interprets his mother’s endurance as strength, but Jaya becomes increasingly conscious of the pain hidden beneath such endurance. Silence can function simultaneously as a “weapon” and a “surrender”: it may offer temporary protection, yet it can also confirm submission. Vimla similarly fails to express her suffering openly. Mukta continues to live according to established marital values even after widowhood, while Kusum’s psychological fragility and eventual suicide disturb Jaya because they reveal the devastating consequences of isolation and social vulnerability.

These women do not share identical circumstances, but collectively they demonstrate how female identity is repeatedly shaped through relationships and expectations. Their lives reveal a culture in which women are often valued according to their usefulness as wives, mothers, caregivers, and supporters of others. Jaya’s fear of failing as a wife or mother is therefore not

merely personal insecurity; it arises from a social structure that measures female worth through service, adjustment, and endurance.

Jaya's silence must consequently be understood as both externally conditioned and internally sustained. Marriage, family expectations, gendered ideas of anger, domestic responsibility, and fear of conflict gradually teach her to suppress parts of herself. At the same time, her retrospective narration demonstrates that this conditioning is never complete. By recognising the difference between Jaya and Suhasini, questioning the meaning of adjustment, recovering suppressed anger, and interpreting the silences surrounding other women, she begins to understand how her identity has been shaped. This self-recognition becomes the first stage of agency because it enables her to see silence not as a natural feminine quality but as a learned pattern that can be questioned and eventually challenged.

Writing, Resistance, and the Emergence of Female Agency

Despite years of accommodation, Jaya is never completely passive. There are forms of resistance under her silence in the shape of anger, dissatisfaction, memory and writing. Her agency is in place before the end of the novel, but only in partial and reluctant ways. The most obvious is with the written word. Jaya has literary ability and is already a writer herself. The trouble is that it is hard for her to write honestly, because she must cross the lines where domestic privacy meets public expression. If somebody's story is recognised, Mohan is hurt because he feels it reveals their private life. He does not state directly that she stop writing, but it is enough. Later, Jaya admits that she was "scared of hurting Mohan, scared of jeopardizing the only career I had, my marriage".

The phrase makes the conflict between authorship and wifedom apparent. This has made marriage her constant and most important part of her being and when it does not go her way, it seems like a risky form of creativity. She then goes on to create safer writing that avoids topics that will offend others. The internalised control depicted in the novel is one of its most important representations. The control of Jaya's writing is no longer a direct command; it becomes an internalised sense of what not to do. However, since she is not content with this kind of writing, it seems that the writer in her has not disappeared. This relationship between home, self-censorship and the fight for women's selfhood is also stressed in the major works on Deshpande's fiction—Al Mahmud, Atrey and Kirpal, Sandhu and Sree.

Kamat is significant because he deals with Jaya's anger and individuality differently. "Write out your anger" he tells her. She is free from the accommodating wife's constant performance with him. Although Kamat does not create Jaya's voice, he does show her that anger can sometimes become a mode of creativity rather than something always to be suppressed. She also shows resistance towards the treatment of Kusum. Jaya remembers that when she was defending Kusum she actually, "for the first time in years," fought Mohan. In the episode, she's able to stand up for herself when her sense of moral rectitude is stronger than her fear of marital disagreement.

These repressed tensions are brought to the fore in Mohan's professional crisis. When the accusations of wrongdoing jeopardize his career, the couple vacates their Churchgate home and ends up in their old flat in Dadar. Mohan assumes that Jaya will follow him; and she finds it

odd that she does just what he asks. The shift to Dadar disturbs habits that don't allow for prolonged thinking. When Jaya is away from normal household duties, she starts reflecting on her life's events. The flat emerges as a place of reflection where memories of family, marriage, sexuality, writing, anger, and motherhood are re-imagined.

Memory then becomes a form of agency. Jaya can't change what has occurred but she can change what she understands about it. Things that she has taken for granted start to show her even bigger patterns. Her adoption of another name reflects a changed identity; her suppression of anger reflects emotional discipline; her abandonment of writing reflects self-censorship; and the bullock metaphor reflects her accommodation to a marriage requiring unequal compromises. This process is reinforced with her first-person narration. Jaya is at once the subject of the story and its commentator. Separating experience from narration allows her to identify patterns which she might not fully have understood during the events.

The novel is thus a paradox of the quiet that is experienced. Jaya is often silent in remembered scenes, but as narrator she is in control of the scenes which are represented. Thus, she is not just a part of the equation, but rather the interpreter of her marriage and her own experience. The fight with Mohan in Dadar is another step towards articulation. When the pressure is severe, Mohan accuses Jaya of being indifferent, and alleges that he has let her do what she wanted. In response, Jaya names one of the sacrifices she made during her married life: "My writing. I had to do without it because of you". She also informs him that she has done what he wanted, and sacrificed herself for him and the children.

The confrontation does not yield understanding right away. Instead, Jaya's emotions finally surpass the regulated behaviour that she has developed, and she starts laughing uncontrollably. Mohan is shocked, and he leaves the flat. Years of accommodation have been aimed at avoiding such a rupture, and Mohan's departure only frightens Jaya more. But without his presence she too has to question how far she has come to define herself as Mohan's wife.

When Rahul disappears, the crisis becomes even more destabilising and shakes Jaya's confidence as a mother. Jaya has tried to build her identity as a successful wife and mother, but now both identities appear insecure. As they fall apart, the question of who she is outside of them looms. This crisis is not a final defeat but a basis for self-recognition.

From Self-Recognition to Self-Assertion

Jaya's journey towards self-emancipation begins when she realises that she is not merely subjected to oppressive structures but has also, at times, participated in maintaining the silence that confines her. Looking back on her life, she questions what made her suppress the desperate woman within and acknowledges that she was afraid of disturbing the image of a happy family (Deshpande 191). This recognition should not be understood as simple self-blame. Jaya's choices have been shaped by her experiences within a gendered social order that repeatedly teaches women to value adjustment, endurance, and marital stability above personal dissatisfaction. At the same time, Deshpande does not present Jaya as completely without responsibility. For meaningful change to occur, Jaya must first recognise the ways in which her own choices and accommodations have helped to sustain the patterns that now trouble her.

Her statement, “I’m not afraid anymore. The panic has gone,” marks an important psychological shift. Much of Jaya’s earlier silence has been governed by fear: fear of Mohan’s anger, fear of damaging the marriage, fear of failing as a mother, and fear of being left alone. The crisis in Dadar brings these fears to the surface, but it also gradually weakens their hold over her. As she reflects on her past, she begins to question the familiar metaphor of marriage as “two bullocks yoked together.” Earlier, the metaphor suggested that husband and wife must move in the same direction if they are to avoid pain and conflict. By the end of the novel, however, Jaya understands that a relationship preserved through the constant denial of difference cannot create genuine emotional intimacy.

At this stage, the words *yatheccchasi tatha kuru*—“Do as you desire”—become especially significant. Jaya recalls the phrase from her father’s diary as Krishna’s words to Arjuna. The emphasis on choice directly addresses a problem that has troubled her throughout her married life. She has spent years understanding what others expect from her, particularly as a wife and mother, while gradually losing contact with what she herself wants. The words therefore represent not freedom from every social obligation, but the recovery of the capacity to choose.

Jaya’s decision does not mean that she becomes completely independent of marriage, family, or society. Instead, her emerging agency lies in accepting responsibility for how she will live within these structures. The novel does not conclude with a conventional scene in which she leaves Mohan and rejects domestic life altogether. Mohan sends a telegram announcing his return, and Jaya remains within the marriage. Deshpande therefore offers a more complex understanding of emancipation. Jaya’s transformation does not depend upon escaping marriage; it depends upon refusing to return to the earlier pattern in which silence was necessary for maintaining it.

Her determination becomes clear when she declares, “I’m going to have to speak . . . I’m going to have to change the silence between us.” This statement represents the result of her psychological development. Speaking does not guarantee that Mohan will understand her, nor does it remove the patriarchal expectations surrounding their relationship. The ending deliberately avoids complete resolution. What changes is Jaya’s awareness that domestic peace cannot continue to depend upon the suppression of her voice. She recognises that a relationship sustained by silence must be confronted if it is to become more truthful.

Jaya’s movement towards agency can therefore be understood through three related processes. First, she interprets and decodes the social and marital structures that have shaped her life. She recognises how expectations concerning marriage, motherhood, obedience, and adjustment have influenced her behaviour. Second, she becomes aware that anger, dissatisfaction, and resistance have continued to exist beneath her outward conformity. These emotions show that her submission was never complete. Third, she accepts the necessity of articulation and begins to understand speech and writing as essential forms of self-assertion.

These processes are not linear. At different moments, Jaya recognises injustice, resists it, withdraws, doubts herself, and then attempts again to understand her position. This inconsistency gives her development psychological credibility. Deshpande does not present female agency as a simple movement from submission to freedom. Instead, agency develops

gradually within existing emotional, social, and familial boundaries. Jaya's self-emancipation is therefore not based on the disappearance of constraint but on her growing capacity to interpret those constraints and respond to them consciously.

Writing remains central to this transformation. Earlier, Jaya had censored her creative expression in order to protect her marriage and avoid Mohan's discomfort. By narrating her own story, however, she begins to confront issues that had remained difficult to express, including marriage, anger, sexuality, motherhood, failure, and identity. The narration itself becomes evidence that the long silence is beginning to break. Jaya does not return to some untouched identity that existed before marriage, nor does she abandon her roles as wife, mother, and writer. Her self-assertion lies instead in refusing to allow any single role to define the whole of her identity. By recognising her capacity for choice, reclaiming her voice, and accepting responsibility for articulation, Jaya moves towards a more conscious and self-directed form of agency.

Conclusion

In *That Long Silence*, female agency is a process that can be described as a gradual shift from self-silencing to self-recognition and from self-recognition to articulation, all of which are psychologically challenging and gradual. Jaya's predicament is caused not by a single oppressive event but by a combination of gendered socialisation, marital accommodation, emotional labour, fear of conflict, domestic responsibility and creative self-censorship. The crisis of Dadar and the memories it evokes alter her perception of ordinary aspects of marriage.

One of the key strengths of the novel is its resistance to representations of the passive feminine victim and instantaneous liberation. Jaya knows of the expectations of the patriarchy that have limited her, and she also faces the aspects of fear and accommodation that have kept her quiet. Her agency is thus interpretive and resistant, and it involves the rediscovery of speech and writing. The final decision to "erase the silence" does not guarantee equality or marital harmony, but it marks a step in a different direction, one in which she is no longer willing to accept being erased as a condition of belonging. Deshpande then places self-assertion not in the absence but in the presence of ongoing social and emotional relationships. Jaya doesn't forget to be a wife, a mother, or a writer, and she doesn't find a pristine self before marriage. Rather, she starts to assert her voice as a speaker, her questions, her writing and her choice within these identities. The feminist aspect of the novel is this subtle idea about agency: Liberation starts not by rejecting every relationship, but by refusing to be silent about one's own perceptions, anger, desires and creative identity.

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