

# The Search for Autonomy: A Journey -Towards Self-Discovery and Empowerment in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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**Mrs. P. Jenitha**

*Assistant Professor of English*

*St. Antony's College of Arts and Sciences for Women, Dindigul*

## Abstract

*This paper aims to analyse the protagonist of *That Long Silence* Jaya's quest for autonomy, self-discovery and empowerment in her life journey. The writer imagines exploring her desires, interests, and values. The author exposes Jaya's ultimate decision to leave her marriage and highlights the challenges and risks she faces. Jaya, an urban, middle-class woman exposed to liberal Western ideas, seeks to free herself from chauvinistic ideas such as the husband as a "sheltering tree." Moreover, in the texture of a novel supposedly about Jaya and Mohan, several tragedies of subordination are woven as though to form a tapestry.*

**Keywords:** Self-Discovery, Empowerment, Autonomy

*That Long Silence* examines the struggle for space of the protagonist, Jaya, who is torn between the traditional female role and her profession as a writer. Her identity is cramped between the social and cultural construct as wife and mother, and her craving to become an independent writer.

The protagonist Jaya is an educated middle-class woman who lives with her husband Mohan and their kids Rahul and Rati. Jaya's father brought up Jaya as an individual, her name stands for victory. Her father wants Jaya to be different from others. In her childhood days, she followed her father's footsteps. Immediately after her graduation Jaya gets married and her role changed as a dutiful wife, affectionate mother and dutiful to her relatives. Her husband Mohan also plays, but he is a traditional follower, and he doesn't like modern life whereas Jaya is educated, intellectual and a good writer, and she has modern thoughts and views, but after the marriage, she leaves all her qualities for her husband because he doesn't like Jaya's profession. She is living for someone else; she searches her identity as an individual because, immediately after the marriage Mohan forces her to change her name to Suhasini. She starts losing her identity.

Mohan leaves home due to his failure in his career and to avoid the situation of two bullocks yoked together. By the end of the novel, she searches her self-identity. As a result, she realises her identity, and Mohan returns home, but she refuses him, and she breaks her long silence of the past. *That Long Silence* deals with a crisis in a middle-class family, which triggers a process of retrospection and introspection. At the end of the novel, Jaya asks herself, in honest self-doubt and self-evaluation, the question: "But why am I making myself the heroine of this story?"

That Long Silence, attempts to highlight the causes and reasons of the oppression of Indian women in the domestic setup which prevents the empowerment of women and the scope for possible resolution in their search for female self-hood. The novel portrays the conflict in the mind of the narrator between the writer and the housewife. She feels suffocated due to the lack of physical, mental and geographical space.

The importance of women has been recognized in literature on various grounds. For centuries, the human experience has been synonymous with the masculine experience. The feminist philosophy researches the problem of “self”. The quest for women’s identity is a typical motif of feminist literature and a central task of feminist literary criticism. Accordingly, Shashi Deshpande’s novels reflect their highly critical mind of women’s identity. Being equal to their male counterparts is still a far cry for Indian women. Though, the Indian Constitution considers women as legal citizens of the country and has equal rights with men, women suffer immensely owing to the dominance of male society. A woman is dynamic in varied roles she plays and faces economic challenges bravely.

Her novels conceive the elements of personal experiences. Her psychological insight into her characters put her on par with the masters of the genre. Her women have a peculiar authenticity, as they seem to be direct offshoots of their peculiar backgrounds. They don’t speak much but we have ample opportunity to read the workings of even their inner beings. Deshpande has a rare vitality of language to make her portraits striking as well as convincing. In this novel, the novelist depicts a haunting tale of a disillusioned woman with her marriage and rediscovers herself. It portrays a quest for the human self within the women. Not only in That Long Silence but in all her works she revolves around the pathetic and heartbreaking condition of women in a male-dominated society. Jaya expresses her physical and psychological sufferings when she says “The only memory of it that remains with me is that of fear – a fear that I was losing Control over my own body. And so I resisted.” [TLS 1989: P1]. Fear is one of the weapons that portray the suffering of women physically and psychologically.

Jaya is a modern woman rooted in tradition, whereas her husband, Mohan, is a traditionalist rooted in customs. The difference between their outlooks is so great that they fail, repeatedly, to understand each other. To Mohan, woman sitting before the fire, waiting for her husband to come home and eat hot food is the real “strength” of a woman, but Jaya interprets it as nothing more than despair. The difference in their attitude is the main cause of their failure to understand each other. It becomes more of a compromise than love, based on social fear rather than on mutual need of each other. The cause may be rooted in their choice of a partner. For example, from the very beginning, Mohan wanted a wife who was well educated and cultured and never a loving one. He made up his mind to get married to Jaya when he saw her speaking fluently, sounding so much like a girl whom he had seen speaking English fluently.

Owing to martial disharmony Jaya recollects her childhood days with her father as he said “I named you Jaya ..... “Jaya for victory” [TLS 989:P15]. “And I was Jaya. But I had been Suhasini as well. I can see her now, Suhasini who was distinct from Jaya, a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman.” (TLS 1989: P15-16) Through these lines Jaya differentiated her name and the name Mohan has given.

Mohan never permitted her to raise her voice against him. Basic emotions like temper, joy, love and sorrow were not expressed by Jaya. Though women do several things for their husband but they are denied to express themselves freely to them.

Mohan encouraged Jaya’s writing for his selfish needs. He was not proud of his wife’s talent. “It’s not that writing I’m speaking of I said dully, thinking – it’s no use, he has truly forgotten, what can be worse than that? He has forgotten what he did. And I realised that even if I spoke, he would not listen to me. He had armed himself with an anger that seemed not quite real, but underneath it I could sense a genuine hostility. He accused me of not caring about the children, of isolating myself from him and his concerns even of some obscure revengeful feelings that were driving me to act this way.” (TLS 1989: P120)

Jaya feels that she has sacrificed her life for the sake of her husband, children and family members. She failed to live for her own self and she feels that she has lost her true identity in order

to please the members of her family. Her suppressed desires and anger are expressed through her writings. She also feels that she has been exploited by her family members for the sake of their desires. Jaya cried and painfully woke up and found herself alone. Jaya expected more in her marriage. Her marriage didn't fulfil her desires and she expressed her pain through her tears.

Jaya also suffered in the loneliness and was frightened to be lonely. Jaya deeply thinks "what have I achieved by this writing. The thought occurs to me again as I look at the neat pile of papers. Well, I've achieved this. I'm not afraid any more: The panic..." (TLS 1989: p191). She plans to achieve her career. She refuses to be Mohan's wife. She wants to live as Jaya and not as Suhasini.

Mohan and Jaya discussed their life. Jaya expressed her feeling and desire. She destroyed her silence. She decided to live her way. Both of them are separated. Jaya goes to her work in her path. She hopes "life has always to be made possible". (TLS 1989: P193).

Towards the end of the novel Jaya emerges as a bold and mature woman who refuses to be merely a shadow of her husband. She firmly resolves to break the silence that has been the root cause for all her troubles in her life. Jaya breaks her silence and faces her life with confidence.