
An Exploration of Magical Realism in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract: Magic realism is a literary mode that merges the ordinary with the extraordinary, presenting fantastical elements as an accepted part of everyday life. Coined by Franz Roh and later popularized in literature by Latin American authors like Gabriel García Márquez, the genre blurs the boundaries between reality and the supernatural, treating improbable occurrences—such as characters living across generations—as natural within the story's world.

While Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is primarily rooted in psychological and social realism, it resonates with the sensibility of magic realism through its symbolic treatment of silence, memory, and inner consciousness. The protagonist Jaya's internal world is rendered with such emotional intensity that silence itself assumes an almost tangible, haunting presence. The cyclical patterns of suffering, especially among women, gain a mythic quality, subtly echoing the narrative strategies of magic realism by illuminating unseen emotional truths within a seemingly realistic setting.

Keywords: Silence, emotional truth, women's suffering, magical realism

Introduction:

Magical Realism in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*: Magical realism, as a literary mode, transcends the dichotomy between the real and the fantastic, combining both in a seamless narrative framework. Originally conceptualized by German art critic Franz Roh in the realm of visual arts, the term was later appropriated and redefined in literary contexts, particularly in Latin American literature by writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, and Isabel Allende. In literary magical realism, fantastical or supernatural elements are incorporated into a realistic environment and treated with a matter-of-fact tone, allowing the extraordinary to be perceived as ordinary. Unlike fantasy, which creates an entirely separate world, magical realism situates magic within the confines of the real, enabling it to coexist with the mundane and the rational.

This literary strategy has proven especially powerful in postcolonial and feminist literature, where it functions not merely as a narrative device but as a mode of resistance. Magical realism, by blending the mundane with the marvelous, offers a unique means for marginalized voices—especially those of women and colonized subjects—to articulate their lived experiences, which are often excluded from dominant discourses. It allows for the expression of emotional, psychological, and cultural truths that transcend literal representation. In such contexts, magic becomes a metaphor for suppressed trauma, ancestral memory, or invisible oppression, and realism provides the grounding necessary for readers to engage with these truths as part of everyday life.

In Indian literature, magical realism assumes a subtle yet resonant form, particularly in the works of writers who grapple with the complexities of identity, gender, and socio-cultural expectations. A compelling example of this is Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*. While her oeuvre is traditionally classified under psychological and social realism due to its close examination of middle-class Indian womanhood, *That Long Silence* exhibits unmistakable resonances of magical realism in its thematic and stylistic treatment of time, memory, silence, myth, and fragmented identity.

The narrative does not rely on overtly supernatural phenomena but instead constructs a magically charged psychological space where past and present coalesce, silence becomes a living presence, and mythological archetypes subtly influence modern experiences. Jaya's internal monologue often dissolves temporal boundaries, allowing for a non-linear unfolding of consciousness that mirrors the timelessness typical of magical realism. Her silences, emotional estrangement, and symbolic rebirth are rendered with such intensity and metaphorical depth that they transcend their realistic settings, becoming mythic expressions of feminine struggle and endurance.

Through this symbolic layering, Deshpande elevates mundane experiences—domestic conflict, marital silence, emotional repression—to a mythopoetic level, thereby granting voice to the unspeakable aspects of women's lives. The psychological becomes metaphysical; the personal becomes political. By embedding these magical realist elements within a seemingly realistic framework, Deshpande disrupts the conventional boundaries between fiction and reality, inner life and social existence. In doing so, she offers readers a deeper and more complex understanding of the suppressed, fractured, and silenced realities of Indian womanhood, illuminating the invisible burdens women carry and the quiet revolutions they undertake in the confines of ordinary life.

Silence as a Magical Element: At the heart of *That Long Silence* lies the profound and multifaceted metaphor of silence, which Deshpande masterfully weaves throughout the narrative as both a thematic concern and a symbolic construct. This silence is not simply the absence of speech or sound; rather, it becomes a metaphysical force—an omnipresent, haunting entity that envelops the protagonist, Jaya, and shapes the contours of her consciousness. In Deshpande's narrative, silence is simultaneously imposed and

internalized—a product of external patriarchal conditioning and internalized self-censorship. It represents the weight of societal expectations, the burden of domestic conformity, and the emotional numbness cultivated by years of repression.

As a literary device, silence assumes a complex duality. On one hand, it is a symbol of suppression, emblematic of the cultural narrative that demands women be docile, invisible, and voiceless within the domestic sphere. On the other hand, silence becomes a form of resistance, a quiet rebellion that allows the self to survive in a world that denies it articulation. Jaya's silence is thus both a symptom and a strategy—a wound inflicted by patriarchal structures and a shield forged in response to them.

In the context of magical realism, silence occupies a liminal space, mediating between binaries such as speech and silence, visibility and invisibility, the physical and the psychological. Magical realism often disrupts conventional notions of time and space, and Deshpande's portrayal of silence does the same. It collapses linear chronology and creates a fluid narrative wherein Jaya's past traumas, memories, and disappointments emerge unbidden into the present moment, guided not by logical sequence but by emotional resonance. This psychological silence takes on an almost spectral quality—it haunts the narrative like an unseen presence, shaping events, decisions, and self-perception in ways that feel more magical than mundane.

Moreover, silence in *That Long Silence* is not static but dynamic. It evolves as Jaya moves through various stages of self-reflection and recognition. Initially, silence is the condition she inhabits—forced into a passive role by societal and familial expectations. But as the narrative progresses, silence becomes something she interrogates and ultimately begins to redefine. The silence that once suffocated her becomes the very space in which she begins to hear her own voice. This transformation lends the silence a magical quality: what was once emptiness becomes a vessel of awakening and possibility.

Deshpande's representation of silence mirrors the magical realist technique of investing the ordinary with extraordinary significance. Just as magical realism elevates the mundane through mythic or surreal expression, Deshpande elevates Jaya's silence to the status of a metaphysical presence, embodying centuries of silenced womanhood, suppressed narratives, and internalized grief. It is a silence heavy with memory, identity, and unspoken truths—a silence that paradoxically speaks volumes.

The novel opens with a moment of crisis—Jaya and her husband Mohan are forced into temporary seclusion due to an impending inquiry into Mohan's professional conduct. This physical confinement becomes a metaphor for Jaya's emotional and psychological imprisonment. Through introspection, Jaya begins to confront the long-held silences in her life: her unvoiced disappointments, her fractured identity, and her suppressed anger. The narrative does not rely on magical incidents but rather on magical consciousness, where everyday reality is tinged with mythic significance. "He saw strength in the woman sitting

silently in front of the fire, but I saw despair... I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon.” (*That Long Silence*, p. 36) Here, silence operates as both resistance and resignation—a paradoxical tool for survival and rebellion. This duality echoes the magical realist tradition of imbuing mundane experiences with extraordinary depth and symbolic value.

Fragmentation of Identity: The Two Names: The question of identity in *That Long Silence* is foregrounded through Jaya’s dual naming: she is called *Jaya* (meaning victory) by her father, and *Suhasini* (meaning soft, smiling woman) by her husband. These two names represent conflicting selves—one assertive, the other submissive. Jaya’s internal conflict emerges from her inability to reconcile these opposing identities. In magical realist narratives, characters often undergo transformations or possess dual existences to highlight fragmented selves caught between worlds—colonial and indigenous, traditional and modern, masculine and feminine. Similarly, Jaya’s identity is split between who she is and who she is expected to be. “I had been Suhasini, the real me had gone underground.” (p. 147) This act of “going underground” mirrors the magical realist motif of hidden realities—those emotional and psychological landscapes invisible to the outside world yet profoundly shaping the character’s inner life.

Symbolism and Allegorical Narratives: Deshpande’s use of embedded stories and allegories further aligns her narrative with magical realism. One such tale is the story of the sparrow and the crow—a childhood fable Jaya recalls. The sparrow, symbolizing the self-reliant, pragmatic woman, refuses to help the helpless crow and ultimately causes its death. Jaya reads this story as a metaphor for societal expectations of women—to be cautious, nurturing, yet emotionally detached. The fable functions as an allegorical mirror of Jaya’s own inner turmoil. Magical realism often employs such symbolic tales to reveal deeper truths within the narrative, where simple stories carry layered meanings that reflect cultural, psychological, or spiritual realities.

Jaya’s reflection on the sparrow’s cruelty and her decision not to tell the story to her son or daughter reveals a growing awareness of how narratives shape gender identities. The story becomes a microcosm of the larger gendered world that demands self-sacrifice from women while offering little recognition.

Stream of Consciousness as Magical Realist Technique: Deshpande employs the stream-of-consciousness technique to represent Jaya’s fragmented mind. Her thoughts drift between past and present, memories and sensations, embodying the timelessness that often characterizes magical realist texts. Through this technique, the reader experiences Jaya’s internal reality, where time is nonlinear and the boundary between memory and moment dissolves. This fluidity of time and self is central to magical realism, which often resists chronological order in favor of emotional truth.

Jaya's psychological alienation and isolation are underscored by her disjointed reflections. Her confinement in the apartment becomes a symbolic space where introspection takes the form of magical transformation—not in physical terms, but in her evolving consciousness. The inner voice that emerges is no longer passive or defeated, but questioning, critical, and self-aware.

Feminism, Myth, and Magical Realism: One of Deshpande's key achievements in the novel is her ability to integrate feminist concerns with mythic structures and magical realist sensibility. Jaya's initial conformance to the mythological exemplars of Sita, Savitri, and Draupadi is gradually replaced by a questioning of their relevance. These figures, drawn from Hindu mythology, represent idealized versions of female virtue and sacrifice. Jaya, however, perceives their stories as outmoded and oppressive in the context of contemporary womanhood.

This reinterpretation of myth, where the protagonist internalizes and eventually rejects traditional narratives, is emblematic of magical realism's capacity to subvert dominant ideologies. Deshpande reclaims these myths not to glorify them, but to expose their limitations and to reframe them from a woman's point of view. In doing so, she aligns with feminist magical realism, where myths are reimagined to reflect female agency and resistance.

The Unseen, the Unspoken, and the Sacred: Jaya's relationship with her cousin Kusum—mentally unstable and eventually ostracized—adds another dimension to the magical realist reading. Kusum embodies the unspoken trauma of countless women who fail to meet societal norms. Her character functions as a shadow self to Jaya—someone who succumbs to madness rather than remaining silently compliant. Jaya's decision to care for Kusum is an act of rebellion against the dictates of family and society, who warn her against getting "involved." The recurring statement—"Think of the children"—echoes like a chorus of societal conditioning that seeks to stifle empathy and individuality.

Kusum's presence in the novel serves as a mystical reminder of suppressed female suffering, and her narrative arc mirrors the magical realist trope of the 'madwoman' or 'seer'—a character who, though marginalized, reveals hidden truths.

Conclusion:

Magical Realism as Feminist Expression: In *That Long Silence*, magical realism does not manifest through overt supernatural phenomena, but through an emotional and psychological hyper-reality—a state where silence speaks, memories bleed into the present, and symbols carry mythic weight. Deshpande's nuanced use of magical realist strategies allows her to articulate the inexpressible dimensions of women's experiences—silenced traumas, fragmented identities, and repressed desires.

By incorporating myth, memory, inner consciousness, and symbolic storytelling, Deshpande transcends the boundaries of realism, offering a layered narrative that is as much about inner revolution as it is about social critique. Her engagement with magical realism becomes a means to reclaim female subjectivity, challenging the social constructs that seek to define and confine women.

Thus, *That Long Silence* stands as a compelling example of how magical realism can be adapted within Indian feminist literature to expose, resist, and reimagine the narratives that govern women's lives.

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