

Breaking That Long Silence: A Journey of Self and Voice**Dr. Vatsal Singh**Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Shyam Lal College (Evening), University of Delhi**Article Received:** 28/07/2025**Article Accepted:** 30/08/2025**Published Online:** 31/08/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.08.551**Abstract**

Much has already been said and written about feminism, and it means different things to different people. For some, it's about raising voices that have been ignored; for others, it's the fight against being treated unfairly. But in this paper, I want to move beyond that and ask a more complex question: ¿Is a woman truly empowered just by having equal rights and opportunities like men? Or is there something deeper that needs to be understood? Getting to know yourself, exploring who you are bit by bit through life, is a natural process, but society often tells you in advance what you should do, what you shouldn't, and how you're supposed to be. That's the problem. It's where you stop discovering yourself and start acting in a way that fits social expectations.

In Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence*, I have tried to show how Jaya, once confident and intelligent girl, gradually forgets what she really wants and ends up accepting ingrained societal values that only make things worse for her and her husband. What's more, it's not only women but also men who get caught and conditioned within these fixed roles, which only keep the cycle of subordination and dominance going.

So, then the question is, ¿what does real empowerment actually look like? Is it just about rights and equality on paper, or is it something deeper, something more organic, more composite, more collaborative? Women do face challenges, but the key is not just in complaining about them, it's in thinking through the problem and finding a way to resolve it. Not by escaping the system, but by finding your place within it and trying to fix things from there. Maybe real empowerment lies in living as who you truly are, without being tied down by these age-old social expectations.

Keywords: Feminism, Empowerment, roles, Voice, Female Identity, suppression, Patriarchal, Silence, Marriage, Gender Roles, Silence.

Introduction

When we talk about feminism, we often hear the same things, raising women's voices, fighting for equal rights, standing up against unfair treatment. But what if empowerment isn't just about getting the same things as men? What if it's about something deeper, something more personal?

This paper takes a closer look at these questions through Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence*. The story of Jaya, the main character, brings forward what many women go through in silence, the expectations, the pressure to be ideal and the slow disappearance of their own voice. Jaya's journey makes us think: can a woman do everything expected of her, running a household, taking care of everyone without feeling the need to compare herself to a man and still feel strong and fulfilled?

I'm not trying to say women should keep getting stuck in the same old trap of patriarchy, and I'm also not saying that we should quietly accept whatever role society gives us. What I want to explore is whether women can choose their own path freely, without always having to break rules just to feel free. Real empowerment, I believe, is not just about having rights, it's about having the space to be yourself, to speak your mind, and to live without being weighed down by what society has always expected from women.

Literature Review

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* holds a significant place in the landscape of Indian feminist literature. The novel was recognized with the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990, one of the most prestigious literary honours in India, awarded for outstanding writing across the country's 24 official languages. Over the years, her contribution to Indian writing has been widely recognized, she was honoured with the Padma Shri and her novel *Shadow Play* was shortlisted for the Hindu Literary Prize.

The novel *That Long Silence* takes us into Jaya's world, a middle-class woman who is trying to deal with the emotional burden of marriage, identity and social expectations. Through her story, Deshpande shows what it feels like when a woman has to keep quiet just to behave like an ideal in the house or to maintain that everything is happy and perfect. The novel is not loud or dramatic, it's simple, thoughtful and very personal, just like the silence Jaya slowly starts to question.

Most of the times in a country like India, men and women come from patriarchal set up and they spend their lives on what they have seen in their own families. Orthodox standards, different expectations from males and females and oppressive structures thinking as the correct way of doing things. Here societal norms and behaviours are deeply rooted in a patriarchal framework, which continues to influence the lives of both men and women. Most individuals grow up internalizing these norms, often without questioning them, simply

because they mirror what they have seen and experienced within their own families. Traditional gender roles, rigid expectations and orthodox standards become the usual way people start looking at things. These set ways of living are so deep-rooted that people start thinking they're the only right way to live and because of that, nobody really stops to question or change them. To challenge and dismantle these oppressive patterns, it is essential that we begin by talking about them openly. Silence or passive acceptance only serves to perpetuate a system that has gone unquestioned for generations.

Research Gap

The novel doesn't simply put all the blame on men. It also shows that both men and women are trapped in the same system. Society teaches both to behave in a certain way from childhood, and breaking those expectations isn't easy. Therefore, the politics of oppression must be examined as a collective experience, where both men and women are shaped, limited and distanced from one another by years long conditioning. The gap created by this divide can only be bridged through awareness, dialogue and mutual understanding. True progress lies in reimagining our relationships, roles and responsibilities in a way that frees all individuals not just women from the burdens of a patriarchal past.

Research Objective

Through this paper, my aim is to explore what female identity really means not just in terms of equal rights or opportunities but in terms of how a woman understands herself within the roles that society assigns her. I want to look deeper into whether true empowerment comes from doing everything men do or from having the freedom to decide what you actually want, without feeling pressured to fit into any ideal, whether traditional or modern.

By reading *That Long Silence* closely, I've tried to understand how a woman like Jaya, who starts off as bright and ambitious, slowly begins to lose touch with her own desires and starts living by what society expects of her. I'm not trying to blame anyone or glorify any one path but to open up the space to ask: ¿Can a woman still feel powerful even while doing household work, if she chooses it freely? ¿Can empowerment exist without always fighting the system, maybe by understanding it and reshaping it from within?

This paper also looks at how not just women but even men are trapped in fixed roles, and how that affects relationships, emotional closeness, and the sense of self. The objective is to reflect on whether real change comes not from rejecting everything we've inherited, but from questioning it, reworking it, and building something more honest and equal in its place.

Discussion

In the story, Jaya, a bright, thoughtful girl raised in a traditional middle-class Indian family. As a child Jaya is intelligent, outspoken and full of curiosity but society doesn't see these as positive traits for a girl. Her grandmother, like many others around her, teaches Jaya

to

be quiet, obedient and skilled in household chores, so she can grow up to be a good wife. She is told that being polite, adjusting to others and keeping her opinions to herself will help her in having a smooth relationship with her future in-laws and maintain peace in her marriage. She is intelligent and ambitious woman who once dreamed of studying at Oxford University. Not only this but she is also a writer. Her father supported her dreams completely.

After getting married to Mohan, a successful and respectable man, she steps into the role of a traditional wife. She cooks, cleans and takes care of the home while Mohan makes all the decisions. She learns to hide her true self. She says, "Marriage is not a union of two individuals, but a merging into fixed roles"(Deshpande 110). Their relationship lacks emotional closeness and Jaya slowly becomes aware that her voice doesn't matter much in the marriage. Marriage brought so many responsibilities that she hardly had time or energy left for herself. Still, she holds on to a small part of her identity through writing. Gradually, she realizes that whenever she expresses her real thoughts, people specially her husband doesn't like it Writing, which once meant so much to her, became something she could only do in her spare time. And even then, she didn't write what she truly felt. She avoided expressing her real thoughts or pain and chose to write about safe, acceptable topics. She says, "To be a woman is to be a stranger in the world. That's what I have been all my life a stranger in my own home"(Deshpande 94).

Jaya being a writer herself never used her writing to express her personal struggles. Instead of writing about her pain, frustrations, she chose to remain silent, just like the other women in her family. Her grandmother, aunt, sister all followed the same pattern of silence. Even when they experienced mistreatments and hardships, they never spoke out or resisted. The silence passed down through generations shows just how deeply these societal expectations have taken root. Women were taught that enduring suffering quietly was the only way to maintain peace and stability. She says, "A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated" (Deshpande 147).

This shows a bigger issue, how women, no matter how capable or educated they are, are always taught to put their family above everything else, even if it means sacrificing their own voice. These sacrifices and silences slowly eat Jaya from the inside, leaving her frustrated and lost. There are many instances in the novel that contribute to this silence in her case.

When Jaya was pregnant for the first time, she asked Mohan if he could cook something. He laughed at the idea. For him, cooking was something only women were supposed to do. At first, it looks like typical male thinking, but later we also see that even Jaya felt uncomfortable when she saw a man cooking. Somewhere, she too had accepted these ideas about gender roles without realizing it. In the novel she reflects, "The real silence is when you don't even ask questions anymore. When you have stopped hoping" (Deshpande 34).

The novel also brings out how marriage and family, instead of being just about love and togetherness, often become about sticking to fixed roles that everyone is expected to follow. These roles often stop people from really understanding each other. Jaya's bond with Kamat is a small way of going against this. He was her older neighbour, lonely but kind, and he listened to her without judging. With him Jaya could be herself something she never felt with Mohan. It wasn't love in a romantic sense, but a human need to be understood. And with Kamat, she could be her real self.

But society doesn't accept such a relationship. And when Jaya finds Kamat dead in his flat, she quietly walks away. She doesn't call anyone or ask for help not because she didn't feel anything but because fear held her back. Scared of what others would say, scared of what Mohan would think. In that moment, what was expected from her as a wife mattered more than what she felt as a person. What's even more painful than Kamat's death is that Jaya couldn't even allow herself to mourn him freely.

There is also an incident in the novel where Jaya explores that her name is missing from a family tree that her uncle Ramu kaka had made with great pride. When she wants to know the reason for this, he simply says that since she's married now, she's part of her husband's family. But what really bothers her is that, not a single woman's name is there not her mother's, not her aunts', not even her grandmother Ajji's, who once kept the whole family together. It feels as if women never existed. This incident keeps coming back to her. It makes her realise how women have never really mattered. Whether they were there or not, no one noticed. They are always missing not just from family trees but from family histories and stories too.

Things start to change when Mohan lands in trouble at work for doing something he shouldn't have. Later, he even loses his job because of it. As all this happens, the silence between him and Jaya becomes even more heavy and difficult. Jaya also speaks to her sister, Kusum, who has left her abusive husband and realizes that different types of men whether abusive or distant can still carry the same kind of patriarchal thinking. She also reconnects with her brother Ravi, whose criticism of Mohan leads to more tension at home.

The family is forced to leave their comfortable apartment and move into a small, simple flat. As usual, he doesn't talk to Jaya about it. He just decides and she's expected to follow. That's how things always were between them he decided everything and she just stayed quiet. She says at one point, "I have been silent for so long that I don't even know what to say" (Deshpande 75).

But this time there's a subtle but significant change; Jaya takes the keys and opens the door herself. It's a small moment but it marks the beginning of her taking some initiative, of doing something on her own.

Meanwhile their children stay with relatives and Jaya is left alone with Mohan. Their teenage son Rahul runs away from home, further straining the fragile relationship between Jaya and Mohan. After a heated argument, when Mohan leaves the house, Jaya is gripped by fear that he might never return. She felt vulnerable, helpless, and broken in his absence. She started to ponder over things which happened in the past and realised that all these years she was behaving like a robot doing everything possible which can make everyone happy. In doing these chores she forgot herself, she forgot that to make others happy it's really important to be happy from within. There were times when she could have expressed herself in front of Mohan and her family members but she never did that. To become ideal, women mostly forget that this is not the correct way of life. Sharing one's thoughts is really important to maintain love and warmth in the family otherwise, what looks like a happy family from the outside is nothing but a pretence, a carefully maintained facade.

Mohan's absence pushes Jaya to reflect on her life, her choices and the emptiness in her marriage. On the outside, it seemed like the picture of a happy family. But beneath that surface was a deep sense of emptiness, a silence that came from not being able to speak her mind or be truly understood. This silence gradually started to erase her identity. She began to mould herself into what society expected, losing touch with who she really was.

Despite everything, Jaya realizes that both she and Mohan have been victims of the same cultural expectations. Neither of them learned how to share emotions or ask for what they truly needed. Mohan doesn't know how to seek support when he needs it and Jaya has never learned how to offer it because she was taught all her life to suppress her own feelings. It's only after Mohan leaves the house and Jaya is left alone that she begins to see her own role in their emotional disconnect.

In her case, her misery after Mohan leaves reveals something important, she does love him, and in his absence, she feels incomplete. His presence matters to her and without him, she cannot truly feel happy or empowered. But alongside this emotional vulnerability comes a powerful decision: she will no longer stay silent. Mohan is her life partner and her silence over the years has only damaged their relationship. She now recognizes that real empowerment doesn't come from abandoning everything or retreating into isolation, it comes from facing issues head-on and changing things from within. Empowerment, in the true sense, is not about escaping the system but transforming it. Real solutions are not found in distance or silence, but through communication, courage, and presence within the very space that once silenced you.

In the end Mohan sends a telegram, saying he's coming back and that his job has been reinstated. Jaya chooses to welcome him not as the silent, dutiful wife she once was, but as a woman who has found her voice. She promises herself that the silence that has

defined her life so far will end. She may not have all the answers but she is ready to begin again with honesty, strength and a renewed sense of self.

If we talk about Mohan's part in the novel, it is a perfect example of how system forces you be fitting in a certain way. He grew up in hardship and like many men felt immense pressure to achieve financial success at any cost. His choices were influenced by the same patriarchal values that shaped Jaya's silence. The real issue is not just women's oppression, it's the entire system that forces both men and women into fixed roles, preventing true emotional connection and mutual understanding. That's why change can only happen if we talk about these issues openly. Simply following what has been done for centuries will only continue the cycle of inequality and suffering. Focusing on the struggles of women is an important part of gender studies but leaving men out of the conversation would be a mistake. Both men and women are shaped by the politics of oppression and without addressing this larger system we can't bridge the emotional and social gaps that it creates.

That's why *That Long Silence* is not only about women emancipation but much more than that. It's also about the whole oppressive set up in which we all are trapped for years. Stressing more on the condition of women is of course a part of women's studies but in this pursuit, we can't leave our men folk behind. We also have to talk about the politics of oppression in which both are conditioned to do things differently without realising the kind of gap it is creating.

Jaya's journey in *That Long Silence* is not just about breaking her personal silence but also about questioning the system that has forced generations of women to suppress their voices. The novel doesn't simply put all the blame on men. It shows that both men and women are trapped in the same system. Society teaches both to behave in a certain way from childhood and breaking those expectations isn't easy.

One very important truth that comes through Jaya's character is that empowerment doesn't necessarily mean walking away from your husband or family. Differences will always exist in relationships but the solution isn't to dominate others nor is it to be dominated. Much can be resolved simply by talking and expressing what we truly feel. But that first step often has to come from women.

Many times, we choose silence. We hold back our thoughts, believing that speaking up might disturb the peace at home. But this idea that silence maintains harmony is exactly what needs to be changed. Only when this barrier is broken can real emancipation begin.

True empowerment, I believe, is not just about rights. It's also about having the freedom to decide your own role in life, your voice, without being held back by what the world has always expected from women.

Conclusion

In *That Long Silence*, empowerment doesn't come from escape, it comes from transformation within. Jaya doesn't leave her marriage; instead, she redefines her place in it. When Mohan returns and she welcomes him back, she is very much herself at that point--honest, expressive and determined to keep her voice alive. That, I believe, is real empowerment not silence, not escape, but speaking and living from your truth. As Jaya realizes in the final moments of the novel:

"I will have to speak to listen; I will have to erase the silence between us. ... And if there is anything I know now it is this: life has always to be made possible" (Deshpande 192).

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