

Anonymous Narrators' Journey with Silence: Observations on Shashi Deshpande's "The Liberated Woman" and "The Intrusion"

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Abstract

The unjust cultural binaries are read and observed through various disciplines, but the aspects relating to silence have seldom been a part of the literary canon. The paper's centrality is established on loud silence and authentic voice in the narrative of anonymous women subjects. The study of silence brings forth issues such as sexual surrender and unwilling physical consummation within the social institution of marriage, where women characters are eventually swept into silence. It also prompts a challenge to ethical boundaries of the imagination to the readers and enables an understanding of the clamour of voices and the discursive unuttered self-expression. This present paper attempts to locate different forms of silence in the select short stories of Shashi Deshpande, i.e. "The Liberated Woman" (1978) and "The Intrusion" (1993).

Keywords: Culture; Marriage; Narrative; Silence; Voice; Woman.

Shashi Deshpande (1938-) is a prolific author who critically draws and departs from the indigenous and theoretical paradigms of the discourse focusing on silence. Her works explore women's marginalized, silent, damaged, and oppressed state in our culture through reflections and sympathetic depictions of cultural and socioeconomic processes. Her writings are essential for examining the opposing point of view in the predominantly patriarchal system. She constructs an unusual narrative that visually depicts the female experience and questions its label in the traditional Indian household environment in her thoughtful writing. Deshpande has been one of the most prolific authors of contemporary literature.

Pratima Shah discusses in her article, "Characteristics of a New Woman in

the Short Stories of Shashi Deshpande, “ how Deshpande introduces the “new woman” who has to fight through modest dependence, aggressive self-assertion, and iconoclastic rage. Her fiction deals with personas in the light of mundane life situations. Silence is a recurrent theme/aspect in her fiction. Her women characters observe a dialectic that springs amidst speech and silence and chooses silence over speech as a marker of survival in a male-dominated world (4).

“A woman should learn the silence with all her submission” (Anacletus Ryan 2). The theoretical and meta-theoretical paradigms have discerned silence concerning corporeal and epistemic violence. In a cultural binary, it is observed that women are more affected by silence, thus resulting in a world more likely to be agency-less and misrepresented. The ideas of empowerment and emancipation seem cognitively imposed and less functional/performed.

Silence is a discourse that approaches a literary text with utmost concern regarding the female experience and its nature. Women have raised their voices against inequality in various domains, such as protest, legal, economic, and social restrictions concerning females' fundamental rights. It could be traced as a step towards silencing silence.

The present paper attempts to locate silence as a form in Shashi Deshpande’s “The Liberated Woman” (1978) and “The Intrusion” (1993). These stories are heartbreaking portrayals of cultural truth about the conditioned traumatic situation subjected to the married women placed within the Indian patriarchy. The writer puts her women characters in a space that echoes silence; also subjugates suffering in their marital lives. Deshpande exhibits a grasp of women’s psyche, mainly urban upper-middle-class women.

The selection of fiction in the short story genre instead of a long fiction adds an absorbed view to the constituents. Such narratives can be finished in a swift reading. They also expose a detailed scope for illumination instead of any other genre form in the literary framework. There is a fair chance to locate the voices in short stories and trace the fragments of silence which would otherwise be difficult to explore in a lengthy fiction; even in their brevity, short stories offer complexity. By selecting the genre, the study would better probe the ideas of women’s voices, silences and survival.

“The Liberated Woman” is a story of a woman who is a doctor by profes-

sion, but in her personal life, her condition is miserable. The story develops while focusing on pain of an educated woman trapped in the shackles of the patriarchal system. She expresses her individuality but blames herself for everything unsettling in her marital life. The story sensitively portrays the psyche of a woman who is the mother of two kids and is financially independent. She is married by her own choice, but her success and fame develop an inferiority complex in her husband. Her husband takes revenge on her through brutal consummation.

The female characters in the selected stories are described as inferior and voiceless, a similar view discussed by Gayatri Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). The term "Subaltern" means the subordinate position of a particular group. She highlights the issues of questionable themes, such as the position of the subaltern women in society (2). Similarly, "The Liberated Woman" is a critique of the Indian traditional mindset and rhetorical endurance inflicted on women. The character in the story is professionally liberated, but this fact becomes the reason for the failure of her marriage (4). Ironically, the protagonist is described in the title as "the essence of modernity" (37) and "a liberated woman" (44). She still feels trapped and choked in a miserable marriage to a partner who engages in sexual sadism.

The protagonist wants to talk about her situation and expose the dark side of her ostensibly blissful marriage. "You tell me what to say about a marriage where love-making has become an exercise in sadism" (39). She confesses, "A sadist - that's what I have for a husband" (40) her wedding was draining down the ruins.

The woman remembers the first few years of her "romantic, runaway marriage" (37) as blissful, but her increasing professional progress over time changed the man she desperately loved and married. From a romantic hero who quoted Shelley to his devoted wife, he became a grumpy husband, uncomfortable with his wife's better social and economic position. He eventually turned into a sadist (37).

Although "silence" literally implies an absence of speech and expression, it speaks and expresses just as much as it chooses to be quiet. Additionally, it reveals various levels and interpretations of the term lack of speech regarding different human categories that link to one another in multiple ways and exist in various contexts. The silence of the underprivileged and marginalized differs significantly from that of the affluent and influential, just as there are differences between the silences of other social groups

and spheres of society. The protagonist's internal conflict has reached a point where she believes that her husband is not to blame because it was her fault for growing up and becoming more famous than her spouse. She blames herself for his lack of success as a writer:

Listen, have you seen old-fashioned couples walking together? Have you noticed that the wife always walks behind her husband? I think that's symbolic. The ideal Hindu wife always walks a few steps behind her husband. If he earns 500, she makes 400. If he earns 1000, she earns 999- or less. And it isn't only money. It's other things too. Never overtake your husband in anything. (40)

Despite significant advancements in recent years, Shashi Deshpande shines a light on how society has been conditioned to view men as always superior to women. Some men still find it challenging to appreciate the talent and sacrifices made by women, demeaning them instead of acting superficially to comprehend and applaud them.

Nuzhat Khan, in "Shashi Deshpande's A Liberated Woman: On Marriage, Divorce & Financial Freedom" (2021), critically remarks on the Indian traditional marriage system, divorce and betrayal confined to women's life (1). The story shows the dual reality of many Indian women who are famous and successful. But, in their marital life, they are trapped in traditional familial roles, serving their best to their husbands' needs which is society's only concern. The husband in the story is a loving and caring person during the daytime but suddenly becomes a monster at night, abusing, beating, and terrorizing his wife to the point where she lacks the ability to scream or call out for help. She narrates, "At night he becomes just a terrified animal. I can't scream, because the kids in the next room may hear ... I can't fight back, he's too strong for me ... And I just endure" (3). Even when he is generally acting during the day and is afraid and embarrassed, she keeps her feelings to herself, maybe oblivious of his harshness at night: "We've built a wall of silence between us" (3). The protagonist in the story now discerns that a wife must follow her husband's steps to succeed in marriage. The woman holds herself responsible for their marriage's demise by insulting her husband's pride. After a month, the narrator discovers the protagonist has been featured in a magazine as "A Liberated Woman" in an interview. The interview brings a sense of confidence to her; she breaks her silence and takes a courageous step to give divorce her husband. Shashi Deshpande's portrayal of the "new woman," her predicament, and the intricacy of the man-woman connection within marriage in the Indian culture make the narrative noteworthy.

The crisis and problems facing educated metropolitan upper-middle-class women are explained in Shashi Deshpande's tales. The typical attitude of the wife is discussed in "A Liberated Woman," which forces her to put up with her husband's abuse. Shashi Deshpande's main worry is how Indian women could adjust honourably within the framework of marriage. She wants to demonstrate how the female characters in each short tale are bound by patriarchy, yet each makes an effort to break free. In her works, the female characters shine as the main characters.

Deshpande introduces the "new woman" through her short stories. The phrase "new woman" was developed by Henry James (1894)". This phrase talks about the women who tried to erase the orthodox image, break their silence, and raise their voices as the protagonist in "The Liberated Woman" breaks her silence to attain their identity. The silence results from a deeply rooted voice that does not find an outlet, ultimately leaving women mute. Identity is where one can think about his/herself, how one can view the society in which one lives, and the characteristics that define their image. Contemplating identity is necessary for understanding the character and portrayal of personas in a literary text.

"The Intrusion" is a story about a woman's consent and agency over her life's wishes and choices. The protagonist is denied agency by her parents as well as her husband. The subject even faces an intrusion over her body when her husband defiles her in the bed. The women protagonists in the stories have a conflict in their consciousness; they follow the old customs and traditions or break their silence to achieve their identity and hold on to their lives. Deshpande raises issues which affect her women characters' journey and notes these predicaments as a sufferer of inequality.

The story "The Intrusion" also brings forth the issue of marital rape, where a husband of a newly married woman becomes the intruder in her personal and psychological space. The author, through the stories, reveals the connection between her female protagonists and their silence within the conditioned space of marital life. Concerning marriage, Simone De Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1947), contemplates, "It is true that while marriages often diminish man, but almost always it annihilates women" (4). In the story, the newlywed narrator experiences silence predominating the hotel room when she goes on a honeymoon trip with her husband. The idea of being alone with a man, strange to her, instils fear in her conscience (34-5).

The protagonist is portrayed as silent and passive when she accepts the marriage proposal. The lack of friendship, the foundation of a husband

and wife relationship, is evident here. It is relatively clear from the narration that she withdrew when she made the action, at which she acknowledged and denied hearing the private sounds coming through the frail door and thin walls (38). She finds it quite repulsive to imagine herself in an unfamiliar room with a stranger (39). As she says, "And at present, we were not friends, not acquaintances even, but merely a husband and wife," it becomes pretty convincing (38). The story's female heroine seems to be a victim of body-mind conflict. Even her husband's eyes' "slightly hazy expression" she finds revealing and demanding (38).

She is hesitant to accept his efforts to continue the routine husband-wife connection, which is still being built. She consumes all her concerns with "exposing the mysteries of her body to him" because she is terrified of rejection (40). Her husband, however, reacts violently and coldly to her stuttering attempt to express their limited acquaintance, yet for her, it provides "a light-hearted sensation of escape" (40). Her feeling of relief quickly vanishes, only to be replaced by the humiliating reality of his ruthless physical assault on her in broad sight. She cries out "not for the physical pain", but she says "for the intrusion into my privacy, the violation of my right to myself" (41). Thus, the husband draws the boundaries of her sphere even within matrimony, where the sexual act for a man is legal, but for a woman, it is rape.

Martin, Elaine K., et al.'s article "A Review of Marital Rape" (2007) quotes Sir William Hale Blackstone. He produces the "Unities theory" that husband and wife become one and that the analytical support of the wife is waving during the marriage (3). Emotional and physical love are two equally important factors in the marital life of the characters, but in both the stories, the protagonists are also the victim of sexual oppression, as their husbands become intruders in their personal space. The physical union in the stories renders an unbearable painful emotion to the subjects instead of pleasure.

The patriarchal consciousness makes women assume a secondary position in the gender binary, which disagrees with their agency; this leads to an identity crisis and dislocation of the idea of self. Both the stories find the protagonists in the complexity of the man-woman relationship with a particular focus on silence within marriage. The personas are silent sufferers, struggling to trace their identity in their inner and outer worlds.

"The Liberated Women" and "The Intrusion" showcase women who lose themselves by fulfilling their husbands' bodily desires. The narrator in

the story "The Intrusion" remains silenced till the end. She was expected to continue her role as the giver silently, and this service was reciprocated, thankfully. She silently sealed her words and became a decorated doll to please her husband. Martin, Elaine K., et al.'s article "A review of marital rape" further discusses Blackstone's "Unities theory", which comments that the wife is considered a commodity after marriage (2). But, the protagonist of "The Liberated Women" breaks her silence at the end and makes a brave decision to be separated from her husband.

Both stories explore that modern women are more decisive and assured but cannot liberate themselves from the restrictions implied by each role. It is the silence that marks their existence more than an agency. Deshpande moderates speech as a constructive force that should emancipate women from their subordinate position in the patriarchal social set-up without destabilizing human relationships and rendering them a distinct voice. The character's life suggests emancipation as she gives in to patriarchal oppression. Women should comprehend their power and affirm their self-identity by stepping out of muteness and entering the self-proclaimed space.

The protagonists in the select stories are nameless. The anonymous narrators' choice of/about their journey, with silence as a companion, is responsible for shaping their destiny. But especially in "The Liberated Woman", the protagonist's desire to be independent is a reason to break her silence, adding newness to her personality. While in "The Intrusion", the protagonist suffers humiliation and suffocation on the first night of her marriage when her privacy intrudes. In contrast, the liberated woman faces brutality on her bed to satisfy her husband.

The writer portrays a detailed sketch of the subjected life lived by women in Indian society. Deshpande impressively explores upper-middle-class educated women's crises and dilemmas through these stories. The selected stories' voices speak about the male's intrusion over the female's body and mind and highlight the silence as an intrusion over the woman's self, especially from the psychological perspective. The portrayal of mute characters indicates that silence has an essential role in literature. The anonymous narrators' choices of their journey with silence are responsible for their fortune.

A woman's status in society is secondary, and the circumstances are submissive. The patriarchal consciousness delivers a mere relegated and brutal reality of a woman's existence. The consciousness gives little rec-

ognition to a woman's self and becomes self-effacement in her ordinary nuanced life. The idea of self-abnegation is deeply rooted in the psyche of women. Deshpande consciously captures this in the select stories and portrays it realistically. Through the role of the protagonist in the stories, she draws the intense emotions such as anguish and conflict of middle-class women and foregrounds tales around inflicted silence.

Deshpande's select stories portray how a sexually assaulted woman feels that marriage does not mitigate the protagonist's feelings if the persona does not own her life and body. Thus, the author exhibits the modern Indian woman searching for herself throughout the selected narratives. Through a detailed analysis/reading of the select stories, it could be concluded that Deshpande's works probe a silence-centric stance in a distinct creative style. This style marks the writer in a contemporary fashion as someone who portrays women in an atypical Indian context. Shashi Deshpande has shown her characters to form their subjective selves by remodelling their voice, which is vital to constructing their identity/agency. There is a sense of stagnancy as the female personas are caught within the system and strive hard to remodel their situation. It is quintessential that they work relentlessly in their unique way to remove the labels that society had put on them, ultimately unmuting their buried conscience.

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