

**INDIAN CONSTITUTION AND GENDER EQUALITY: A FEMINIST READING OF
SHASHI DESHPANDE'S 'THAT LONG SILENCE'**

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ABSTRACT:

The Indian Constitution guarantees gender equality through fundamental rights and directive principles, yet women's lived experiences frequently contradict these legal assurances. Shashi Deshpande's 'That Long Silence' presents a compelling feminist critique of the gap between constitutional ideals and social realities. This paper examines how the novel reflects constitutional promises of equality, dignity, and personal liberty, while simultaneously exposing the Constitution's silence on patriarchal practices within marriage and domestic life. Through the protagonist Jaya's struggle with silence, identity, and self-expression, the study argues that constitutional equality remains largely symbolic unless supported by social and cultural transformation. The novel thus becomes a literary site for interrogating gender justice in constitutional India.

Keywords: *Gender Equality, Indian Constitution, Feminism, Indian English Novel, Shashi Deshpande.*

INTRODUCTION

The Indian Constitution envisions a society founded on equality, liberty, and dignity. Articles 14 and 15 guarantee equality before law and prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, while Article 21 ensures the right to life and personal liberty. Additionally, Article 15(3) empowers the state to make special provisions for women, and Article 51A(e) calls upon citizens to renounce

practices derogatory to the dignity of women. Despite these progressive guarantees, Indian women continue to face systemic inequality, particularly within the private sphere of marriage and family.

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988) foregrounds this contradiction by portraying the inner life of a middle-class Indian woman caught between constitutional ideals and patriarchal expectations. This paper explores how the novel exposes the limitations of constitutional equality by focusing on women's silence, emotional suppression, and lack of agency. It argues that Deshpande critiques not the Constitution itself, but its failure to transform social attitudes toward gender equality.

The Indian Constitution and Gender Equality:

The framers of the Indian Constitution recognized the historical oppression of women and sought to ensure formal equality through constitutional provisions. Article 14 establishes equality before law, while Article 15(1) prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex. Article 21 has been judicially expanded to include dignity, privacy, and autonomy ('Constitution of India').

However, feminist scholars argue that the Constitution largely addresses public discrimination while remaining silent on private patriarchy. Marriage, domestic labor, emotional exploitation, and gendered silence remain beyond the effective reach of constitutional remedies. *That Long Silence* dramatizes this constitutional silence by situating gender inequality within the intimate spaces of home and marriage.

Silence as a Gendered Condition:

Silence is the central metaphor in Deshpande's novel. Jaya, the protagonist, has internalized the belief that a good wife must endure silently. She reflects, "A woman's life, they used to say, is one long silence" (Deshpande 7). This silence is not mandated by law but enforced by social norms that the Constitution does not directly confront.

Although Article 19 guarantees freedom of expression, Jaya's silence demonstrates how constitutional freedoms remain inaccessible within patriarchal households. Her inability to speak freely reveals the disjunction between constitutional liberty and social reality. Deshpande thus exposes how gender inequality persists not through legal prohibition but through cultural conditioning.

Marriage, Equality, and Constitutional Blind Spots:

Marriage in *'That Long Silence'* functions as a site of unequal power relations. Jaya's husband Mohan expects conformity, sacrifice, and emotional restraint. While the Constitution guarantees equality and dignity, it does not address emotional domination or the unequal distribution of power within marriage.

Jaya's realization that her individuality has been erased reflects constitutional blindness toward domestic patriarchy. She admits that she shaped herself according to male expectations, suppressing her voice to preserve marital harmony (Deshpande 42). This highlights how constitutional equality remains formal rather than substantive.

Identity, Dignity, and Article 21:

Article 21's guarantee of life with dignity is central to feminist constitutional interpretation. Jaya's struggle is fundamentally about dignity and selfhood. She is educated and economically independent, yet emotionally constrained. This contradiction underscores the failure of constitutional rights to penetrate private life.

Jaya's eventual decision to break her silence represents an assertion of dignity aligned with constitutional ideals. However, the novel makes clear that such assertion is personal rather than institutional, emphasizing the absence of structural support for women's empowerment.

Writing as Resistance:

Jaya's relationship with writing symbolizes feminist resistance. She abandons writing because her stories disturb patriarchal comfort. Her silence as a writer parallels her silence as a wife. This suppression reflects constitutional silence on women's creative and intellectual autonomy.

By reclaiming her voice at the end of the novel, Jaya challenges the patriarchal order. Literature itself becomes a means of demanding the realization of constitutional equality. Deshpande suggests that without women's narratives, constitutional promises remain incomplete.

Middle-Class Women and Invisible Inequality:

Unlike narratives of overt violence, '*That Long Silence*' focuses on middle-class domestic oppression, often invisible in legal discourse. The Constitution recognizes equality in public employment and education, but Jaya's experience reveals inequality embedded in everyday emotional labor.

This invisibility contributes to constitutional silence. Since oppression is normalized rather than criminalized, it escapes legal scrutiny. Deshpande's novel thus expands the feminist understanding of gender justice beyond legal definitions.

Literature as a Constitutional Critique:

'*That Long Silence*' functions as a critique of constitutional optimism. It reveals that gender equality cannot be achieved solely through legal provisions; it requires transformation of social consciousness. Literature fills the gap left by constitutional silence by articulating women's lived realities.

Deshpande does not reject the Constitution but implicitly calls for its deeper realization. Her novel aligns with Ambedkar's insistence that social democracy must accompany political democracy.

Conclusion:

Shashi Deshpande's '*That Long Silence*' offers a profound feminist critique of the gap between constitutional promises of gender equality and women's lived experiences in India. While the Constitution guarantees equality, liberty, and dignity, its silence on private patriarchy allows gender inequality to persist within marriage and family. Through Jaya's journey from silence to self-assertion, the novel exposes the limitations of formal equality and emphasizes the need for social and cultural transformation. Literature, thus, emerges as a vital companion to constitutional law in the pursuit of genuine gender justice.

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