

The Unheard Woman: Silence as Resistance in Shashi Deshpande's the Stone Woman

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Abstract

This paper, the complex role of silence in the short story by Shashi Deshpande titled *The Stone Woman* assumes that silence is not only a symbol of patriarchal oppression but it is also a covert form of resistance. Although women in old Indian families are culturally programmed to be emotionally reserved, Deshpande redefines silence as a survival tactic and a statement of inner independence. The story uses multiple metaphors and a complex narrative voice to show how silence of women, who have been made silent in their relationships and social life, can also be used to protect themselves against being emotionally exploited.

Using the feminist and postcolonial approaches and narrative theory, the present research studies that silence is a coded language with which women bargain the identity, protect inner worlds, and avoid being subjected to the influence of patriarchal norms. Through foregrounding the unheard woman, *The Stone Woman*, attempts to break down the expectation of silence being synonymous with passivity, and instead shows how it can be a strong source of resistance even in intimate and domestic environments.

Keywords: Silence, Resistance, Shashi Deshpande, *The Stone Woman*, Feminist criticism, Patriarchy, Narrative theory, Emotional autonomy

Introduction

In Feminist Literature, the element of silence gains the central focus as it tends to be a signifier of emotional restraint and patriarchy. Silence is romanticised as a feminine virtue of dignity, patience, and moral superiority in the Indian culture, specifically. Nevertheless, this idealisation often hides the consequences of silencing that involve emotional denial and identity eradication. In her subtle inquiry into the inner world of women, Deshpande reveals that absence of voice strengthens the domination of the patriarchal and, at the same time allows women to struggle against it. *The Stone Woman* gives an interesting case study of the functioning of silence in the psyche of a woman, in marriage and social world.

Women in the story are portrayed as inheritors of a very long tradition of silence, which is created by the society and internalized fear. Deshpande however makes this silence more difficult at this point by showing that it is a silence not entirely imposed; it is also a maneuver and defensive. The emotional petrification in the metaphor of a stone woman is accompanied by the implication of impenetrability of *The Stone Woman*, who refuses to be hurt anymore by the world that is not listening. The story brings to the fore an important difference between external silence of a woman and her active internal monologue which brings an intricate friction between repression and self-preservation.

Feminist scholarship has long shown interest in the subject of silence as a symptom of oppression and means of coded expression. Adrienne Rich (1979) describes the silence of women as a knowledge deposit and Elaine Showalter (1986) sees the silence as a linguistic manipulation whereby women express that which the dominant discourses have pushed to the background. These views attack the patriarchal interpretations based on which silence is weakness. According to the postcolonial theorists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), the subaltern woman is not only silenced by patriarchy, but also thereafter by the prevailing cultural institutions that make her voice irrelevant. The idea by Spivak that the subaltern cannot speak is relevant to the work by

Deshpande where the women are not prevented to speak, but the actual circumstances in which the speech is heard are not offered.

In Indian feminist literature, such scholars as Susie Tharu and K. Lalita analyze the process of imposing silence on women through cultural norms as the sign of virtue. According to Kamala Ganesh (1993), Indian women are socialised into silence in order to withstand family harmony thus strengthening the patriarchal value in the name of respectability.

In this academic environment, the works of Deshpande have received considerable popularity as they depict the interiority and emotional multivalence of women. Such critics as S. Prasanna Sree point out the nature of her emphasis on muted interiority, but Meena Shirwadkar points out her critique of domestic gender dynamics. However there is limited research that specifically examines silence as resistance in *Stone Woman*. They are the majority of the readings of silence as mostly being victimisation. The following paper will seal that gap by showing how silence is employed as a psychological and political tool.

The presented work utilizes 3 interconnected theoretical prisms, i.e., feminist theories of silence, the subaltern approach by Spivak and narrative theory. The idea of coded female expression developed by Showalter and the idea of silence as survival by Rich help understand that women express themselves using gestures, omissions, and inner monologues. Silence therefore works as a symbolic language where women regain emotional independence. Spivak points out that the voice of the subaltern woman is literally silenced, so it is no wonder that Deshpande has not given her protagonist a voice, her voice will not be recognized and acknowledged as a valid voice. As a result, silence is created in reaction to an unlistening world. The concept of focalisation by Gerard Genette and the feminist narratology developed by Susan Lanser can be used to demonstrate how the narration voice of Deshpande returns the feminine voice to silence. The dichotomy between exterior muteness and interior articulation disputes the principle that silence is emptiness. Collectively, these views enable silence to be analysed as intolerance and struggle.

The silence of her marriage life is evidence of emotional policing. When her husband comments her bracelet as an ugly thing, she silently takes it away even though “women frozen for all time into a pose they have been willed into” (Deshpande,167). This scene sums up the way women are denying some aspects of their personalities to keep peace. She subsequently feels it being groped by her fingers, which is an indication that she still feels a sense of loss. The silence in this case does not amount to obedience, it is a price of survival.

Throughout the story, Deshpande compares the silence of the narrator to her high-pitched inner voice. She sees another woman talking freely but she does not feel as far. Later on, her mind breaks down, which is known as words come to me disjointed and fragmentary “women with unreal bodies... who played and sang and danced all day” (Deshpande,166) showing how the silence over time deteriorates language confidence. However, her discontent does not stop here, because, she says “a voice inside me protests” (Deshpande,168), and, this proves that, the psyche is not dead, it is even defiant.

Her policing is carried to her music habits by her husband. He ridicules her passion about film songs as absurd jingles and she silences them, yet the songs continue to linger around until they provide an occasion to break out (Deshpande, 164). This stubborn coming back of the melody is one that represents the impregnability of her inner self. “When silence becomes unbearable, her body rebels. “My uneasiness congeals into a heavy oppressive weight... I make an involuntary sound” (Deshpande,165) .Her palm becomes clammy, indicating that the body is not what the voice can say. The embodied silence is converted to embodied resistance. Intimacy also serves to make silence more difficult. In the moment she enters the embrace of her husband, “the tune comes back,” (Deshpande,168), the inner voice of the person is reborn, meaning that silence is not absolute and situational, as well as emotional.

Finally, she withdraws into herself to the universe of the wonder of the two of them, one of fantasy that shields her inner reality. Her last doubt, “Sometimes I think that’s the truth. I don’t know” (Deshpande,164) sums up the wearying of existence between repression and objection. But her inquiry means a voice within her that will not be unwritten.

The analysis shows that silence in the tale is not a unitary idea, but a complex system in which women are trying to maneuver around oppressive systems. Silence is resistant and repressive. Despite the fact that the protagonist is externally silenced through patriarchal norms coupled with expectations of a marriage, she uses silence as a form of emotional shield. Her speech withdrawal is her refusal to practice emotional labor. The repetitive bodily reactions, nausea, clammy palms, heavy, demonstrate that the body expresses the unarticulable.

Although the metaphor of stone women focuses on how women are being chiselled into coldness by the erotic dreams of male fantasy, it is also used to speak of the inability to be emotional as a kind of power that is unintended. Silence is then a way of holding back aspects of oneself to a world which constantly requires sacrifice.

One of the fundamental observations is that the silence is inherited culturally. The fact that the narrator is afraid she is turning into one of them, as well as the fact that women are frozen forever in a posture they have been willed into, shows that silence is a script. Women are taught to fill silence as an act of femininity respectability, and internalize the role that society has created of them. This freezing indicates that silence is not actually just non-speech, but rather the performance of posture, expression and identity by social construction. Silence turns into a pose--made, practised and even traditional.

The second significant finding is that silence acquires a symbolic vitality by depicting the temple images. The stone women that are sculpted by sculptors provide an example of the way in which patriarchal fantasy forms femininity. The narrator has heightened sensitivity when she hears the imaginary sound of the tap tap of the hammer to show the reader that women are made-up into having unreal expectations. Silence in this case depicts objectification. Similar to the idols of the temple, women are supposed to behave in the same way: they must act ceaselessly, gracefully, repressing desire and being mute. The fact that the narrator is being compared to these stone figures shows her the fear of being transformed into an emotionless person.

The third discovery is made out of body expressions of silence. Silence is not limited to talk but it pervades the body. The heavy oppressive weight of the narrator, clammy palms, nausea, and vertigo show that there is psychosomatic effects of silence. Her body breaks through in instances when her voice fails to do so. This is important: body is being a place of resistance. Her body does not allow her to remain silent even in a situation when she is not able to state that she feels uncomfortable. These automatic reactions mean that emotional truth continues to exist under repression and the unconsciousness of the self does not allow it to be sculpted.

Fourth, silence is an emotional management in marriage. The criticisms of the husband whether on her bracelet or film tunes do not include shouting and active domination. Rather, they are based on the small and mundane judgments which define her self-image. She is not taking off the bracelet because she concurs with him but because silence has been a lesson to her. It is not that she chokes her tunes voluntarily, but through conditioned guilt. These plays expose silence as a means of marital discipline. However, the inability of the tunes to cease even though they are waiting to resist implies that resistance lies within the psyche. Silence hence becomes the effect of marital power as well as the means of survival of the inner self of the power.

The fifth finding is related to the disintegration of language. The narrator even has thoughts that are said to be disjointed and fragmented and this highlights the way silence even destroys inner coherence. The reference of language as the medium of transfer between thoughts and words breaks when under the pressure of emotions. However, her inner voice, which is protesting, tells her that an inner voice is still functioning. Silence, then, splintered expression, but not consciousness.

The sixth and, probably, the most significant discovery is that silence acts as a means of resistance. The isolation of the narrator into a virtual world is not a form of escapism because it is a denial to forfeit the space that patriarchy cannot perquer- her inner world. Her fantasized world of the wonder of the two of us is a psychological refuge where she crafts her story on her own conditions. Extrinsic silence helps her to live up to what is expected but internally it protects her uniqueness. This inner world is therefore a silent rebellion and thus allows her to maintain identity, memory, emotional truth and selfhood against total erasure by the outside world. Based on the current paper, it can be concluded that Deshpande redefines silence as an act of resistance; the unwillingness to be moulded, judged, or ingested by the patriarchal lust. This paper reveals that the silence

in the story carries numerous functions by appealing to the feminist theory, subaltern studies, and narrative theory and shows how the unheard woman retains agency by silent protest.

Conclusion

Silence in Shashi Deshpande *The Stone Women* is a multidimensional, extremely ambivalent phenomenon, the entity that cannot be simplified to passive suffering or interpreted in one way only as the oppression of women. Instead, the narrative by Deshpande depicts silence both as a creation of a gendered social order and as the main tool of the main character to negotiate, react, and stay mentally alive in the said social order. The novel shines the light of the inner world of a woman who, in spite of her absence of soundness in the outer world, develops an inner world strong enough to confront the structures in which she attempts to be defined. Silence therefore takes the functions of the burden, armour, language and finally quiet rebellion. Predicting the subtle aspects of this silence in advance, Deshpande criticizes the effects of patriarchal demands and simultaneously validates the strength and active women in limited areas.

However, perhaps the most arresting discoveries of this paper is how silence can be a sculptural power- how it can make women what they are supposed to be. The generational passing of silence is symbolized by the fear that the protagonist has about becoming one of them as well, women whose lives are frozen forever in a pose they have been willed to. The women who have come before her have been shaped, emotionally, physically, socially, into submissive figures, just like the stone women of the temple. These figurines are not just a work of art but also a symbol of the imposed stillness that is forced on women, the poses which society expects. But the consciousness of the narrator towards this danger is the germ of her opposition. Unlike the stone women, she is sentient, conscious and aware of the act of silencing; by this very awareness is a subversive power.

Silence also comes up as one of the means of emotional control in the marital situation. The off-hand remarks of the husband about the bracelet she has put on like a part of herself or her innate talent to hum film songs are examples where silencing is performed not by the outright use of force but by the repetitive and unconscious signs of interaction. The combination of such little actions creates a powerful framework of emotional control, which teaches the woman about what she may say. However, the reactions of the main character indicate an even more complicated situation: she behaves accordingly, but a certain part of her still resists on the inside. The fact that her songs were suppressed and that she was always searching her lost bracelet accentuates the perseverance of her inner self. Through this, silence is a conflicted space, both imposed and strategic, painful and protective.

Another thing that Deshpande shows is that silence does not exist within the sphere of speech only; it also penetrates the corporeal. The physical revolt of the silencing of the protagonist is shown by the vertigo, nausea, and clammy palms. When she fails to express her suffocation, her body expresses the message that her voice fails to. This physical outcry emphasizes the fact that emotional truth cannot be fully suppressed. The body is the one that does not want to be sculpted into stone; it shakes, fights back, and reveals the stormy interior world of the mask of submission. In this Deshpande shows the psychological effects of silence at the same time hinting at the self in rebellion.

The most significant role of silence in the story perhaps is that it helps to maintain the internal world of the protagonist. The example of how silence is used as a personal sanctuary is found in her walking into the world of the wonder of the two of us. Though this interior space romanticises her relationship it is also the place where she regains control over her emotional life. She creates a mental sanctuary to which her story belongs only in a world where she is denied the voice. This inner withdrawal highlights how silence can be a tactic of maintaining an emotional independence. Although some parts cannot verbally refute her husband, she is able to construct meaning within the safe parameters of her internal life. Therefore, the silence becomes a willful act of denial - not giving up but denying other people to fully access her inner world.

The story that Deshpande tells breaks traditional feminist beliefs that silence is passivity. Rather, the narrative provokes the interpretation of silence as an act of both weakness and power interaction. Although, undoubtedly, patriarchal pressures contribute to the silence of the protagonist, she also recreates it, thereby making silence a boundary, an emotional self-protection and place of preserving identity. Her silence does not only mean that she

does not know how to speak but it is a decision on her part to refuse to speak in a world that has been found unworthy of her truth. This difference is important, since it reposes victimisation as agency, erasure as endurance.

Finally, it is found in *The Stone Woman* that silence returned to its place becomes a rather subtle but powerful resistance. The silence of the main character covers a voice, which is active, critical, and full of emotions. She might be chiseled into immobility, but inside she fights the tool of anticipation. Her silence is her medium by which she moves through the oppressive structures without letting these structures take over her inner being. In this way, Deshpande turns into a voice of the voiceless woman, but she also reinvents silence as a deep land of female agentic activity in this manner. Even in the ultimate lightlessness, the silent woman continues living, thinking, remembering, protesting, and suffering, refuting the suggestion that silence equates to nothingness. Rather, silence in this story echoes with the unspoken power.

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