



From Silence to Self-Discovery: A Comparative Analysis of Shashi Deshpande and Taslima Nasrin

Harjinder Kaur¹, Dr. Geeta Sharma²

^{1,2}Eternal University Baru Sahib, Himachal Pradesh, India.

Emails: sherharjinder@gmail.com¹, gscsum@gmail.com²

Abstract

*Sometimes, being silenced helps people figure out their identity by making them able to find out the reason and struggle against it. This study is based on a comparative analysis of Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* and Taslima Nasrin's *French Lover* through their portrayals of Jaya and Nila. The novels explore the struggle of these two protagonists, who liberate themselves from patriarchal society and conventional thinking. Their silence resonates, prompting them to embrace self-identity and independence. In this comparative analysis, the writers reflect upon their writing styles and those of other authors, highlighting the problems women face of male dominance within their societies. This article, in one way or another, tracks the development of female characters, from silent characters and sweet daughters at home initially to troublesome young married women in the end. The two novels' female characters are similar because they do not have a voice from the beginning but acquire it towards the end. The lives of these female protagonists, initially depicted as family dolls, undergo significant changes, and they subsequently embark on a journey to discover their own identities. However, these women start to recognize their own speaking and acting abilities, as well as their chauvinistic attitudes.*

Keywords: Female, Freedom, Identity Crisis, Society, and Silence.

1. Introduction

Shashi Deshpande is a highly esteemed Indian author, known for her profound examination of the lives and challenges faced by women in contemporary India. She was born in 1938 and has written several novels, essays, and short stories that explore gender, identity, and societal standards. [1] The subtle way in which Deshpande depicts the female experience and the intricacies of their positions within the context of families and society is widely praised in her work. Her best-known pieces are *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *That Long Silence*, and *The Binding Vine*, all of which showcase her skillful narrative and ardent devotion to feminist discourse. Deshpande has made a significant contribution to Indian literature by telling gripping stories that give readers a deep insight into the struggles and inner lives of women. Deshpande, a renowned Indian English author, uses a real and informal tone to illustrate women's complex emotions and their need to cross the barriers, for developing an adequate secure sense of self in the community. Deshpande's works focus on the issues and obstacles that women face as a result of social

customs; male child preference, forced marriage, forced marital sex, rape, and sex-role stereotyping. She depicts the struggles that women undergo daily as they negotiate the intricate tasks of playing both the roles of wife and mother. She's able to accurately depict events from real life in her writings, which makes her works remarkable. Deshpande writes with a purpose, which is to resist and fight against injustice, oppression, and gender bias. She doesn't write for the reader's idle amusement. Her writing evolved into a voice for the oppressed and victims, striving to survive in a violent, nameless authority culture, best described as social, religious, or patriarchal. The first chosen work for this research is *That Long Silence*, written by Shashi Deshpande, delves deeply into a woman's inner journey despite the expectations and social pressures of Indian society today. [2-5] The protagonist of the book, which won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990, is Jaya, a middle-aged housewife and aspiring writer, who is forced to face her unmet expectations and repressed feelings as her husband's financial scandal upends



their cozy existence. The story, which is set in contemporary Mumbai, explores themes of gender roles, identity, and silence while giving a moving and truthful account of a woman's struggle to speak up in a patriarchal culture. That Long Silence is a noteworthy and enduring piece of feminist fiction because of Deshpande's insightful and evocative writing, which effectively conveys the complexity of Jaya's experiences. Swedish-Bangladeshi novelist, doctor, and human rights activist Taslima Nasrin is well-known for her forceful and contentious essays on women's rights, secularism, and freedom of speech. Nasrin, who was born in Mymensingh, Bangladesh, in 1962, started as a doctor but quickly switched to writing to confront gender and societal inequities. She was eventually forced into exile after her most well-known piece, *Lajja*, which was released in 1993 and criticizes the treatment of Hindus in Bangladesh. [6-9] The work caused a great deal of controversy and threats against her life. Through her writing and public appearances, Nasrin challenges repressive cultural standards and advocates for the underprivileged, despite facing multiple fatwas and being forced to live in other countries for her safety. She is still a vocal supporter of secularism, atheism, and human rights. Her fearlessness and unwavering commitment to her beliefs have elevated her to a prominent position in the international movement for women's rights and freedom of speech. The second chosen text for the research is *French Lover* by Taslima Nasrin explores the complexities of intercultural relationships as well as the pursuit of freedom and identity. The protagonist of the tale is Nilanjana, a young Bengali woman who, upon marrying the affluent, older Kishanlal, relocates to Paris. Nilanjana, who feels constrained in her marriage, meets the charming and free-spirited Benoit Dupont, a Frenchman, who sparks a passionate affair that acts as a catalyst for her self-discovery. Nasrin addresses issues of emancipation, cross-cultural conflict, and the complexity of human emotions via Nilanjana's journey. The book highlights the hardships and victories of a woman trying to find her voice in a strange country, perfectly capturing Paris's character as a city of romance and change. With its sad and thought-provoking narrative,

French Lover questions societal norms and honours the resiliency of individuals. [10-13] The current study sheds light on how silence can become a source of strength, enabling individuals to rise against and combat the conditions of patriarchal dominance. [14-16] The comparative study centers on the lives of two female characters, Jaya and Nila, who, despite their prolonged silence, ultimately become conscious of their own lives, enabling them to live a life of freedom and identity. Deshpande and Nasrin's heroines can think about and come up with solutions to difficult situations caused by patriarchal dynamics. The most significant strategy when it comes to resolving conflicts in different relationships is silence. The female characters in Deshpande and Nasrin's novel appear to be breaking the silence. The purpose of the current study is to highlight the struggles of female characters to achieve freedom and identity.

2. Review of Literature

The story provides an authentic portrayal and perspective on well-educated Indian women, as well as the treatment of women in both their familial and societal contexts. Furthermore, Pandey discusses their contributions of feminist writers, who, through their literary works, depict the roles and status of women in society and the home. The work expounds on Shashi Deshpande's critique of a society that diminishes the life opportunities of educated women. It underscores the fact that, despite their inherent potential, women continue to experience suffering and marginalization (Pandey, 2015). Saini, in his research, illuminates the portrayal of contemporary women who, despite their intelligence and talents, grapple with the quest for their own identity and individuality. The work also sheds light on issues such as sexual exploitation and the ennui experienced by women confined within the domestic sphere, serving the male-dominated household in our patriarchal system. The research portrays a patriarchal society and examines the plight of both men and women who contend with a system that persistently places blame on females, resulting in enduring suffering (Saini, 2014). Sreelakshmy discusses in an article the ongoing struggle of women to attain self-identity and self-respect. The article sheds light on women's challenges, particularly in the



context of domestic crises. The study explores a novel that vividly portrays the suffering, conflicts, and anguish experienced by women in their quest for equality with men. Despite having strong qualifications, women in India often lack independence and feel constrained in pursuing their aspirations. Indian literature often depicts them as devoted to their husbands and children, entangling them in traditional norms (Sreelakshmy, 2020). Nasrin writes with a purpose, which is to resist and fight against injustice, oppression, and gender bias. Her writing is not done to amuse the reader in idleness. She evolved into a voice for the oppressed and victims who struggle to survive in the violent, nameless authority culture that is likely best described as social, religious, or patriarchal (Maurya, 2014). Taslima Nasrin's widely circulated and appreciated works about issues affecting women have made her an important leader in Bangladeshi feminist thought. Nasrin is worried about several facets of women's oppression. Her fight is to free the minds and bodies of women from the control of males. Nasrin's horrific stereotypes of men are a reflection of her own experiences, particularly the time she was nine years old and saw soldiers rape women, including some of her fellow students. (Zaman, 1999). According to Nila all men are of same category who treat them as an object. They only love female to satisfy their lust considering female as the object. Although, all these incidents transform her life to self-actualization. She gains total control over her life and body, and Nasrin's attitude on women's sexual rights is profoundly feminist since she argues that a woman can never truly be free until she has total control over her body. (Sona, G. 2016). Her situation becomes the predicament of hundreds of other women in like situations. Nila had to put in a lot of effort to succeed in this procedure. The internal protest that says, "I fell into the trap of love and came out of it myself ... time is never wasted. This time was spent in acquiring wisdom and I needed it." (French Lover, 291, 2002) When Nasrin writes on behalf of Nila, she exposes that her soulmate lack of loyal devotion or love for her is what led to her freedom. Nila experience's identity crises and gradually comes to terms with her subordinate role, which inspires her to become

independent. Thus, she makes the decision to gain financial independence. But when her husband rejects her decision, Nila feels compelled to support it by saying, "You should have married a dumb girl who would silently do the housework and never protest at anything, who doesn't have a soul to call her own and cannot read or write" (French Lover, 56, 2002). Imtiaz and Kranti delve into the strict attitude of males and patriarchy, aiming to mold females to conform to the societal framework under male power and supervision. The article asserts that women are considered inferior to men and lack an independent identity. They are depicted as weak, subordinate, and caregivers. Throughout their lives, women are obligated to adhere to the patriarchal rules imposed on them. In early life, they must follow their father, and after marriage, they find themselves under the supervision of their husbands. (Imtiaz and Kranti, 2018) Becoming a target of male-dominated systems for her existence, Taslima Nasreen has personally dealt with how women are subjected to a meek role in which they are powerless to fulfil their rights to liberty, equal treatment, and a healthy way of life. She subsequently throws an awful blow to the hierarchical patriarchal system in her novel where a woman's trustworthiness is repeatedly examined and disputed, leading her to suffer mentally as well as physically. (Kumar and Karni, 2023) Although Taslima Nasrin demonstrates that marriage is not the final objective, it is a stereotype that a woman's purpose is achieved when she has a husband. Nila experiences a metamorphosis following her marriage as she realizes to found the "true her." Suffocated in her husband's environment, Nila's hard work to break barriers to free and spins to her own to discover her identity from silence (Soyimla, A.2018). There are certain similarities and differences between the well-known novels *That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande and *French Lover* by Taslima Nasrin, which both explore themes of identity, love, silence, and social obligations; however, their storytelling styles and milieus differ significantly.

3. From Silence to Self-Discovery

The research focuses on the text *That Long Silence*, which delves into the inner life of Jaya, a woman grappling with her identity and sense of self amidst



the rules and expectations of conventional Indian culture. Shashi Deshpande illustrates the perplexed state of the modern educated Indian woman through Jaya's character. Jaya, a middle-class girl with a good education, got married to Mohan, an engineer with excellent earnings. She married him with the hope of living a joyful life. However, her life transforms into that of an Indian woman, fulfilling the roles of wife, mother, and homemaker for her family. She, like other Indian girls, must navigate the challenges of male hegemony. At her parent's home, she was living independently, as her father wanted to make her daughter different from other girls. When Jaya was born, her father gave her the name Jaya, which means 'Victory'. Jaya says her aunt wants to make her a strong girl who will live her life with her identity. He instilled a sense of superiority in his daughter. Jaya has a writing talent; she publishes her articles in newspapers, but her husband Mohan is not pleased with her writing style and warns her to write something different. At this point, she refrained from advocating for her rights and continued to submit to her husband's dominance. Jaya, an Indian woman in her middle age who is entangled in a web of personal aspirations and cultural expectations, is the subject of a profound internal study. The story is quite reflective as Jaya works through her inner problems and eventually sets off on a quest for self-awareness. Jaya's silence serves as a symbol of the larger oppression that women experience in society. Since the start of the story, it has been evident that Jaya's identity has been primarily shaped by her roles as a mother and wife. There are underlying conflicts and a dearth of genuine communication in her marriage to Mohan. Jaya has been forced to repress her feelings and ideas because of Mohan's expectations, which are in line with social conventions and have stunted her personal development. This silence, which reflects the power dynamics in their marriage and the larger patriarchal system, is both verbal and emotional. The text depicts numerous instances where Jaya fell silent as a result of the limitations and directives placed upon her. In the first part of the novel, shortly after her marriage, she must change her name from Jaya to Suhasini at her husband's request. She began to behave and dress in a way that aligned with her

husband's wishes, despite her initial feelings of silence and suppression. Despite her dissatisfaction with the name change, she understood that her father, Appa, had given her this name out of love, signifying 'victory', and he wanted her daughter to be strong and stand out from the crowd. However, Mohan gives her new name Suhasini believes that this name, which implies a soft smile and an innocent face, is better. "She says; Her father gives her the name Jaya, which means 'victory'. Her father raised her as an independent individual. Later, Mohan gave her the name 'Suhasini,' which means a soft-smiled, placid, motherly woman" (TLS, 16). In *That Long Silence*, Jaya is artistically gifted. She first receives her husband's support. He pushes her to create quality pieces for different newspapers and journals. "As per his recommendation, she begins penning "lighthearted comedies concerning the struggles of a middle-class homemaker" (TLS, 148). She dislikes the type of writing she is currently undertaking. However, she continues to write because she wants to please him. Writer Jaya is a deep thinker who aspires to write about personal experiences. She wins an award for one of her narratives. The issue arises when she receives a prize for a narrative that provokes Mohan's anger. Jaya, by giving the example of the worm, highlights that even though it has the freedom to live its own life, as a wife of Mohan and mother of Rati and Rahul, she is unable to explore independently. She says; "I'm scared of writing. Scared of failing. Oh God, I thought, I can't do this anymore. Even a worm has a hole it can crawl into. I had mine as Mohan's wife. As Rahul's and Rati's mother. And so, I can crawl back into my hole." (TLS, 148). Jaya, seeking her voice, resumed writing according to her preferences after Mohan discouraged her from focusing on a couple struggling with false love. She started writing on other topics, which made her articles boring. At Kamat's request, she returns to her writing and gains her fame back, but it makes Mohan unhappy. But this time she is not worried about it and rises with her identity. She asserts that she alone bears responsibility for their silence. In the end, she says, "If I have to plug that 'hole in my heart', I will have to speak; to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us" (TLS, 192). Deshpande



reveals the depth of Jaya's internal conflict through her reflective narrative. Jaya highlights the contrast between her real self and the character she has acquired to fit in with society by sprinkling memories of her past among her musings on life. Jaya's self-discovery takes place in a major area, their old, small apartment in Dadar, the narrative's setting. The apartment represents Jaya's inner world, which is chaotic with unresolved feelings and unmet expectations since it is full of memories. The abrupt crisis in Mohan's work, which compels the family to face their weaknesses, is what sets off Jaya's metamorphosis. The rifts in their ostensibly steady life are reflected in this crisis, which serves as a mirror. Jaya is going back to her roots, both literally and figuratively, by moving back into the old flat. She starts writing in this area, a gesture that represents her taking back her voice. Jaya uses writing as a means of expressing her repressed feelings and ideas, ending the protracted period of quiet that has characterized her life. Jaya's self-discovery path is depicted with nuance and complexity. Deshpande portrays this metamorphosis as a calm, reflective process rather than a violent revolt. Through her work, Jaya starts to challenge the social conventions that have shaped her existence. She considers her relationships, her unmet concerns, and her dreams that she has repressed. As a result of her introspective journey, Jaya gradually begins to see the value of her voice and agency. Through the encounters she has with various characters in the book, Jaya's character complexity is brought to light. Her marriage, her kids, and her friendships offer many perspectives from which to view her identity. These exchanges highlight the complexity of her silence and how people close to her have supported it. Jaya's connection with Mukta, a widow who leads a somewhat free life, provides a striking contrast that draws attention to Jaya's limitations and goals. Deshpande's depiction of Jaya's journey is distinguished by a sophisticated and realistic grasp of the difficulties that women encounter. Jaya's journey of self-discovery is not a straight line; rather, it is a sequence of epiphanies and disappointments. Jaya is left at a transformative point in the narrative rather than a straightforward conclusion. Though Jaya hasn't entirely overcome her

silence by the book's end, she has started to express her feelings and ideas, which marks the beginning of a new chapter in her life. On the other hand, In French Lover, Taslima Nasrin tells the tale of Nilanjana, an Indian woman who moves to Paris after joining André, a Frenchman, in marriage. Nila also turned silent when she got married to Kishanlal NIR, living in France. Kishanlal also aspires to portray Nila as a typical Indian wife, serving guests and performing household chores with a smile on her face. She too endured oppression and hardship under her husband's dominance. Nila, despite possessing a sophisticated education, finds herself compelled to relinquish her aspirations, even in a Western country. She says; "Nila wound the corner of her sari around her finger and said, 'Actually, my time weighs heavily on me. My education hasn't prepared me to simply stay at home. (FL, 55). Nila's husband, Kishanlal, said to Nila that Indians did not argue with anyone; they would have to remain calm in all situations. She says; "Kishan shook his head violently and said, 'No, no, no, Indian wives can't talk like this" (FL, 55). In response, Nila calmly answered Kishan, expressing her frustration at her silence. Nila Says; In a calm tone, Nila said, 'Which Indian wife doesn't speak like this—your grandmother, right?' None of them screamed. "You should have married a dumb girl who'd silently do the housework and never protest at anything, who doesn't have a soul to call her own and cannot read or write, who didn't have wits about her and didn't dream a single dream" (FL, 56). Thus, this conversation between Nila and Kishanlal reveals that Kishanlal wants to keep Nila under his control, but on the other side, Nila doesn't want to remain ignorant and stand against her identity. Nilanjana's voyage of self-discovery in a strange country brings to light the battle that women everywhere confront to find their individuality and autonomy a fight that cuts over national and cultural barriers. Nilanjana feels quite alone and out of place during her first few days in Paris. She is physically free, but her new environment and the cultural divide that separates her from her old life have imprisoned her in a different type of silence. Her loneliness is increased by André's callous and occasionally patronizing demeanor, which causes her to second-guess her choice to leave India. Nasrin



conveys Nilanjana's emotional struggle and her search for self-identity through her internal monologue. Unlike Jaya in *That Long Silence*, Nilanjana struggles more since she is an immigrant and must contend with the difficulties of both assimilating into a new culture and attempting to maintain her identity. Her investigation of Paris, a city that represents freedom and promise but also presents its own set of problems, is entwined with her path of self-discovery. As Nilanjana gradually overcomes her emotional reliance on André and begins to pursue her interests and goals, her metamorphosis starts. A significant part of this process is her relationships with other individuals, particularly her connection with another expat. She gains a variety of viewpoints from these encounters and learns the value of independence and self-expression. The story in which Nasrin tells of Nilanjana's trip is both universal and intimate. It illustrates the larger issue of women's liberation and the difficulty of standing out in a society that frequently marginalizes them. As Nilanjana learns to establish her independence and negotiate the challenges of her new existence, she is reclaiming her identity through self-discovery. Nilanjana's path ultimately results in a realistic acceptance of her new self rather than a traditional happy ending. She gains acceptance of her uniqueness and learns to accept both her advantages and disadvantages. A compelling story of resiliency and empowerment, Nasrin's portrayal of Nilanjana's journey from quiet to self-discovery emphasizes the value of self-awareness and the guts to reinvent one's life.

Conclusion

Both feminist works, *That Long Silence*, and *French Lover* offer viewers distinct viewpoints on pertinent conceptual themes, exploring issues of gender identity and social norms within a variety of cultural, narrative, and aesthetic contexts. *French Lover* is, in essence, a potent examination of a woman's search for self-awareness and freedom from the repressive systems of patriarchy. She is compassionate; however, she can also make sensible choices. Her courage, determination, and willingness to endure in a harsh, patriarchal culture amaze us. Self-assurance steadily eliminates negativity and vengeance. As a

victim of structural societal stress, she establishes her objective to employ her autonomy, assurance, and self-sufficiency to defeat the victors. Both writers seem to be emphasizing to women in their novels that maintaining life at all costs is crucial in combating oppression. Unavoidably, feminism revolves around the issue of survival not simply bodily survival but also the maintenance of some semblance of human dignity, warmth, and the capacity to connect with others.

Acknowledgement

I had not got any financial help from anyone for this work.

References

- [1]. Deshpande, Sashi. *That Long Silence*. New Delhi: Penguin Books Limited, 1989.
- [2]. Nasrin, Taslima. *French Lover*. New Delhi, 2002.
- [3]. Imtiyaz, A. T. and Kranti, V. (2018) Matrix of Violence and Sacrifice: A Feministic Study of Taslima Nasreen's Novel *French Lover*, *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*. 6(4). Pp-188-193. RJELAL.
- [4]. Kumar, G and Karnik, B. (2023). Tale of Female Body: A Critical Study of Taslima Nasreen's Novels *Shodh* and *French Lover*. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 5(10), 1-6. IJFMR,
- [5]. Maurya, A. (2014). Violence and Women: A Critical Study of Taslima Nasrin's Novel *Shodh*. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, 3(5), 23-25. IJHSSI.
- [6]. Pandey, P. (2015). Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*: A Study in Humanistic Vision. *An International Journal of English*, 1(3), pp. 1-9. INTJENGL
- [7]. Rasheed, M. (2019). Feminist Awakening in Taslima Nasrin's *French Lover*. *Think India Journal*, 7838- 7846. TINJ.
- [8]. Rathod, G.P. (2022). Voicing the Unvoiced: A Reflection on Taslima Nasrin's *French Lover*" *International Journal Creative Research Thoughts*.10, pp. 891-894, JGCRT.
- [9]. Sani, M. (2014). Women at The Window the Feministic Approaches of Doris Lessing's *The Grass is singing*. *International Journal English*



- and Literature, 49(1), pp.73-77. IJEL.
- [10]. Sreelakshmy, S. (2020). The Role of Women in That Long Silence. Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science, 8(6). Pp.40-42. JRHSS.
- [11]. Soyimla, A. (2018). Feminist Study on Taslima Nasrin's French Lover. An International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 59(4), 282-289. IJHSS.
- [12]. Banu, S. S. (2017). Search for Self- Discovery in Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence. Special Issue Published in International Journal of Trend in Research and Development, 33-34. IJTRD.
- [13]. Sona, Gaur. (2016). Theme of Self-Actualization in Taslima Nasrin's French Lover, 2(21), Himachal Pradesh University.
- [14]. Sigma, G.R. (2013). Feminist Themes in Taslima Nasrin's French Lover. International Journal in English, (12).1-4. INTJENL
- [15]. Surya, S. (2017). "Despondency of Women as Portrayal in Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence" International Journal of English Literature of Social Sciences, 2, pp.2456-7620. INJELSS.
- [16]. Zaman, H. (1999). The Taslima Nasrin Controversy and Feminism in Bangladesh: A Geo-Political and Transnational Perspective, Atlantis, 23(2), 42-54.