Abstract: As a private personal addressal of the constraints and commitments that muffle the voice of the woman writer, Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence* (1988) deals directly with feminist narratological preoccupation with the context of how a woman writes. Deshpande expertly handles the use of the first person homodiegetic narrator to build a sense of intimacy and empathy with the reader, and also to add to the touch of real life authenticity which facilitates the reader’s sense of identification with the situations depicted in the novel. As in most women’s writing, the plot is minimal, and is restricted to the mind of the narrator, which is the site for the quest for selfhood that formulates the substance of the novel. Shashi Deshpande exploits the flashback and stream of consciousness techniques to their full potential to lay bare the innards of the intimate personal story of a woman. Considering the nature of the subject matter, perhaps this is the only technique permissible. *That Long Silence* as a representative sample of women’s writing exposes stereotypical images of women as meaningless constructions of the male imagination. The novel also shows instances of “reflexive perception” and “inversion” which have been identified as characteristic features of women’s writing. Also the presence of a mad woman in the text allows us to interpret the novel from the perspective of
Gilbert and Gubar. In the light of certain feminist theories, certain recognizable strains of women’s writing may thus be identified.

**Keywords:** feminist narratological application, selfhood, stream of consciousness, inversion, reflexive perception.

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Maninder Kapoor and Seema Singh

When Femi Osofisan in “Warriors of a Failed Utopia” identifies African exiled writers as “disillusioned fugitives” (qtd. in Cazenave and Celerier 131) writing for Europe and America, he could equally well be referring to the elite tribe of Indian writers with foreign credentials investing in foreign audiences, and basking in the warmth of foreign recognition. While glittering awards are no doubt attractive, this paper honours one who dared to remain behind.

Shashi Deshpande (1938–) is singular among Indian English women writers in the sense that she deliberately refrains from the temptation of succumbing to literary fashion in the West. She refuses to exoticize India in her fiction. She disobeys the herd instinct, and does not belong to the “celebrity club” of Indian writers who pander exclusively to the western palate and are prolific producers of fiction meant only for export. When Tobias Wachinger speaks condescendingly of the “imagining” (72) of a celebrity community of Indian novels as a direct

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consequence of the ministrations of western criteria for excellence, he does not even acknowledge Shashi Deshpande as a remote presence on the literary horizon. In Wachinger’s words, “the western metropole is of central importance, both as the commodifying, often enabling power behind narrative production and as the target audience of these novels” (72). Home-grown Shashi Deshpande is however immune to the demands of the western agenda and targets an indigenous audience. While Deshpande abstains from “pickling” (Wachinger 74) India, she wryly acknowledges that she was never the cynosure of critical attention and began to be noticed only after she was published abroad. Significantly, Deshpande expresses a cautionary note when she admits that western recognition enforces its own criteria, and demands a certain measure of conformity: “After the Booker and the Pulitzer, Indian writers have been under pressure to conform. Once our writers get over that and write honestly—doesn’t matter whether a western publisher wants it or not—we’ll have much better writing” (De 1).

Deshpande writes honestly, and scrupulously avoids the cardinal sin of betraying the subaltern by presenting the East within the packaging of the West to entice the West. Her claim to fame lies elsewhere as well. Arnab Chakladar recognises her unique strength while he brings attention to the irony that texts that do not relate to national allegories, or East/West encounters or a transnational subjectivity are marginalised or ignored. Appreciating the sensitively local flavour of her oeuvre, he states:

. . . the very local concerns of a writer such as Deshpande, her very lack of a global address in her style or themes, unsettle the configurations of “India” and

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“Indian Literature” that are willy-nilly created by the seemingly unconscious act of text-selection . . . Her writings not only expand our understanding of Indian women’s literature, or of representations of women’s agency, but also expand our understanding of the complex relationships that mediate community and tradition, culture and nation, and of Indian literature as a whole. (94)

Besides six short story collections, Shashi Deshpande’s fiction includes *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Vine* (1993), *A Matter of Time* (1996), and *Small Remedies* (2000). These novels are undoubtedly a searing portrait of Indian womanhood in distress. Also, they labour under an obsessive compulsive preoccupation with woman’s quest for selfhood. Her women protagonists—Indu, Saru, Jaya, Urmila, and Sumi invariably undertake an arduous journey which transports them from a state of self-effacement to one of self-realisation. Yet Deshpande shies away from the label of a “feminist” writer. She frankly admits: “I don’t like to call myself a feminist writer. I’m a feminist but I don’t write to propagate any ‘ism’” (De 1). While Deshpande fights shy of the straitjacket imposed by “isms”, her work presents a nuanced rendition of the power of gender to decide destiny within an Indian situation. This paper singles out the Sahitya Akademi award-winning novel, *That Long Silence* (1988) for its overtly conscious concern with the mechanics of women’s writing, and assesses its usefulness as raw material for a feminist narratological application. Robyn Warhol has defined “feminist narratology” as the study of narrative structures and strategies in the context of the cultural constructions of gender (21). Undoubtedly, different


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cultures differently construct gender. This paper shall attempt to dissect the extent to which gender as constructed in the Indian context dictates the terms and conditions of narration.

For Deshpande, writing itself is a means to self-discovery—a medium by way of which she announces to the world that there is more to her than merely being “Mrs Deshpande, Raghunandan’s mother, Vikram’s mother”. Galled at the step motherly treatment accorded to women’s writing, she recalls:

I feel I came through only because I had faith in myself. The desire to say something was so strong. That was hard when my whole life was considered unimportant, my work was considered unimportant, even writing by women was considered unimportant. Many women are silenced by lack of time. If I admire anything in myself, it’s only that I kept on. It’s easy to give up. (De 1)

At the same time Deshpande expresses a deep resentment at the casual dismissal of women’s writing as substandard: “If you’re writing about domestic things or the family, they immediately put you in an inferior slot. Somehow, women’s writing is always the zenana. It’s often called by the derogatory term, adige mane sahitya” (De 1). Deshpande insists that women’s writing needs to be read differently, that a story about a kitchen need not be belittled when it’s about a human being trying to place herself within relationships, people, and ideas. Deshpande’s preoccupation with the themes, processes, and reception of women’s writing finds ideal manifestation in That Long Silence. Interestingly, these are the very issues that constitute the subject matter of feminist narratology when it declares that gender makes a difference to narrative. However, as is

generally acknowledged, gender is socially constructed, is open to variation across and within cultures, and is not a monolithic construct that can unequivocally define a concept like women’s writing (Page 52). Yet it may be averred that despite the nuances in the concept of gender, That Long Silence serves as an interesting example within the Indian cultural context to test the veracity of feminist narratological principles. Such an illustration from Indian women’s writing would also enable us to deflect the allegation of Eurocentrism that is often levelled against feminist narratology.

Indeed, That Long Silence speaks the language of feminist narratology to make an explicitly eloquent comment on the process of women’s writing. The feminist narratological project deliberates over the existence of “a woman’s writing” and “a female tradition” and demands attention to “the context of how stories are told, by whom and for whom” (Mezei 1). Significantly, these are the very questions that figure prominently on Deshpande’s agenda in That Long Silence. Here is a woman writing for women, in the real world as well as the fictional world, in a deliberate attempt to unburden her soul of “the weight of that long silence of one half of the world” (qtd. in Deshpande epigraph). This quotation from Elizabeth Robins’ speech to the Women Writers Suffrage League (WWSL) in 1907 becomes the source of not only the title, but also the epigraph to the novel. Undoubtedly, the novel breaks “that long silence” and voices the agony of the female population of India, and perhaps even of the world.

At the very outset, the reader is initiated into the nitty gritties of women’s writing. The woman narrator speaks in the first person to directly address the reader, establishing thereby a

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close bond of intimacy and empathy that links the “I” and the “you” in a comfort zone of familiarity. It is stated that writing requires a brand of ruthlessness, detachment, and distance. Further, writing is compared to the process of childbirth. To quote: “I am reminded of the process of childbirth. The only memory that remains with me is that of fear, a fear that I was losing control over my own body. And so I resisted” (1). There is then an insistent identification with woman’s exclusive experience.

Subsequently, the narrator reveals her identity as Mohan’s wife, and to use Susan Lanser’s terminology, the narrative act acquires the dimensions of status, contact, and stance (86-94). Together these three components constitute the narrative act, and delineate Lanser’s poetics of “point of view”. When the readers directly register the narrating “I” as Mohan’s wife and as a struggling writer, that “I” displays the status of a homodiegetic narrator making direct contact with “you”, representative by implication of a category of women readers sensitive to and cognizant of the trials and tribulations of such writing. Simultaneously, the “I” reveals her “stance” towards the discourse content that is to be initiated. This is to be a painful though cathartic attempt at self revelation. Thus the “status”, “contact”, and “stance” of the narrating “I” help articulate our comprehension of the author’s textual persona, or to use narratological terminology, the “implied author”. As Seymour Chatman reminds us, “it is essential not to confuse author and narrator” (147). What we reconstruct from the narrative is the “implied author”, who is not the narrator, “but rather the principle that invented the narrator, along with

everything else in the narrative, that stacked the cards in this particular way, had these things happen to these characters in these words or images” (147).

Yet in That Long Silence, both the author and narrator seem suspiciously similar. Both are urban, middle-class, educated, professional women with university degrees. Shashi Deshpande is a woman writer who churned out saccharine romances for Femina and Eve’s Weekly before she acquired international status. The narrator Jaya is also an aspiring writer who bottles her breath to mouth inane adolescent fantasies about innocent young girls who mated themselves with the right men. Her humble claim to fame is the regular weekly column on blissful “Seeta” for Woman’s World—expertly written light humorous pieces about the travails of a middle-class housewife—stories that are supremely successful in building a happy illusion that does not even remotely suggest the actual truth. These are stories whose implied author is in Kamat’s words, one of the novel’s characters, “plump good humoured pea brained but shrewd, devious, skimming over life . . .” (149). As a woman writer, Jaya must sift her subject matter with care, and skim over life. She must throttle her real self, and close the door firmly on all those women she had been clamouring to write about, but could not because she ran the risk of their remotely resembling either Mohan’s mother or aunt or her mother or aunt. Seeta was the safest bet—a convenient fiction acceptable to Mohan—not ugly things about a man and a woman whom people might mistake for Mohan and Jaya, and thus violate Mohan’s sense of dignity and propriety. Jaya cannot counter his accusation of “exhibitionism” nor can she explain that while she makes use of personal experience as raw material, she transmutes it into something

completely different. Since she cannot explain, she must abjure or place her marriage in jeopardy. Rather than invite such a disaster, she prefers to masquerade as what she is not. Thus she corks her anger, abandons ambition, consents to being pea brained, and emulates Seeta, who as the heroine of the Hindu epic Ramayana embodies the Indian epitome of female perfection. While she does take recourse to self pity, write under a false name, fear failure, and find excuses for it, the end of the novel finds her abandoning fear and restraint to follow freely the dictates of her desire, buoyed by the recognition that she must erase the silence, and speak “Sanskrit”, and not the “Prakrit” that women characters were condemned to in Sanskrit drama. The allusion is subtle. She had been speaking “Prakrit” all along, the language she believed Mohan wanted to hear. Now finally on an even keel, she can share the same language, and revel in its power. She has indeed come a long way, and this journey forms the substance of the novel.

Not only does the novel trace the evolution of the woman writer, it also captures a particular socio-cultural milieu that is peculiar to India and thus establishes the “context” which is an important concern for feminist narratology (Mezei 1). The subject position adopted is that of the “Indian” woman writer for whom writing or any profession for that matter can only be secondary as the only admissible career or profession is the husband. As Jaya once tells Mohan, “I know you better than you know yourself” (75) to further deliberate that he was her career, her profession, her means of livelihood, and not to know him amounted to failing at her job. In such a situation writing can never be a full-blooded passion, or even a consuming career. It can only enjoy the status of a respectable hobby that can never be taken very seriously. By problematizing

such a situation, the novel is able to foreground not only Jaya’s predicament, but also the writer’s
dilemma.

Interestingly, Shashi Deshpande is an Indian English woman writer writing about the
travails of another Indian English woman writer. When Jaya manoeuvres her way through
problems and pitfalls to actually write her story towards the end of the novel, the reader is
constrained into believing in the illusion that what is actually being read is Jaya’s novel. The use
of the first person further helps to preserve the illusion, and enables the merging of the persona
of Shashi Deshpande with that of Jaya, perhaps committing in the process the same cardinal sin
that Mohan has all along been fearful of when he says: “. . . all those people who read this and
know us . . . will think I am this kind of a man, they will think I am this man. How can I look
anyone in the face again” (144). The readers are unable to heed Seymour Chatman’s warning and
tend to confuse the author with the narrator. The real world and the fictional world coalesce, and
the voice of the author is indistinguishable from that of the narrator. Very relevant at this
juncture is Monroe Beardsley’s argument when he says that: “. . . the speaker of a literary work
cannot be identified with the author—and therefore the character and condition of the speaker
can be known by internal evidence alone—unless the author has provided a pragmatic context, or
acclaim of one that connects the speaker with himself” (265).

Significantly, Shashi Deshpande does provide such a context that connects the speaker
with herself when she says: “And then I wrote That Long Silence almost entirely a woman’s
novel, nevertheless a book about the silencing of one-half of humanity. A lifetime of

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introspection went into this novel, the one closest to me personally, the thinking and ideas in this are closest to my own” (Jain 210). A statement as deliberate and categorical as this makes it possible to place it in the context of Susan Lanser’s contention that if literature is to be understood as a communicative process between writer and reader where the former intends by different means to persuade the latter to share the perceptual and ideological vision of the world he or she has portrayed, then an elaborate articulation of the author’s textual persona clearly contributes to the reader’s interpretation of the story. Deshpande’s statement ensures and legitimizes the identification of the narrator with the author to the extent that the reader begins to think of Jaya as Deshpande’s textual persona, as a mouthpiece not only for her, but also for the one half of humanity that she so powerfully represents. Further, that one-half of humanity is able to empathize with Jaya, and find their struggle reflected in her trauma is what accounts for the novel’s success. As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan puts it: “So compellingly realistic is this rendering that no Indian woman reader can read this novel without a steady, sympathetic identification, and indeed frequent shocks of recognition” (78).

To argue further, such sensitive empathy is possible to a large extent through Deshpande’s expert use of the first person narrative technique. When the narrating “I” and the experiencing “I” belong to the protagonist as in That Long Silence, what the reader enjoys is the insight of the experiencing “I” functioning as an internal focalizer. When the text is so exclusively attuned to the spatio-temporal, emotional, and ideological perception of that narrating and experiencing “I”, the readers are magnetically drawn into the story, and invited to

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co-experience what it is like to be a participant in the unfolding events, which in turn accounts for the sense of empathy and emotional identification. The disadvantage, however, of the first person narrative technique is that first person narrators are restricted to ordinary human situations (Lanser 16). They cannot be in two places at the same time. They do not know what will happen in the future. They cannot narrate the story of their own death, and they can never know for certain what other characters think or thought. In the case of That Long Silence, significantly, these are no disadvantages, but actually serve to advantage because they allow Deshpande an intensity and concentration of focus that blasts the woman upstage centre and relegates all else to the peripheral sidelines. Thus the narrative acquires immediacy, authority, focus, and voice precisely because Deshpande limits and lopsides her point of view to the specific focus of a woman and her quest for selfhood. When the quest for selfhood is seen as the leitmotif of the novel, it becomes clear why the narrative stacks its cards in a particular way, why certain things happen to the woman protagonist in certain words and images. There is no plot. Nothing much happens, and what happens is rendered succinctly by the narrator herself when she sifts through irrelevant details to pounce on major events that define her bio-data: “I was born. My father died when I was fifteen. I got married to Mohan. I have two children and I did not let a third live” (2). Here in stark outline is a stereotypical pattern that plots the lives of most women. Here is not the site of the action. The action lies in the charting of the quest for selfhood which in turn, controls the narrative.

Right at the outset, the narrating “I” or Jaya dwells at length over the pitfalls that such a quest for rediscovering one’s true self necessarily involves: “Self-revelation is a cruel process . . . the real you never emerges . . . ten different mirrors show you ten different faces” (1). In the course of the narrative, some of the faces of Jaya are revealed as also the struggle she makes to project and preserve the face that family and society demand of her—to be the happy mother of the advertising visual, serving her family with “love and care”, to be the living embodiment of Seeta, Savitri, and Draupadi, to be “soft, smiling, placid, motherly” Suhasini - the name Mohan gives her when she marries him. The halo and the mask are constantly slipping while Jaya clamours to make her presence felt. Suhasini and Jaya are constantly at battle, and that battle is well articulated by Shakuntala Bharvani when she says: “The woman of today, therefore speaking in the language of psychology has a near schizophrenic personality. One side steadily “accepts” while the other craves to speak, to think, and express the life of the mind” (150). Thus Suhasini and Jaya are different dimensions to the same personality. It would be more appropriate then to say that in the attempt to be Suhasini, Jaya is mislaid. Suhasini rejects speech and anger as “unwomanly”, and throttles her writing ambitions. Jaya resurfaces, and insists on introspection and self analysis, on speech and articulation, and on bold confrontation with the phantoms of the past and with the challenges of the future. It is with a new maturity that Jaya returns to her writing to rediscover the child within her—“a child, wearing a dress with pockets for the first time . . . heady with the excitement of finding unexpected resources within herself” (187). Thus writing becomes for her a cathartic outlet, and a concrete manifestation of the

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unexpected resources within herself. This, however, is possible only with the recognition that as Mohan’s wife, she had cut off the bits of her that had refused to be Mohan’s wife, and that such fragmentation is neither possible nor feasible. She must reconcile the different dimensions of her personality to project a composite whole. The novel ends on a positive note of affirmation with Jaya looking forward with new hope to a new beginning with Mohan, and declaring: “I will have to speak, to listen. I will have to erase the silence between us” (192). Jaya’s quest for selfhood runs parallel to her evolution as a writer. Both journeys find their apogee in the actual event of writing.

Interestingly, technique matches theme. Since the theme involves a search for identity, most of the action is psychological, and takes place in the mind of the protagonist. The actual physical action covers the space of only a few days, but unleashes a train of thought that takes us backward and forward in time through recollection and reflection, dream sequences, recalled conversations, and secret confidences that actualise the quest for identity in concrete terms. These forays into the past pursue the protagonist’s stream of consciousness to inform the reader of the host of family that people the past, and the events that punctuate it. This enables the readers to piece together the jigsaw of thoughts and feelings that not only impact the present, but also initiate and enable the search for identity that underpins the entire narration. Thus it is the action in the mind that hogs attention, rather than the actual events that take place. They are important only in so far as they initiate a thought process. This is a thought process that enables her to relive in her imagination the significant moments of her life. As M. Rajeshwar puts it:

The exercise helps her above anything else, to come to grips with reality as it presents itself. It is in this context that the stream of consciousness technique adopted in the novel is artistically most gratifying. A smooth linear development of the novel would not have facilitated the to and fro movement in time of Jaya’s consciousness. Jaya’s unfolding of her story in bits and pieces, moving back and forth with remarkable felicity, borders on the incoherent, necessitating the stream of consciousness technique. (79)

Perhaps the best description of the narrative technique is what Jaya offers when she says that: “All this I’ve written—it’s like one of those multicoloured patchwork quilts the Kakis made for any new baby in the family. So many bits and pieces—a crazy conglomeration of shapes, sizes and colours put together” (188). Interestingly, this description is equally applicable to Jaya’s writing as well as to Shashi Deshpande’s narrative technique in the novel. This is the point of encounter between the real world and the fictional world where Jaya’s persona merges with that of Shashi Deshpande. Jaya further proceeds to reflect on what she believes she has achieved through the process of writing. She is not afraid any more. She is able to look panic in the eye, and recognise that there is more to her than merely being Mohan’s wife, that she needs not snip off bits and pieces of herself that refused to be Mohan’s wife. It is as though the movement from silence to speech, the actual process of articulation liberates and rehabilitates her to hope and health. And this is what helps us identify most Indian women’s writing. More often than not, it is an attempt at breaking the silence, at self analysis, at self realisation, at giving voice to a

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grievance, at finding an outlet for the suppressed woman within. Consequently, the use of the first person, the personal confidential tone, the diary like entries, the frequent flashbacks, and the stream of consciousness technique serve as appropriate modes of expression. The act of breaking the silence serves as a palliative to cure the ailment, much in the way as a patient on the psychiatrist’s couch is able to speak, and in the process be restored to pristine health. Shahrukh Husain puts it very succinctly when he says: “This psycho-analytical trend is particularly emphasised in the structure of Deshpande’s novel, where critical past experiences are sometimes recounted in italics, and in the original words of the analysis and to recreate the atmosphere of a therapy session . . .” (174).

In the case of Jaya, the final act of speech after “the long silence” is all the more powerful since, throughout the novel, it is compared with the silence of the host of women who create its socio-cultural context. Silence is a habit so deeply engrained in their psyches that they seem congenitally incapable of imagining a scenario where speech is possible. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan puts it best when she says:

> The force of Deshpande’s indictment of women’s lives lies in the way she is able to universalize their condition, chiefly by drawing similarities among Jaya and a variety of other female figures, including characters from Indian history and myth; and among three generations of women in her family (Jaya, her mother, her grandmother); among different classes of women (Jaya, her maid Jeeja); among

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different kinds of women of the same class and generation (Jaya, her cousin Kusum, her widowed neighbour Mukta). (78)

It is then, the variety of female figures and their respective silences that commands attention. When Jaya breaks the silence, and decides to be angry, her anger is met with complete bewilderment, incomprehension, and distaste from Mohan. As Jaya puts it: “He had looked at me as if my emotions had made me ugly, as if I’d got bloated with them. Later, when I knew him better, I realised that to him anger made a woman ‘unwomanly’” (83). Thus a patriarchal world order does not admit of either speech or anger as a “womanly” woman’s attributes. For Mohan, Jaya’s anger is sacrilege because he can neither remember nor envisage his mother ever having raised her voice against his father however badly he may have behaved towards her. So Jaya learns to suppress her anger. As she points out, the very concept of “an angry young woman” is alien to the Indian psyche. To quote Jaya: “A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There’s no room for anger in my life, no room for despair, either. There’s only order and routine—today, I have to change the sheets; tomorrow, scrub the bathrooms; the day after, clean the fridge . . .” (147-48). Through these words, Jaya is able to capture the only image of woman that Indian society is willing to countenance. Perhaps the novel may best be interpreted against the context of the “Images of Women” branch of feminist criticism which flourished in the 1970s, and which comes down heavily against the creation of “unreal” or false images of women in fiction. This brand of feminist criticism venerates authenticity and truthful representation of the real world as the highest ideal. Jaya’s despairing

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words convey a bitter consciousness of how “other” and alien such an image is, and indeed voice the same concern as that expressed by Josephine Donovan in the following excerpt: “Women in literature written by men are for the most part seen as Other, as objects of interest only in so far as they serve or detract from the goals of the male protagonist. Such literature is alien from a female point of view because it denies her essential selfhood” (212). In literature written by women which insists on a female point of view, as in Shashi Deshpande’s That Long Silence of the real world, and in Jaya’s of the fictional world, there is an indignation that women in the real as well as the fictional world should be constrained to conform to a male ideal of womanhood.

Mohan cannot even begin to comprehend the idea of “an angry woman”. Such an idea shatters his world, habituated as he is to the silent women of his childhood and youth. That his mother preserves her silence in the face of extreme provocation enhances her image in his eyes, and he expresses his admiration: “God, she was tough. Women in those days were tough” (36). Jaya is able to gauge in concrete terms the vastness of the chasm between the two conflicting male and female points of view when she says: “He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire, but I saw despair. I saw a despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender. I’m a woman and I can understand her better, he’s a man and he can’t” (36-37). Using Jaya as her mouthpiece, Shashi Deshpande is able to bring a woman’s understanding and sympathy to interrogating stereotypical images of women that a patriarchal society insists on thrusting upon an unsuspecting populace.

for the western tradition, she says: “Much of our literature in fact depends upon a series of fixed images of women, stereotypes. . . . Female stereotypes symbolise either the spiritual or the material, good or evil, Mary . . . or Eve . . .” (213). The eastern tradition too, advocates a similar dichotomy—Seeta or Apsara... While Seeta is placed on a pedestal and worshipped, Apsara is dreamed about as she lures and entices. One is a deity, the other a fantasy. Ideal images of women as projected by the mythological figures of Seeta, Savitri, Draupadi, and Gandhari are held up as epitomes of perfection to be emulated by the mass of womankind. Importantly, all these images of women suffer silently, but do not speak. Thus silence becomes a commendable virtue, and speech a crime. Jaya’s journey from silence to speech enables her to rebel against the clamping control of the straitjacket imposed by mythological images of women. Her resort to writing is all the more impactful since it is situated against the backdrop of a series of silent Seetas who people her immediate environment, and also mirror the truth of the real world.

Reflecting an Indian reality, writing by women as represented by Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence* makes an attempt to show how woman outgrows the status of “object”.

Interestingly, the novel also serves admirably well as raw material to test the veracity of Annette Kolodny’s tentative claims of what could constitute the characteristic features of women’s writing. Speaking from the vantage point of her experience of contemporary Canadian and American authors, she is able to identify “certain demonstrable repetitions of particular thematic concerns, image patterns and stylistic devices among these authors” (79). She contends that:

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women writers repeatedly invest their female characters with “reflexive perceptions”, a habit of mind that, itself, becomes a repeated stylistic device as character after character is depicted discovering herself, or finding some part of herself in activities she has not planned, or in situations she cannot fully comprehend. (79)

Kolodny of course finds her examples in Margaret Atwood and Sylvia Plath. What is remarkable is that That Long Silence, though so vastly disparate in terms of socio-cultural milieu, also displays similar examples of “reflexive perceptions”. At one point, Shashi Deshpande dwells at length over a dream sequence that jolts Jaya out of her complacency: “The realisation that I am alone overwhelms me. Worse—I do not know where I am, where I have to go and how I can find him. The disorientation is total. . . . I continue to lie there paralysed, aphasic . . . we will never be able to make it . . .” (86). The sense of losing control and total disorientation is overpowering. This of course is a dream sequence and suggests a sub-conscious state. But, there are other examples too, very much in the conscious world, as when Jaya describes a moment when in the midst of a quarrel, she is seized by a fit of uncontrollable, hysterical laughter. To use her words: “. . . I had to cork in this laughter. But it was too late . . . Laughter burst out of me, spilled over, and Mohan stared at me in horror as I rocked helplessly” (122). Here, the sense of losing control is even more acute. Yet again, at another point, Jaya reflects over how her entire life has been rather like the childhood charade where Simon gave orders. Simon says “kneel down” and we knelt. Simon says “clap your hands” and we clapped. All of a sudden, it seemed

to her that: “... the mysterious all powerful Simon, the Simon who had brooked no rival had disappeared. And I could do nothing. I was overcome by a paralysis of will and sat staring at my slipper dangling from my toes, unable to move” (137). In each of these situations, Jaya finds that she is lost and bewildered and incapable of rational comprehension. On yet another occasion, in the midst of an exclusive function Jaya feels a sense of being drained of all individuality, and surrounded by exact replicas of herself. As she describes it: “... I was so exactly like the others, I was almost invisible. I had felt annihilated” (142).

In view of these examples then, it would appear that Shashi Deshpande, though so far removed in space, offers convincing and consolidating proof for Kolodny’s contention concerning women’s writing manifesting a sense of what she terms as “amputated self-perception”. In each of these successive situations, Jaya finds herself consciously viewing herself, and yet out of control, which in turn is strongly suggestive of the general malaise woman suffers from since she is never in control, and always subject to the dictates of an external, unnamed force. Hence the constant sense of dislocation and disorientation.

Kolodny proceeds to identify another feature of women’s writing. As she points out:

Still another phenomenon I keep coming across in women’s writing is what I have labelled, for want of a better term, “inversion”—and it works in a number of complex ways. On the one hand, the stereotyped, traditional literary images of women—as, for example, the loving “Mom,” the “bitch,” the Sex Goddess—are being turned around in fiction, either for comic purposes, to explore their inherent

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absurdity, or, in other instances, to reveal their hidden reality, though in new ways, not previously apprehended. On the other hand, there is a tendency to “invert” even more generalized traditional images and conventionalized iconographic associations so that they come to connote their opposites. (80)

This brings us back to Donovan’s indictment of men’s writing as wholly inspired and informed by stereotypical images of women. As argued earlier, That Long Silence explodes the stereotype of a silent suffering Seeta. Further, the novel lovingly lingers over such explosions, thereby making “inversion” a regular feature of the narration. The insistence on “inversion” also contributes, in turn, to the tone of irony that pervades the entire novel. Jaya’s prime concern as narrator is to articulate the huge lacuna between the ideal and the real. The image of loving wife and mother is perhaps the most revered, and the most worshipped in Indian society. As Sangeeta Dutta points out: “Indian culture is deeply informed with the myth that motherhood is woman’s inevitable destiny and happiness can come only through it. With Sita and Savitri as predominant models of reference, Indian women are expected to be pure and faithful as wives and self-effacing, loving, and giving as mothers” (84). Jaya’s first lessons as a bride demand that she be indoctrinated with the rules of wifehood. She discovers how sharply defined a wife’s role was. Cooking, cleaning, care-giving, waiting were a woman’s exclusive preserve and prerogative. Any transgression of the code was strictly taboo. A strong undercurrent of the bitterness and boredom of a wife runs through the novel. Jaya loses no opportunity to foreground the undercurrent. Almost at every point, she insists on pointing out the flip side of the glorified,

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deified image of the loving wife and mother which acquires then, the status of an illusion—a
deliberate invention of the male imagination. Jaya’s narration allows us a glimpse of the
underbelly of such an image, or to use Kolodny’s terminology “inverts” it, turning it round to
connote its opposite. What surfaces then is Jaya’s sense of suffocation as she prods the reality
beneath the veneer of the happy family. The veneer may be preserved only at the expense of the
negation of Jaya’s self. It is the voice of Jaya’s suppressed self that registers the reality of many
“inversions”, prime among them being that love is a “myth” (97), that the “chasm” (98) between
man and woman can never be negotiated, that Mohan’s presence is often a “burden” (68), that
the household is a “monster” (25), that all “looking-after-others, caring-for-others women” (84)
want is an increase of their power, that motherhood does not naturally and inevitably bring “love,
wisdom, understanding and nobility” (173). Thus “inversion” patterns the narrative to such an
extent that it deliberately destroys the halo that deifies the image of loving wife and mother. Jaya
describes the actual process of inversion in her own inimitable way: “I’ve seen things differently.
As if I’ve put my head down and looked at the world from between my legs. The world not just
upside down but different” (189). After an attempt to identify instances of “reflexive perception”
and “inversion” in That Long Silence, it is difficult to exit the “images of women” mode without
making reference to Sandra Gilbert’s and Susan Gubar’s monumental The Madwoman in the
Attic (1979). Gilbert and Gubar speak a similar language when they identify women’s writing
strategy as one that insists on “assaulting and revising, deconstructing and reconstructing those
images of women inherited from male literature, especially . . . the paradigmatic polarities of

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angel and monster” (76). They further proceed to seize upon Bertha Mason, the mad woman in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* to represent “usually in some sense the author’s double, an image of her own anxiety and rage” (78-79). Interestingly enough, *That Long Silence* does contain such a “madwoman” figure in the person of “Kusum”, Shashi Deshpande’s very own Bertha Mason.

Kusum matches the exact dimensions of Gilbert’s and Gubar’s mad woman in the attic. She is Jaya’s double—an image of her anxiety and rage and also a means by which Jaya can rationalise her own sense of fragmentation in the face of the disjunction between allotted roles and reality. If the reader recognises Jaya as a stand-in for Deshpande, the co-relation between author and double is all the more explicit. To argue from the perspective of Gilbert and Gubar, it is possible perhaps to suggest that Jaya and Kusum, the angel and the monster, the sweet heroine and the raging madwoman are aspects of the woman author’s own self-image. It is with fascination that one notes that what is applicable to nineteenth century British women authors might be equally relevant to Shashi Deshpande, though so far removed in space and time. Gilbert and Gubar speak with authority, and claim that the “mad double” is a common factor, not only in all nineteenth century British women’s writing, but also in twentieth-century fiction by women. Now here in Shashi Deshpande is evidence from Indian English women’s fiction as well.

Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence* deals directly with feminist narratological concerns since it addresses the constraints and dilemmas that pressurise the woman writer. The use of the first person homodiegetic narrator serves admirably well in building a sense of

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intimacy and empathy with the reader. It also adds to the touch of real life authenticity which helps the reader to identify with the situations depicted in the novel. As in most women’s writing, the plot is minimal and restricted to the mind of the narrator, which is the site of the quest for selfhood that formulates the substance of the novel. Again, the use of frequent flashbacks and the stream of consciousness technique are very appropriate in this context. Since this is the intimate personal story of a woman, perhaps this is the best technique possible. The novel also helps shape a definitive tradition of women’s writing when it is interpreted in the context of the “Images of Women” brand of criticism. Such a criticism comes down heavily on men’s literature for leaning extensively on stereotypical images of women. Women’s writing as represented by Shashi Deshpande’s That Long Silence makes an attempt to blast these stereotypes. The novel also shows instances of “reflexive perception” and “inversion” which have been identified as features of women’s writing. Also, the presence of a madwoman in the text allows an interpretation of the novel from the perspective of Gilbert and Gubar. In the course of making interpretations in the light of certain feminist theories, it is known that these theories have been much critiqued. What is important however for this analysis is that they help identify certain recognisable features of women’s writing. It may safely be concluded then that when women write, they are able to infuse a note of strong feeling, establish a sense of empathy, make effective use of the first person to explore the quest for selfhood, exploit the stream of consciousness technique to its full potential, expose stereotypical representations of women as

insubstantial, and create the figure of a mad woman to come to terms with their own anxieties and insecurities.

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