

GENDERED MARGINALITY AND FOURTH WORLD CONSCIOUSNESS: READING DESHPANDE'S THAT LONG SILENCE AND KAPUR'S A MARRIED WOMAN

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Abstract

*This paper examines gendered marginality and the emergence of what may be described as a Fourth World consciousness in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* and Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*. Both novels portray educated, middle-class Indian women whose marginalization does not arise from economic deprivation but from emotional erasure, patriarchal control, and the internalization of silence within marriage and society. Drawing attention to women who exist within dominant social structures yet remain unheard, the study explores how silence, conformity, and restrained rebellion shape female subjectivity. Deshpande's *Jaya* embodies a muted resistance grounded in introspection and self-realization, while Kapur's *Astha* moves toward a more overt challenge to normative femininity through emotional and sexual transgression. The paper argues that these women reflect a Fourth World consciousness—one marked by internal exile, psychological displacement, and a struggle for self-definition within hegemonic systems. By comparing these two narratives, the study highlights the shifting modes of resistance available to Indian women across generations, suggesting that while silence once functioned as survival, later articulations of desire signal a tentative movement toward agency. Ultimately, the paper contends that both novels reveal marginality as a deeply gendered condition and affirm literature as a crucial space for articulating women's suppressed voices.*

Keywords: *Gendered marginality, Fourth World consciousness, Silence and voice, Marriage and patriarchy, Indian English women's fiction*

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian English fiction by women has repeatedly drawn attention to forms of marginality that operate quietly within socially sanctioned spaces. Rather than foregrounding visible deprivation or exclusion, many women writers focus on characters who appear stable and privileged yet experience deep psychological and emotional displacement. Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* and Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* exemplify this narrative concern. Both novels centre on educated, middle-class women whose lives unfold within marriage and domestic respectability, even as their inner worlds reveal erasure, dissatisfaction, and muted resistance. In these texts, marginality is not imposed through poverty or social ostracism but through gendered expectations that normalize silence and compromise.

In *That Long Silence*, Deshpande constructs the figure of *Jaya*, whose life is shaped by habitual accommodation rather than dramatic conflict. *Jaya's* marginality develops gradually, through years of emotional adjustment that prioritize marital stability over self-expression. From early in her marriage, she learns that disagreement threatens harmony and that silence ensures continuity. This silence is neither violent nor overtly enforced; it is sustained through cultural ideals that associate womanhood with endurance. Although *Jaya* is educated and intellectually capable, her identity is consistently subordinated to her role as a wife, leading to a slow erosion of selfhood.

A striking feature of *Jaya's* experience is her awareness of this erasure. She understands the compromises she has made, even as she continues to justify them. This awareness situates her in a state of internal exile—socially included

yet emotionally displaced. Her position resonates with what may be described as a Fourth World consciousness in a gendered context: a condition in which individuals remain embedded within dominant systems while being denied meaningful agency. Jaya's silence is strategic rather than passive, shaped by fear of loss and the pressure to preserve domestic order.

Writing initially offers Jaya a space of articulation, a tentative means of asserting her voice. When her literary success unsettles her husband, however, she retreats from writing altogether. This withdrawal is significant precisely because it is voluntary. No explicit prohibition is imposed; instead, Jaya internalizes the belief that her creativity disrupts marital balance. Deshpande exposes how patriarchy often operates through emotional negotiation, persuading women to silence themselves in the name of harmony rather than through direct coercion.

Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* presents a later articulation of similar tensions, shaped by changing social and political contexts. Astha, like Jaya, is educated and economically secure, yet she experiences marriage as emotionally restrictive. Her dissatisfaction does not turn inward but finds expression through transgressive relationships and political involvement. Astha's emotional and sexual relationship with Pipeelika Khan introduces her to alternative modes of intimacy that challenge heteronormative domestic expectations.

Astha's marginality is intensified by her sexuality, which places her outside socially acceptable norms. While her relationship with Pipeelika Khan offers moments of recognition and desire, it remains fragile and uneven. Kapur avoids romanticizing this relationship, presenting it instead as emotionally complex and ethically fraught. Astha's rebellion, though real, is constrained by guilt, dependence, and social pressure, underscoring the limits of individual resistance within entrenched patriarchal systems.

Unlike Jaya, Astha articulates her dissatisfaction openly, yet speech alone does not secure transformation. Her eventual return to marriage reflects not resolution but accommodation. Kapur's narrative suggests that defiance, when unsupported by structural change, often leads back to conformity. Astha's experience highlights the persistence of marginality even when resistance takes visible forms.

Marriage emerges in both novels as a central site of gendered marginalization. While it confers legitimacy and security, it demands emotional labor and self-effacement from women. The expectation that women should endure dissatisfaction quietly transforms marginality into a normalized condition. Silence, in this context, functions not as absence but as a cultural practice that sustains hierarchy. Both Deshpande and Kapur reveal how such silence is learned and reproduced across generations.

The contrast between Jaya and Astha reflects a shift in feminist consciousness. Jaya belongs to a generation for whom survival often depended on restraint and compromise. Her resistance unfolds inwardly, through reflection and gradual awareness. Astha represents a later generation exposed to feminist discourse and alternative identities. Her resistance is experiential, expressed through relationships and political engagement. Despite these differences, both women confront similar limitations, suggesting that structural gendered marginality persists despite social change.

Silence operates differently across the two novels. In *That Long Silence*, it dominates the narrative as both condition and metaphor. Jaya's growing recognition of her silence marks the beginning of self-understanding. In *A Married Woman*, silence exists alongside speech; Astha voices dissatisfaction, yet her words fail to dismantle the structures that confine her. Kapur thus complicates the assumption that articulation automatically leads to empowerment.

The idea of Fourth World consciousness provides a useful lens for reading these narratives. Jaya and Astha remain situated within dominant social frameworks while experiencing exclusion at the level of voice and agency. Their

struggles are marked by negotiation rather than confrontation, revealing marginality as a lived, ongoing condition rather than a singular event.

Neither novel offers a triumphant resolution. Deshpande refrains from presenting Jaya's awakening as emancipation, just as Kapur avoids framing Astha's rebellion as liberation. Instead, both writers foreground the complexity of women's choices within restrictive environments. Marginality becomes not only a condition of suffering but also a space from which critical awareness emerges.

By focusing on middle-class women, Deshpande and Kapur challenge the assumption that marginality belongs solely to the economically deprived. Their narratives demonstrate how gender itself produces internal exile, even within privilege. This perspective deepens feminist discourse by revealing how power operates subtly through normalization rather than exclusion.

That *Long Silence* and *A Married Woman* ultimately affirm literature's role in articulating experiences that remain difficult to voice elsewhere. Through Jaya and Astha, these novels illuminate the emotional labor, compromise, and restrained resistance that shape women's lives. Although neither journey culminates in radical transformation, both underscore the significance of consciousness, voice, and self-recognition. In giving form to women's silences, these texts transform marginality into a site of insight and ethical reflection.

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