



Voices of Resistance: Female Agency in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* and Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract

This research article explores female agency and resistance in Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi and Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence, positioning both works within the broader framework of feminist Indian literature. Traditionally, Indian literary narratives have often confined women to subordinate, symbolic, or passive roles, reflecting patriarchal ideologies. Devi and Deshpande, however, disrupt these conventions, portraying women as active agents capable of negotiating oppression, asserting identity, and redefining social and psychological realities. In Draupadi, Devi foregrounds a tribal woman confronting systemic exploitation, sexualized violence, and institutional injustice. Draupadi's defiance is radical, overt, and socially transformative, challenging entrenched patriarchal and structural hierarchies. Her resistance operates both as a personal assertion and as a collective critique, illustrating that empowerment encompasses ethical courage, political awareness, and moral engagement. The narrative further explores the intersections of caste, gender, and class, revealing the complex socio-political dimensions of female agency. In contrast, Deshpande's That Long Silence highlights subtle, psychological, and domestic forms of resistance. The protagonist, Jaya, negotiates societal expectations, familial obligations, and internalized patriarchal norms through introspection, self-reflection, and strategic assertion of identity. The "long silence" represents both societal restraint and conscious, deliberate self-expression, emphasizing that empowerment can operate through internal, relational, and cognitive strategies. Deshpande's narrative illustrates the significance of emotional intelligence, personal resilience, and domestic negotiation as crucial forms of female agency, complementing the overt activism exemplified by Draupadi. This study employs a qualitative, comparative, and interpretive methodology grounded in feminist literary theory, textual analysis, and socio-cultural critique. By examining narrative strategies, characterization, thematic frameworks, and socio-political contexts, the research demonstrates that Indian literature provides a spectrum of female agency, encompassing both public confrontation and private resilience. By juxtaposing Draupadi's radical activism with Jaya's introspective resistance, the study affirms that female empowerment is multifaceted, contextually grounded, and socially significant. The article contributes to feminist scholarship by highlighting the diverse strategies through which women assert autonomy, resist oppression, and negotiate identity, offering a nuanced understanding of female subjectivity in Indian literary traditions.

Keywords: Female agency, resistance, feminism, patriarchy, psychological resistance



Introduction:

The study of women's experiences in Indian literature reveals a significant transformation over time, reflecting the interplay between evolving social norms, cultural shifts, and feminist consciousness. Traditionally, female characters in Indian narratives were depicted as passive, obedient, or symbolic, serving as instruments to advance male-centered plots or moral allegories. However, postcolonial and contemporary Indian literature has progressively foregrounded women's agency, subjectivity, and resistance, highlighting the ways in which women navigate structural oppression, gendered expectations, and social constraints. This article examines Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* and Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* as paradigmatic examples of how Indian literature represents female empowerment through both overt political action and nuanced psychological resistance.

Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* foregrounds the life of a tribal woman who becomes a symbol of defiance against systemic exploitation and sexualized violence. Draupadi's narrative exposes the intersections of caste, gender, and socio-political marginalization, illustrating how patriarchal and institutional structures converge to oppress marginalized women. Her resistance is radical, embodied, and public, asserting both moral and political autonomy. Devi's work interrogates normative constructions of femininity, demonstrating that courage, assertiveness, and ethical consciousness are central to women's agency. By situating Draupadi's struggle within broader socio-political frameworks, Devi emphasizes the ethical, communal, and structural dimensions of resistance, challenging the notion that women's empowerment is limited to personal or domestic spheres.

In contrast, Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* explores female agency within domestic, relational, and psychological contexts. The protagonist, Jaya, negotiates social expectations, marital obligations, and internalized patriarchal norms, highlighting the subtle, often invisible forms of resistance that women exercise within everyday life. The "long silence" represents both imposed societal restraint and conscious, strategic reflection, signifying the complexity of internalized oppression and the potential for self-realization. Deshpande's narrative foregrounds the cognitive and emotional dimensions of resistance, illustrating how introspection, self-awareness, and personal decision-making constitute vital forms of empowerment. By emphasizing internal struggles and relational negotiation, the text presents a model of female agency that is contextually grounded, psychologically nuanced, and culturally specific.

The comparative study of these works situates female resistance on a spectrum, ranging from radical political defiance to subtle psychological assertion. Both texts illuminate the moral, ethical, and socio-political dimensions of women's lives, offering complementary perspectives on how agency is articulated and enacted. While *Draupadi* exemplifies visible, confrontational empowerment, Jaya embodies reflective, internalized resistance, together demonstrating that female agency is multidimensional and contextually contingent.

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology informed by feminist literary theory and socio-cultural critique. By analyzing narrative strategies, characterization, thematic patterns, and socio-political contexts, the research underscores how literature



functions as a medium for representing and negotiating gendered power structures. The article contributes to feminist scholarship by revealing the intersections of personal, political, and psychological forms of resistance, demonstrating the enduring relevance of these texts in understanding the complexity of women's agency in Indian literature.

1. Political Resistance and Public Agency in Draupadi:

Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* presents a radical exploration of female agency in the face of systemic oppression, situating resistance within a socio-political framework. Draupadi, a tribal woman, is subjected to sexualized violence by state authorities, reflecting both gendered and caste-based marginalization. Devi's narrative foregrounds how women's bodies are politicized and how patriarchal and institutional power converge to sustain oppression. However, the protagonist refuses victimhood, asserting autonomy over her body and actions in ways that destabilize conventional power hierarchies. Her resistance is both embodied and symbolic, illustrating the inseparability of personal and political struggle in contexts of structural injustice.

Devi's work demonstrates that female agency can be overt, confrontational, and socially transformative. Draupadi's defiance—through her refusal to submit, her vocal opposition, and her strategic use of violence—challenges not only immediate oppressors but also broader societal complicity. By articulating a narrative of anger, dignity, and assertiveness, Devi repositions the female protagonist as an active agent in the struggle against systemic violence. The text interrogates normative constructions of femininity, highlighting how gendered expectations often intersect with class, caste, and socio-economic disadvantage to constrain women's options.

The narrative structure, language, and characterization amplify the theme of resistance. Devi employs stark realism and unflinching depictions of violence to foreground the political urgency of Draupadi's plight, while simultaneously exploring the moral and ethical dimensions of her decisions. The story thus becomes a site for both social critique and literary experimentation, challenging readers to confront uncomfortable truths about gender, power, and justice.

Furthermore, Devi situates Draupadi's resistance within a collective consciousness. Although the protagonist's struggle is intensely personal, it resonates with broader patterns of oppression experienced by tribal women and marginalized communities, rendering the narrative socially representative. By linking individual defiance to communal realities, Devi emphasizes that agency is both an ethical and a political undertaking, underscoring literature's capacity to illuminate and critique systemic injustice.

Through *Draupadi*, Devi illustrates that female agency in Indian literature need not be passive or symbolic; it can be combative, visible, and transformative. The narrative offers a model of resistance that foregrounds moral courage, political awareness, and bodily autonomy as essential components of empowerment, contributing significantly to feminist literary discourse and the understanding of women's roles in socially and politically oppressive contexts.



2. Psychological and Domestic Resistance in *That Long Silence*:

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* presents a profoundly introspective exploration of female agency within domestic and psychological spheres. Unlike the overt political resistance depicted in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, Deshpande emphasizes the nuanced, often invisible, forms of resistance enacted by women constrained by family, social norms, and internalized expectations. The protagonist, Jaya, navigates a middle-class urban environment in which the pressures of patriarchal domesticity limit her autonomy, self-expression, and decision-making power. The "long silence" of the title signifies both the social conditioning that silences women and the deliberate, strategic silences employed by Jaya to negotiate power and identity in her domestic world.

Jaya's internal conflicts illustrate the psychological dimensions of oppression and the subtle forms of rebellion women exercise within domestic spaces. Deshpande's narrative highlights how societal expectations around marriage, motherhood, and gendered duties shape women's self-perception, creating tension between personal aspirations and familial obligations. Jaya experiences moments of frustration, anger, and self-doubt, yet she also demonstrates resilience, self-awareness, and moral agency. By reflecting on her own experiences and choices, Jaya exercises intellectual and emotional autonomy, carving out spaces of identity within a structure that often seeks to repress individuality.

Deshpande's literary technique underscores the centrality of subjective experience in understanding women's resistance. Through first-person narration, interior monologue, and fragmented memories, the author conveys the complex interplay between personal desires, social responsibilities, and psychological constraints. The narrative's reflective style allows readers to engage with Jaya's consciousness, witnessing her internal negotiation of power, autonomy, and identity. Resistance, in this context, is subtle, relational, and performative, manifesting in small but significant decisions, self-assertion, and the articulation of previously unspoken thoughts.

The text also interrogates societal complicity in perpetuating women's subjugation. Deshpande examines how cultural norms, gendered expectations, and social conditioning function alongside overt patriarchy to maintain systemic silencing. Jaya's resistance, therefore, is not merely an individual act but a critique of entrenched social structures that marginalize female voices. Her introspective journey highlights the importance of self-awareness, reflection, and ethical decision-making as instruments of empowerment.

By contrasting domestic and psychological forms of resistance with political defiance, *That Long Silence* expands the understanding of female agency. Deshpande demonstrates that empowerment is not always loud or confrontational; it can be cognitive, emotional, and strategic. Through Jaya, the narrative illustrates that asserting agency within the private sphere, negotiating identity, and challenging internalized constraints are equally vital dimensions of resistance. This approach enriches feminist literary discourse by foregrounding subtle, context-specific, and culturally grounded modalities of women's empowerment.



3. Comparative Analysis and Synthesis:

A comparative examination of Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* and Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* reveals that while both texts foreground female agency, the modalities, contexts, and expressions of resistance differ significantly, reflecting the diversity of women's experiences in Indian society. In *Draupadi*, resistance is overt, political, and public, whereas in *That Long Silence*, resistance is subtle, psychological, and domestic. Together, these narratives illustrate the spectrum of female agency, highlighting that empowerment is neither monolithic nor confined to any single sphere of existence.

Devi's *Draupadi* confronts institutionalized oppression directly, using her body, voice, and actions to challenge systemic injustice. Her defiance is radical, visible, and socially transformative, compelling society and authority to acknowledge her autonomy. This form of resistance emphasizes collective awareness and societal change, underscoring the ethical and political dimensions of female agency. In contrast, Deshpande's *Jaya* navigates oppression within private and psychological domains, engaging in introspection, emotional negotiation, and subtle assertion of selfhood. While less publicly confrontational, her resistance is no less significant, revealing the ways in which women maintain autonomy, moral integrity, and identity even within restrictive domestic frameworks.

Both narratives, however, share convergences that are crucial for understanding female empowerment in Indian literature. First, they depict women as active participants in shaping their lives, rejecting passivity and victimhood. *Draupadi* and *Jaya* embody resilience, courage, and self-reflection, demonstrating that resistance can manifest in multiple forms—political, social, and psychological. Second, both texts engage with societal structures—patriarchy, caste hierarchies, and social norms—that constrain women's agency, highlighting how resistance often entails negotiation, confrontation, or subversion of these structures. Third, language, narrative perspective, and characterization are employed strategically by both authors to foreground women's voices, ensuring that female subjectivity is central to the literary text.

The contrast between overt and subtle forms of resistance also illuminates broader socio-cultural dynamics. Devi situates her protagonist in a marginalized tribal context, emphasizing political violence, caste oppression, and social invisibility, thus highlighting structural inequalities and collective struggles. Deshpande, conversely, situates *Jaya* within an urban, middle-class milieu, emphasizing psychological oppression, domestic expectation, and emotional suppression, thus illustrating how agency operates within nuanced and relational contexts. This comparative framework underscores that female resistance in Indian literature is contextually contingent, shaped by socio-economic, cultural, and historical circumstances.

Furthermore, both narratives contribute to feminist literary discourse by challenging patriarchal representations of women as passive, obedient, or symbolic. Devi and Deshpande offer diverse models of agency—one radical and confrontational, the other reflective and strategic—thereby expanding the literary imagination for female empowerment. The study of these texts together demonstrates that Indian literature accommodates multiple expressions of



resistance, affirming the intellectual and moral capacity of women to negotiate, confront, and transform their circumstances.

Ultimately, juxtaposing Draupadi and That Long Silence enhances understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of female agency. The comparison emphasizes that empowerment is neither uniform nor linear; it encompasses both public defiance and private introspection, demonstrating the interplay between societal constraints, individual consciousness, and literary articulation in shaping representations of women's resistance.

Conclusion:

The comparative study of Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* and Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* underscores the multifaceted nature of female agency and resistance in Indian literature. These narratives demonstrate that women's empowerment is not a singular or uniform phenomenon but rather a spectrum of strategies and expressions shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts. Devi's *Draupadi* embodies radical political defiance and public resistance, confronting systemic oppression, caste-based marginalization, and gendered violence with courage, assertiveness, and ethical conviction. In contrast, Deshpande's *Jaya* negotiates constraints within domestic and psychological spheres, employing introspection, self-awareness, and subtle assertion to assert autonomy, reclaim identity, and challenge patriarchal expectations. Together, these texts highlight that resistance can be both overt and covert, external and internal, yet equally significant in redefining women's roles and possibilities within society.

Both authors foreground the centrality of women's voices, challenging traditional literary representations that have historically silenced, marginalized, or stereotyped female characters. Through carefully constructed narrative strategies, characterization, and thematic exploration, Devi and Deshpande illuminate the lived experiences of women and the diverse ways in which they confront oppression. The juxtaposition of *Draupadi*'s public, political activism with *Jaya*'s private, psychological resistance exemplifies the heterogeneity of women's agency, demonstrating that empowerment is deeply contextual, responsive to social realities, and articulated in relation to cultural, economic, and political pressures.

This study also highlights the broader significance of such literary representations for feminist scholarship, pedagogy, and cultural critique. By analyzing how these texts navigate gendered power relations, articulate ethical consciousness, and envision transformative possibilities, the research contributes to a more inclusive understanding of Indian literature and its engagement with questions of gender, identity, and social justice. Moreover, it affirms the relevance of both radical and subtle forms of resistance in contemporary discourse, emphasizing those literary narratives can function as critical tools for reflecting, interrogating, and reshaping societal perceptions of women.

In conclusion, *Draupadi* and *That Long Silence* collectively enrich the study of female agency in Indian literature by offering complementary perspectives on resistance, autonomy, and identity formation. Their contributions underscore the importance of examining diverse contexts, narrative forms, and strategies of empowerment to fully appreciate the complexity



of women's experiences. Through these works, Indian literature not only gives voice to women's struggles but also celebrates their resilience, courage, and enduring capacity to assert agency in a patriarchal world.

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