

THE COMPULSORY PERFORMANCE: GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND THE FICTION OF FEMININITY IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THAT LONG SILENCE*

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Abstract: This paper applies Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* (1988), arguing that the femininity enacted by the protagonist Jaya Kulkarni is not an expression of natural essence but a compulsory, citational performance produced through repetition. Drawing primarily on Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), this paper examines how Jaya's domestic labour, enforced silence, and self-erasure function as reiterated performances that consolidate a patriarchally mandated subject position. The paper further argues that the novel foregrounds the inherent instability of these performances: Jaya's failed repetitions, her split self, and her eventual resolve to write constitute a form of subversive reiteration that destabilises the fiction of an original, natural femininity. While existing scholarship on Deshpande has largely read Jaya through liberal feminist frameworks centred on identity, voice, and empowerment, a Butlerian reading reveals that the novel is less about recovering a pre-existing self than about exposing the regulatory norms that produce the gendered subject in the first place.

Index Terms: gender performativity, Judith Butler, Shashi Deshpande, *That Long Silence*, Indian feminist fiction, citationality, subjectivity, patriarchy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988) is a novel about a woman who has spent seventeen years performing a role she did not choose. Its protagonist, Jaya Kulkarni, is a middle-class, English-educated housewife who has gradually surrendered her writing, her opinions, and ultimately her sense of self to the demands of a patriarchal marriage. The novel opens in crisis — Jaya and her husband Mohan retreating to a small Dadar flat after Mohan becomes implicated in a financial scandal — and it is this forced pause in the daily routine that allows Jaya, and the reader, to examine the architecture of a life built on compliance. The novel won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990 and has since become a foundational text in Indian feminist literary criticism.

Much of the existing scholarship on *That Long Silence* engages with the novel through frameworks of liberal feminism: Jaya's journey is read as a search for selfhood, her silence as a form of oppression, and her eventual resolve to speak as an act of empowerment. While these readings have considerable merit, they rest on a largely unexamined assumption that there is a stable, authentic self waiting to be recovered once the patriarchal weight is lifted. This paper proposes a different theoretical orientation. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, as elaborated in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), it argues that the femininity Jaya enacts is not a mask placed over a natural self, but is itself a constructed effect — produced, maintained, and policed through the repeated performance of gendered acts.

Butler's central contention is that gender is not something one has but something one does. It is "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 1990, p. 45). On this account, Jaya's cooking, her silence in the face of Mohan's displeasure, her suppression of her writing, her deference to every domestic and social expectation — these are not the expressions of a feminine nature but the very performances through which femininity is produced. The appearance of interiority, of a self that precedes and generates these acts, is itself an effect of the performance.

This paper argues that *That Long Silence* enacts, at the level of narrative, precisely the Butlerian insight that femininity is a compulsory fiction. It does so through three related mechanisms: the performance of domesticity as a site of gendered subject-production; the weaponisation of silence as a regulatory technology; and the citational invocation of mythological femininity as a disciplinary norm. The paper further attends to those moments in the novel where the performance breaks down — where Jaya's

compliance is revealed to be effortful, partial, and unstable — and argues that these ruptures constitute what Butler calls "subversive reiteration": the possibility of a different kind of performance, one that exposes the norm rather than consolidating it.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BUTLER AND THE PERFORMANCE OF GENDER

The concept of gender performativity, as Judith Butler develops it, represents a significant departure from the sex/gender distinction that characterised much second-wave feminist theory. Where earlier feminism had argued that biological sex was given by nature while gender was a social construction imposed upon it, Butler challenges the stability of both terms. In *Gender Trouble*, she argues that even the category of sex is retrospectively naturalised, that the body itself is produced as a legible, gendered surface through discursive practices. Gender, then, is not an attribute of a pre-given subject; it is, rather, the mechanism through which subjects are constituted.

The term "performativity" is not, Butler insists, equivalent to theatrical performance. It does not imply voluntarism — a conscious agent freely choosing from a wardrobe of gendered styles. The concept is derived, rather, from J. L. Austin's speech act theory and Jacques Derrida's notion of iterability: the idea that a sign's meaning depends not on authorial intention but on its citation of prior usages. Gender performativity, Butler writes in *Bodies That Matter*, "must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (1993, p. 2). To perform femininity is to cite a norm, to repeat a script that pre-exists the individual subject and shapes the very possibilities of her existence.

This citational structure has two important implications. First, it means that gendered norms are never fully secured; every performance is a re-performance, and the gap between the norm and its instantiation is always a site of potential deviation. Second, it means that the subject who performs is not the origin of the performance but its product. The "I" who performs femininity is constituted through those performances; there is no prior self who could simply opt out. This is why Butler describes the regulatory regime as "compulsory": to fail to perform femininity correctly is not liberation but misrecognition, a failure to be intelligible as a gendered subject within the dominant order.

For the purposes of this paper, three Butlerian concepts are particularly productive in reading *That Long Silence*: citationality (the invocation of prior scripts and mythological models of femininity); reiteration (the compulsive repetition of domestic and affective performances); and subversive reiteration (the possibility of citing the norm differently, in ways that expose rather than consolidate its fiction). These three concepts map, respectively, onto the three central aspects of Jaya's experience: her interpellation into models of ideal Indian womanhood; her daily performance of domesticity; and her eventual, tentative attempt to write.

III. THE DOMESTIC BODY AS A SITE OF GENDERED SUBJECT-PRODUCTION

In *That Long Silence*, the domestic sphere is not simply a setting; it is an apparatus of subject-production. The household chores that structure Jaya's daily existence — cooking, cleaning, managing the children, maintaining the appearance of an orderly home — are presented by the novel not as natural expressions of Jaya's femininity but as a regime of acts through which her femininity is continuously produced and monitored. This is entirely consonant with Butler's argument that "acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (1990, p. 185).

From the earliest pages of the novel, Jaya's femininity is located in her body's domestic labour. As a girl, her grandmother's instruction is unambiguous: to become a marriageable woman, Jaya must learn to cook, to clean, to be accommodating, to keep quiet. This instruction does not address a pre-existing feminine identity; it constitutes one. The grandmother's lessons function as what Butler, following Althusser, would call interpellation — the process by which the subject is hailed into a subject position, and in answering that hailing, becomes the subject she is named as. Jaya becomes "girl," and later "wife," precisely through her repetition of these prescribed acts.

After marriage, the domestic regime intensifies. Jaya cooks Mohan's food, manages the household finances, attends to the children's school and emotional needs, and maintains the affective labour of marital harmony — smiling, absorbing, deferring. These acts are not the products of desire; they are performed, as Butler would say, under compulsion. The novel's retrospective narration allows Jaya to perceive, from the distance of the Dadar flat, what she could not recognise while embedded in the routine: that she had been "acting," that the compliant, self-effacing woman Mohan saw was a character she had learned to inhabit. The performance had become so total, so uninterrupted, that it had acquired the appearance of nature.

Crucially, the novel reveals that this performance demanded ongoing effort. Jaya recalls the constant micro-management of her own impulses — the suppression of opinions, the calibration of responses to avoid Mohan's displeasure, the deliberate subordination of her writing to the demands of the household. Butler argues that the compulsive repetition of gendered performance betrays an anxiety at its core: "if the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible" (1990, p. 189). Jaya's effort to maintain the performance is itself evidence that femininity is not a natural state but a regulatory achievement, one that could, in principle, be achieved differently.

The spatial politics of the novel reinforce this reading. The flat in Dadar, the old flat to which Jaya and Mohan retreat, is explicitly coded as the site of domesticity at its most raw and demanding — the small kitchen, the cramped rooms, the absence of the middle-class amenities that had cushioned the performance in their Churchgate apartment. But it is also, paradoxically, the space in which Jaya's performance begins to falter. Freed from the constant social surveillance of her Churchgate life, she cooks less, reflects more, and begins to write. The domestic body, released temporarily from the obligation to perform, begins to become legible to itself. The flat is, in Butlerian terms, a space in which the reiteration is interrupted — and in that interruption, the constructed nature of the performance becomes visible.

IV. SILENCE AS GENDERED PERFORMANCE: THE REGULATORY TECHNOLOGY OF FEMININITY

The title of Deshpande's novel is not merely a description of a marital estrangement; it names the central mechanism by which femininity is enforced and reproduced. Silence, in *That Long Silence*, is not the absence of performance but a performance in itself — one of the most demanding and regulatory acts that Jaya is required to sustain. To read the novel through Butler is to recognise that the demand for women's silence is not a repression of a pre-existing voice but a technology for producing a particular kind of gendered subject: the accommodating, non-threatening, properly feminine wife.

The novel stages this most explicitly through Mohan's reaction to Jaya's single moment of unguarded speech. When Jaya, in a moment of anger, refers to Mohan's mother as "a cook," Mohan withdraws into furious silence and declares that anger "make[s] a woman unwomanly." The locution is revealing: it is not that Jaya's anger is morally wrong or factually incorrect; it is that it is ontologically transgressive. To be angry, to speak unfiltered, is to fail to be a woman — or at least, to fail to be the kind of woman that the patriarchal order requires and recognises. Mohan's statement functions as a disciplinary injunction: be silent or forfeit your femininity.

This is precisely the structure Butler describes in her account of how the performative citation of norms works to constitute the subject. The gendered subject is produced not only through positive performances — cooking, smiling, deferring — but through the negative enforcement of what is not permitted: anger, assertion, professional ambition, the public articulation of desire. Jaya's seventeen years of marital silence are not merely a personal psychological response to Mohan's displeasure; they are a sustained performance of the norm of feminine self-effacement, repeated daily until the performance appears to be character.

The novel's retrospective structure is well-suited to anatomising this process. Through Jaya's extended recollection in the Dadar flat, the reader watches the silence being produced and maintained over time. Jaya recalls the specific adjustments she made in the early years of marriage: softening her opinions, framing her observations in ways that would not provoke, learning to read Mohan's moods as a precondition for speech. Each of these adjustments is, in Butler's terms, a reiteration of the feminine norm — a repetition that simultaneously cites the norm and reinscribes it. The cumulative effect is a subject who has internalised the prohibition so thoroughly that she experiences her own silence as natural, as who she is, rather than as what she has been required to perform.

Butler's argument that the regulatory norm must be repeatedly invoked also illuminates the novel's treatment of silence as fragile. The very fact that Mohan must discipline Jaya's single outburst with such force — that her one moment of unguarded speech requires weeks of punitive withdrawal — reveals the precariousness of the silent-feminine-wife as a subject position. If femininity were natural, it would not need such vigorous enforcement. The disciplinary apparatus that surrounds Jaya's speech — Mohan's anger, the grandmother's instructions, the social expectations of educated middle-class wifedom — exists precisely because the norm is unstable, because it requires constant reiteration to sustain the illusion of nature.

There is also a recursive irony at the heart of the novel that a Butlerian reading makes legible. Jaya is a writer — someone whose professional existence depends on finding and articulating a voice. Yet the very training in femininity that has been applied to her since childhood is a training in self-suppression, in the management and ultimately the elimination of that voice in the domestic sphere. The woman who writes publishes stories in women's magazines under a pseudonym; the wife does not speak at the dinner

table without calculating the consequences. These are not two separate women: they are two incompatible gendered performances that the novel insists cannot be simultaneously sustained. The split self that Deshpande articulates is, in Butler's terms, the inevitable consequence of a regulatory regime that demands the complete subordination of one set of capacities to another.

V. CITATIONALITY AND THE MYTHOLOGICAL SCRIPT: SITA, GANDHARI, AND THE IDEAL INDIAN WIFE

Butler's concept of citationality — the idea that each performance of gender cites a prior norm, a pre-existing script that the performance instantiates and renews — finds a remarkably literal expression in *That Long Silence*. Deshpande's novel is populated by mythological and literary figures of ideal Indian femininity: Sita, Gandhari, Savitri. These figures function not as mere cultural references but as the normative templates against which Jaya's performance is measured, both by others and by Jaya herself. To be a good wife in the world of the novel is to cite Sita: to follow one's husband without complaint, to subordinate one's own desires to his, to be unwavering in loyalty even in the face of injustice.

The novel stages the citational mechanism with particular clarity in the passages where Jaya reflects on what it means to be a "good wife." The invocation of Sita and Gandhari is never presented as metaphor; it is presented as instruction, as a script that women are expected to perform. These mythological figures are the prior performances that Jaya's own marital performance must cite in order to be legible as femininity within the cultural context of the novel. In Butler's terms, they represent what she calls the "regulatory ideal" — the normative standard that can never be fully achieved but whose impossible demand structures every performance.

The family tree episode, which Jaya recalls with considerable pain, makes this citational structure visible in spatial terms. When Jaya discovers that her name, along with those of all the women in her family, has been erased from the official family genealogy, she encounters the structural consequence of the citational norm: women do not exist as subjects in the patriarchal record, only as functions. The grandmother, "the indomitable woman who alone held the family together," has no place in the family tree. The women's labour — domestic, emotional, reproductive — has been the condition of the family's survival, yet it is precisely this labour that renders them invisible within the official narrative of patrilineal descent. The family tree is a map not of persons but of performances: only those who perform the masculine role of lineage-bearing are recorded.

Butler argues that the citational norm operates through what she calls "the forcible citation of a norm" (1993, p. 232): one is compelled to cite it, and the compulsion is enforced through the threat of unintelligibility — the prospect of becoming unrecognisable as a gendered, social, legible subject. In *That Long Silence*, this threat is made tangible through the figure of the woman who fails to cite correctly. Jaya is haunted by the example of her aunt, a woman who refused accommodation and was destroyed by the refusal — socially isolated, rendered illegible. The lesson Jaya has absorbed is that the citational demand is not optional: one cites Sita or one ceases to exist as a recognisable woman within the social order.

And yet the citational structure also, as Butler insists, contains the seeds of its own destabilisation. Every citation is also, necessarily, an interpretation — a slightly different performance of the prior script. The novel hints at this possibility in its treatment of Jaya's grandmother, whose indomitable management of the family constitutes, in practice, a form of authority and competence that the myth of the passive Sita cannot contain. The grandmother cites the norm of feminine self-sacrifice while simultaneously exceeding it. This discrepancy between the cited norm and its instantiation is, for Butler, the condition of possibility for subversive reiteration: if the citation is never exact, the norm is never entirely secured.

VI. SUBVERSIVE REITERATION: WRITING AS PERFORMATIVE RESISTANCE

Having established that Jaya's femininity is a compulsory, citational performance, this paper must now attend to what Butler describes as the possibility of performing gender differently — of citing the norm in ways that expose its constructed character rather than reinforcing it. Butler is careful to distinguish this from voluntarist notions of gender rebellion; one cannot simply step outside the performative regime. But one can reiterate the norm "in order to destabilize it" (1993, p. 237), to produce performances that reveal the gap between the regulatory ideal and its instantiation, and in doing so, to open the norm to contestation.

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya's writing functions as precisely this kind of subversive reiteration. To write is, for Jaya, to perform a different kind of subjectivity — to become, temporarily, the subject who speaks rather than the subject who accommodates. The novel consistently codes the act of writing as transgressive within the domestic frame: it is an act that exceeds the feminine script, that introduces into the domestic space a form of agency and self-articulation that the script does not permit. When Jaya writes, she is not recovering an authentic self that pre-existed the performance; she is performing an alternative subjectivity, one that cites different norms — the norms of the writer, the intellectual, the woman who speaks.

This is not, the novel insists, a triumphant liberation. Butler's point about the limits of subversive reiteration is worth holding in view: the alternative performance does not escape the regulatory frame; it operates within it, and its subversiveness is always partial, always precarious. Jaya's writing in the Dadar flat is tentative, fragmentary, and deeply uncertain. She does not know whether she can write. She does not know what she wants to say. She is, in Butler's terms, still constituted by the very norms she is attempting to cite differently — still the woman who has spent seventeen years learning that her voice is unwelcome. The novel's refusal to deliver a straightforward liberation narrative is, from a Butlerian perspective, one of its most theoretically honest gestures.

Nevertheless, the novel's ending insists that something has changed. When Jaya declares that she is no longer afraid, that the panic has gone, and that she will speak and do what she desires, this is not presented as the assertion of a pre-existing authentic self. It is presented as the beginning of a new performance — one that may be no less constructed than the performance it replaces, but that cites different norms, opens different possibilities. Butler writes that "the injunction to be a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated" (1990, p. 185). Jaya's seventeen years of failed, effortful femininity have produced precisely such incoherence: a subject who can no longer sustain the performance and who, in her failure to sustain it, discovers that she might perform something else.

The novel's treatment of Kamat — the neighbour and friend who encourages Jaya's writing during an earlier period of her life — is also legible in this frame. Kamat functions not as a romantic liberator but as a witness to a different performance of Jaya's subjectivity: the performance of the woman who writes, who thinks, who has something to say. His death closes off this possibility for years. What the Dadar interlude ultimately restores is not Kamat but the performance he witnessed — the subjectivity that Jaya had suppressed in order to sustain the performance of the compliant wife. To write in the Dadar flat is to resume an interrupted reiteration, to cite once more the norm of the writing self, and in doing so to resist, however partially, the citational compulsion of the domestic feminine.

VII. AGAINST LIBERAL FEMINIST READINGS: THE LIMITS OF THE 'VOICE' PARADIGM

Much of the existing critical scholarship on *That Long Silence* operates within what might broadly be described as a liberal feminist paradigm. This framework reads Jaya's journey as a quest for an authentic self suppressed by patriarchal forces, and her eventual resolve to speak as the recovery of a voice that was always potentially hers. Sanjoy Saksena's reading of Jaya's role as "self-protective and subversive" within the "domestic politics" of the novel is representative: it identifies the subversive dimension of Jaya's interiority while preserving the assumption of a coherent subject who exercises it. Similarly, readings that centre the novel's treatment of silence as "repression" presuppose a voice that pre-exists its repression and can be straightforwardly released.

The contribution of a Butlerian reading is to complicate this account. If femininity is not a mask but a mode of subject-production, then the self that Jaya recovers at the end of the novel is not a self that pre-existed the performance; it is a different performance, constructed through different citational acts. This does not diminish the significance of Jaya's transformation — the Butlerian account is not nihilistic about the possibility of change. But it does relocate that significance: what matters is not the recovery of an essential self but the opening of new performative possibilities, the discovery that the norm can be cited differently.

This distinction has practical critical consequences. The liberal feminist reading of *That Long Silence* tends to invest its critical energy in the figure of Jaya as an exceptional individual — a woman smart and courageous enough to see through the patriarchal construction and assert her authentic identity. The Butlerian reading, by contrast, directs critical attention to the structure of the norm itself: to the citational apparatus that produces the compliant wife as a subject, and to the ways in which the novel renders that apparatus visible. Deshpande is, on this reading, not primarily a novelist of individual liberation but a novelist of structural exposure: what her novel reveals is the machinery by which femininity is manufactured and the cost of that manufacturing process to women who are subject to it.

This reorientation also allows the reader to take seriously the novel's treatment of women who are not Jaya — the grandmother, the aunt, the maidservant, the women glimpsed on the margins of the narrative — as participants in the same citational regime rather than as foils to Jaya's exceptional interiority. Each of them is performing femininity under the same compulsion, citing the same norms, producing through their repetitions the same regulatory ideal. Deshpande's novel, on a Butlerian reading, is less about one woman's liberation than about the pervasive and compulsory nature of the performance itself.

VIII. CONCLUSION

That Long Silence is a novel about the cost of performance. Its protagonist has spent seventeen years performing femininity — cooking, deferring, being silent, making herself legible to a patriarchal social order that can only recognise her as wife, mother, and domestic support. The crisis that opens the novel is also, therefore, a crisis of performance: removed from the stage of her Churchgate life, Jaya can no longer sustain the fiction, and in that failure to sustain it, the constructed character of the fiction becomes visible.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity provides the analytical vocabulary to read this construction with precision. The domestic labour that structures Jaya's daily existence is not the expression of a feminine nature but a regime of repeated acts through which a gendered subject is produced. The silence that defines her marriage is not the repression of a pre-existing voice but a performance of the regulatory norm of feminine self-effacement, sustained through citational repetition and enforced through disciplinary threat. The mythological figures of Sita and Gandhari are not merely cultural references but the prior scripts that Jaya's performance must cite in order to be legible as femininity within its cultural context. And the writing that Jaya finally returns to in the Dadar flat is not the recovery of an authentic self but a subversive reiteration — a different citation of gender, one that opens the possibility of a different kind of subject.

What a Butlerian reading adds to the existing feminist scholarship on Deshpande is a structural account of how femininity is produced, not merely a moral account of how it is imposed. The novel's power lies not only in its portrayal of one woman's suffering under patriarchy, but in its meticulous anatomy of the apparatus that produces and sustains the compliant feminine subject. *That Long Silence* is, on this reading, a novel about the compulsory fiction of femininity and about what becomes possible when that fiction, however momentarily, begins to unravel.

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