



Reclaiming the Self and Identity: Deconstructing the Devastating Effect of Silence and the Dehumanising Impact of Marriage in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract:

This paper aims to study Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* from feminist as well as psychoanalytic viewpoints. It puts a strong emphasis on silence and suppressed thoughts, and their impact on the female psyche. However, silence is depicted here as an intricate theme symbolising a range of ideologies within the course of the novel. By highlighting the emotional and psychological turmoil of Jaya in her suffocating married life with Mohan, this paper aims to critique the institution of marriage, and the various socio-cultural mores of patriarchy, which attempt to silence women, thereby ensuring male dominance and superiority. All in all, this study delineates the plight of Indian women being the victims of male oppression and despotism, which routinely restricts women's autonomy, denies equality and identity. Thus, this paper accentuates the importance of women raising their voices in order to reclaim their identity.

Keywords: silence, psychological turmoil, marriage, identity, patriarchy.

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande was born on 19th August 1938 in Dharwad, Karnataka, the second daughter of the Kannada dramatist and writer Adya Rangacharya and Sharada Adya. She was educated in Bombay and Bangalore, had her first job with a lawyer and then as a law reporter. As she was born and raised in the patriarchal society of India, her works intricately explore the nuanced and complex lives of women, the themes of men-women relationships, female identity, marital struggles, the psychological impact of patriarchy, and women's arduous journey toward self-realisation and identity. She, in her essay, "Of Concerns, Of Anxieties", mentions that: "There are three things in my early life that have shaped me as a writer. These are: that my father was a writer, that I was educated exclusively in English and that I was born a female". (Deshpande 107). The last part of this statement, 'that I was born a female', clearly echoes the voice of a feminist soul in her and the importance for a woman to raise her voice in a patriarchal society.

However, unlike the early feminist authors who chose to portray the subjugation of women in ordinary life, Shashi Deshpande moved a step further. She made educated women as the subject of her writing, voicing the agony of those women who depend on their male counterparts for choices, decisions and even their way of living. However, this notion of writing about the turmoil of women, especially housewives, was inspired by Shashi's own experiences after her marriage in 1962. Becoming a mother in England, she experienced anxiety and aloofness; with her husband at work and she alone in the house with the children, a sense of lost identity began to haunt her. Thus, upon returning to India, she decided to write about her experiences as a wife and mother in England. As she mentions in her essay collection - *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays*:

There was ... the feeling that after becoming a wife and mother, my intellectual self, which had been so important a part of me until then, was being suppressed, that it was being discounted, not valued. And this dormant self was becoming restive, it wanted a

release. Maybe it was out of the conflict between this 'female self' and the intellectual self that self-expression began. (Deshpande 5)

In this regard, Simone De Beauvoir's comment on the plight of housewives can be taken under consideration. She states, "Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day." (Simone de Beauvoir 470). This reflects the psychological strain of housewives, who are trapped in a repetitive loop of absurd tasks that create nothing productive. However, in this respect, the selected novel for this study, *That Long Silence* (1988), serves as a literary milestone. It exposes the suffocating reality of Indian women's turmoil and their ongoing struggle for a voice, independence, and liberty. Most importantly, it highlights their quest to achieve an identity that signifies their own inherent worth, rather than defining them solely as someone's daughter, wife, or mother. Thus, set in the modern era of Indian society, this novel serves as a critique of the institution of marriage, as well as the traditional and cultural beliefs of the patriarchal society, which still continues to subjugate women, reducing their worth to mere objects of sexual pleasure.

However, silence plays a pivotal role in the novel as a way of exploring the pain and suffering of women, and of questioning the ways in which traditional social norms and expectations continue to shape their lives in particular. Thus, this work is celebrated for shedding light on the adversities, evils of patriarchy, the quiet yet formidable strength of women, and the enduring importance of equality, freedom of speech, and self-identity.

Illustrating the nihilistic, dull and suffocating married life of the protagonist Jaya, this narrative reflects almost every housewife's plight within the constraints of marriage in a patriarchal society. Patriarchy forces women to live the suffocating life of an ideal wife and mother by stifling their own wishes. This is explicitly evident from Jaya's melancholic conjugal

life, which lacks emotional attachment to her husband, lacks encouragement to communicate her thoughts, lacks liberty to write her true feelings and denies autonomy to create her own identity. Thus, by tracing Jaya's quest for self-identity, this narrative reflects on the importance of having one's own voice or clarity of mind to reclaim identity.

However, silence is here used as a symbol of Jaya's inner turmoil and her inability to communicate her true feelings to the people around her. Jaya feels trapped in her role as a wife and mother, and her silence is a way of expressing her dissatisfaction with her life. Throughout the novel, she struggles to find a way to break out of this silence, to express herself. She longs to communicate her desires to her husband, yet she is painfully aware that he prefers her to remain silent or only say what he wants to hear, rather than listen to her genuine perspectives. Simone de Beauvoir, in her work, talked about the pitiable female world, which has actually been constructed by the male and which is dominated by the patriarchal tools of oppression. As Beauvoir remarks, "Men have presumed to create a feminine domain—the kingdom of life, of immanence—only in order to lock women therein. (Simone de Beauvoir 90). This reveals the chained and caged life of women, locked behind the unseen prison of patriarchy. We can see Jaya as an ideal woman belonging to this vain kingdom, as, as per her husband's wishes, she chooses to suppress her own thoughts and feelings, fulfilling the role of an ideal wife who never questions her husband's opinions, rarely speaks in front of him, and never does what he dislikes. Thus, this paper aims to show the consequences of such silence and suppressed desires on one's psyche.

Throughout the novel, Jaya suffers from psychological turmoil, struggling to resolve the anxiety, inner turbulence, and wounded psyche, which created a restlessness in her life and has snatched away the very sight of peace and bliss. She tries to analyse each and every aspect of her life to search out the meaning of her existence, to overcome nihilism, to conquer existential angst, and to find the cause of her failed relationship with her husband. Ultimately,

she makes the courageous decision to abandon her silence and speak her thoughts with firm resolve. This marks the end of the novel on an optimistic note with the hope of Jaya being able to reclaim her self-identity by raising her voice.

Silence is frequently used as a weapon by the patriarchy to control the lives of women and ensure they remain submissive and compliant to male dominance. Thus, Jaya's husband Mohan's discouraging attitude toward Jaya's attempts to communicate her desires can be seen as a practice of the patriarchy's vicious scheme: keeping women in an inferior position by suppressing their voices. As Jaya says, during one of their arguments - "He has forgotten what he did. And I realised that even if I spoke, he would not listen to me. He had armed himself with an anger that seemed not quite real, but underneath it I could sense a genuine hostility." (120).

Nonetheless, silence on Jaya's part can be seen as a way of coping with the pressures and expectations placed on her by society. Society expects her only to listen and obey—sometimes as a daughter, sister, wife, or mother—while completely ignoring her wishes as a human being. Thus, she finds silence to be a safe shelter in order not to upset anyone especially Mohan; and in doing so, killing her own voice, continuing to be a loyal and obedient wife. She mentions - "I could never laugh at Mohan, at anything that mattered to Mohan. If I did so, it diminished him; and who wanted a dwarfed husband?" (169). Her silence here shows the helplessness of a housewife or a woman, as well as the level of patriarchal exploitation. This system manipulates and binds women to such an extent that they start considering silence as a privilege and a solution to all their problems, although this silence wreaks havoc on their psyche. It leads women to internalize the notion that the husband is the centre—the subject who adds value to his wife's life. Thus, being silent and blindly adhering to his wishes is seen as the best way to keep him happy, thereby securing their own value and worth in society.

However, behind Jaya's very idea of marriage and her family of two children and a husband serving as her safe shell—is a deep-seated patriarchal influence. This is clear when she says - "Mohan's wife, Rahul and Rati's mother - I can crawl to that hole...a warm and safe hole". (173). Patriarchy shapes women's lives through such belief systems that convince women their lives are safest and most successful only when defined by their roles as wives and mothers. Furthermore, Vanitamami's advice to Jaya just before her marriage that "a husband is like a sheltering tree"(32), also signifies patriarchy's firm grip or deep-rootedness, which makes women themselves preachers of patriarchal ideologies of male supremacy. Thus, by unveiling each and every aspect of Jaya's life and psychoanalysing her silence and character as a whole, this paper aims to make an in-depth study of the institution of patriarchy and marriage, how they shape the lives of women; and women's constant struggle to break through the barriers of patriarchy to establish their self-identity and liberty.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis, emphasising narrative structure, motifs, metaphors, symbols and silences which in their own symbolic manner adds to the thematic exploration of the dilemma of women and the dominance of male in society. It takes account of the Psychoanalytic Theory to study the effect of silence and suppressed thoughts in one's psyche. On a broader range, it uses psychoanalysis to analyse how adversely one's psyche can be affected by constant exposure to a mundane life of negligence, of no autonomy, dignity or self recognition, living life on other's terms and conditions, thus studying the mental turmoil of a woman in marriage. The research also takes under consideration various feminist theories to strengthen the study, such as - Simone de Beauvoir's theory of 'gender as a social construct', Elaine Showalter's theory of 'Gynocriticism', Judith Butler's theory of 'Gender as Performance', etc. The research also takes under consideration the most recent peer-reviewed

articles, research papers and scholarly books that critically analyzed the text from various angles. This approach ensures that the study is part of the prevailing academic discourse, yet it also adds new insights into the existing field.

Analysis

"If I were a man and cared to know the world I live in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy — the weight of that long silence of one half the world". This statement by Elizabeth Robin, which forms the epigraph to the novel, indicates the female world of silence and submission, as well as the disparity between the male and female worlds. Shashi Deshpande uses first-person narration, forcing her central character, Jaya, to tell her story. Jaya, however, warns the reader at the outset that she is not the heroine of her story, nor does she speak of her isolated self. One could say that the novel deals with the relationship between men and women, marriage, family life, and one's lost self while coping with the expectations of these relationships.

Born and raised in a middle-class, patriarchal society, Jaya had the mores and values of patriarchy instilled in her psyche from her very childhood. She was told stories about Sita, Savitri and Draupadi, that depicted their perfect wifely behaviour, silent suffering and self-sacrificing attitudes to save their families. This is reflective of Simone de Beauvoir's theory of gender as a social construction, where she explains that "The delights of passivity are made to seem desirable to the young girl by parents and teachers, books and myths, women and men; she is taught to enjoy them from earliest childhood" (Simone de Beauvoir 301). Hence, these storytelling sessions in Jaya's childhood can be seen as her family's attempts to shape her views of an ideal wife or woman. However, the mature Jaya finds difficulty in living her life on these rules. Seething with internal and external discontent, her distorted psyche makes her bounce upon the springboard of life. Jaya reconciles herself to the fact that she does not want to be a

“Sita following her husband into exile” (11) or a “Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband”(11) or a “Draupadi stoically sharing her husband’s travails.”(11). However, this realisation occurs to Jaya only after her strenuous journey of self examination, soul searching, and mediation. The catalyst for this journey was her straining, suffocating and debilitating married life with her husband Mohan, which wreaked havoc on her entire being. Consequently, she rejects a subaltern and subservient attitude.

Mohan wanted a well-educated and cultured wife, so he resolved to marry Jaya when he heard her speaking fluently. “You know Jaya, the first day I met you at your Ramukaku’s house, you were talking to your brother, Dinkar, and somehow you sounded so much like that girl. I think it was at that moment that I decided I would marry you “(90). Calculative, cold, and materialistic Mohan married not out of love or affection, but on the basis of certain criteria. Meanwhile, Jaya’s soul craved emotional attachment, causing her to find herself a square peg in a round hole. There, develops a disheartening silence between the husband and the wife. Mohan’s queries remain unanswered by Jaya, for she is unable to connect with him or find a word of response: “I racked my brains trying to think of an answer”(31).

Jaya’s anxiety to fulfil her role as a wife and mother also snatched away from her the career of a writer, as Mohan would remark: “How could you, how could you have done it?...they will think I am this kind of a man. How can I look anyone in the face again? And you, how could you write these things, how could you write such ugly things...I had been convinced I had done him wrong. And I had stopped writing after that” (143-144). It’s reflective of Elaine Showalter’s claim that “women have had a literature of their own all along” (Showalter 13), yet their views and voices were forcefully dismissed by the patriarchy, from time immemorial. This dismissal further gives the image of a caged bird whose wings are cut ruthlessly with every attempt to fly. However, all of Jaya’s sacrifices were seemingly wiped out when Mohan claimed she had done nothing for him “...nothing mattered to you, only your needs, you could

see nothing else”(118). She was accused of not caring about the children and of distancing herself from him and his concerns. But, what is unfortunate to see here is Jaya’s silence; she still chooses to be silent and listen calmly to all the allegations levied against her by her husband. For him, she has given up writing and speaking her true desires so as not to hurt him. She has changed her dressing sense, changed her hairstyle and designed it the way his friend’s wives do, because he wants her to do so. In a way, she has changed her whole way of living, yet, she is given the title of a selfish woman and a failed wife and mother. Even so, Jaya still fails to break through her silence - “I was full of a sense of angry confusion. What was he charging me with? And, oh God, why couldn't I speak? Why couldn't I say something? I felt foolishly inadequate...”(119). This shows the pitiful condition of Jaya whose voice has been suppressed for so long that now she has forgotten to take stand for her own self, even at the most required moment.

Simone de Beauvoir’s seminal text, *The Second Sex*, talks about the subalterned and marginalized women who have been denied recognition, power, and independence by patriarchy from time immemorial. She notes that “History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete power; since the earliest days of the patriarchy, they have thought best to keep women in a state of dependence; their codes of law have been set up against her; and thus she has been definitely established as the Other” (Simone de Beauvoir 159). This othering of women is evident in Jaya's case as well. The analysis of Jaya’s married life indicates her secondary position below her husband, where her husband acts as the centre—being the patriarch of the family—and she as the “other”, being a housewife with no voice or authority.

However, silence has acted both as a defence mechanism and as a prison or curse for Jaya, becoming a hindrance in the various relationships she tries to build. In the case of the relationship between Jaya and her daughter, Rati, miscommunication has made it somewhat

distant and complicated; a gap and lack of understanding can be traced where both fail to connect with each other. This can also be seen as the reason behind Jaya's son Rahul's detachment from the family. Most importantly, this lack of communication is the core of Jaya and Mohan's distorted relationship, where only Mohan's thoughts found verbal exposition. From Jaya's part, there was only silence—her thoughts never found a verbal form, remaining voiceless within her heart. Thus, their communication remained incomplete “...he will come back and give me a carefully edited version of what has happened - as he has done so often till now - and then ask me, ‘what do you say Jaya?’? ... I have looked at his face for clues and then given him the answer I know he wants to hear”.(192). This is reflective of Jaya's helplessness or powerlessness in their relationship, where she is reduced to a mere puppet of her husband's hand, performing every action as per her husband's wishes.

Moreover, behind this silence of Jaya, along with Mohan's discouraging attitude, also works the influence of various other institutions of patriarchy such as family. For instance, in her childhood days, her grandmother remarked, “I feel sorry for your husband, Jaya, whoever he is...Look at you for everything a question, for everything a retort. What husband can be comfortable with that?”(27). This illustrates the gender performativity theory of Judith Butler, which states that “gender reality is created through sustained social performances”(Judith Butler 180). Here, the grandmother's constant remarks on Jaya's behavior—her curiosity-driven nature, her way of speaking, and the pitch of her voice—reveal attempts to mold her character as submissive, calm and docile, which are socially accepted traits of a good woman. However, Jaya reveals that she had performed all these gender-specific roles, had no questions or retorts for Mohan, lived a life of silence and sacrifices, yet there was no comfort or bliss in her married life. As she notes, “So many subjects were barred that the silence seemed heavy with uneasiness” (27). This indicates the futility of these traits, which are forcefully entrusted

to an individual in the name of sex and gender. It brings no peace and position in women's lives, rather deteriorates their physical as well as psychological state.

Jaya's arduous journey of introspection and identity also revealed some bitter realities of patriarchy, especially its denial of recognition to women. It deliberately wipes out the contribution and existence of women. Jaya discovers that in the family tree prepared by Ramukaka, there is no mention of her name. While this dismays her, she is even more shattered to see that her mother, her kakis (her uncles' wives), and in fact her grandmother, Ajji, who in real sense was the root of the family, even her name was excluded and wiped out from the family history. It was only the male members who got a place in the family tree and the women are as easily ignored as their sacrifices, contribution and role in a family and society get ignored and erased. Thus, Jaya throughout the narrative tries to analyse the meaning of a woman's life or their status in the family or society by closely observing the lives of the female characters around her. She tries to unravel the life of Kusum, of Mukta, of Jeeja, of Mohan's mother, of her own mother, and of course, of her own life, so to come out with the understanding of women's need to break out of their silence, of their submissive role and reclaiming their own identity and dignity.

Jaya recalls the pathetic life of her distant cousin Kusum, who was abandoned by her husband and subsequently looked down upon by society and her own family. Driven insane by her circumstances, exploitation, and pain, Kusum tragically suffers a mental breakdown and commits suicide. Thus, Kusum's life serves as a constant, haunting example of the societal marginalisation of women, and the cruelty of the institutions of marriage and patriarchy. Similarly, Jaya's widowed neighbour, Mukta, who supports her family entirely through her own earnings, is often found fasting for her husband. Although her husband is no longer alive, she is unable to break the habit of performing these rituals for his well-being. This illustrates patriarchy's deep-rooted philosophies in the mind of women, that women find impossible to

break through. As Judith Butler remarked, “gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity”.(Judith Butler 143). Thus, all the female characters in the novel can indeed be seen as submerged in the process of ‘becoming’, attaining more and more traits of their specific gender.

However, the life story of Mohan's mother offers glimpses of the extreme violence and oppression faced by women within the institution of marriage. She silently endured all the tortures, finding peace only in the lap of death when she died silently, while undergoing an abortion. Moreover, Jaya's mother and grandmother represent the older, traditional generation of submissive women who lived their lives by the rules of patriarchy. They passively accepted their marginalised conditions and preached the same ideologies to the next generation. As they instilled in Jaya the belief that a woman's happiness is intrinsically tied to her husband's: "The happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you" (138). These kind of remarks or conditioning holds strong grip in Jaya's psyche, as she is seen struggling the worst in her melancholic conjugal life, yet fails to challenge Mohan's dominating and oppressive attitudes.

Shashi Deshpande further highlights the physical relationship between men and women, which often becomes a tormenting and oppressive experience for women, being overpowered by their male counterparts. Jaya explains her dull, mechanical, or emotionless physical relationship with her husband, where their bodies unite but not their hearts; and where her role is to silently endure all the pain without complaining. She labels it as love, to continue being a silent partner to this act of sensuality. However, in her arduous journey of introspection, Jaya begins to realize the cost of her silence, that she has maintained for the sake of her marital life—a journey in which her own name was essentially snatched away from her. In her father's house, her name was Jaya— “Jaya for victory” (15), as her father would call her. Yet this victorious name was changed to Suhasini, which stands for "a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped" (15-16). Thus, the

name itself suggested all the expectations entrusted to her in her married life: to be selfless, docile, obedient, submissive, and silent. Consequently, her life was completely turned upside down—from a little girl who had curiosity to learn, to know, to question with keen interest in her heart, into a woman who stifled her voice and lost her spark. Ultimately, she was reduced to a life of silence, obedience, and submission to her husband.

Beauvoir, in her work, *The Second Sex*, criticised the husband-wife relationship by calling it a master-slave relation, which is marked by power and dominance. She highlights the hypocrisy of the patriarchal system, which creates a biased and artificial division between the two sexes, which ultimately leads to women's subjugation, marginalisation, and plight. Thus, Beauvoir accentuates the importance of equality for a couple to grow and thrive, as she remarks, “When we abolish the slavery of half of humanity, together with the whole system of hypocrisy that it implies, then the ‘division’ of humanity will reveal its genuine significance and the human couple will find its true form” (Simone de Beauvoir, 687). Similarly, in Jaya and Mohan's relationship, we find a kind of master-slave dynamic where Jaya is supposed to follow every wish and order of Mohan; in other words, she is bound to live her life entirely on his terms.

Jaya's silence, passive role, and submission to Mohan placed her in such a paralysed world that as soon as Mohan left the Dadar flat, Jaya broke down into pieces. She was unable to recollect herself, her identity, her roles, or her position, in fact, her whole world seemed utterly shattered. She lamented, “What am I going to do? What shall I do if he doesn't come back? Mukta I was so confident, so sure of myself, I felt so superior to others...Kusum, yes, and you too...and now, without Mohan, I am...I don't know, I don't know what I am”(167). This reveals the devastating mental state of a woman in a patriarchal society, demonstrating how women are conditioned to the point that they can't even imagine their world existing without their husbands.

However, the silence of Jaya has always been taken for granted by Mohan. He takes her acquiescence for granted, and she complies out of compulsion. Fleeing their upscale Churchgate flat due to an impending business inquiry, Mohan simply took the decision on Jaya's behalf to accompany him, although he didn't care whether she really wanted to come along. But, the worst part was when Mohan placed all the allegations regarding his work scam on Jaya and the children. As he declares "It was for you and the children that I did this" (9), explaining that just to give her and the children a good life he had to choose the wrong path; and this very declaration left Jaya in complete shock. Thus, her piled up anger, disgust, suppressed thoughts, pains, and desires took a toll on her psyche. Amidst an unbearable period of suffering, waiting, suffocation, anxiety and growing hysteria, the process of self-examination and self-criticism begins for Jaya. She is flooded with memories of the past—her earlier life, her marriage to Mohan, the frustrations and disappointments of her seventeen-year marriage, and her personal failure, all of which begin to haunt and torment her. However, this journey into the past provides her with vital guidance for the future. Her introspection forces her to acknowledge the necessity of breaking out of her silence and abandoning her role as Mohan's passive partner. In order to establish a relationship built on equality and liberty rather than silence or submission, as well as for the cessation of her psychological turmoil and cessation of hostility. All in all, to bring peace in life and true harmony in family, she ultimately decides to choose subversion over submission.

Conclusion

The study serves as a peep into the unspoken world of Jaya, delineating the strenuous journey of a woman's introspection and identity in a patriarchal society. Silence functions here as a multifaceted trait, ranging from a symbol of women's marginalization and helplessness to a representation of their suppressed potency, vigor, and influence. Ultimately, silence plays a

pivotal role in the construction of the narrative. However, the life of Jaya exposes the reality of modern, educated women who are still subject to male oppression and choose silence over self-identity, respect, independence and authority. The strained relationship of Jaya and Mohan indicates the fragility of the institution of marriage, where there is only a pretension of a happy family. Underneath it lie a distorted heart, a wounded psyche, compromises and sacrifices. These sacrifices are on the part of women to keep the marriage going, to keep the husband and children happy, to keep up the role of an ideal wife and mother—at the expense of stifling their own dreams, desires, happiness, and mental peace. Thus, Deshpande's narrative could be studied as a scathing critique of the institution of marriage, governed by patriarchy's draining canons, which marginalize women by institutionalizing male dominance across social, economic, cultural and political spheres. This systemic power imbalance devalues women's contributions, restricts their autonomy, and denies equality. Thus, through Jaya's constant struggle throughout the novel and finally her firm resolve to break through her silence, Deshpande indicates the importance of every woman to outgrow the image and roles assigned to them by society and raise their voice in order to reclaim their identity, self-esteem and sovereignty.

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