



Exploring Feminist Perspective in Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence

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ABSTRACT

Woman is the originator, creator and producer of the world. A human society is made up of two fundamental elements: men and women. But it is the plight of our nation that women are considered less equal to males. Feminism tries to put an end to exploitation and oppression and tries to achieve gender equality. Feminism is about respecting women, their experiences, their knowledge, and their strength and giving them equal opportunities as men. The fundamental theme of Deshpande's 1988 novel 'That Long Silence', which she claims to be her most autobiographical work, is silence, both by the family and by society. It is a touching feminist work that probes into the inner world of Indian women who struggle with consistency, silence, and uniqueness. Shashi Deshpande explores a realistic and practical feminist vision in Jaya. Her feminism is about acknowledging one's silence, one's duties, and the ability to speak up again, not about rebelling. By empowering Jaya, Deshpande empowers innumerable women who have been silenced by custom, marriage, and social expectations. The aim of this paper is to investigate the issues and hardship that middle-class women face in patriarchal society.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender equality, Societal expectations, Female protagonists, Exploitation and oppression

Introduction:

Feminism is a socio-political movement that is based on the aim to provide social, personal, and political equality to the women of which they were debarred from the ancient past. In the near past, women were not allowed to enjoy even the slightest of the privileges which were open to men. In previous times, Men dominated the society, while women were merely secondary to them. A woman had no opinion, no one used to give any respect or regard to her point of view and the men were the sole in charge of all the decisions.

Early in the 20th century, feminism emerged as an "organised movement in support of female rights and interests." Feminism promotes equal freedom of self-expression for women and examines their fight against "male created conceptions" as well as their sociopolitical and economic standing in society. (Khanam, 2023)

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most well-known Indian novelists working in English. Her writings mostly focus on women's struggles and sufferings in the male-dominated society. The issues and challenges faced by women have been championed by Shashi Deshpande. She discusses how a woman in a middle-class society face a struggle between tradition and modernization. "That Long Silence" is her fifth published novel which was published in 1988. This work garnered her critical acclaim within the literary community as well as the Sahitya Akademi Award, India's top literary honour in 1990. Deshpande took a very long time—"six years"—to finish That Long Silence. The title of Deshpande's novel is derived from a speech given by suffragette Elizabeth Robbins to the Women Writers Suffrage League (WWSL) in 1907 concerning the long and eternal silence of women. An excerpt from her speech has also been chosen as the novel's epigraph, setting its tone:

"If I were a man and
Cared to know the
World I lived in,
I almost think it would
make me a shade uneasy –

the weight of that
long silence of one half
of the world."

The author hopes to break the lengthy silence around women's experiences and worldviews with this book. In addition to the patriarchal system, the author aims to show that women are also somewhat to blame for the deteriorating state of their lives. The oppression of women is a result of their silent suffering and lack of outcry. The fundamental theme of 'That Long Silence', which Deshpande claims to be her most autobiographical work, is silence, both by the family and by society. Jaya represents those Indian women who want to break the barrier of a long silence created around them by the male hegemony. That Long Silence depicts the women in an authentic, realistic and credible manner. The entire novel centers on the way of life and changes that Jaya has unwillingly accepted. It's not just one woman's tale; it's the narrative of countless women whose sentiments, emotions, and dreams are being crushed by our society's expectations. Moreover, this is a tale about a couple's communication gap and how it ruined their relationship and their family life.

Simone de Beauvoir in her book 'The Second Sex' says, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." (de Beauvoir, 1949)

The novel tells the tale of Jaya, a middle-class educated girl who feels constrained and confined in her life with her husband. Jaya wants to liberate herself from the conventional bond of marriage and attempts to realize her true worth as an individual through self-realization, but the issue is made worse by the silence between her and her husband.

Jaya was a strong young woman who was supported by her father. Her life was significantly impacted by her father. "I named you Jaya," her father reassured her, adding, "Jaya for victory." (TLS, 156) However, She is disappointed by her father's untimely death. She is weak and vulnerable because of her mother's attitude, who does not provide her with any support. Because of her mother's unusual treatment, she feels even more hurt and resentful. Jaya is compelled to feel that to her mother the favourite children are always her brothers, Dinkar and Ravi.

Despite being a strong-willed and optimistic young woman, Jaya's all goals and hopes were dashed after her marriage. She was a girl with high expectations. But she can't prosper and suppresses her urge to stretch her wings and reach the heights of achievement. She has been a rebellious adolescent who possess the nature of questioning everything which she finds wrong according to her. Before her marriage, Jaya has enjoyed asking questions but she used to be suppressed by her paternal grandmother, Ajji, saying that she would feel uneasy at her husband's home if she asks too many questions. Thus, she was told to learn how to remain silent. Jaya no longer asks questions, but even then, she is feeling uneasiness in her married life.

After her graduation, she married Mohan who is an engineer. Jaya's all goals and hopes were shattered after her marriage. Mohan holds a conventional perspective on the place of women in the home. He views the ideal woman as one who takes care of the home and prioritizes her family over her job. Jaya who was an educated woman, merely became a homemaker. Moreover, she is renamed Suhasini after the marriage, which translates to "a soft, smiling, calm motherly woman." (TLS, 15) The former name represents a feminist, whereas the latter name represents a traditional woman who is submissive.

The societal taboos around marriage changed her into a woman: "She used to get angry easily as a child." However, she put up with her rage after being married. She understood that rage, in Mohan's opinion, constituted a woman "unwomanly." (TLS, 83). Jaya's character effectively illustrates her transformation into womanhood. Jaya reshaped herself to be a decent wife, devoted daughter-in-law, and mother of two kids Rahul and Rati.

The only thing Suhasini cared about was her family. Jaya began reading magazines for women that focused on how to make men happy. At Mohan's suggestion, she got her lovely hair cut short, "similar to Mehra's wife" (TLS, 96). Jaya would silently obey Mohan's instructions to dress like upper-class women, but even at that point, Jaya admits, "I had always been afraid of failing to impress him as a woman" (TLS, 96).

According to P. V. Kane, practically every significant work of Indian mythology has supported the idea that "a wife's primary responsibility is to serve her husband and to worship him as her god". (Kane, 1941) It appears that males are allowed to verbally abuse their wives and slap them up as they prefer in this patriarchal society. Jaya expects for intimacy to develop after marriage, while Mohan views marriage as a union of two bodies only. He doesn't seem to be interested in the idea of "love." Thus, they engage in silent, wordless intercourse. After completing the sexual act as he desires, Mohan only inquires, "Did I hurt you?" (TLS, 95), to which Jaya predictably responds, "No" (TLS, 95).

K. Sandhu believes that Mohan always asks whether he hurt her at the end of their intimate interaction. It is clear that the interaction is forced rather than genuine (Sandhu, 2010).

According to Indira Bhatt, after 17 years of marriage, Jaya's life becomes unbalanced due to Mohan's scam in his office. In order to defend his actions, when Mohan tells Jaya, "I did this, in order to serve you and our children" (9), Jaya finds it difficult to accept this as well, even though she is unable to respond. Mohan wants to use his wife as buffer, a substance to mitigate the effect of the powers he has set into action against himself," (Qtd. in Bala, 2001)

Mohan was very money-centric, conventional, and authoritative. Deshpande compares a married couple to a pair of bullocks yoked together, implying that the two must go in the same direction, which would lead to pain and discomfort. (Anusha & Kavitha, 2022)

When her husband tells her that he has decided to move to the Dadar's flat, and she follows him without saying anything like the famous and frequently cited mythological stereotypes of Sita, Savitri, and Draupadi: "So did I. Sita complying with her husband towards exile, Savitri chasing death to retrieve her husband, Draupadi quietly sharing her husband's travails..." (11)

In order to flourish in the patriarchal culture, Jaya as well as other women in the community choose to remain silent. The only thing keeping them safe from more tragedy is to keep silence. When she opens her diaries, she discovers, much to her surprise, that only her responsibilities as a wife and mother are depicted in the diary; she finds her own self, Jaya the person, is lost. She has completely devoted herself to her husband's comforts and maintaining order in the home so that she can become a perfect wife and mother. In this course, she feels as though she lacks something, a sense of self and importance.

Jaya was a writer, but she wasn't been able to express herself freely. She was particularly interested in her premarital and post marital writings, and she attempted to write about her thoughts and about the communication gap in a marriage. However, her husband showed little respect for her outstanding writing. Rather, she was counseled against writing such stories, which are seen negatively in our culture. Instead of asking her to stop writing, Mohan suggested that she should modify her style. Thus, Jaya's writings were entirely influenced by her fear of her husband.

Jaya used to write realistic stories for newspapers and periodicals. Her story of "a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body" even earned her an award. Mohan, however, feels hurt because he believes the story is about their private life and it is made public. He states: "Everyone who study this and who know us as well, they will understand that these two persons are us, they will think I am this type of man, How could I face the people then? And you, how can you write such ugliness and these things, and how will you deal with people after that? (TLS,143-44).

Jaya once decides to stop writing after observing her husband's response. Jaya's statement that she was "scared of hurting Mohan, scared of ruining the only career I had, my marriage" (TLS, 145) is supported by her fear. Even after that incident, Jaya continues to write, but she wrote in a more constrained, self-censored, and safe manner to ensure that no one would be harmed but she herself is not at all happy with what she is writing. She also continues to write in her "Seeta" column only in order to please the society. but she was not at all satisfied with what she was writing.

From one perspective, a woman in Indian society has been educated to modern Western education. While on the other hand, she has been trained by her parents to think like Sita, Savitri, and Draupadi just like a conventional, ideal Hindu woman. She discovers that a woman loses her individual identity in this male-dominated culture. That Long Silence stems from what we refer to as a feminist dilemma. Despite being a writer, Jaya adopts a prolonged silence because of this predicament. A conflict arises between her inner housewife and writer. The housewife expects silence from her, but the writer inside her encourages her to share her opinions and experiences with the public.(Gaikwad & Songire, 2016)

In "That Long Silence," Deshpande portrays Jaya as an educated and married writer. As a writer, Jaya should have to use her analytical talents to highlight societal issues and contradictions in her writing. But this actually never takes place. For numerous causes, she has to succumb to familial and society pressures. Despite her desire to express herself, she is compelled to submit to male-dominated society's expectations. Despite her education, she refuses to speak out against injustices. (Al Mahmud, 2022)

One day when Ramu kaka showed her the family tree of her house and she can't locate her name in her own family tree, she realizes that she is no more the member of her parents' family and since her husband's house is now her home, her name will be included in the family tree of her husband. However, Jaya is also shocked to discover that the tree does not contain her maternal side married female relatives also. Despite her desire, she was unable to ask Ramu kaka its reason. It was also impossible to ask Mohan about this because Jaya had learnt by that point that "no questions, no retorts." Just quiet" (143).

Kamat is an advertiser and is also Jaya's neighbour upstairs in Dadar. He is a widower and his only son is settled in abroad. He shows much understanding and sympathy for Jaya. He urges, "Take yourself seriously, woman. Work, if you want people to take you seriously. Don't hide behind a fake identity." (TLS, 148) Jaya is encouraged by Kamat to write under a pseudonym. She is able to give Kamat's residential address. Jaya is inspired by Kamat to continue her writing career. (Sulaiman, 2024).

The rejection and return of her writings infuriated Jaya. "Show your fury in your creation" (147) was Kamat's suggestion after observing her rage. Kamat claims that Jaya was "frightened" (148), but she was at loss for words. In her society, she lacked that independence. "Have you seen or heard of an offended young woman?" she asks Kamat after realizing that women do not have the right to be furious. (147)

Mohan began accusing Jaya of being uncaring towards him after he lost his job. "He blamed me of having no concern for the children, of alienating me from him and his problems", (120) the fact is unacceptable to her. Jaya wanted to accomplish a lot of things, like get a certain job, adopt a baby, or participate in an anti-price campaign, but she was unable to achieve any of them. without uttering these words, she only says to Mohan, "I've devoted my entire life for you and your children" (120) and "I did all what you expected from me" (120). She laughs when she can no longer tolerate this allegation, "Laughter explodes out of me, spilt over, and Mohan gazed at me in shock as I rocked uncontrollably" (122). For Jaya, it was purely "hysteria" (122).

After she settles down, she discovers that she is "alone" (122) in the empty room. She and the house have been abandoned by enraged Mohan. Jaya is taken aback.

When Jaya is without Mohan, she acknowledges and comes to terms with the fact that "I was afraid of cracking through that thin shell of a happy family..." (191). She no longer feels fear. "I'm no longer afraid," says Aya. There is no longer any panic (191).

Mohan eventually sends Jaya a telegram informing her of his return, but Jaya has changed. She declares, "I can no longer do it. I'll have to talk if I have to close that 'hole in the heart.' I'll need to break the ice between us" (192). Jaya acknowledges that her current situation is all her own fault. She feels that "life would be terrible" (193) if there were no hope. She embraces the idea that "life always needs to be made feasible" (193). A new Jaya is thus created.

Thus in the end, we find Jaya understands that the prolonged quietness has hindered openness and communication in her family. She feels that she has only lived half of her life and has followed others. She makes the decision to end "that long silence" and speak for herself.

Conclusion:

In *That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande, a woman fights for her own happiness. This silence alludes to women's introspection and restraint. The pain that an Indian woman endures in a dominated family are reflected in that long silence. It illustrates how women endure extreme suffering and silently endure being molested by men throughout their lives. The story perfectly captures the image of a middle-class woman who is torn between the traditional and the modern society. The entire novel centers on the way of life and changes that Jaya has unwillingly accepted.

Thus in the end, we can say that Deshpande's novels are renowned for their compassionate representation of women's problems as well as the honest depiction of Indian society. Her heroines are the women who cope with the successes and failures, problems, and sorrows of life. However, they eventually come to accept it. Even they are strengthened by the problems of life.

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