



**Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*:
The Inevitable Silence of an Indian Woman**

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is a spellbinding novel that put the inner lives of women center stage and questions the tradition-bound Indian society that treats women inhumanly. She is a renowned Indian novelist who has won many accolades, including the Padma Shri award (2009) and Sahitya Akademi Award (1990), for her talented craftsmanship. It is a poignant novel about the portrayal of women who lead a subservient life and the chain of injustice they suffer through. The novel is merely not just the story of the protagonist of the play but it is the story of every woman in Indian family whether urban or rural. The study is based on the hypothesis that Deshpande's writings persuasively depict the gender oppression and the real life problems in modern educated India. The researcher aims at to highlight how women are torn between traditional norms of the society and modern attitudes of self. In this paper, therefore, an attempt is made to highlight the novelist's attention to the unsentimental representation of the Indian middle-class women and the oppression confronted by them in a deaf patriarchal social order.

Key Words: Gender Oppression, Indian women, Injustice, Patriarchal Society.

“Marriage incites man to a capricious imperialism”

Simon de Beauvoir

Shashi Deshpande, a prominent Indian novelist, was born in Karnataka, India in 1938. She is an award-winning Indian writer whose talented craftsmanship includes nine





immensely popular novels: *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *If I Die Today* (1982), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *Come Up and Be Dead* (1985), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Vine* (1994), *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Small Remedies* (2000), *Moving On* (2004), *In the Country of Deceit* (2008) and *Shadow Play* (2013). Furthermore, she has written umpteen short stories in the following anthologies: *The Legacy and Other Stories* (1978), *It Was Dark* (1986), *The Miracle and Other Stories* (1986), *It Was the Nightingale* (1986) and *The Intrusion and Other Stories* (1994). She has also written four children's books: *A Summer Adventure* (1978), *The Hidden Treasure* (1980), *The Only Witness* (1980) and *The Narayanpur Incident* (1982). Deshpande has won many awards and honors including the Padma Shri award in 2009.

Shashi Deshpande is considered as one of the most proficient women writers in India. She being a person of Indian origin with cultural values never gave much importance to her career. She had devoted her early years of marriage taking care of housework and nurturing the children.

I never decided that I was going to become a writer; it was never a conscious decision. I got married, I had no definite career, and I had two children. I was restless with being just a housewife and mother; I was looking for a job. Then we were in England for a year, my husband was a doctor. I was very isolated there because he was at work all day and I had these two children and no friends, so then we returned and he said 'why don't you write about our year there?'. Then I joined a journalism course. I loved writing, I felt at home with it...so I think in one way I stumbled into it but I really think of it this way as writing was something which was waiting for me along the time and then I reached that point, and then I knew what my life was going to be about. (BBC World Service)

Shashi Deshpande has a penchant for writing whose major themes are inclined towards human feelings and emotions. Her writings are the realistic depiction of the people and the complexities of the everyday mundane life. Her primary concern is the women's struggles in the Indian society. And to elucidate the same, she keeps women center stage and delicately puts limelight on some of the thought-provoking issues.



Her protagonists include the middle class and married working women. And being well educated, they very well understand the social inequality prevailing in the Indian patriarchal society.

My characters take their own ways. I've heard people saying we should have strong women characters. But my writing has to do with women as they are. (Bande 136-240)

Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* has received the most prestigious Sahitya Akademi award in 1990. The author has portrayed the explicit gender discrimination in a man-woman relationship that is socially constructed and further worsened by our own people like parents, in-laws, relatives and neighbors. The author has dealt with the female psychic frustrations in the novel and the silence rooted in the complicated web of relationships between a man and a woman.

Set in a typical Indian background, *That Long Silence* brings forth an eerie tale of the protagonist Jaya. She is presented in relation to tradition and the different relationships she enters into, with a family. She has depicted the experience of Jaya in different roles- as a dutiful wife (of Mohan), as an affectionate mother (of Rahul and Rati) or even as a professional writer (who has given up on genuine writings). She is shattered and feels subjugated with her marriage and life yet she remains silent because a girl is always trained to be silent since her young years in an Indian social set up. Eventually, she loses her identity and tries to rediscover herself at the end.

According to Indian tradition, a wife is expected to stay at home, look after the babies and keep out the rest of the world. She is expected to have the qualities prescribed in Indian tradition:

Karyeshu Mantri, Karaneshu Daasi,
Rupeeha Lakshmi, Kshamayaa Dharitrii,
Bhojyeshu Mata, Shayanetu Rambha,
Shat Karma Yukta, Kula Dharma Patni.

Like a slave while serving; a minister while counseling; Goddess Lakshmi in her looks; the earth in forbearance; a mother while feeding; as wife like

Rambha, the celestial prostitute; these six are the true characteristics of an ideal wife. (Sinha 130)

As a writer, she is writing her personal story considering her the heroine and Mohan, her husband, the hero. However, she feels guilty of herself to recall the past i.e. to remember what she was and what she has become! She observes,

Self-revelation is a cruel process. The real picture, the real 'you' never emerges. Looking for it is as bewildering as trying to know how you really look. Ten different faces show you ten different faces. (The Long Silence 1)

The married couple Jaya and Mohan have been living together for seventeen long years after their marriage. Still there is a lot of incompatibility between the two and Jaya is fed up of their monotonous life that brings in no excitement for her. She further adds,

I had often found family life unendurable. Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony. I remember now how often I had sighed for a catastrophe, a disaster, no, not a personal one, but anything to shake us out of our dull grooves. (The Long Silence 4)

In her writing, she unfolds and pens down the experiences of her seventeen years of married life with Mohan. She realizes that this relationship has entirely silenced her wherein her voice never counts for anything as it is always about the likes and dislikes of Mohan only. She feels oppressed like a bird in the cage in the married relationship with Mohan and always wants to liberate herself from the uncanny traditions of the family as well as of the society.

Mohan explains to assume Jaya's company with him but he never looks into her demands and neither does she communicate anything directly to Mohan and hence there always remains a gap between husband and wife and silence prevails in the house. (Basu 98-104)



Jaya feels that she has lost her individual identity but has never raised her voice to protest. She feels fragmented and does not know any more who she is, except for Mohan's wife! Furthermore, Shashi Deshpande observes that Jaya's life can be summarized as,

Stay at home, look after your babies, keep out of the rest of the world, and you're safe. For all outside appearances hers was a happy family, her husband was in a top position, they had two children - one boy -and one girl - and she was yet another wife and mother whose life centered around her family and her home- nothing more. (Nirmala 53-64)

She gets into a predicament when a magazine asks to include her brief bio-data along with her writing but she was unable to write any. She could only write the below mentioned lines and feels shameful and insulted about it. Consequently, she turns into a very apprehensive and hesitant personality who gets engaged in searching her identity as an individual. She starts believing that it is only the fairy tales where people have happy families and they live happily ever after.

And I have found myself agonizing over what I could write. What there was in my life that meant something... I was born. My father died when I was fifteen. I got married to Mohan. I have two children and I did not let the third live. (The Long Silence 2)

She finds herself trapped in the roles assigned by the male-dominated society and wants to liberate herself from a life where everyone considers her worthless. She wants to unfetter the bonds of unsuccessful marriage in which she has lost everything and become miserable. She is very much disappointed with the suffocating happenings for these many years and finds no other way but silence as her means of communication. But now, she revolts against the stifling traditions of the Indian society and attempts to break the seventeen year long silence. She leaves behind the frightening feeling of suppression and oppression.

Shashi Deshpande has presented a drastic transformation in the protagonist's personality where she realizes that she herself is responsible for her victimization.





Initially a nervous and dutiful wife, Jaya emerges as an individual full of confidence and learns to live for herself. She refuses to dance on her husband's tunes and eventually feels emancipated.

In a nut shell, this paper is an attempt to portray Shashi Deshpande craftsman skills that explore Indian feminine predicaments through the female psyche in routine life with reference to the protagonist Jaya in *That Long Silence*. The author has beautifully presented the subtle nuances of the struggles of women trapped in married relationships. Feeling liberated and composed, Jaya moves ahead in her married life with a new zeal.

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