

Deconstructing Silence: A Palimpsest of Identity, Patriarchal Complicity, and the Feminist Assertion in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract:

The aim of this article is to investigate the issues and hardships that the middle-class women face every day in the patriarchal society. It talks about the importance of self-delineation and the quest for identity. Jaya, the protagonist of the novel is the face of tolerance, suppression and silence. She's curious and filled with questions. Her progressive views were not well received by her grandmother. She used to urge her to be skilled at home tasks and to act well after marriage, and to keep quiet if she didn't agree. Since childhood, Jaya's opinions were mattered to her family and now to her husband. Mohan is a character that fits into complicit masculinity as he holds unquestioned authority in the household and benefits from it. Deshpande has attempted to convey the women's efforts to break the silence and express their inner conflicts through Jaya's character. Society teaches Jaya that her role as a wife is the defining element of her life — the *centre*. The novel also positions marriage and patriarchy as supposed centres of a woman's life. But Jaya discovers they are not absolute as they are built on social constructs, gendered expectations, and the suppression of female voices. This dissertation also attempts to deconstruct Jaya's journey from hopelessness to optimism and breaking the silence.

Keywords: Self Delineation, Oppression, Complicit masculinity, Marital conflict, Feminism

'*That Long Silence*' by Shashi Deshpande is a poignant and reflective narrative that explores the emotional and psychological landscape of a middle-class Indian woman's journey through silence, suppression, and self-realization. The novel, illuminates the domestic and social realities of women in post-colonial India and is well grounded in the feminist theory. Deshpande provides voice to the unsaid experiences of many women whose lives are influenced by societal conventions, conventional expectations, and the weight of silence through the character of Jaya. Deshpande gives voice to the unsaid experiences of many women whose lives are influenced by societal conventions, conventional expectations, and the burden of silence through the character of Jaya.

Deshpande explores complicit masculinity and how society shapes men and women while presenting a profoundly feminist storyline through the protagonist Jaya. The novel also explores masculine theory, namely how patriarchal expectations impact male characters like Mohan and how conventional ideas of masculinity operate. The societal construction and conditioning of men to maintain control, authority, emotional control, and dominance are critically examined by masculine theory.

The image of a middle-class woman caught between tradition and modernity is emphasized throughout the book. Jaya, the protagonist of the novel, longs for her own self-delineation. The bride, Jaya and the groom, Mohan knew nothing about each other and were strangers. Deshpande describes Jaya's married life using the imagery of "*a pair of bullocks yoked together*" performing duties mechanically. The author talks about the dilemma of a woman-writer who is also a housewife. Even as a writer, Jaya finds

it hard to express herself completely. Though she is a well-educated one, she holds silence as a defence mechanism to maintain the family united honor and peace.

This can be seen in the lines “*But the words remained unsaid. I knew his mood was best met with silence. And I was right.*” (*That Long Silence* 78) These lines show how women's voices are being silenced and repressed. The muting of women's voices in patriarchal societies is symbolized by Jaya's silence. Jaya has been instructed to keep quiet, stay out of arguments, and maintain harmony among the family.

At the time of crisis, Jaya and her husband get shifted to their Dadar flat temporarily. She goes into an intense introspection of her life and gets lost in the images of those experiences which she got during her marital life. After seventeen years of playing roles of a loyal wife and tireless mother, the silence becomes deafening. She feels a void in her life. Her normal routine gets disturbed when they shifted to a new flat. At this point of change, Jaya look into herself and wants to find out her own identity. She doesn't want to be like Mohan's mother and sister who always compromises. But she also has to take care of her husband and children. Now she feels as a stereotyped housewife who is “*nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support.*” (*That Long Silence* 76)

Deshpande created a character named Kamat to make Jaya realize that what kind of person she actually is and what kind of attachment, compatibility, and relationship she can have with a man who is more understanding than her husband. Kamat is character that is created to show that unconventional men do exist. Jaya expressed her true self while she's around him and is her safe space. These lines show Kamat's empathy and insight. He didn't judge Jaya's for her vulnerabilities, and so he a safe space for her. *With this man, I had not been a woman. I had been just myself – Jaya There had been the ease in our relationship I had never known in any other*”, she gratefully acknowledges. (*That Long Silence* 153)

Like all the other women, Jaya had perhaps no right to take her own decisions in her life. She had to wait for someone to chart out her course of life. She was always told to “*Wait until you get married. Wait until your husband comes. Wait until you go to your in-laws' home. Wait until you have kids.*” (*That Long Silence* 30) Jaya always had to seek permission from someone or the other in life even for the tiniest things rather than taking her own decisions. Like all the other women, Jaya was dubious and wondered when will this waiting get over.

At the heart of the novel is Jaya, a woman who has suppressed her goals, desires, ambitions, and even her thoughts in order to maintain peace in her marriage to Mohan. The couple departs to an old Bombay apartment after Mohan is suspected of financial misconduct and temporarily quits his work. Jaya starts to reflect back on her life in this solitary and peaceful space, challenging the decisions she has taken and the identity she has lost along the way. The phrase “*That Long Silence*” in the title relates to Jaya's actual marital stillness as well as the symbolic silence imposed on innumerable women who are supposed to be submissive, passive, and selfless.

Jaya being a woman never had the chance to be her own true self among the people around her. She loved herself and felt valuable when she was with Kamat. She felt as though she has a lot a part of herself when Kamat died. The societal structure unconsciously shaped Jaya to become the ideal woman, wife and mother. She never had the experience of being her true self where she could speak her mind, express her thoughts and have intellectual conversations.

“*With Kamat, I was not afraid of the truth.*” (*That Long Silence* 90) This line reveals that According to this sentence, she avoids facing her own reality in her relationships with other people, particularly Mohan, but being with Kamat gives her the confidence to do so. Kamat respects her as an individual,

not as someone's wife, daughter, or mother, in contrast to other people in her life. Jaya feels a special sense of sincerity and freedom when she is with Kamat. She believes that she doesn't have to disguise herself or pretend like someone she's not. He doesn't expect her to be the "ideal woman", which helps her feel heard and acknowledged for who she really is. His presence helps her in rediscovering parts of her identity that she had buried due to societal pressure and personal compromises.

Sometimes, Jaya appears to be not very different from other women of this novel – Nayana, who despises her drunkard husband but craves for a son; Mukta, the widow who fasts; Mohan's mother, who suffers her husband's humiliations silently and Jeeja, who thinks that a woman without her kumkum on the forehead is nothing. *How could I blame him for not marrying again when I couldn't give him children? How could I blame that woman for marrying him? With whom shall I be angry? (That Long Silence 52)* These lines show that Jeeja does not question her husband's decision nor criticizes him for marrying another woman. This shows how patriarchal norms condition women to believe that their main role is reproduction, and failing that, they are considered "incomplete" or "lesser."

When the choice of selection comes between her husband and family, without any hesitation Jaya chooses to be with her husband, however she was an assertive and independent individual. She doesn't want to know the value of herself. In her own description, her married life is: *"A pair of bullocks yoked together . . . a clever phrase, but can it substitute for the reality? A man and a woman married for seventeen years. A couple with two children. A family somewhat preserved like the one caught and preserved for posterity by the advertising visuals I so loved. But the reality was only this; We were two persons. A man ... A woman". (That Long Silence 8)* The image of the pair of bullocks yoked together suggests that yoked bullocks should share the burden, between themselves, but no one knows whether they love each other or not.

In the early years of marriage, Jaya has been on the threshold of acquiring name as a creative writer. It is Mohan who has been encouraging her to write. On Mohan's advice, she begins writing the middles, *"light humorous pieces about the travails of a middle-class housewife."* (That Long Silence 148-149) She has made a good beginning with a story about a man *". . . who could not reach out to his wife except through her body."* (That Long Silence 144) Mohan assumes that the story portrays their own personal life and he thought people around him may assume that he is the kind of person portrayed in the story. But Jaya knows that there is no truth in his accusation, still she does not try to reason with Mohan, as she does not like to risk her relation with him to maintain the façade of a happy marriage.

R.W. Connell's theory of complicit masculinity refers to men who may not embody the aggressive or dominating traits of hegemonic masculinity themselves but still benefit from the patriarchal system. Mohan is one such character who fits into complicit masculinity as he holds unquestioned authority in the household. *"I had expected my wife to be a woman who would cling to me, who would need me at every step."* (That Long Silence 83) This shows his belief that an "ideal wife" should be always dependent on the husband reinforcing his comfort within patriarchal norms.

He is a typical patriarchal husband, but he has no power over Jaya in public. To him, wife is exclusively a husband's property and therefore can be used as a status symbol to be flaunted. He did not allow Jaya to share her own point of views on any of his decisions. His image of an ideal wife is a result of his observance of the submissive women that he has seen in his family during his growing years, and he expects Jaya to behave in a similar manner. Mohan also once said that, *"My mother never raised her voice against my father, however badly he behaved to her."* Jaya recalls an incident about Mohan's mother which was told by Vimala, Mohan's sister *". . . She mumbled something. The next moment he*

picked up his heavy brass plate and threw it. . . (That Long Silence 83)” Therefore, Jaya maintains her image as a traditional wife and tries to sacrifice anything for her husband.

In order to convey how women are judged and valued through a patriarchal lens, Shashi Deshpande incorporates beauty standards, which frequently cause women to internalize and compare themselves to unrealistic goals. These norms reinforce gender inequity and anxieties by influencing how characters view themselves and one another. *“A fatherless child since birth, a dark baby, a crow in a family of fair skinned swans.” (That Long Silence 62)* This phrase suggests that fatherlessness is a shame that affects both the mother and the kid. For girls, whose beauty is frequently seen as their most valuable “asset,” being dark-skinned inevitably puts the child down in the unspoken social hierarchy.

Mohan remarks *“I’m glad, Jaya, you haven’t put on any weight. Most women get shapeless at your age. You’re still the way you were when we got married.” (That Long Silence 85)* Jaya freezes at the moment of her marriage as her identity is measure against the young bride she once was. This represents Mohan’s ownership and entitlement of Jaya as he expects her to remain unchanged to satisfy his image and social standing. Mohan’s remark appears as a compliment but functions as objectification and control: it praises Jaya for remaining the youthful body he “bought” at marriage, while simultaneously shaming ageing women.

Jaya feels herself totally lost as she is taken for granted by Mohan. She realizes that he doesn't care about her feelings or emotions. She blames herself for her silence and her loss of identity. Jaya loses her identity and has to forge a new identity and name suiting her husband’s desires. Jaya means victory but her husband calls her Suhasini that means a placid motherly woman. Name is the only component that makes a person unique but with the loss of her name she lost her identity and her delineation. This can be proven with the following lines: *“Actually, my name isn’t Jaya at all. Not now, I mean. It’s Suhasini . . . It’s the name Mohan gave me when we got married.” But the name Jaya was given to her by her father on the day of her birth. Her father said to Jaya, “I named you Jaya. Jaya for victory.” (That Long Silence 15)*

Mohan wanted a wife who was well educated and cultured and never a loving one. He made up his mind to get married to Jaya when he saw her speaking fluently, sounding so much like a girl whom he had seen speaking English fluently. He tells Jaya: *“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 that moment that I decided I would marry you.” (That Long Silence 90)*

In the beginning what Jaya finds when she searches herself, that she is Mohan’s wife, Rahul’s and Rati’s mother. She is not her real self. But searching for and defining ‘self’, she recalls Kamat’s words; *“Take yourself seriously, woman.” (That Long Silence 99)* And she’s doing well in that direction, but that doesn’t mean she’s not achieving her own identity as she fulfils her role as a wife and mother. Now she feels that she can have her identity only if she has Mohan with her. If she rejects her wife and mother’s role, what remains in herself? She realizes that she is nothing without Mohan.

Mohan’s father had also played a vital role in the development of his psyche. His father had been very cruel, dictatorial, and tyrannical with his mother. She tolerated everything in silence and so Mohan had in his mind the definite image of wife thus: *“His image of a wife has been created by the submissive woman that he has seen in his family in his growing years.” (That Long Silence 83)* Mohan has seen strength in his mother who suffered silently the tortures of her husband. This can be proven with: *“. . . Her eyes were red, but it could have been the smoke for the wood was always bad, it never burnt clean, and though they had got used to its pungent, acrid smell in the house, her eyes were always red with*

the smoke.” (*That Long Silence* 36) So with his pre conceived notion Mohan has in his mind that a wife must be gentle, quiet and silent and so he named his wife as Suhasini. The novelist has thrown light on the issues of gender injustice and power structure of patriarchy which is reflected in several characters in the novel.

Jacques Derrida proposed the concept the centre is not the centre from his theory of deconstruction. In the novel it fits beautifully because the novel itself questions fixed centres of meaning, power, and identity in a woman’s life. Traditionally, a “centre” in any structure gives it stability and order in society, family, or a text. Derrida argued that the “centre” is actually not fixed, it is unstable, shifting, and defined only in relation to other elements. In Jaya’s life, Mohan functions as the “centre” because he’s the authority, breadwinner, and an emotional anchor. Social norms teach Jaya that her marriage and husband are the central meaning of her existence. “ When he stopped speaking to me, I realised how easily silence could become a wall.” This shows the “centre” of her marriage was never as secure as it seemed “ *For seventeen years I had been a willing accomplice. I had tried to protect the image of Mohan, the man in control.*” (*That Long Silence* 146) This line implies how the “centre” only existed because Jaya upheld it.

Society teaches Jaya that her role as a wife is the defining element of her life — *the centre*. The novel also positions marriage and patriarchy as supposed centres of a woman’s life. But Jaya discovers they are not absolute as they are built on social constructs, gendered expectations, and the suppression of female voices. Jaya reflects on her suppressed dreams, her writing, and her past, she realises that this marital role is imposed, not natural. The real “centre” shifts toward her inner self, though it is still unstable. Silence as a shifting centre as it is both a prison and a survival tool for Jaya. The meaning of her silence is not fixed and thus it changes depending on her emotional state and power dynamics. In Derrida’s terms, Mohan, marriage, and patriarchal norms appear to be the stable centres of Jaya’s life but they are actually unstable, dependent on silence, societal conditioning, and her complicity. *That Long Silence* shows that the “centre” is not truly the centre; meaning and stable shift when Jaya starts questioning and withdrawing from blind compliance.

Shashi Deshpande’s novels reveal the women’s quest for self, and exploration into the female psyche and awareness of the mysteries of life and the protagonist’s place in it. The patience of silence and endurance is broken. As Shashi Deshpande herself states that innermost feelings come out in my writings. The kind of emotions we know women have but never come out.

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