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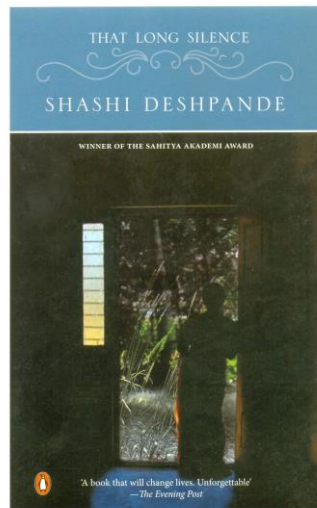
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## From Suppression to Self-realisation: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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## **Abstract**

Women have been depicted in various ways by writers of modern Indo-English fiction. Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Kamala Das, Nayantara Sehgal and Shashi Deshpande have effectively portrayed the different facets of women in Indian society.

Shashi Deshpande is a well known feminist writer with seven novels and four collections of short stories to her credit. Her novel, *That Long Silence* in 1989 earned her prestigious Sahitya Akademy Award.

The major themes of her novels include man-woman relationship, human desire, longing, gender discrimination, marginalization, rebellion, protest and patriarchy. Being an Indian female, Shashi Deshpande through *That Long Silence* brilliantly focuses on gender discrimination, impact of patriarchy, conflicts in conjugal life, subordinate position of females, and wrong child rearing practices persisting in Indian society. Since childhood girls are taught to suppress their feelings in order to fit in the frame of ideal woman created by society.

Jaya, the protagonist of the novel, is a victim of gender discrimination and patriarchy. After marriage, she becomes voiceless in order to remain happy in conjugal life.

This paper is an attempt to trace the journey of Jaya the protagonist of *That Long Silence* from patriarchal suppression towards self-realization.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Gender discrimination and suppression.

## **Shashi Deshpande and Indian Women**

Shashi Deshpande represents the real life experience of half of the humanity, women. In Indian society stress is given to create female persona for different stages, docile daughters, chaste and obedient wives and sacrificing mothers. The only domain ascribed to female is to fit in this good daughter, good wife and good mother criteria. Husband and wife are considered as soul mates. But man assumes himself superior to woman, and he never tries to create emotional bonding with his wife, to understand her wishes or act according to her consent.

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## **Jaya's Silence**

Though Jaya was a highly educated girl, the female members of her family enthrust upon her their own experiences of life as she has no own knowledge of real life yet. They taught her how to live happily after marriage by not opposing her husband, to obey his all orders and to rank him as her god just as they did. Though she was a modern and convent educated girl equipped with the skill of writing, she followed their instructions due to her traditional upbringing. Divorce is considered a taboo in contemporary middle class Indian society. As an impact of the teaching she received from her mother and other female members of the family, she became voiceless after marriage. She never opposed or confronted her husband in order to save her marriage.

## **Women in Indian Patriarchal Society**

This long silence of Jaya is an expression of the silence of the modern Indian housewife. In Indian Patriarchal society, there is no self-identity for a woman. The laws of the Manu are the roots of the traditional orthodox manner in which men in Indian society are conditioned to look at and treat women. In Manu's Code, chapter 9 underlines social and moral codes for both men and women. But men are directed towards governing social and moral behaviour while the woman is only somebody's daughter, sister, wife or mother. The men are clearly given the upper hand as described in verse 3. Women are fated to be dependent on the father in childhood, husband in youth and sons in old age and are forbidden from being self-reliant at any stage. Verse 5 warns men against being even a little careless toward women as women are fickle-minded and incapable of taking care of themselves (Burke 62).

It is easy for an uneducated woman to accept this dominance and leads her life silently without arguing like Jeeja, Jaya's help maid whose husband is a drunkard who frequently beats her. She does not protest even when her husband remarries because she thinks that she has failed to give him a child, so he has every right to remarry. Mohan's sister Vimala developed ovarian tumour and bleeds herself to death in silence. All these women are victims of ingrained patriarchal values. But the situation for highly educated women is very tough. She has her own point of view on a particular situation. It is not easy for her to follow someone silently without even telling her own attitude.

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### **Privileges for Male Children**

Jaya was the neglected child of the family. She became victim of wrong child rearing practice followed in Indian households. She always feels difference in her mother's attitude towards her and her brothers. Her longing for her mother's love never fulfilled. She sadly recalls, "When I had passionately wanted her love, she had ignored me and concentrated on her sons. ... 'Smarming that had been Dada's (her elder brother) word for her behaviour, and the smarming had never been for me. When I got married, she had been unperturbed, there had been not even a pretence of tears when I left home" (106) and "I longed for a soft, motherly breast to cry on. And then I had to smile, I had never gone to her for comfort" (139)

### **Jaya's Marriage**

Jaya received higher education, in spite of gender discrimination. She was convent-educated, English speaking lady with a literary taste. After her father's death the responsibility of her marriage is transferred to his brother's shoulders.

Only later had I come upon them with a painful awareness. Dada had wanted me off his hands; he had wanted to be free of his responsibility for an unmarried younger sister, so that he could go ahead with his own plans. After Appa's death, the Kakas had never left Dada forget his role as the man of the house. And so Dada had cleverly maneuvered me... (93)

### **Tragic Path**

When Jaya tries to figure out why she had married Mohan, she sees the truth that it was because 'he had decided to marry' her, she 'had only to acquiesce'. Jaya's traditional upbringing makes her submissive after marriage. She never argued or opposed her husband in order to save her marriage. As she has observed the lives of widowed and deserted women, she was afraid to live a deserted life. Vanita Mami counsels her just before her marriage: "Remember Jaya, a husband is like a sheltering tree. Keep the tree alive and flourishing, even if you have to water it with deceit and lies" (32). She further says: "If your husband has a mistress or two, ignore it. Take up a hobby instead, cats,

may be, or your sister's children" (32). She does not believe in these patriarchal notions but still follows the same path out of helplessness. At the time of her marriage, her husband changed her name from Jaya to Suhasini. She didn't protest just to keep him happy. Even she cut her hair as per her husband's choice, dressed according to her husband's choice.

### **Silence for Seventeen Years**

Soon after marriage, a quarrel between the two leads Mohan to silence. She feels guilty as Mohan is the "Sheltering tree", "God for her" as she was taught by the ladies of her family before marriage and to keep her husband happy. She wraps herself in a cover of silence. For seventeen years of her marriage she successfully manages to suppress her feelings as she thought it's important for a happy and successful married life. She even gives up her career as a writer to make her husband happy.

In the context of marriage, Bertrand Russell says:

The essence of a good marriage is respect for each other's personality combined with that deep intimacy, physical, mental and spiritual which makes a serious love between man and woman the most fructifying of all human experiences. Such love, like everything that is great and precious, demands its own morality, and frequently entails a sacrifice to the less to the greater; but the sacrifice must be voluntary, for where it is not, it will destroy the very basis of the love for the sake for which it is made (Russell 215).

### **Sudden Disaster and Forced Loneliness**

Jaya's married life was stable and happy but a disaster came when her husband was blamed for his involvement in a financial malpractice and enquiry against him was set up. Their children Rahul and Rati were away on a long tour with their family friends at that time, so he expects Jaya to go into hiding with him but she denies complying with. Mohan leaves home without saying anything to her. Now she has plenty of time to analyse her marital relationship with her husband. She realizes that Mohan has lost

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interest in her. She is afraid lest something should happen to Mohan. She cannot imagine a life without Mohan or his support:

The thought of living without him and twisted my insides, his death had seemed to me the final catastrophe. The very idea of his dying had made me feel so bereft that tears had flowed effortlessly down my cheeks. If he had been a little late coming home, I had been sure he was dead. By the time, he returned, I had, in my imagination shaped my life to a desolate widowhood (96-97).

Jaya is left all alone in their Dadar flat. She gets the news that Rahul has disappeared while holidaying. She feels completely shattered, needs help of someone to console her during this traumatic state but there was no one to console her. But after a few days, everything settled down. Rahul is back and she also gets a telegram from Mohan that "All is well". Now, her focus came to herself, she decides to articulate her long silence, her doubts, fears and her inner thoughts which she has suppressed for seventeen years to save her marriage. She scarifies every time, has never confronted her husband but even then she was blamed by her husband when crisis came in their life. She spends seventeen years of her life according to her husband's choice and will. Her husband wants her to be an ideal housewife whose sole duty was to please her husband, to cook food of his choice, to bring up children and to maintain the house. She has left her writing career as well for her husband's sake.

Jaya starts penning down her experience of marital life which is a sort of catharsis for her. She has decided not to be passive and silent no more. She says

The panic has gone, I am Mohan's wife  
I had thought, and cut off the bits of me  
that had refused to be Mohan's wife. Now  
I know that kind of fragmentation is not possible (191).

### **Finally, Self-assertion**

The protagonists of Shashi Deshpande rebel but they choose the middle path because they believe in the institutions of marriage and family. Thus, women in Indian

society have ingrained these patriarchal social norms to such an extent that they turn themselves into an effigy of submissiveness and dependency. But Jaya strikes a great contrast to these women by her consciousness to assert her self identity. An identity that is free from the conservative anticipation and discriminations and that can uphold one's pride in a world full of irrationality. She decides to carve a niche of her own. She will no longer live in a terrified state. She decides to break the ice between Mohan and herself, and completes her journey towards self-assertion.

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