

## **Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence: Suffocation of Silence and Dilemma of Indian Women**

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### **Abstract:**

Silence is an important aspect in women's writings. It is considered a form or mode of resistance. However, sometimes this excessive silence takes the form of cowardice. The meaning of it is interpreted in terms of the mentality of the person against whom it is casted. Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* is the understanding of woman's silence and its suffocation. Jaya internalizes silence as the heritage of her culture. But it continuously sickens her soul. Throughout the novel she tries to calculate the gain and loss of being silent and eventually finds that she always hides her faults behind her relations and responsibilities. Her growing dissatisfaction comes to an end with the sermon of Lord Krishna who gives freedom to every individual to do as they desire. It is the tale of every woman living in a patriarchal setup. This paper tries to illuminate the impact of silence in Indian women's life and Jaya's overcoming of it. The study tries to understand what makes a woman to stay silent and what eventually forces her speak up.

**Keywords:** *Silence, Women, Patriarchy, Dilemma, Tradition, Identity, Marriage.*

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is a notable work which gained much recognition and popularity for its honest and realistic portrayal of educated Indian women of present time. The book is not a simple piece of fiction but has its grounding in the current panorama of Indian society. In her novels, "Shashi Deshpande studies the issues and problems of contemporary middle class women. Her heroines are sensitive, intelligent and career-oriented"(Thirunavukkarasu). In today's middle class families almost every girl is educated and is aware of her rights and duties. However, the question is that what is it which stops a well-educated and learned woman to assert herself? Why a woman has to think a million times before speaking out? And how women should go about it? Thus, "that Long Silence is not an imaginary story. It is a story that happens in every middle class and educated Indian woman's life" (Boldsky).

Shashi Deshpande seems to answer all these inherent questions of the so called equality of this time. Being a woman she exactly knows the mechanics working under the process of submission. She tries to unravel the mistakes of both male and female perspectives. Mohan takes Jaya for granted but Jaya too takes herself in the same way. Because of some underlying dilemma she comes to the conclusion but quite late. Jaya takes enough time to understand herself and her power of voice. She chooses to be silent to avoid conflict throughout the novel. This avoiding of conflicts is very common in any power relation. Jaya's mental trauma resembles with that of Maya, "...it was not my pet's death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered, perhaps as yet not even experienced and filled me with this despair" (Desai 13). They do not even sometimes know the reason of their pain. A woman prefers to be silent to save a relationship whereas a man never thinks of that. Most of the times women think that their fate is responsible for their situation and accept the injustice as Monica Ali says, "what could not be

changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. ”The marriage institution gives immeasurable power to man over his wife. They can take decisions for her as if they think women are incapable of taking right decision for them. The inherent issue is that women too, think the same. It is like accepting a subordinate position just to get rid of the situation of fighting. Here the idea behind is that the women has to accept whatever is given to her unconditionally otherwise she may lose the title of an ideal wife, therefore missing out an image of ideal woman of honor in the very society. The statement of Simone De Beauvoir, “One is not born but rather becomes a woman” talks about the same process (qtd. Felicity). Every woman has to learn and accept this becoming otherwise she may end up becoming nothing. The hypothetical rules set by a male dominated society carry the burden of making ideal submissive women. The novel *That Long Silence* is about Jaya,

She is the protagonist of *That Long Silence* who is an intelligent woman with graduation in English, a writer and a columnist had a bright career. Unfortunately, none of these attributes would provide her a respectable position in the eyes of her husband Mohan, who had socialization in a typical traditional environment. He perceived his wife on par with Seeta, Savitri and Draupadi. (T.G.)

The upbringing of a woman is very important in terms of the transmission of the patriarchal values in the female child. “The socialization of a girl child for her future roles as wife and mother begins in early childhood when the prevailing social mores and norms are studiously inculcated into her through myths, legends, folklore and rituals” (KK 2). These values ingrain an inherent dilemma in the heart of women like Jaya, for their position and value. They always go through a mental trauma before breaking any of the rules of patriarchy. They know very well the punishment of crossing these fictional borders set by the male dominated society. Jaya goes through the same kind of dilemma. It becomes really hard for her to transcend those lines of

silences which her upbringing has sketched on her personality. In short, “The tradition-bound docile woman in Jaya is irreconcilable with the modernist individuality seeking Jaya” (Sobti). Her inability to establish balance between her actual and expected personality causes her inner turmoil.

Jaya struggles as, “Girls struggle against losing voice and against creating an inner division or split, so that large part of themselves are kept out of relationship” (Gilligan 24). Jaya understands gradually that there is no harm in failing. All that matters is effort. Jaya is always scared of trying and failing which makes her success impossible. She understands finally that one has to take the responsibility of his/her failure. Nobody can transfer that burden on someone else’s shoulders. Jaya always tries to put that blame on Mohan. Of, course he takes her for granted but Jaya too is responsible of her situation because she allows that to happen.

The tale is not just about Jaya but every individual who chooses to escape rather than confront and fight. Jaya eventually realizes that in the process of becoming Mohan’s ideal wife she fails to cater her individual self. To hide her failure she puts the burden of that on Mohan’s head. But finally she starts understanding her mistake. In her inability to express herself she suffocates her own identity. She finally learns to accept her failure, which becomes her first step towards success.

Jaya’s fear of failure is connected with her father’s defeat at writer’s level. Her father writes a book which is a huge failure. This incident makes her skeptic about the concept of trying. To escape this feeling she takes the shelter in her marriage. “...Two bullocks yoked together- that was how I saw the two of us the day we came here, Mohan and I. Now I reject that image. It’s wrong. If I think of us in that way, I condemn myself to a lifetime of disbelief in ourselves” (Deshpande 191).

The novel is the clamor of a woman's inner agony. Jaya is torn between her individual and familial identity. It reflects the confession of a tradition torn woman. She knows, "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" (Deshpande 1). The very beginning of the novel sets the tone of the story. Jaya tries to confront her own self. She is always scared of facing the difficulties of her life in realizing her independent identity. The mental pain is such that she does not dare to share with pride what she likes. She needs to understand, "There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (Mukharjee 29). She follows Mohan's choices and accepts his opinions uncritically despite having a different approach toward the things. She has lost the element of self-importance completely. Upon asking for her bio-data by a magazine she thinks,

(...) And I found myself agonizing over what I could write, what there was in my life that meant something. Finally, when I had sifted out what I had thought were irrelevant facts, only these had remained: I was born. My father died when I was fifteen. I got married to Mohan. I have two children and I did not let a third live. (Deshpande 2)

Jaya's married life is apparently fine like any other woman's in the same society. She is married to a suitable man and has two children. She has everything a woman could ask for. But what she thinks about her life tells a lot about her marriage's underlying boredom, dissatisfaction, lack of respect and probably love too. It is not just Jaya's situation but actually the microcosm of almost every educated Indian woman's life. She herself admits the unending monotony of her marriage: "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" (Deshpande 4).

Jaya feels the suffocation in her own world which she chooses over the years. The suffocation is the result of her inner emptiness. Mohan gives her all the material thing required for a good living but fails to offer her the things which fulfill a woman's heart. Love, respect and mutual understanding are perennially missing from Jaya's life. He never attempts to know what she thinks or like. Jaya too is not comfortable sharing her desires with Mohan because he cuts them short before she utters anything, "(...) But I never dared to confess it to him. What if he too, said, 'What poor taste you have, Jaya!'" (Deshpande3).

The very common phenomenon is the desire to end life. Jaya too thinks about it, fails to conclude that too, because of the very typical reason of putting family first. This is what is taught to every woman since their birth. Jaya also thinks of ending her life but eventually does not do it because she finds it a harsh punishment for Mohan. The hope for a better change makes every woman to cling to life, "And I had been left with my question hanging like an obscenity between us. I had believed him then, but now I am not so sure" (Deshpande11).

Mohan is the epitome of male supremacy in Jaya's life. She thinks a lot but finds herself incapable of articulating her thinking in front of Mohan. Vimala, Mohan's sister, who is dead now tells Jaya, the stories of atrocity and mental violence and takes promise from her not to talk about it with Mohan. A woman shattered with unending domestic errands and her husband's cruelties drifts her into an unbreakable silence. Jaya grasps the crux that no man is capable of understanding and speculates,

He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire, but I saw despair. I saw despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender. I'm a woman and I can understand her better; he's a man and he can't. (Deshpande 36)

Vimala tells the story of her mother to Jaya with the promise that she would not share it with Mohan. It is just the tip of the iceberg. The actual problem is so grave that there is no comprehensible solution of it unless there is a break in the long preserved silence. Though Mohan never gets to know how his parents' relation was like, But Vilama, Mohan's sister, confides in Jaya about their dead relation. The problem is that there are still some parts of the country where not only illiterate people but also elite and educated class treats women of their family at worse. Mohan's mother is no better than a domestic and sexual slave. She continuously gets pregnant and loses her five babies. Nobody is least bothered about her physical and mental health. Vimala is the only girl available to take care of her mother. She gets so exhausted that she does not get time to study. She is well aware of her father's narrow-mindedness that she never dares to tell him about her problems because the only suggestion he has to offer her is shutting down her education.

While Avva... almost all my childhood I remember her as being pregnant. She didn't want that last child, She'd lost four or five babies by then, and she was desperate (...) If I complained, Anna would have just said, "Don't go to school then, who's asking you to go?" He made Prema stay away from school when Sudha was born. I didn't want that to happen. (Deshpande 37)

Whatever the condition of these two women is, it is because of their silence. The issue with women is that they consider their silence as a sign of strength without knowing that it is open to interpretation for men. Avva never dares resisting her husband's atrocities because of her cultural shackles. The voice has to work as a catalyst to bring about changes. But the lack of education and burden of ideals force women into a sickening silence. Vimala too undergoes the same fate. She suffers from an ovarian tumour with metastases in the lungs but nobody cares for her enough to take her to the hospital and "she sank into a coma and died a week later, her silence intact"

(Deshpande 39). The silence is very common among many Indian women. The sickening and death of Avva and Vimala is symbolic of the very core of the issue. The tumour is symbolic of the mass of ideas and emotions that never finds a way to come out and becomes the death cause for Vimala. If they had not accepted everything as it is the story of them would have been something else. Jaya too thinks, "...something that links the destinies of the two...the silence in which they died" (Deshpande 39). The breaking of silence is an enormous dilemma among women because it may deprive them from every precious thing in their life. However, no one thinks of the other side of the situation. There are very few who understand that silence may cause the more harm than speaking out.

The height of the issue is that most of the times there is a lack of female solidarity which causes much destruction. The rules of patriarchy have been made by men however it usually becomes evident that it is being reinforced and implemented by women themselves. In the novel *Jaya*, too resents the injustice meted out by her own mother when she hands over her property to her eldest son not daughter even if the daughter needs it more than the son. Dada eventually hands over the flat to Jaya, however, the pain is that it is not a gift by her mother. The transmission of the feeling of being 'someone else's property' and 'owned by someone else' causes so much chaos in a woman's life. The family that bring her up does not consider her the part of the family and the other family in which she goes does not accept her completely. The feeling of being in-between weakens almost every woman.

In the novel *Vanitamami* claims Makarandmama's property but Jaya's Ai refuses to give it to her. *Vanitamami* is 'childless' which is a curse for a woman in male dominated setup. The only value such a society sees in a woman is her reproduction capacity. If a woman unfortunately fails to fulfill this task she is labeled as 'incomplete woman.' *Vanitamami* adopts Kusum, a feeble child to soothe her depriving motherhood. "Perhaps *Vanitamami* had felt a kindred spirit



in Kusum, both of them born failures, born losers” (Deshpande 45). But ‘Choosing’ is in itself very important. Choosing simply means taking decisions which is still alien for many women. For Vanitamami too, “Perhaps the truth was that Vanitamami had never known what it was to choose” (Deshpande 45). After getting married, her life is completely in the hands of her in-laws. She never gets the right to make a choice for herself, “Even Vanitamami’s saris were chosen for her by the old woman” (Deshpande 45). As an adopted child Kusum lives in constant dilemma of being in a place that does not accept her fully. She has to hide herself from her father, “The cry of ‘Run, Kusum, Chandumama’s coming’ had been enough to make her fly in terror” (Deshpande 45).

The level of making peace with everything is unmatched in Indian women. Jeeja, the maid at Jaya’s home serves as a relieving sight for Jaya. Her painful life with a drunkard makes Jaya think that she is in a better position. Jaya finds Jeeja’s silence without any trace of complaints or anger. She completely accepts her unfortunate condition. Jaya recounts, “There had been days when she had come to work bruised and hurt, rare days when she had not come at all. But I had never heard her complain” (Deshpande 51). What is worth noticing is that despite being an independent woman she never thinks of staying away from that man who causes her immense pain. She denies Jaya to give any of her payment to her husband, which simply tells a lot about their relationship. The real confusion is that it is never taught to such women to raise their voices against injustice. They have simply learned to accept everything just to make peace in their relationships. She believes that when she marries him he is not a drunkard. His failure allows him to be so. She fails to bear him any child which is a big thing. So she has no right to oppose his second marriage. The irony is that the social design is such that if a woman does something wrong she is responsible for that, however if a man does the same again it is a woman is responsible. The idea of such unjustified thoughts compels women to sacrifice themselves

forever or accepts the blames. Jeeja exasperatingly says, “How could I blame him for marrying again when I could not give him any children? ...With whom shall I be angry?” (Deshpande 52) Jeeja’s problems never end with her husband’s death it increases rather. Her son Rajaram, behaves exactly like his father, beats his wife who in turn curses him to die. But again Jeeja intervenes, “Stop that! Don’t forget, he keeps the *kumkum* on your forehead. What is a woman without that?”(Deshpande 53) The irony is that a woman who accepts every atrocity without uttering a word discourages another woman to speak out. The issue lies where instead of becoming a moral support to another woman Jeeja indulges herself in propagating the patriarchal values.

In the novel Shashi Deshpande presents a realistic and comprehensive account of man-woman relationship whereas a woman has to either struggle or silently accept her subordinate position. The reasons for imbalance in relationship are quite obvious. The binary opposition always asserts itself where the love should precede, “According to the author husbands don't give attention to wives emotions, likes and dislikes. The author expresses the emotion with vivid details like that of lovemaking, relationship with children, etc” (T.G.). These struggles are most common in any patriarchic panorama. The conflict arises because of the most unjustified ways of understanding and treatment. Instead of focusing on the collaboration the values have converted the relations of a man and a woman in constant power games. One tries to propagate his power over the other and the other lets that happen. Jaya tries to make sense of her life through the lenses of the lives of others around her. Mohan and Jaya have a gap in their relationship, which neither Jaya dares nor Mohan bothers to fill. Mohan is always busy in his own thoughts without caring about Jaya. But the point is that Jaya understands her mistakes, “The novelist suggests that the women should accept their own responsibility for their victimization, instead of putting the blame on others” (Gulia 423).

The lack of proper communication between Mohan and Jaya was the prime reason for their imbalance in marriage. Though apparently there was no conflict because Jaya never speaks anything to bring it into the scene. Jaya always pulls herself in her shell where her soft heart is safe. She never gathers the courage to speak about her opinion which avoids all the struggles between them. Her fear of being denied or scolded makes her extremely introvert. She wants to say a lot but never does anything. It is like, “Between two of them the relationship was a noiseless flow of judgment, lack of communication and opinions. Mohan was having the prime position and Jaya the inferior one” (Siddiqui 60).

When Jaya looks back she finds her life wasted in trivialities. Finding a time to spend with her own self is a rare phenomenon for her, “Mohan’s constant presence, since we came here, had become a burden to me” (Deshpane 68). Mohan’s dominating attitude suffocates Jaya to the extent that she feels him a burden over her psyche. The questions of identity, which many women never think of, puzzle her nights and days. When she speculates over her past,

...I found was the woman who had once lived here. Mohan’s wife, Rahul’s and Rati’s mother. Not myself. (...) there are so many, each self attached like a Siamese twin to a self of another person, neither able to exist without the other.  
(Deshpande 69)

Jaya finds her life meaningless and wasted in most superficial things. She does not find anything fulfilling and worthwhile. The problem is that she never gets room for her deep thought and always indulges into the daily routine of life like her child’s first school day, servants’ absences and other thing except her own self. Among all the stupid details of her life the very essence gets crushed, “The agonized cries-‘I can’t cope, I can’t manage, I can’t go on’- had been smothered” (Deshpande 70).

The silence is the main cause of the unrest in life. When we cling to silence with our will that is called a kind of strength of character however an unreasonable silence kept with a desire to make peace with some fear makes one coward in life. “Silence condones injustice, breeds subservience and fosters a malignant hypocrisy” (Durrani 375). Jaya takes so much time to raise her voice for her own self. The reason for it can be her inner conflict to speak or not. Usually for women in such situations, it becomes really hard to distinguish between acceptable or unacceptable modes of life.

In her usual understated tone, she seemsto have commented upon the helplessness of the woman when it cameto marital affairs. Wed to an unknown person, snatched away from home and now forced to live with and serve complete strangers, it is not herpain but her expression that makes her unique. (Ritambhara 122)

Jaya’s introvert nature and her habit of thinking a lot and saying minimum indicate toward her acute loneliness. She finds a husband in Mohan but never a friend with whom she can speak her heart out, “Her silence is responsible for the misery and slavery. Her mental agony is so adverse that her desire for articulation fails” (Chandramani). This minimal requirement of a successful marriage quite often lacks in many couples. This feeling makes her extremely skeptic about her opinions and ideas. She fails to gather a confidence that helps living a satisfactory and meaningful life. So,“ the novel displays the process of Jaya’s self analysis and self recognition that help her toemerge from her cosy corner that she preferred so long to reality” (K.N.). The problem is that sometimes the marriages are not based on mutual respect and love but on financial security and other less important things. The absence of the basic needs of a good and healthy relation makes the marriage and life monotonous and meaningless for both, men and women. The truth is, “It is not unfrequently happens that fathers give away their daughters in

marriage to strangers without exercising care in making inquiry concerning the suitor's character and social positions "(Saraswati 63). Another important thing is the public opinion. The irony is that people think of it before thinking of themselves. Here we attach every bit of family honor with women and women are forced to think about it first than anything else. Almost every woman feels it. Kamala Das in her autobiography *My Story* goes through similar feeling and expresses as, "My parents and other relatives were obsessed with public opinion and bothered excessively with our society's reaction to any action of an individual. A broken marriage was as distasteful, as horrifying as an attack of leprosy" (Das 97). Mohan marries Jaya because she was a convent educated girl. She is the best manifestation of Mohan's desire for a woman. He always expects her to be a 'woman', the definition of which is so clear in his mind. When somehow Jaya gathers to retaliate him he shrinks into an unending silence which horrifies Jaya and she decides to conform to his rules. Jaya learns everything that Mohan wants in her wife. This gives her a feeling of a dutiful wife. On every appreciation, "I almost wag my tail, like a dog that's been patted by its master" (Deshpande 84). Jaya is actually herself responsible for her condition. She likes it that he depends on her and this feeling never lets her come out of that shackle. Her dreams express the same conscious in her, "But as I run after him, I realize that it is too late anyway, we will never be able to make it, we will never be able to get away, it is all my fault, all my fault" (Deshpande 86). She finds the struggle to cope with it as useless, "But all this is actually a futile exercise, trying to figure out why I married Mohan; the truth is that he had decided to marry me, I had only to acquiesce" (Deshpande 94). The very process of marriage is one sided that does not leave any scope for women to breathe.

Jaya holds so much anger in her but she fears to bring that out. Kamat makes her understand that she should give her anger a platform of writing so that it can help her, to which she responds, "Because no woman can be angry. Have you heard of any angry young

woman?”(Deshpande 147) Jaya does not even know about her capabilities of making changes. She is actually always scared of trying and failing. Jaya sees her relationships not as the source of love but her escape. She tries to hide her faults in them. But her inner dilemma never lets her sit in relief. The novel is an expression of a woman’s attempt to break the silence of her soul. It is a kind of coming of age novel where Jaya eventually learns the essence of life as she recalls, “‘Yathechchasi tatha kuru’- ... ‘Do as you Desire’” (Deshpande 192).She gets the answers of her life through religion. Life gives ample chances to improve. Everyone should utilize those opportunities given by God.

Thus the life of Jaya replicates the dilemma of many Indian women torn between their desires and traditions. The dilemma is to whether speak out the heart or keep it to oneself. Jaya is always scared of the conflict. Mohan gives her everything but comfort to be herself. The reason is that their marriage itself is based on superficial reasons. Mohan wanted an educated and thinking wife but appreciates her thoughts. Jaya accepts Mohan’s marriage proposal without putting her own opinion. This imbalance causes much destruction. The prime reason for marriage should be love and trust but for Jaya, “Love? No, I knew nothing of it. I knew only my need of Mohan and his need of me” (Deshpande 153). Eventually Jaya has to learn to speak out to free herself from the very tendency of escapism. She decides, “If I have to plug that ‘hole in the heart’, I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us” (Deshpande 192) Speaking out is the only option.

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