

REPRESENTATION OF STRUGGLES OF WOMEN IN MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILIES IN THAT LONG SILENCE OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

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Abstract:

That Long Silence of Shashi Deshpande explores the struggles of women in middle-class Indian families, focusing on their silent endurance and subtle resistance to patriarchal norms. The novel centers on Jaya, a homemaker and aspiring writer, who confronts her suppressed individuality and societal expectations after her husband is implicated in a professional scandal. The narrative examines themes of identity, self-discovery, and resistance, revealing the psychological and emotional burdens borne by women in patriarchal settings. Using feminist theory, this paper highlights Deshpande's critique of gender norms, societal expectations, and the cultural framework perpetuating subjugation of women. The paper argues that That Long Silence advocates for self-awareness and agency among women trapped in traditional roles, portraying their struggles with sensitivity and depth. By analysing the journey of Jaya, the paper offers insights into the lived experiences of middle-class women in India, emphasizing the intersections of gender, class, and tradition.

Keywords: Shashi Deshpande, women's struggles, middle-class families, patriarchy, feminist literature

Introduction:

Novels of Shashi Deshpande are widely acclaimed for their portrayal of inner lives and struggles of women within patriarchal Indian societies. That Long Silence is a seminal work that captures the silent suffering and subtle resistance of women in middle-class families. The protagonist of the novel, Jaya, exemplifies the challenges faced by women who must reconcile societal expectations with their personal aspirations (Deshpande, 17). This paper examines how Deshpande critiques patriarchal norms, focusing on marriage, societal expectations, identity, and self-discovery. By employing a feminist framework, the study delves into how silence operates as both oppression and resistance.

Representation of Marriage and Domesticity:

Marriage in That Long Silence is portrayed as a space where women are expected to sacrifice their individuality to maintain societal harmony. Relationship of Jaya with her husband, Mohan, is rooted in traditional gender roles that prioritize his authority and her submission. As Jaya reflects, "A husband is like a sheltering tree" (Deshpande, 32), a statement that encapsulates her internalized belief in male dominance.

Deshpande critiques the oppressive nature of marriage in middle-class families, showing how women are often confined to the domestic sphere. Scholars like Meenakshi Choudhuri argue that "The depiction of domestic spaces by Deshpande reflects the psychological imprisonment of women" (Choudhuri, 46). Silence of Jaya within her marriage mirrors the societal expectation for women to endure emotional and psychological neglect without complaint.

The Role of Societal Expectations:

Middle-class Indian families are often governed by rigid societal expectations that dictate gender roles. Women are expected to embody virtues of sacrifice and obedience, while men assume the roles of providers and decision-makers. Jaya internalizes these norms, lamenting, "I was taught to believe that a good wife never talks back, never complains" (Deshpande, 84).

This conditioning stifles individuality of women, as Anita Nair observes: "Deshpande's women struggle not just against societal expectations but also against their own deeply ingrained beliefs about

femininity” (Nair, 18). The psychological toll of these expectations is evident in Jaya’s feelings of guilt and inadequacy, which she describes as “a shadow I could never shake off” (Deshpande, 102).

Journey of Jaya toward self-awareness is a central theme in *That Long Silence*. Her reflections on her unfulfilled dreams as a writer reveal the struggles women face in balancing personal aspirations with familial duties. She admits, “I had stopped writing because Mohan didn’t like it. It was easier to give up than to fight” (Deshpande, 56).

Deshpande emphasizes the importance of self-discovery in overcoming societal constraints. As Jaya begins to question her choices, she realizes that her silence has been complicit in her oppression. Chandra Holm notes, “Protagonists of Deshpande often embark on journeys of self-discovery, breaking free from the shackles of tradition” (Holm, 91). Jaya’s eventual recognition of her agency signifies a feminist assertion of identity and independence.

That Long Silence addresses several feminist concerns, including gender inequality, emotional labor, and the suppression of voices of women. Silence of Jaya serves as a powerful metaphor for the cultural silencing of women. As she observes, “We learn to make ourselves small, to make our needs invisible” (Deshpande, 123).

Deshpande critiques the emotional labor imposed on women, which often goes unacknowledged in patriarchal societies. R. S. Pathak argues, “Deshpande’s novels reveal the invisible burdens carried by women, who are expected to maintain family harmony at great personal cost” (Pathak, 31). Jaya’s eventual decision to break her silence symbolizes a rejection of these oppressive norms and a move toward empowerment.

Intersection of Gender and Class:

The novel highlights how class influences experiences of oppression of women. As a middle-class homemaker, Jaya enjoys certain privileges but remains confined by conservative values that prioritize reputation and conformity. Deshpande underscores the intersectionality of gender and class, showing how societal expectations vary across different social strata.

For example, Jaya reflects on her inability to leave Mohan despite his flaws, noting, “Where could I go? What would people say?” (Deshpande, 89). This fear of societal judgment is a common theme in middle-class families, as Choudhuri explains: “Middle-class respectability often becomes a prison for women, forcing them to conform to rigid norms” (Choudhuri, 49).

The Significance of Silence:

Silence is both a symbol of oppression and a tool for reflection in *That Long Silence*. Jaya’s initial silence represents her compliance with patriarchal norms, while her eventual decision to speak out marks a turning point in her journey toward empowerment. As she declares, “The time has come to stop pretending, to start living for myself” (Deshpande, 193).

Holm observes that “silence in novels of Deshpande often functions as a double-edged sword, reflecting both submission and resistance” (Holm, 95). Jaya’s breaking of her silence signifies a feminist reclamation of agency, challenging the cultural norms that have suppressed her voice.

Conclusion:

That Long Silence of Shashi Deshpande is a profound exploration of the lived experiences of women in patriarchal middle-class Indian families. By centering the narrative on Jaya, Deshpande unravels the intricate web of societal expectations, marital obligations, and gendered silences that confine women. The portrayal of the novel of struggles of Jaya reflects the larger realities faced by countless women who grapple with their identity while fulfilling prescribed roles as wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law. Transformation of Jaya from passive acceptance to active self-reflection and

eventual assertion is emblematic of a feminist awakening—a call for women to reclaim their agency and find their voice.

The novel critiques the deeply ingrained patriarchal structures that permeate both public and private spheres. Deshpande masterfully uses silence as a motif to highlight the dual nature of women's experiences—on one hand, it reflects their subjugation, and on the other, it serves as a space for introspection and eventual resistance. Jaya's journey underscores the necessity of breaking these silences, both literal and metaphorical, to achieve liberation and self-expression. The breaking of silence is not merely an act of rebellion; it is an act of survival and empowerment.

Furthermore, *That Long Silence* transcends the specificities of the story of Jaya to address universal concerns about gender and class. Deshpande shows how women across different contexts navigate the intersections of societal expectations, familial roles, and personal desires. By doing so, the novel advocates for a reimagining of traditional gender roles and the cultural norms that perpetuate inequality. The work of Deshpande is not only a critique but also a blueprint for change, urging readers to question and dismantle the systems that uphold patriarchal oppression.

The relevance of *That Long Silence* endures in contemporary feminist discourse, as it speaks to the timeless and ongoing struggles of women seeking autonomy within restrictive societal frameworks. The ability of Deshpande to articulate these complexities with nuance and sensitivity makes the novel a landmark in Indian feminist literature. By giving voice to silences of women, Deshpande emphasizes the transformative power of storytelling in challenging societal norms and envisioning a more equitable future.

In conclusion, *That Long Silence* is a testament to the resilience of women and their capacity for self-reinvention. It calls for a collective recognition of women's struggles and the need for societal reforms that prioritize gender equity. Through Jaya's story, Shashi Deshpande reminds us that breaking the silence is not just an individual act of defiance but a step toward collective liberation. The novel thus continues to inspire critical thought and action in addressing the persistent challenges of gender inequality and patriarchy.

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