

**THE SOUND OF SILENCE: EXPLORING THE GENDER DYNAMICS IN SHASHI
DESPANDE'S *THAT LONG SILENCE***

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ABSTRACT :

This article examines the author Shashi Deshpande's life and literary contributions in Indian literature. She is a renowned Indian writer known for her vignettes of women's experiences in contemporary India. The deep exploration of female subjectivity, family relationships, social and cultural challenges faced by women are characterized in Shashi Deshpande's work. This article reveals how she examines patriarchal norms and common female struggles. The voice of the silent are revealed through her analysis of her works such as "That Long Silence," "The Dark Holds No Terrors," and "Small Remedies,". Based on the interviews and critiques, this article also focuses on Shashi Deshpande's writing, feminism and Indian literature.

Keywords: *Gender- patriarchal norms- self expression of women*

ABBREVIATION: TLS - *THAT LONG SILENCE*

In the novel *That Long Silence*, silence is used as a metaphor of the cultural and personal restraints put on women, and it becomes a prominent pattern through which Shashi Deshpande explores gender, identity, and self-expression. The novel encourages readers to consider the complex dynamics of gender, identity, and personal liberation, making it an important contribution to feminist writing. It represents the personal restraints that prevent women from speaking up and cultural, as well as the internal struggle to restore their identity. Jaya's role in the novel *That Long Silence* is diverse and crucial. As the protagonist, she personifies the novel's investigation of silence, identity, and gender roles. Her self-analysis journey serves as a critical lens through which the author Shashi Deshpande investigates the nature of patriarchal norms and the opportunity for personal liberation. Jaya's character is a strong portrayal of the difficulties faced by women, and their struggle for self-expression in a traditionalist culture. The primary reason why women remain silent is that the most advanced society have well patriarchal standards that are permanent, defines specific duties and actions for women. Women are frequently trained from an early age to be submissive, obedient, and selfless. Many societies exclude women from decision-making processes, both within their households and in their combined contexts. This marginalization contributes to their quiet and perceived insignificance. The novel centers around Jaya, a middle-aged woman who oppose her own suppressed emotions and desires while struggling with the societal expectations imposed on her. Throughout the novel, silence is portrayed as a key form of oppression that women endure within the confines of their homes and societal roles. Jaya's silence is a result of the assigned norms that dictate a woman's behavior, urging her to suppress her true self. Shashi Deshpande illustrates how Jaya's silence is not just a personal choice but a forced condition, resulting from years of being controlled and societal pressure. The novel deals with the topic of silence in the context of Jaya's relationships, especially her union with Mohan. There are underlying tensions and unresolved difficulties in their relationship. Jaya can't express her unhappiness due to lack of conversation and Mohan expects her to be a submissive, quiet wife. This period of marital silence focus on the power struggles and lack of genuine communication, the isolation that results from such enforced stillness. Jaya's identity and her silence are intertwined. The narrative explores her inner conflicts as she

considers her life decisions and the person she has become. The pieces of herself that she has buried to fulfill the roles of wife and mother are symbolized by her silence. Shashi Deshpande depicts Jaya's path towards strength and self-awareness as she starts to reflect on her actions. Jaya's final identification of the necessity of breaking her silence is a crucial element in the narrative. This process is described by the author as both painful and freeing. When Jaya begins, she starts to face her life's facts and the social institutions that have silenced her in order to express her views and feelings. It is implied that Jaya's act of breaking her silence was an act of defiance, and that it was essential to her quest for empowerment and self-discovery. Jaya's quiet is tangible because of the stream of consciousness approach, which lets readers experience her thoughts and feelings up close. By using this strategy, the topic of stillness is emphasized and given a concrete presence in the story. The book makes a considerable contribution to feminist writing by providing a complex picture of the silent war that women wage and the courage needed to speak their truths. In Jaya's personal connections, being silent can be a barrier to sincere communication and closeness. On a more introspective level, silence in the novel is also associated with Jaya's inner turmoil and self-reflection. Her silence becomes a space for contemplation and self-examination as, she struggles with her identity and the choices she has made. Shashi Deshpande uses Jaya's internal monologues to explore into her suppressed emotions and desires, revealing the complexities of her character and the silent struggles she endures. This silence is a crucial aspect of Jaya's journey towards self-awareness and empowerment. A significant development in the novel is Jaya's gradual realization of the need to break her silence. As Jaya begins to voice her thoughts and confront the realities of her life, she challenges the societal and personal constraints that have kept her silent. This process of articulating her experiences and emotions marks a significant step in her path to regain her voice and asserting her identity. Breaking the silence becomes an act of uprising and self-assertion, crucial for Jaya's personal growth and empowerment. Jaya's performance in this novel is also criticized by other roles like Vanitamami.

"Why don't you teach our Kusum some English, Jaya, his English is very weak, Vanitamami used to ask me.

"Why don't you ask your husband to get our Kusum's husband a better job? Why don't you take our Kusum to a lady doctor, poor thing, she has three daughters, at least let the fourth be a son.

"Why don't you take Kusum to Bombay and show her to a good doctor? She's behaving funnily..." (TLS pg. 21).

Vanitamami consider English proficiency as a status symbol related with modernity and sophistication. This shows that she has a desire for the family to adapt to changing social norms and embrace aspects of Western culture by encouraging Kusum to learn English. This reflects her attitude towards education and social status. Vanitamami represents the older generation that upholds and preserve traditional values and gender roles. Through her behavior and attitudes, Vanitamami reinforces the idea that women should remain silent and not question their roles within the family and society. Jaya accepts and promotes the status without challenging it. Vanitamami serves as a role model for Jaya and other younger women as she is an elder in the family. Her acceptance of traditional roles and her silent endurance of life's challenges provide a contrasting environment to Jaya's growing dissatisfaction and desire for change. Kusum feels concerned about her own health or well-being if she is experiencing symptoms that necessitate a visit to the hospital. She worries about what the doctor will find or if she needs treatment. Jaya's interactions with Vanitamami highlights how deeply established these norms are and how they are passed down from one generation to the next. Vanitamami's acceptance of her circumstances pressures Jaya to conform as well. As the narrative unfolds, Jaya's inner turmoil and dissatisfaction with her life become increasingly evident. She grapples with feelings of loneliness, frustration, and a sense of being trapped within the confines of societal expectations. Her relationship with Mohan is strained,

marked by communication gaps and her emotional needs are unfilled. Amidst her domestic responsibilities, Jaya finds solace in her friendship with Meena, a fellow housewife who shares her frustrations and desires for a more meaningful existence. Jaya and Meena bond over their shared experiences as middle-class housewives steering the complexities of domestic life in a patriarchal society. They both were struggling with the feelings of isolation, unfulfilled aspirations, and the suppress expectations placed upon them as women. Their friendship provides them with a safe space to express their innermost thoughts, fears, and frustrations. They confide in each other about their respective marital issues, family pressures, and personal struggles, finding comfort in knowing that they are not alone in their silent battles. Though the protagonist Jaya had to suffer by not being able to say anything, Ajji, her grandmother has served as a maternal frame in her life. She is portrayed as a wise and compassionate person who provides emotional support and guidance to Jaya, especially during moments of uncertainty and turmoil. She offers sage advice to Jaya based on her own observations and experiences, providing a perspective that is very much rooted in tradition yet modified with empathy and understanding. Throughout the novel, Ajji provides firm support to Jaya, offering words of encouragement and comfort during moments of distress. Her parental presence helps Jaya navigate the challenges of womanhood and find strength in her own identity.

‘I feel sorry for your husband, Jaya, whoever he is,’ she had said to me once. ‘What for, ajji?’
Look at you - for everything a question, for everything a retort. What husband can be comfortable with that?.. (TLS Pg. 27)

By stating that she feels sorry for Jaya's husband, Ajji implying that she perceives Jaya as being burdened or unhappy within her marriage, which in turn affects her husband. This comment reflects the perspective of Ajji's on Jaya's situation within her marriage and her perception of the challenges Jaya faces. Throughout the novel, Ajji witnesses Jaya's internal struggles, including her feelings of dissatisfaction and unfulfillment. Ajji expresses her concern for Jaya's happiness and emotional well-being. In Indian culture, the upbringing of children are often played by the grandparents and are highly revered for their experience and knowledge. The other character who remained silent in this novel was Nayana, a friend of Jaya's, and her character serves as a foil to Jaya, which highlights contrasting approaches to life and womanhood. Nayana is portrayed as an independent and confident woman who defies traditional gender norms and societal expectations.

Unlike Jaya, who struggles with feelings of dissatisfaction and unfulfillment within her marriage, Nayana is self-assured and assertive in pursuing her own goals and desires. She also served as a source of inspiration and support, encouraging Jaya to assert herself and pursue her own aspiration. “Just my bad luck, my fate,” Nayana had sobbed loudly when she had lost the second, her breasts still oozing milk. (TLS pg. 27). When Nayana said, "Just my bad luck, my fate," it reflects her resignation or acceptance of her circumstances, particularly in the context of her personal life or relationships. Nayana's statement can also be relevant to the challenges she has encountered in her career or life choices. Despite her ambition and determination, she had faced obstacles or setbacks that have hindered her progress or led to feelings of frustration or disillusionment. Seeing Nayana again after a period provoked feelings of excitement and anticipation in Jaya. She felt delighted to reconnect with a friend from her past and eager to catch up on each other's lives. In this novel, *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande explores various societal struggles faced by women in Indian society. The novel portrays the silent struggles endured by women within patriarchal structures. Jaya, along with other female characters like Nayana and Meena, silently endure societal pressures, unfulfilled aspirations, marital conflict, and often suppressing their desires and emotions to maintain familial harmony. Jaya's experiences as a mother highlight the challenges of balancing the responsibilities of her family with personal aspirations and desires. The other feminine character Mukta, a close friend of the protagonist, Jaya also had to go through various

challenges and struggles she faces as a woman in Indian society. She faces discrimination and inequality based on her gender, both within the family and in wider society. She kept crying, “My children will starve, don’t do it, my children will starve” (*TLS* pg. 180). It likely reflects her dread fears and anxieties about her family's well-being, particularly in the face of economic unreliability or hardships. What’s the matter, Jaya? Is anything wrong? Mukta looked at me intently. No, nothing,’ I said, ‘Nothing.’ (*TLS* pg. 180). It reflects her concern for Jaya's well-being and her perceptiveness regarding Jaya's emotional state. She recognizes that Jaya is struggling with something and wants to provide her friend with an opportunity to share her feelings and receive emotional support. The novel deals with the countless ways in which silence serves as both surviving mechanism and a form of resistance for women like Jaya, who navigate the constraints of traditional gender roles and societal norms. Whether it's the silence of unfulfilled desires, suppressed emotions, or stifled aspirations, Shashi Deshpande skillfully portrays the silent struggles that spread through the lives of her characters. Through Jaya's journey of self-discovery and empowerment, the author challenges readers to confront the silence that surrounds issues of gender, class, and power, urging them to break free from the shackles of silence and advocate for greater equality and justice. This novel, "That Long Silence" stands as a pitiful testament to the resilience and also to the strength of women who confront societal struggles with courage and determination. Through the exploration of silence and its implications, Shashi Deshpande invites the readers to reflect on the silent battles that are faced by women in their quest for liberty, dignity, and equality in a society fraught with oppression and inequality.

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