

Gender Roles and the Quest for Identity: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract:

*Women in all ages remain the object of suppression. They often neither have any voice nor an independent identity of their own. Men become the deciding factor about how a woman should behave and act. They have always been taught to be docile, submissive, and conventional to be accepted by the society. They are made to behave in a certain stereotypical way to maintain the male supremacy. They are given a position inferior to men in a hierarchical social structure, controlled and dominated by men and they merely serve as objects of this control and rule. The whole purpose of their existence revolves around serving in the family as someone's daughter, wife, sister or mother. These stereotypical gender roles assigned to them by the society keep them confined within the four walls of familial entanglement where they do not have any voice or agency. Shashi Deshpande in her novel, *That Long Silence* captures this traumatized and painful existence of women in a middle-class Indian family. The novelist portrays the ever-suffering existence and the quest for independent identity of women through the presentation of the character of Jaya who has to maintain silence throughout her married life for the fear of disrupting familial comfort and security. I, in my paper, will attempt to address this crisis raised by the author and also show how the society creates a boundary for women to delimit their capabilities and stifle their voice and agency in a constrictive social structure that does not allow women to speak.*

Keywords: *Gender, Identity, Patriarchy, Hierarchy, Stereotype, Silence*

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 330) this statement made by Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* highlights the social construction of gender stereotypes where women are given a place inferior to men in a hierarchical social structure controlled and dominated

by men. Without denying the biological differences between the sexes, Beauvoir postulated that women only become women because of the circumstances in which they are brought up and survive. In this construction of social identity humanity is identical with the male and man defines woman not in herself but in relation to him. As a result, women are reduced to the role of the 'Other'. A woman in our society is taught to be docile and submissive since her childhood in order to be accepted by the society where she will have to serve as someone's daughter, wife, sister or mother. A woman, to use Judith Butler's words, "functions as a relational term between groups of men. She does not have an identity, and neither does she exchange one identity for another." (Butler, 1999, p. 50) Women lose their individual self in the vast abyss of familial entanglement. Certain rules and regulations are set for them to keep them subjugated and suppressed. This discrimination which starts in their childhood continues till the end of their life. Shashi Deshpande in her novel *That Long Silence* captures the existence of painful and traumatized women in a middle-class Indian family. The novel revolves around Jaya, a middle class, educated, and sensitive housewife who has to maintain silence throughout her life to fit into the norms of the patriarchal society. Frustrated by the boredom and drudgery of this strict familial entanglement she finally decides to come out of her "long silence" and assert her true self in the form of writing, and thus, she tries to reclaim her long lost identity which has been suppressed for long in a constrictive and exploitative social structure that does not allow any space for women.

"The destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage." (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 502) In a patriarchal society marriage is considered sacred through which two souls meet, but, in reality, it often turns into a trap, an institution of oppression and domination for women where they are treated as subservient to their male counterparts. Losing the freedom and individuality they are merely reduced to objects whose whole purpose is to follow orders. Jaya is one of the victims of this institution. When she was born her father named her Jaya which means victory and she was brought up to be an educated and independent woman defying all the social stereotypes assigned to a girl child. But as soon as she gets married to Mohan, her independent self is relegated almost to the verge of extinction. When she gets married to Mohan, he gives her a name, Suhasini, 'a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman' whose meaning and purpose is completely distinct from Jaya, and whose whole purpose of existence

is to look after the family, which is, in fact, a compromise with all her wishes and aspirations. After her marriage, she is trapped in the vortex of familial affairs of taking care of her husband and children. The renaming of Jaya actually is suggestive of the social expectations from a married woman. Jaya is transformed from an independent thinking woman to a stereotypical woman who is “nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support.” (p. 76) This transformation of Jaya exposes the emptiness of conventional marriage that deprives a woman of her independent voice and identity. While reflecting on a family photo featuring herself, her husband and their children on the dinner table at their Dadar flat in which she is pictured as serving with “love and care”, Mohan, “the head of the family, smiles indulgently,” and the children are “lively and playful” (p. 4), Jaya realizes the hostilities breeding within her after seventeen years of her married life that has kept her confined within the four walls of familial entanglement. The picture perfectly depicts the roles assigned to a woman in an Indian family. Jaya finds her life boring and unendurable and wishes for a catastrophe to end this boredom. Jaya’s wish for the catastrophe reflects the mental agony she has been going through in her married life. Devoid of any emotional attachment with Mohan, both she and Mohan were just performing the roles assigned to a married couple. As Jaya points out, “Since we got married, both of us had been scrupulous about playing out our allotted roles” (p. 75), where she plays the role of a duty-bound housewife whose whole concern is to look after her husband and family. The repetitive performance of the roles assigned to her for these long years causes her great mental agony leading to her being hysterical. She gradually loses her sanity and in the state of her being hysterical she can identify herself with Kusum, a woman who had become mad under the pressure of the suppressive familial structure and had subsequently committed suicide by jumping into a well. Jaya sympathizes with Kusum for her pathetic existence but immediately realizes her own travails and sufferings which is no lesser than Kusum. She says:

... It wasn’t poor Kusum at all; it was poor Jaya. In her madness, sycophantic, dependent, frightened, clinging Kusum had escaped. In her madness, she had been able to get away from the burden of pleasing others; only in her madness had she been able to be gloriously, unashamedly herself. (pp. 126-127)

Kusum's madness concedes that the only escape for women from the drudgery of familial entanglement is to lose sanity. It is only in the madness that they can be free and independent. Kusum's death by jumping into the well shows the state of despair she had been in. Jaya's gradual loss of sanity and Kusum's madness and subsequent suicide exposes the cruelty of the patriarchal social structure.

The rigid patriarchal social structure restricts the wishes and aspiration of women and their whole existence is supposed to revolve around the family's desire. As Beauvoir says in 'The Married Woman,' Man is socially autonomous and complete individual; he is regarded above all as a producer and his existence is justified by the work he provides for the group...the reproductive and domestic role to which woman is confined has not guaranteed her an equal dignity." (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 503) This confinement causes a great damage to their individual and identity. Being born and brought up with a progressive thought, Jaya is overwhelmed at the sharp distinction of gender roles at play in Mohan's conservative family. It is like a revelation to her. She says:

... the women in his family, so definite about their roles, so well trained in their duties, so skillful in the right areas, so indifferent to everything else. I had never seen so clear, so precise a pattern before, and I had been entranced by it. (p. 83)

These sharply defined gender roles are used as means of control and domination that refrain women from their independent voice and identity. Jaya, a graduate in English who could have excelled in her career, is abstained from doing any job and is confined with the household affairs where she works to be at the beck and call of everyone's want in the family. After her marriage Jaya had to concede to the gender roles assigned to an Indian housewife and socialize herself to fit into the family according to the norms. Deprived of any voice and agency, she gradually lost her individual self and had started to identify herself as Mohan's wife, Rahul and Rati's mother. The crisis of her identity is revealed when she is asked to give her bio-data from a magazine. She does not have anything to write but to talk of some familial matters. She writes: "I was born. My father died when I was fifteen. I got married to Mohan. I have two children and I did not let the third live" (p. 2). Simone de Beauvoir rightly observes in *The Second Sex* as quoted by Ahsan and Tiwari in their paper "It has been said that marriage diminishes man, which is often true, but almost always it annihilates

women.” (Ahsan & Tiwari, 2018, p. 260). After her marriage to Mohan, Jaya lives under the shadow of her husband. Her individual self and identity are relegated into the dark confinement of familial affairs. A potential talent, who could have prospered as a writer, for Jaya used to write for a magazine on issues related to women, has to abandon her writing after her husband's objection about the content of her writing. Virginia Woolf has observed that: “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.” (Woolf, 1929, p.4) Devoid of economic independence and a separate room, meaning a space of her own, Jaya has to abide by her husband's order and give up her writing. She is thus the epitome of all the women who are deprived of their voice in the society for being woman. The strict social norms keep the women entangled in the household affairs that stifle their voice and agency and delimit their capabilities causing dependency and nervousness. That is the reason when Mohan leaves the house for some time Jaya becomes worried about the future because by then she is domesticated to believe that a husband is like a ‘sheltering tree’ without whom a wife would become dangerously vulnerable and unprotected. Her nervousness and dependency are the norm whereas her independence and inquisitiveness are considered rebellious and unnatural.

Women are often deprived of asserting their choices and therefore grow up to abstain from expressing their disagreement and discontent within the given hierarchical social structure. It is because of this deprivation that women sometimes have to suffer immense agony throughout their whole lives in silence. Everything in a woman's life is controlled by the man in the society. The men set the rules for them. Jaya as young girl, loved to listen to songs by Rafi and Lata but her father tried to wean her from that taste by saying: “What poor taste you have, Jaya.” (p. 3) Though he failed in his attempt to refrain Jaya from listening to songs of her choice, the restrictions and control that her father tried to put on her in her childhood leaves a psychological scar that causes her never to revolt to situations but to remain silent and conform to everything out of the fear of disrupting the status quo. This fear of disrupting the familial comfort and security leads her to become a submissive wife after her marriage, as one who always maintains silence. After her marriage when they are late for going for the movies, her husband would tell her not to hurry because they would miss only the ads at worse, adding that no one would love to watch those ads. Although Jaya was aware that she loved to watch the ads she never dared to express her choice

anxious that Mohan would echo his father and say, what a poor taste she had! She thought her disagreement with her husband might have displeased him and she might have become a bad wife and a failure as a housewife. This fear of displeasing her husband was the reason of her silent suffering throughout her married life. As N. Prabhakaran observes

Her silence is a sign of alienation and understanding rooted in every woman's soul in different forms- a silence which is often misunderstood by men as a symbol of woman's self-satisfaction. (Prabhakaran, 2018, p. 87)

In a patriarchal social setup, it is the men who get to decide what they want and how they want it and the women are supposed to follow the rules passively. This is the destiny of Jaya too. In their familial affair it is Mohan who takes the decisions and she follows them without asking questions because by then she realizes that society or the family did not allow the voice to a woman and to become an ideal wife one needed to maintain silence. She recollected the warning of her grandmother who had expressed her concern over Jaya's inquisitive nature. She had warned her that no husband would be comfortable with so many questions, as if the whole purpose of her existence was to please a husband. Jaya conforms to the societal norms and learns to remain silent without any question. Thus, when Mohan decides to take refuge at their Dadar flat fearing the repercussion because of some financial embezzlement he had committed in his engineering profession and an inquiry was ordered against him, he takes it for granted that Jaya would accompany him and so he does not feel it necessary to ask her if she wanted to go with him. Even Jaya too does not express her disagreement because by then she had socialized herself to be the silent wife. She contemplated over the fate of the mythical women like Sita, Savitri, Draupadi who had to suffer for their husbands and realizes that the tradition had not changed. She says:

I remember now that he had assumed I would accompany him, had taken for granted my acquiescence in his plans. So had I. Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails.... (p.11).

Her silent suffering for becoming the ideal wife leads her to identify herself with the character of Gandhari in *Mahabharata* who had bandaged her eyes to become like her husband. Jaya too like Gandhari chooses to remain blind by not asking questions to Mohan (p. 61). The social conditioning of women deprived them of their voice and agency. When Jaya came to live with Mohan at their Dadar flat she had thought that they were like “two bullocks yoked together” which meant they would have equal roles and importance in the family, but soon she realized the difference between the two. In reality they were distinct in their identity. One of them is a man and the other is a woman where one dominates and the other is dominated, where one sets the rule and the other only passively follows. Simone de Beauvoir rightly observes as quoted by Divya Mishra in her paper: “Marriage has always been a very different thing for man and for woman. The two sexes are necessary to each other, but this necessity has never brought about a condition of reciprocity between them...” (Mishra, 2016, p. 9) Jaya’s silent acquiescence to everything for the familial comfort and security shows the vulnerability of women in a patriarchal society. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak makes a significant observation in her essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ that being the ‘subaltern’ the women cannot speak because “There is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak.” (Spivak, 2010, p. 310) The constrictive social structure stifles their voice and they remain silent throughout their whole life and bear with all the agonies and sufferings silently.

In a traditional marriage the fear of losing familial comfort and security have been used as tools to suppress women from voicing their discomfort and discontent and in this process of suppression women too have played the role of unconscious accomplice with their male counterparts. Thus, their idealization of a husband as the ‘sheltering tree’ without whom the women would become ‘dangerously vulnerable and unprotected’ no matter how bad he is, actually is a perpetuation of their own suffering and subjugation. Looking after the husband is considered the most important thing in a woman’s life after marriage. Thus, when Tara curses her husband out of frustration for the unbearable mental and physical agony he has been inflicting upon her, she was refrained from that by her mother-in-law because she believes that it is because of him she still has the kumkum on her forehead and without which there is no meaning of a woman’s life. She says: “Stop that! Don’t forget, he keeps the kumkum on your forehead. What is a woman without that?” (p. 53). Jaya too domesticates herself to believe

in that dictum and prepares herself to do everything to protect this shelter. But the hollowness of the phrase is exposed when Jaya comes to realize the gulf between her and Mohan after spending seventeen years of married life with him. They have been playing the roles of a wife and a husband, where her entire being is devoted to the service of Mohan, without any emotional attachment. That's why she tells Mohan that she knows him more than he knows himself. She says: "...wasn't he my profession, my career, my means of livelihood? Not to know him was to admit that I had failed at my job." (p. 75) Thus, when Mohan was without his usual routine at their Dadar flat, it seems to Jaya as if she has lost her job, her career as a housewife has come to a jeopardy. Again, she is very careful to take care of her relationship with Mohan and is always keenly concerned to keep Mohan pleased, never to show her anger to him because he believed anger made a woman unwomanly. Jaya conceded with the idea in the fear that it could hamper her career as a housewife and the 'shelter' might get shattered. She reflects:

... A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There's no room for anger in my life, no room for despair either. There's only order and routine- today, I have to change the sheets; tomorrow, scrub the bathrooms; the day after, clean the fridge.... (p. 48)

In this patriarchal social setup, anger is considered 'unwomanly' while all these rules are set by men are tools of suppression and domination. It is not permissible for a woman to articulate her anger even if she is treated as non-human. Yet, after all these years of her life in complete devotion to Mohan in his service without question he complains: "You've never cared for me" (p. 124) and this makes Jaya realize the hollowness of her relationship with Mohan. The complete involvement of Jaya in looking after these trivialities took away her individual self and while she looks back into the diaries of her life she has spent, she realizes the void and emptiness of her existence. She ruminates:

The picture of a life spent on such trivialities scared me. Reading through the entries, I could feel her dwindling, the woman who had lived this life.... The biggest question facing the woman of these diaries had obviously been: what shall I make for breakfast/ lunch/ tea/ dinner? That had been the leitmotif of my life. (p. 70)

Reflecting upon her life after so many years of silent acquiescence in the service of Mohan and the family she realizes that “the life she had been living so far did not belong to her but to someone else” (Ahashan & Tiwari, 2018, p. 261) and yet she has left with nothing but emptiness and silence.

The women are ideologically domesticated to believe their suppression as natural and beneficial for them. Thus, they bear with all the humiliations and sufferings in silence without realizing that their stance helps in perpetuating the subjugation and suppression of their gender. After being married to Mohan, Jaya realizes how sharply defined a woman's role is at his house. Thus, the missing button in Mohan's shirt is considered a matter for which Jaya should be ashamed of and Jaya regretfully ponders over her silence when Sudha, a spoilt and pert girl says: “Poor Monanna, looks like he'll have to fix his own button.” (p. 84) Sudha's sarcastic remark over Jaya's inability to take proper care of her husband reflects the condition of women in a patriarchal society where women too play equal roles in perpetuating this suppression of women. After this incident, Jaya decides to pattern herself like them where she will always be apprehensive of pleasing her husband. This domestication of women to believe in their subjugation as natural makes Sujata, Jaya's cousin laughs at her own naivety when she says that why her male cousins can't clear up the tables after dinner as if she has cracked some joke, or said something unnatural and unrealistic. This laughter brings Jaya back to her own experience when she once has told Mohan to cook during her pregnancy and Mohan was completely shocked and surprised at this proposal and had smiled. This shock and laughter are the reflections of the female subjugation and suppression that have kept the women confined with the household affairs. Again, the treatment that Vimala, Mohan's sister received at her in-law's house exposes the futility of the conventional marriage. She had to go through immense mental agony for not being able to bear a child and died a pathetic and silent death, and even in the situation of utmost physical crisis when she was bed-ridden, her mother-in-law would taunt her saying:

God knows what's wrong with her. She's been lying there on her bed for over a month now.... I never heard of women going to hospitals and doctors for such a thing. As if other women don't have heavy periods! What a fuss! But these women who've never had children are like that. (p. 39)

The apathy and ignorance of Vimala's mother-in-law towards Vimala's sufferings highlights the hegemonic subjugation and suppression of womanhood.

Without any voice or agency, the women suffer all the mental and physical agony silently. Jaya reflects over the ill fate of Mohan's mother who had been suffering all through her married life without uttering a word. She had been ill treated by her husband but she did never raise her voice in protest and this silent suffering of her mother at the hands of his father shows the pathetic existence of women in this patriarchal social structure that does not allow voice to a woman. And this silent suffering of her mother appeared quite natural and is a symbol of strength to Mohan as he says: "God...she was tough. Women in those days were tough" and Jaya regretfully says:

He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire,
but I saw despair. I saw a despair so great that it would not voice
itself. I saw struggle so bitter that silence is the only weapon.
Silence and surrender. (p. 36)

The suffering of Jaya's mother is a vivid portrayal of the status of a housewife in our society. Same was the fate with Jeeja, the maid at their Dadar flat who could not bear a child and bear with immense mental and physical torture from her husband silently. Her daughter-in-law, Tara is again a victim of this patriarchal violence at the hands of her husband, Rajaram who carries forward the legacy of torturing women. The awareness of this prolonged sufferings of women makes Jaya somewhat sadistic and she reflects upon the time when a girl child was crushed to death immediately after her birth. She ponders over this ill fate of women and says:

All those agonies...for days I had been unable to get it out of my
mind. But now I wondered whether it wasn't more merciful, that
swift ending of the agony once and for all, than this prolonging of it
for years and years. (p. 53)

Jaya's concern and apprehension over this prolonged suffering of women reflects the ever-suffering condition of women in this male dominated patriarchal society that doesn't allow women to speak or express their grievances.

Jaya had been completely devoted to her husband and children for seventeen years of their marriage. However, after her husband leaves their Dadar

apartment, she sees how hollow her life has already become. She becomes frustrated at the routine and tedium of the familial tie which has robbed her of her sense of self and independence. She had kept quiet all these years believing that she was doing that for safety and security of her family, but doing so had removed the very purpose of her existence. She has been diminished from an intelligent, self-assured lady to a fearful, inexperienced woman dependent on male assistance and support. As Kamal Das puts it:

You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf.

(The Old Playhouse)

She was reduced to being known just as Mohan's wife as a result of her extreme dependence on and total submission to him. But in the end, she makes the decision to use writing as a way to establish her Self and reclaim her long-lost identity. She had to keep a long silence in her marriage to Mohan, which makes writing challenging for her. She claims at the beginning of the book that she used to write so easily but that lately it feels like she is at a loss for words. This is due to the fact that up to this point, she has only written about traditional women, who lacked autonomous identity and lived their lives only to be mated with the right men. But, in the end she decides to write about herself by overcoming the drudgery and suffocation of familial entanglement and its nuances. She says- "Nor am I writing a story of a callous, insensitive husband and a sensitive, suffering wife. I'm writing of us. Of Mohan and me." (p. 1) She decides to assert her true self in her writing. She says: "I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us." (p. 192) She is apprehensive about what she has achieved by writing and realizes that she has overcome the fear of disrupting the familial comfort and security. She says:

Well, I have achieved this. I'm not afraid any more. The panic has gone. I'm Mohan's wife, I had thought, and cut off the bits of me that refused to be Mohan's wife. Now I know that kind of fragmentation is not possible. (p. 191)

Jaya's efforts towards emancipation from a duty-bound housewife to become an independent self is seen as the only hope for all the women who have been suffering throughout their life in a repressive patriarchal social structure that does not allow them any voice or agency.

The novel, *That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande is a perfect reflection of the status of women in the society. The author through her painstaking efforts brings to the fore the ever sufferings of women in the patriarchal society where a woman's role revolves around the family and its trivialities delimiting her potential and contribution in the society. The author through the presentation of the character of Jaya exposes the prejudices of the existing social structure. The author ends the novel with a positive note where Jaya realizes and expresses a hope to break free from the bondage of familial entanglement:

We don't change overnight. It's possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know now it is this: life has always to be made possible. (p. 193)

Jaya wishes to end the cycle of dominance through her writing and emerge triumphant, where she will be treated first and foremost as a human being—not as someone's daughter, wife, sister, or mother, but live her actual self, 'Jaya'. Jaya comprehends that looking the other way won't stop this oppression, thus in order to be heard or to accomplish one's Self, one must speak up and expose the deceptions of social security around family comfort. Jaya's desire for liberation and actions in that direction serve as a beacon of hope for women looking to escape the shackles of familial entanglements.

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