



# Demystifying the Domestic Zone: Portrayal of Jaya as an Alienated Figure in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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**Abstract**— *The conjugal zone has been traditionally construed to be a space where two partners can share equal rights and respect. But contrary to this belief, it is part of our observation that women rather than enjoying this space as a haven safeguarding their dignity and identity as human beings, tend to become victims. The space not only marginalizes them but serves to dehumanize them. The present paper, through an in-depth study of Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence looks analytically at the institution of marriage and talks about the situations and circumstances that place women in a state of subjugation and suppression. The figure of a woman is idealized and glorified but when it comes to reality the domestic domain which is expected to be a safe heaven and refuge for her turns out to be a space of oppression and subjugation. The marital space that should hold a promise of peace, prosperity, respect, dignity, love and happiness through a shared life together, unfortunately turns out to be an arena where the male will have the utmost freedom and complete authority and control over the female partner. The paper tries to investigate how marriage as an institution has failed to safeguard the honour and dignity of women and offer them their due share and rights in the relationship.*



**Keywords**— *Domestic, marriage, conjugal space, subjugation, woman*

Set in an urban middle class household, *That Long Silence* deals with Shashi Deshpande's concerns regarding the idea of domesticity with relation to women. It talks about the complex human relationships and takes up the issue of marriage in modern Indian society. A study of her novels makes it evident that in most of her novels she takes up the issue of failed marriages and showcases how the partners in a marriage lack mutual understanding due to the disordered social setup which allows the male member in the family a larger space at the expense of the female member whose freedom is curtailed. His dominance and authority is played out on the woman who is rendered an outsider in a space which ironically comes into existence by the very fact that she is there. Still she is taken as one who can create the space but has to remain an outsider and play the subservient role ordained by the patriarchal set up in a house hold: 'Since she will remain a stranger there, she will preserve a sense of inferiority, of exclusion, or, at best, of irony.' (Kristeva and Clement 59)

The present novel looks analytically at the institution of marriage and talks about the situations and circumstances that place women in a state of subjugation and suppression. The figure of a woman is idealized and glorified but when it comes to reality the domestic domain which is expected to be a safe heaven and refuge for her turns out to be a space of oppression and subjugation.

*That Long Silence* is the story of an educated middle class girl, Jaya, who finds herself restricted in her conjugal relationship. She is a writer as well as a housewife and for a period of seventeen years she allows herself to suppress her own creative skills as the idea of being an ideal wife is considered more important than to be a good writer in a patriarchal society. Anne Oakley rightly observes:

This housewife role ensures that women stay subordinate to men, making it difficult for them to pursue careers and this role which is exclusively allocated to women, has no status, is unpaid and alienating and yet it

takes precedence over all other roles. (www.collegetermpapers.com)

She has to play the role of the loyal wife and a mother who never gets tired. In the novel we see that before her wedding, she gets trained by her aunt. Her aunt tells her how to be a perfect wife: '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' (Deshpande 28). She is supposed to be in a subservient position to men:

In woman, on the contrary, there is from the beginning, a conflict between her autonomous existence and her objective self, her 'being-the-other'; she is taught that to please she must try to please, she must make herself object; she should therefore renounce her autonomy. She is treated like a live doll and is refused liberty. Thus a vicious circle is formed; for the less she exercises her freedom to understand, to grasp and discover the world about her, the less resource will she find within herself, the less will she dare to affirm herself as subject. (Beauvoir 308)

The sense of isolation, estrangement and alienation that a woman has to undergo in the domestic space is not specifically due to the fact that hers is a subservient position in the family. This has also to do with the very set up and the very structure that defines the domestic zone where while the female is the home maker, the male is the provider of things. The relationship is seen in terms of management and resource, demand and supply. Instead of mutual understanding and enjoying the status of partners with equal rights and equal share in freedom what the partners in the marriage get is their respective roles that they have to perform to live up to the expectation of the society. The man has to be the responsible one, to take care of the finance and the woman has to manage things with a perfect hand. The failure on the part of man to fulfill his responsibility leads him to vent his frustration on the woman who becomes a scape-goat. What is required is a reconfiguration of the set roles in the domestic zone. Deshpande tries to convey the idea that in the conjugal relationship if any of the partners becomes a victim of the set up, it will result in an atmosphere of suffocation and suffering leading both the partners to their respective zones of alienation and aloofness. She suggests that it is not only women who are affected by the patriarchal set up but men too have been a victim and as a result have caused women to suffer all the more:

On a more general level, it must be remembered that Indian society has always been highly hierarchical and that in India patriarchy is only one from among the several hierarchies that oppress women – and men as well. (Jackson 115)

This can be seen through the character of Mohan (Jaya's husband) who finds himself trapped in a certain specific role that he has to play as a husband. He has to carry with himself a sense of responsibility. He feels that it is his duty to be the ideal man who can provide everything his family demands. 'Mohan has always had very clear ideas about himself. He was a dutiful son, he is a dutiful father, husband, brother.'(9) But Mohan uses this sense of responsibility as a tool to blame his wife for his failures. When he is caught in corruption, he indirectly holds Jaya responsible of it: 'It was for you and the children I did this. I wanted you to have a good life, I wanted the children to have all those things I never had.'(9)

Through Jaya, Deshpande tries to delineate the very fact that self-realization can be a method for assertion of an individuality that is often denied to a woman. Jaya speaks: '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. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces' (1). When Jaya and her husband, Mohan move to a new flat, she goes into a phase of intense introspection. The haunting memories of her bitter experiences with Mohan bring disappointment in her life. She appears to be a satisfied housewife who is married to a caring man but there is a void in her life that she feels internally. On the one hand, she rejects the idea to be like Mohan's mother and sister who always were in position of compromise, but on the other hand she submits herself to Mohan. She feels as a stereotyped housewife who is 'nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support' (76). She seems to be echoing the sentiments of Marry Murray who avers: 'Husbands were *guardians* of their wives.'(64) Though apparently Jaya looks satisfied but she has suppressed many aspects of her personality:

Jaya represents modern woman's ambivalent attitude to married life. In order to maintain her marriage as a happy one, she slowly transforms herself to this ideal of womanhood, where she learns to repress her anger. Jaya always works up to please her husband. She even transforms her appearance to suit his idea of a modern woman-cuts her hair and wears dark glasses. (Diwekar)

Marriage becomes an altar where the woman has to go through the process of self-effacement. The very idea

of marriage making people 'two bodies with one soul' has been twisted in a very nasty way to suit the ideology of the hierarchal and patriarchal interests. It is the woman who has to become the soul of her husband and sacrifice her very soul. She has to merge into him and become him without having access to his power and his authority. Her career is that of a housewife and her success and failure is measured in terms of her identification with her husband. She has to come to terms with this very idea in a relationship which is shaped more out of the demands of the social set up than the mutual understanding, respect and the freedom to remain a blissful individual soul even after having merged into one another. The remarks of Jaya carry the pathos of a journey in a relationship which has obviously taxed her soul:

'I know you better than you know yourself,' I had once told Mohan. And I had meant it; 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. (75)

Deshpande very skillfully depicts the dull and monotonous life of a woman confined in the domestic zone as an ideal home maker who has to fulfill many roles expected of her and play them smoothly and without a voice of complaint and protest. The training begins very early in life so that by the time she has to perform, she doesn't cut a sorry figure. Her stage allows her freedom only to the extent she can please and entertain her audience—who will prefer to see her waiting. This waiting is what defined her very existence:

But for women the waiting game starts early in childhood. Wait until you get married. Wait until your husband comes. Wait until you go to your in-laws' home. Wait until you have kids. Yes, ever since I got married, I had done nothing but wait. Waiting for Mohan to come home, waiting for children to be born, for them to start school, waiting for them to come home, waiting for the milk, the servants, the lunch carrier man... (79)

Jaya's creative ability, in the beginning, gets the encouragement of her husband. But the problem is that this encouragement is also biased. She has to write in order to make him happy. It should be in her mind that her words reach into public domain 'without giving pain to the opposite sex.' (74) When she gets a prize for her story, it hurts Mohan's sentiments as he gets insecure and intolerant. She is no more an independent writer who has the authority to choose whatever she has to write:

I had known then that it hadn't mattered to Mohan that I had written a good story, a story about a couple, a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body. For Mohan it had mattered that people might think the couple was us, that the man was him. To Mohan, I had been no writer, only an exhibitionist. (144)

She is forced to write on the subjects that she hardly takes interest in. Her predicament resembles the predicament of many educated women who are compelled to curb their creative skills and freedom to express their heartfelt thoughts due to social and family pressures:

And for me, she had been the means through which I had shut the door firmly on all these women who had invaded my being, screaming for attention, women I had known I could not write about, because they might, it was just possible, resemble, Mohan's mother or aunt or my mother or aunt. (149)

That is the reason why her writings lack originality. She knows about the falsity of her expressions yet she feels helpless. Here, Shashi Deshpande seems to observe that sometimes women do not get appreciation for their services even when they work tirelessly. Any creation that seems to defame the family is considered a crime. Simon De Beauvoir rightly observes:

A husband regards none of his wife's good qualities as particularly meritorious. . . He fails to realize that his wife is no character from some pious and conventional treatise, but a real individual of flesh and blood. (492)

Deshpande seems to convey the fact that women writers have curbed themselves from telling the truth in giving greater importance to their roles as wives than to themselves as individuals. History has been witness to this injustice as Simon De Beauvoir suggests: 'The history of humanity is a history of systematic attempt to silence the female' (492).

Jaya always is a girl who looks for love, respect and freedom for which are missing in her married life. This is why she gets inclined towards Kamat who gives her attention and respect. She feels free in his company because he treats her as an equal and offers constructive criticism to what she writes. In him she finds a true companion that she misses in the personality of her husband. She says: 'It had been a revelation to me that two people, a man and woman, could talk this way, with this man I had not been a woman. I had been just myself, Jaya' (153). She cannot believe that

she can be so much of herself in any man's company. Deshpande chooses to give us a very realistic picture of Jaya's character. Her attraction towards Kamat is natural because he is the person who makes her behave as she wants to. But she cannot categorize this relationship as sometimes Kamat behaves like a father, and other times, like a lover. The author tries to suggest how the culturally constructed norms of society make people wear a mask pretending to be somebody that they are not rather than being truthful to themselves. Appearances are to be maintained without any question. This can be seen when Jaya behaves in a strange way on the death of Kamat. When she finds Kamat lying dead in his room she runs away instead of staying there. She doesn't want herself to be caught in a situation that can spoil her married life with Mohan. This behavior of Jaya is of that typical Indian wife who cannot step out of the boundary that marriage has set for her. The guilt and sorrow is there still she has no choice but to remain silent. This showcases how the conservative norms of the society, most of the times, crush an individual's freedom of expression and make one incapable of showing one's inner feelings.

It is observed that there are so many rules that are specifically applied to a woman in a marriage. She is morally bound to her husband only. But the rules change in case of a man in the same conjugal relationship. He has the advantage of freely mixing up with other women and even having extra marital affairs as he enjoys immense freedom both inside the household and outside it. But if a married woman simply tries to be friends with other men, she is looked down upon with contempt. Through the relationship between Kamat and Jaya, the author actually tries to encapsulate the very idea that healthy human relationships are to be promoted without any gender biases.

Jaya's self-realization suggests that women should be courageous enough to make choices and take decisions. They should not allow themselves to be held responsible for their suffering and victimization. Jaya's realization makes her believe that she has to move forward. She has to overcome all the boundaries and hurdles. In her interview with Aditi De, Deshpande comments, 'Many women are silenced by lack of time. If I admire anything in myself, it's only that I kept on.' This is the reason why she looks back at the problems and complexities related with her marital life. What she realizes is that all these seventeen years of married life, she had been Mohan's wife and Rahul's or Rati's mother. She had not been herself. But after this realization she is not ready to give up. She decides to move forward and develops hope. She expects that things can be better if one tries. She thinks that she can develop a better understanding with Mohan and can make him a true companion. She decides to reject the traditional silence of a

wife and emerges as a more confident woman who is ready to face all the challenges.

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