



Depiction of Women's Oppression in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract— This article examines Shashi Deshpande's poignant portrayal of the subtle oppression women experiences in her novel *That Long Silence (TLS)*. Through an in-depth analysis of the characters, narrative and plot, the researcher gives emphasis to how Shashi Deshpande skillfully exposes the societal structures that lead to gender inequality in Indian society. Women in the world are experiencing some sort of subtle oppression, either directly or indirectly, in the form of socio - cultural norms, old patriarchal values, conservative thoughts, religious rituals, traditional beliefs and so on. The women's subtle oppression can include the issues they used to face because of the emotional imbalance, financial instability, prohibition of education and domestic work in the kitchen. Through the female characters like Jaya, Mohan's mother, Jeeja, Manda and Nayana, the novelist Deshpande brings out the subtle suppression and oppression of society. These characters are willingly or unwillingly getting into the track and are unable to deviate or resist themselves from the ongoing path. They can take a pause but continue their journey until their deaths without any modification. The women are willing to liberate themselves from the shackles of the traditional roles which is imposed upon them. They are the victims of suppression that leads to everlasting depression in their life and there is no chance of deviation.

Keywords— *Oppression, depression, gender inequality, financial instability, old patriarchal values, societal structures & emotional imbalance.*



Shashi Deshpande through her novels gives a clarion call to the society by portraying the issues faced by women directly or indirectly. The subtle suppression or oppression makes the women to cut short their visions and hinders their growth in the modern society. In India, women are oppressed while getting married. Their income, freedom, individuality are insignificant to the narrow minded people in the society. Majority of women have endured this oppression for a very long time. They believe that their oppressed life is the only way of life carved for them.

In her novels, the protagonists, who belong to the modern generation, question such unrecognised

vulnerabilities. Her writings also influence the readers to comprehend the social bonds which subtly bind women to family values, cultural codes, religious rituals and patriarchal conventions.

In most Indian families, women are supposed to take care of the family, food, clothes, health and other needs by depending upon the husband. Arya Raval opines, "Even in the 21st century, women are still the target of gender discrimination in home-based activities. Many women leave their jobs and leadership role due to household and family duties." (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>) The husband is the breadwinner of the family and he can be a dutiful son,

dutiful father, dutiful husband and dutiful brother. But sometimes a wife cannot play the roles of a dutiful daughter and dutiful sister if she is married. The woman has to sacrifice a few roles in order to please her husband and her husband's family. In the Indian cultural context, the family's breadwinner is the man, who goes about his daily labour, earns and spends money to support his family. Low wages, wrongdoing, lack of promotion at work, unemployment and bad habits such as drinking, gambling and aimless loitering may be among the reasons why the husband fails to fulfil his responsibilities. That will have a substantial impact on the family.

The female members of the household will be busy in cooking, cleaning, organising the house and taking care of the entire family. If a family relies solely on the income of a spouse who has lost his job or is unable to continue working, this will destroy their happiness. The typical busy wife, Jaya mentions, "We seemed to be left with nothing but our bodies and after we had dealt with them we faced blankness. The nothingness of what had seemed a busy and full life was frightening." (*TLS*, p. 25.)

The traditions that have been followed by one generation can be easily passed on to the subsequent generation by the more experienced members of the family. They instruct the young women to take care of the domestic responsibilities and they are not permitted to allow their thoughts wander to different wants. It is also forbidden for her to think for herself or form an opinion. The woman should not react, express her view or ask questions to her husband. Sethuraman claims, "Jaya experiences the torture of loneliness and long silence when her hysterical laughter makes Mohan desert her." (*Critical Responses to Indian Writing in English: Essays in Honour of Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam*, p.174.) The women have to wait for the change to happen; until then, they have to suffer in silence. Jaya recalls the conversation she had with Ajji:

"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?"

I had neither any questions nor any retorts for Mohan now and yet there was no comfort. So many subjects were barred that the silence seemed heavy with uneasiness (*TLS*, p. 27.)

The more experienced family members can easily pass on the traditions upheld by one generation to the following generation. The young women are instructed to

assume responsibility for home tasks and are prohibited from indulging in divergent desires. She is not allowed to use her own judgement or make a decision. Women should refrain from expressing their opinions or posing inquiries to their husbands. The ladies are required to endure the current circumstances until the desired transformation occurs, during which they are compelled to maintain a state of silent suffering. Anita Singh rightly remarks, "...Jaya and variety of other female figures, in generations of women in her family (Jaya, her mother, her grandmother); among different classes of woman of the same class and generation (Jaya her cousin Kusum, her widowed neighbour Mukta), who have all trained in silence." (*Post - Independence Indian English Fiction*, pp. 126-127.)

Since early childhood, the vast majority of Indian women who manage households are also responsible for learning how to cook. They put in a lot of effort and sacrifice their own needs to care for their husbands, in-laws and children, yet they receive not much in return. It is important for married women to have the support of their husbands and the community surrounding them. Through her cooking, she is ensuring that everyone is well-fed and she used to wait for her husband. Jaya defines the state of the mother:

She gave them their dinner, even the older ones and then she cooked rice for him again, for he would not, he made it clear to her, eat what he called 'your children's disgusting leavings'. He wanted his rice fresh and hot, from a vessel that was untouched. She had just finished this second cooking and was waiting, hoping perhaps that he would not be too late, for it wouldn't do to let the food get cold and as for lighting the fire again, that was unthinkable. (*TLS*, p. 35.)

Jaya disliked Kusum as a child but when she was ill, mind disoriented and mentally sick, she plans to put her up in Dada flat, so that Jeeja, Mukta and Lata, the eldest can help Kusum. Kusum wants to go to home, to see all his children but Jaya knows that they don't need her and said "They are managing quite well without you." (*TLS*, p.21.). Kusum replied, "But I need them". So Jaya has written to Dilip, who had taken her away. Shashi Deshpande portrays the pitiable state of Kusum as, "She was of no use to anyone after she went crazy, nobody needed her." (*TLS*, p.22.)

Women in various parts of India like to give birth to a male babe. Some parents believe that their girl kid will be a burden for the rest of their lives. Gone are the days when women were considered a burden; now, thanks to adequate educational options for women, they can be self-

reliant. Nonetheless, many women are afraid of begetting a girl babe. Jaya observed Nayana, the lower class woman confidently says, "this time it is going to be a boy" (*TLS*, p. 27.), even though her husband, her brothers, her father – as wasters, good-for-nothing, drunkards. Jaya also probed regarding the reason for her preference to male children, to which she replied "Why give birth to a girl, behnji, who'll only suffer because of men all her life? Look at me! My mother loved me very much, she wanted so much for me... a house with electricity and water, shining brass vessels, a silver waist chain, silver anklets... and what have I got? No, no, behnji, better to have a son." (*TLS*, p. 28.)

Women should be treated with respect and concern. But the elders in the family proclaim that it is quite common in every house and advise the girl to adjust and behave accordingly and insist the girl to keep a control over her tongue. The women in the family tolerate the verbal and physical attack to a certain extent. They will eventually erupt because they are fed up with the husband's failure to change. Tara, wife of Rajaram sobs and how Jeeja, the elder consoles, " 'So many drunkards die', she cried, 'but this one won't. He'll torture us all to death instead.' Jeeja sternly shut her up, 'Stop that! Don't forget, he keeps the kumkum on your forehead. What is a woman without that?' " (*TLS*, p. 53.)

Jaya asked her husband to cook once, during her first month pregnancy, as the scent of oil and spices made her queasy. She recalls, "You want me to cook?" Mohan had smiled. I should have seen the connection then between Mohan's smile and the laughter of all those women and girls in aiji's house." (*TLS*, p. 81.)

Shashi Deshpande, through her minor characters, also depicts the difficulties that Indian women face in terms of their fragility. There are connections between the vulnerabilities in terms of financial resources, health, societal conditions and mental health. It causes the women to endure their misfortune in silence or to break down and weep. The women lack the autonomy which is necessary to make decisions independently. They must have enough freedom in making decisions in the family and express their views also. Addison quotes, "When Liberty is gone, Life grows insipid and has lost its relish." (*The Pocket Book of Quotations*, p.184.) Nayana, the woman who does menial jobs leads her life in tears and she explains her state:

My mother gave me the name Nayana because my eyes were very beautiful, she said. When I was born, she said, she saw those eyes first. She put kaajal in my eyes every day Now, behnji, I don't do it any more. What's the use? The kaajal will flow away with my tears. Thank God. my

mother didn't live to see my state. I've kept that kaajal box for my daughter. (*TLS*, p. 134.)

When females reach the age of marriage in the majority of South Indian communities, they are accompanied by their parents, siblings, close relatives or neighbours. If the girls are recruited for a job or higher education outside of their home city, they will be asked to remain in the hostel on a limited basis after ensuring a safe and secure environment or they will stay in the home of a relative. Even when going for shopping, to the cinema or temples, they will be escorted by friends. When it comes to marriage, if the parents discover a suitable partner with a good job and salary for their daughters, they are immediately forced to marry him. He will be an alien to their daughters and she will be required to comprehend, adapt to and accept his requirements. The girl will be completely uprooted from her parents' home and her new residence will be that of her husband. Even if she desires to visit her parents, siblings or hometown festivals, the girl must request permission from her husband and in-laws.

Manda can describe her day in dramatic detail. Manda, as a child accepts reality, life's hardships, lifestyle, insults and disappointments based on her grandmother's and mother's experiences. Jaya can predict the life of Manda as, "I saw her future in an instant - marriage, a drunkard for a husband, children, more children, poverty, ill health, cruelty, work, more work..." (*TLS*, p. 163.)

Nilima asked a question in English to Jaya as, "Where are you going, auntie?", "To the hospital, to see my father," Manda replied in Marathi. Jaya's earlier prophesy concerning Manda is shattered. She can predict now as, "Manda was going to school, she would be educated, she would not be like her grandmother." (*TLS*, p. 164.) Jaya understands both the human environment and the physical environment can be thought of as separate but interrelated systems. Therefore, the advancement of women is a good barometer of a nation's overall level of development.

Shakuntala Bharvani asserts, "Parents inculcated in their girls a certain duality, sometimes quite unconsciously: on the one hand an impulsive desire to be emancipated and liberated and on the other, an almost instinctive urge to be traditional and conservative." (*Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines: Critical Perspectives*, pp.104-105.) The daughters must embrace the customs of the husband's household. Even if they have a valid reason, the females are not in a position to reject their parents' proposals. Some of the parents are aware of the groom's behaviour prior to the wedding but they believe that he will alter his drinking, gambling and loitering habits. The elders believe that in order to assume responsibility, one

must be married. Jaya feels, "Mohan I'd said the name to myself after we got married, but it had tasted unfamiliar. The man too we were married, yet he was a stranger. Intimacy with him had seemed a grotesque indecency. Surely, I'd thought, it was not expected of me, not at once, anyway? We would achieve it gradually, by degrees or stages, I'd optimistically reassured myself." (TLS, p. 94.)

Parents tend to place a bigger importance on the upbringing of their sons than their daughters, because they believe that the male child will be the one to care for them during their dying days. Because of the institution of marriage, the daughters won't be able to help out their parents anymore, as they have to go and live with someone else's family. Even if the brothers are given advantages from childhood onward in terms of education, priorities and property, they are nevertheless responsible for taking care of their parents. However, they anticipate sisters such as Jaya to pay a visit to their mother, who is now a widow. Jaya affirms:

The hints fell most heavily on me, and from the corner I had been pushed into I wanted to cry out: *why does it have to be me?*

There was no point really in asking the question, for I knew the answer myself. It was simple - both Dada and Ravi had escaped, pinning me down to the position of responsibility. (TLS, p.104.)

Some of the girls in India are forced or convinced to accept the bridegroom finalized by the family members. Parents or the siblings from the family will be in a hurry to identify the life partner for their son or daughter as they attain the age of marriage, so that the responsibility will get over. Jaya understands:

Dada had wanted me off his hands; he had wanted to be free of his responsibility for a unmarried younger sister, so that he could go ahead with his own plans. After Appa's death, the Kakas had never let Dada forget his role as the man of the house. And so Dada had cleverly manoeuvred me into a position from which not marrying Mohan would have been childish, irresponsible and unfair to Dada. ('I know I'm only your brother, I know I have no real right to tell you what to do, if only Appa had been here...') (TLS, p. 93.)

Women themselves do not fully accept the idea that men and women are equal, despite this being a teaching from childhood. Jaya knows that her brother Dinakar will not return. Some males treat women equally in family and social matters, which is not acceptable to

women themselves. Vanitamami blames Dinakar for her wife's behaviour, despite the fact that she has given her wife ample privacy "Dinu has changed, hasn't he?" And then, 'It's his wife, of course. She tries to keep him and the children away from us. "Don't eat this and don't eat that," she kept telling the children when they were here. In English. As if we can't understand. And Dinu doesn't say a word to her. But the boy was always like that, he never quarrelled with anyone.'" (TLS, p.105.)

In Indian culture, the primary role that women are expected to play is that of homemakers. Their responsibilities are limited to the confines of a dwelling with four walls. In some communities, even if she is employed, a woman is never regarded as the primary breadwinner. Mansoor Ali states:

She [Shashi Deshpande] deals with the middle-class Indian woman who represents overwhelming majority of Indian woman and is struggling to adjust in it rather than get free from the traditional world. She has written of educated Indian woman, their conflict and predicaments against the background of contemporary India. While doing so, she has analyzed the socio-culture modes and values that have given Indian women their image and role towards themselves and the society. Shashi Deshpande's chief contribution consists of exploring the moral and psychic dilemmas repercussions of her woman characters along with her effort to cope with the challenges and achieve a new harmony of relationship. (*Changing Faces of New Woman: Indian Writing in English*, p. 175.)

The vast majority of Indian housewives from middle-class backgrounds constantly put their families' needs first, without sparing a thought for their own conveniences, meagre requirements, happiness or insecurities. Peter Barry opines "The marriage 'inexorably locks her into a social system which denies her autonomy.'" (*Beginning Theory*, p.137.) The only thing that matters is the family's well-being. However, they are frequently ignored, uncared for and their efforts go unrecognised. Jaya remembers:

The job I wanted to take, the baby I had wanted to adopt, the anti-price campaign I'd wanted to take part in.... But, even as I listed these to myself, it came to me that perhaps it had nothing to do with Mohan, the fact that I had not done these things, that I had left them alone. Perhaps I had not really cared enough about these things myself. Instead I said,

and my voice sounded sullen even to me,
I've done everything you wanted me to.
(*TLS*, p.120.)

Women will be seen as the embodiment of sacrifice by everyone in a society. However, men do not acknowledge or value the women who live in their houses. "Majority of the Indian society is a patriarchal society, where men hold a higher stature than a woman. Women are considered as the caretaker of the house and are confined within the premises of the house. The dependency of women on her husband and other family members result in the fear of rejection from the society if she raises her voice against such intolerance." (<https://lawbhoomi.com>)

Socio-cultural norms and beliefs pass down the responsibilities and duties of being an Indian housewife, mother or daughter from one generation to the next. They are able to recognise the gap and the contradiction in patriarchal beliefs due to the fact that they are modern and independent women. In order to avoid upsetting the feelings of the family members, they silently adhere to established beliefs without challenge. They are able to see everyone in the house but they get the distinct impression that no one understands them; so, they begin to lead an isolated existence by focusing on the housework. Jaya suffers, "I felt the same now. 'Cheating, cheating' I wanted to cry out, the way we had as children when we knew we were going to be defeated. But as if I'd been struck dumb, I could say nothing. I sat in my place, pinned to it by his anger, a monstrously huge spear that went through me, excruciatingly painful, yet leaving me cruelly conscious." (*TLS*, p.121.)

In Indian culture, the elders provide the bride with premarital counsel, assuming that it will serve as preparation for their future. The statements made by each and every person are unique but the objective is for the women to behave in a submissive manner and take on the part of a subordinate. Jaya recalls the maxim of Vanitamaami as, "A husband is like a Sheltering tree." (*TLS*, p. 137.) , whereas Ramukaka said, "Remember, Jaya, the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you." (*TLS*, p. 138.) Her Dada advised before she left Ambegaon, "Be good to Mohan, Jaya." (*TLS*, p. 138.) The elders believe they are preparing the bride for the marriage with their own knowledge but as the elders warned, this might turn into a threat and a panic state for them to bear in mind.

In India, certain prejudices are maintained by one community in order to gain dominance over another. It continues because people blindly follow one generation to the next. Women's place in the parental household,

whether married or not, they are always their parents' daughters. They are given the same consideration as the boy. However, in Indian culture, once a girl marries, her husband's home becomes her home. Her surname will be altered at her in-laws' residence. They lose their individuality, which they have had since birth and attempt to accept their new identity through her husband. Ramukaka showed Jaya the family tree during her visit to the town residence but she could only locate the names of the boys so she exclaimed as, "But Ramukaka, I'm not here!" (*TLS*, p. 143.) Ramukaka clarified as, "How can you be here? You don't belong to this family! You're married, you're now part of Mohan's family. You have no place here." (*TLS*, p. 143.) Mohan also accepted the fact as, "Of course, your Ramukaka is right. You belong to my family now!" (*TLS*, p. 143.)

Several notions and norms in the Indian cultural perspective appear to be insignificant. The majority of the women usually do not object to it since they do not want to disrupt the show or the flow of the practice. When Ramukaka classifies Jaya as a member of Mohan's family, she feels compelled to inquire as, ".....if I don't belong to this family, what about the Kakis and Ai? They married into this family, didn't they, why are they not here? And what about ajji, who single-handedly kept the family together, why isn't she here? But I had said nothing - neither to Ramukaka, nor to Mohan. (*TLS*, p. 143.) Women know some of the practices are meaningless to the context, but they, "had learnt it at last - no questions, no retorts. Only silence." (*TLS*, p. 143.)

The majority of lower class women's vulnerabilities include insults, disdain, financial instability, a lack of basic necessities and others. In the event that a patient from a lower social class is admitted to the hospital, that individual's standard of care will not be satisfactory. If it is a private hospital, even the first aid treatment will begin after they pay the money or else they should have some influence. Jeeja informs Jaya that Rajaram is in Sion Hospital and requests her to speak with the doctor. Jeeja continues by saying, "If you speak to the doctor there, they will look after him better, they will give him special care. Otherwise no one cares, no one is bothered about poor patients, they won't even tell us anything if we ask them. They bark at us as if we're dogs." (*TLS*, p. 160.)

Some of the women in India, blindly believe their husbands in their lives. They will depend upon their life partner completely as the husbands never allow them to experience travelling, studying and acquiring worldly knowledge. They know only their home and the religious places like temples, churches in and around the house.

They dance for the tune of the song sung by their husbands. Some of the husbands mould their wives into the image they have in their heads, either emotionally or by the assumed control they hold over in the patriarchal society. Jaya realizes, "Yes, it was all Mohan's fault. I had shaped myself so resolutely to his desires all these years, yet what was I left with now?" Nothing. Just emptiness and silence. (TLS, p. 144.) Rajeshwar Mittapalli claims the transformation of Jaya as, "She has indubitably gained the moral courage and necessary resourcefulness required for the purpose." (Studies in Indian Writing in English, p.66.)

Indian women, after engaging in married life, sacrifice their lives to protect their children, husbands and family members. Their husbands are the ones who decide whether she is going "to be, or not to be" (*Hamlet*: Act 3, Scene 1) in her own life. Women are expected to live according to the patriarchal world's design. They are expected to focus solely on men's pleasures. Mahatma Gandhi claims, "The world shall see it in all its wonder and glory when woman has secured an equal opportunity for herself with man and fully developed her powers of mutual aid and combination." (*Words of Wisdom*, p. 39.) They should have asked questions but they never did. Jaya, for instance, thinks, "I should have said it to Mohan then. Even if some of the details had been from our life, it had not been a relating of my experience, but a transmuting of it into something quite different. But I had not said this to Mohan. I had been ashamed." (TLS, p. 144.) It is nonsensical to ask the Indian women, the final lines of W. H. Auden's poem, 'The Unknown Citizen', "Was [s]he free?," Was [s]he happy? The question is absurd." (*Five Centuries of Poetry*, p. 288.)

CONCLUSION

Shashi Deshpande consistently captures the plight and frailties of women from all social classes but the major focus is on the middle class and the lower class of society. The wives need their husbands in lower-class society, even if the husbands are wanderers, drunkards or unemployed. They are helpless to alter either their plight or the actions and routines of their husband. Losing their husbands makes them socially vulnerable and emotionally weak in the lives of women like Nayana, Jeeja, Nilima and Mukta. Some of the traditions, cultures and beliefs that have been practised in India for so long need to be updated. They are outdated and not relevant to the present era. Jaya, the 'modern woman' who follows partly the traditional rules and questions the same, should not be branded a rebel. The mother of the family is the one who passes on the family's customs and traditions to subsequent generations. She is

aware that it will be difficult and exhausting to carry out, sustain or continue traditional practices. Women are the primary contributors to their own plight, ultimately leading to their downfall. They have the chance to succeed but cultural taboos and expectations prevent them from doing so. Even the subtle suppression can be resolved but only if the women are educated and work for their livelihood. They have to be independent enough to lead a life in the absence of their husbands. Hence Shashi Deshpande through this novel conveys her message that women on any account should not depend upon men but be self-reliant in every aspect. She gives a clarion call to Indian women, "Awake, Arise, and Anodize."

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