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Gender Inequality and Domestic Environment in *That Long Silence* by
Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract

This study analyzes the depiction of gender inequality in residential settings in *That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande. *That Long Silence* is a profound examination of the internal experiences of an Indian middle-class woman contending with the limitations imposed by patriarchy. The novel focuses on Jaya, a wife and mother compelled to engage in introspection amid a marital crisis. Deshpande's narrative reveals that household environment, typically viewed as secure and loving, frequently transform into arenas of oppression, silence, and gender inequity. The novel attacks entrenched patriarchal ideas that restrict women to the domestic sphere, depriving them of autonomy and agency. The analysis examines the novel's critique of patriarchal systems ingrained in middle-class Indian households, highlighting domesticity as a locus of both subjugation and possible defiance. The novel illustrates the suppression of women and their quest for identity through the psychological journey of the protagonist, Jaya. This paper employs feminist literary theory to assert that Deshpande reconceptualizes the domestic sphere as a disputed domain where gender roles are negotiated and contested.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Domestic Environment, Feminism, That Long Silence, Shashi Deshpande.

Introduction

Indian English literature has consistently explored topics of gender, identity, and socioeconomic stratification. Shashi Deshpande holds a prominent position among modern female authors for her authentic depiction of women's experiences within patriarchal structures. Her novel *That Long Silence* (1988) explores the internal struggles of the protagonist, Jaya, who is a middle-class housewife who faces by her repressed personality amid a marital crisis. The domestic world,

conventionally romanticized as a realm of solace and safety, is scrutinized in the novel as a locus of gender disparity. Feminist critics Beauvoir and Millett, contend that the domestic sphere frequently perpetuates patriarchal dominance by confining women to limited duties. This study examines how Deshpande reveals these inequities and portrays the domestic sphere as simultaneously oppressive and transformative.

This research adopts fundamental principles from feminist literary criticism, specifically the writings of Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir (1949) contends that women are socially created as the "Other," relegated to immanence within domestic responsibilities. Likewise, Millett (1970), in *Sexual Politics*, emphasizes the functioning of patriarchy inside quotidian institutions, such as the home. The notion of "domestic space" is influenced by gender studies, which perceive the house not solely as a physical site but as a socio-cultural construct that governs behavior and perpetuates power structures. In this backdrop, Jaya's residence epitomizes a microcosm of patriarchal society.

In *That Long Silence*, the home is shown as a constructive setting that curtails Jaya's autonomy. Her existence centers on meeting the expectations of her husband Mohan and upholding the illusion of an ideal family. The household environment mandates conformity, allowing minimal scope for uniqueness. Jaya contemplates: "A husband can serve as a protective tree; nevertheless, at times, he may also cast a shadow that obscures your existence" (). This metaphor encapsulates the duality of domesticity - providing security while concurrently exerting control. The mansion transforms into a metaphorical prison that stifles Jaya's aspirations and goals. Critics like Sharma (2005) assert that Deshpande depicts the middle-class home as an environment where women absorb patriarchy. Jaya's acceptance of her status exemplifies the perpetuation of gender inequity through both external influences and internal training.

In *That Long Silence*, is depicted not as a sanctuary but as a constrictive space that perpetuates conventional gender norms. Jaya's existence is centered on her responsibilities as a spouse and parent, with less opportunity for personal development or self-expression. The domestic realm becomes into a metaphorical confinement, wherein her identity is molded and constrained by society norms. Deshpande emphasizes that women are socialized to embrace domesticity as their principal role. Jaya internalizes this conviction, relinquishing her aspirations as a writer to align with her husband Mohan's expectations. The house consequently transforms into an environment that stifles individuality, thereby perpetuating gender inequality.

Silence is essential to the novel's examination of gender inequity. Jaya's prolonged silence symbolizes the institutional repression of women's voices in intimate environments. Mohan, her husband, exemplifies conventional authority, demanding uncritical compliance and emotional suppression. The family environment perpetuates this silence by inhibiting candid discourse. Jaya acquires the skill to evade conflict and repress her thoughts to preserve domestic harmony. This quiet serves as a survival instinct; however, it simultaneously sustains inequity by obstructing rebellion. She evades conflict to preserve marital harmony, exemplifying the archetype of the subservient wife.

Shashi Deshpande has articulated in interviews that women are frequently instructed to prioritize familial obligations above self-expression. This conditioning leads to emotional suppression and an erosion of identity. Jaya's epiphany is pivotal: "I had finally comprehended it no inquiries, no responses, merely silence." This silence transcends the personal realm and is inherently political, illustrating the extensive marginalization of women. Feminist scholars contend that breaking silence constitutes the initial step toward empowerment (Spivak, 1988). In this context, Jaya's life serves as an act of defiance.

The inflexible gender roles in the domestic realm precipitate Jaya's identity dilemma. Prior to marriage, she harbored ambitions of being a writer; yet, post-marriage, she stifles her creative

expression to conform to conventional norms. Mohan favors her composition of light, non-confrontational works, so perpetuating the notion that women's creativity should adhere to socially accepted limits. This limitation embodies what Millett characterizes as the regulation of female expression inside patriarchal structures. Jaya's plight exemplifies the tension between individualism and conformity. She inquires: "What is my identity?" The inquiry remains unresolved. This existential problem highlights the psychological effects of gender inequality, wherein women are deprived of a secure identity beyond their household responsibilities.

Notwithstanding its repressive character, the domestic environment in *That Long Silence* also serves as a locus for introspection and metamorphosis. Jaya's introspection allows her to acknowledge the injustices she has suffered. Her choice to speak out signifies a pivotal moment: "I must communicate and listen; I must eliminate the silence that exists between us ()" This moment represents a transition from passivity to agency. Deshpande posits that resistance originates within the domestic realm, contesting the fundamental mechanisms that perpetuate inequality. Scholars such as Rao (2010) contend that "Deshpande's heroes pursue progressive development rather than radical insurrection. Jaya's journey exemplifies a pragmatic approach to feminism grounded in self-awareness and negotiation rather than conflict. The strict delineation of gender roles in the household precipitates Jaya's identity dilemma. She grapples with reconciling her role as a compliant spouse with her aspiration for autonomy and self-expression. Her writing, previously a source of identity, is forsaken in favor of socially acceptable narratives that conform to patriarchal standards.

Deshpande illustrates how household environments impose expectations that diminish women to their relationship identities - wife, mother, daughter-in-law - obliterating their individuality. Jaya's journey exemplifies the overarching experience of numerous women navigating the dichotomy between tradition and individuality. Jaya's self-reflection transforms into an act of defiance, enabling her to confront her silence and acknowledge the injustices she has faced. At the conclusion of the novel, Jaya decides to shatter her silence and restore her voice. This transition denotes a metamorphosis of the household environment - from a locus of subjugation to a realm where transformation can commence. Deshpande posits that genuine empowerment commences with self-awareness and the audacity to articulate one's thoughts.

Conclusion

That Long Silence provides a detailed examination of gender disparity within residential environments. Shashi Deshpande elucidates how the home, frequently romanticized as a sanctuary, may serve as an instrument of control that constrains women's autonomy and identity. The story underscores the psychological and emotional ramifications of silence and conformity via Jaya's journey. Simultaneously, Deshpande articulates the potential for transformation, underscoring the significance of voice, self-actualization, and defiance. The domestic environment, despite its harsh nature, serves as a catalyst for transformation. The novel advocates for a reformation of gender roles and a reimagining of the home as a domain of equality and empowerment. Deshpande ultimately advocates for a redefining of domestic spaces as conditions that foster equality, autonomy, and self-expression.

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