

## **Marginalized Voice And Gender Issues In Shashi Deshpande's 'That Long Silence'**

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### **Abstract:**

The word 'Gender' gained prominence with the emergence of feminist and many women's movements in the world. Gender and feminist issues reached the forefront due to some fundamental inequalities that have existed in the society since times immemorial. The new discipline of gender theory raised questions about the patriarchal society and the various connotations of the word 'gender'. This paper intends to observe the glorification of masculinity and marginalization of femininity in India. Indian family patterns polarize the roles of a male and a female. The paper explores the novel of Shashi Deshpande i.e 'That long silence' which tries to erase the stereotypes of this claustrophobic society. Her fiction depicts the conflict between tradition and modernity and how the protagonist Jaya goes through a process of re discovering herself in this complex social world where she concerns herself with the predicament of her role as a mother, wife, daughter and a human being as juxtaposed to the imperialistic attitude of her husband.

Key Words: Marginalization, gender issues, inequalities, patriarchy, re-discovery, identity, self-realizations, stereotypes, transformation.

### **Objectives:**

1. To highlight the fundamental inequalities that has existed in the society.
2. To explore the conflict between tradition and modernity in 'That long silence'.
3. To observe the Glorification of masculinity and marginalization of femininity in India.

## **Introduction:**

The word 'gender' gained prominence with the emergence of women's movement and feminist theory in the West. Gender is a dynamic phenomenon and it changes in accordance to the role that one performs in the society. Men or women acquire a gender status after repeated acts of performances. Masculinity and femininity are considered as two separate constructs of gender. Under the premises of gender and feminist theories, issues were raised about the fundamental differences and inequalities that persisted in the patriarchal society. In this set up one gender resumed more power and became more superior to the other. This newly emerged discipline of gender studies invoked questions of power of male dominated society over the marginalized world of women.

In any society, the social positions, be it masculine or feminine has certain expectations programmed in such a peculiar manner that trains them to communicate with others conventionally. Our behavior, cognitions, emotions are always in relation to the notion of gender. The roles employed by males and females assist in differentiating their identities. According to Butler, 'Gender is a pattern of behavior, practices and attitudes that are dynamic and keep changing according to times. Gender is not a social construct but a performance or a disguise we put on.' Men and women formulate their identities by their repeat performances. They are bound by their own stereotypes. Reinforcing gender roles by associating attributes and characteristics to each gender restricts one's identity. A common gender role stereotype for instance is that boys are autonomous as compared to girls. The image of femininity has been constructed since ages reflecting gentleness, sensitivity, care, empathy, submissiveness etc. But the concept of femininity redefined itself during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, far beyond the archetypal ideals and emerged distinctively from the practical realm. What was considered as subordinate earlier started penetrating the mainstream society. The increased realization in people about sex and gender blurred the stereotypes between male and female. Coltrane redefines Gender in Gender and Families as:

'Gender is neither sex organs nor sex acts, but the socially constructed ideal of what it means to be a woman or man. Gender exists outside of us in our culture, but also resides inside of us, and our everyday activities provide opportunities for expressing, and perhaps transforming, the meaning of gender'.

A focus on its relevance in India, femininity had a complex existence. Whenever a woman was spoken of, it was always in relation to man. She was presented as a wife, mother, and daughter-but never as a woman. Her entire life was idealized as a life of devotion, sacrifice and service. According to Manu,

‘A wife must ever remain devoted to her husband and always please him while he is alive. After his death she should not think of any other man’. ( qtd in Arora 11)

Shashi Deshpande, one of the most prolific Indian writers, who has always represented middle class Indian women, concerns her writings with the challenges she faces in this patriarchal society. Deshpande writes about the marginalized state of women and their failures in the rapidly changing socio-economic background of India. Her fictions revolve around the women’s battle between tradition and modernity.

Shashi Deshpande depicts a society of many complex relationships. In this society men and women of different age groups, classes and gendered roles live together. The commonness of all these people is mistrust, uneasiness and a feeling of emptiness of values especially women. Women are caught in the course of redefining and rediscovering their own roles, positions and relationships within their claustrophobic domain. The male-oriented society inculcates in girls and defines their roles as a daughter, wife and mother. It brings in them a great sensitivity about her roles and future status in the society.

The novel ‘That long silence’ by Shashi Deshpande is a quest for gender specific self-definition of women, who are educated and progressive but cannot leave behind their background and forget their upbringing. Critics like Nilufer.E. Bharucha opines about gender inequality in the text of Deshpande as –“Her text provides the most detailed and competent record of gender injustice in contemporary India”.

In the Indian society the supreme woman has been embodied by Sita who is depicted in The Ramayana for the complete dedication to her husband. This image of woman has emerged deep in the Indian psyche and women deliberately or involuntarily have molded themselves to conform to this image. It is only since the past three decades due to the spread of education and western thought, women of India are evolving from their conventional roles of ‘wife and mother’ to more independent human beings who are capable of much more than just fitting into their traditional images.

A change in the thought process in the Indian women and the gender roles she assumed underwent a drastic shift in the writings of post independence era. Deshpande in particular has dealt with the changing ethos of womanhood and all her women protagonists occupy the centre stage.

Jaya, the protagonist, in Deshpande's 'That Long Silence' conforms to the 'Sita' imafe initially and is modest, subservient and docile. She is the typical house-wife who follows her husband like a shadow. The decision of her husband Mohan about leaving his Churchgate flat and shift to a small shabby flat at Dadar makes Jaya articulate: 'I remember how that he had assumed, I would accompany him taken for granted my approval of his plans. So was I, Sita following her husband to exile, Savithri dogging death to reclaim her husband...'

It is here that Jaya starts rediscovering herself. She reflects upon her life and finds out that the life she had been living so far was not hers but someone else's. She recollected how she had to give up the name 'Jaya' given by her father during her birth and change it to 'Suhasini' – a name given by her husband. Her entire life she had assumed the role of a soft, smiling, placid, nurturing mother and a wife. Deshpande presents this facet of a woman's life which intensely enlightens how the existence of a woman is confined to the gender norms of a close-minded society.

Jaya's narrative shifts to her mother-in-law, a woman of a different generation. The mother in law's long silence about her husband's disgusting attitude and insensitivity of the son displays a continued conformity into the gender roles of the patriarchal society. Women constantly bear the exploitation and sub ordination of their own needs to those of her family.

Another important woman in this novel is Mukta, a widow, toiling between her old mother and Neelima, her teenage daughter. Though economically independent and highly proficient, yet unable to overcome the superstitions. However she wants her daughter to be free from such superstitions and conventions.

Jaya is basically modern but rooted in tradition. Her innate sensitivity revolts against the attempts to cram herself into the ideological mould of a conventional wife. To conform to the ideals of a wife and a mother, she suppresses her emotional needs. Marriage and home does not give her any autonomy because Mohan takes up the role of a protector, provider without trying to understand her nature of silence. Their marital life turns shaky and gloomy due to the differences in their attitude. Quoting a poem by Linda Pastan,

**“My husband gives me an A  
For last night’s supper,  
An incomplete for my ironing  
A B plus in bed.  
My son says I am average,  
An average Mother, but if  
I put my mind to it  
I could improve.  
My daughter believes  
In Pass/Fail, and tells me  
I pass. Wait ‘till they learn  
I’m dropping out.”**

Jaya’s attitude also seems to be similar. Her decision to give up ‘Seetha’, the column she was writing symbolizes her longingness to give up her traditional role –model wife. When Jaya searches through herself she finds “the woman who had once lived. Mohan’s wife, Rahul’s and Rati’s mother. Not Myself”.

### **Conclusion:**

Shashi Deshpande makes a deliberate focus on the marginalized voice of the Indian middle class women. She does not completely blame a man for subjugation of woman. It is the gender roles which confines a woman in the maze called as male-dominated society. Women may be weak but they have the will power to rise up like a phoenix out of its own ashes. Jaya’s vigor and courage makes her question the oppression of society, religion and culture but she refrains herself from taking the radical path suggested by Western feminists. Women rather prefer their own paths in seeking human happiness and emerging victorious. She brings harmony, yet achieves individuation and self-identity without changing the culture and tradition of the society.

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