

SILENCE AND SUPPRESSION: FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of patriarchal marriage on women's freedom through a feminist lens, with particular reference to That Long Silence by Shashi Deshpande. The novel portrays the life of Jaya, a middle-class woman whose identity is gradually shaped and constrained by the expectations of marriage. It argues that patriarchal marriage functions as a limiting structure, suppressing women's voices, autonomy, and individuality. Jaya's prolonged silence becomes a symbol of the emotional and psychological oppression experienced by women within marital relationships. Conditioned to be submissive and accommodating, she internalizes societal norms that prioritize male authority, resulting in a loss of self-expression and identity. The study highlights how marriage, rather than offering companionship, often enforces conformity and restricts women's freedom. Through a critical analysis of Jaya's experiences, it reveals the mechanisms through which patriarchal values operate within domestic spaces, reinforcing gender inequality. Finally, the paper emphasizes the necessity of breaking this silence as an act of resistance and self-realization, advocating for women's autonomy and self-expression as essential steps toward reclaiming freedom both within and beyond the institution of marriage.

KEYWORDS: Patriarchal Marriage, Women's Freedom, Feminist Lens, Limiting Structure, Suppressing Women's Voices.

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Introduction

Marriage has traditionally been regarded as a sacred and essential institution, often associated with stability, companionship, and social order. However, from a feminist perspective, marriage within a patriarchal framework is critically examined as a structure that can limit women's freedom and individuality. Feminist theorists argue that such a system is rarely based on equality; instead, it operates through power dynamics that place women in subordinate positions, restricting their autonomy, voice, and self-expression. In Indian society, patriarchal values are deeply embedded in cultural and social practices, shaping the roles and expectations assigned to women within marriage. Women are often conditioned to be obedient, self-sacrificing, and accommodating, while their personal desires and identities are suppressed. Consequently, marriage becomes not merely a personal relationship but a social institution that reinforces gender inequality and curtails women's independence.

This paper explores these concerns through a feminist reading of *That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande. The novel portrays the life of Jaya, a middle-class woman who struggles with silence, identity, and self-expression within her marriage. Her experiences reflect the emotional and psychological constraints imposed by patriarchal expectations, illustrating how women internalize these norms and gradually lose their sense of self.

Research Objectives

- To examine the impact of patriarchal marriage on women's identity and autonomy
- To explore the psychological effects of patriarchal oppression
- To analyze the role of silence as a tool of both compliance and conflict
- To study the constraints on women's creative and personal expression
- To highlight feminist perspectives on resistance and self-realization

Patriarchal Marriage and the Silencing of Women's Identity

In *That Long Silence*, patriarchal marriage functions as a powerful social institution that gradually suppresses women's identity, independence, and self-expression. Through the character of Jaya, Shashi Deshpande illustrates how deeply internalized norms and expectations shape a woman's life—not through direct coercion, but through subtle, continuous conditioning. Jaya enters marriage as an educated and thoughtful woman, with a strong sense of individuality, particularly reflected in her identity as a writer. However, once she becomes part of a patriarchal marital structure, her role is redefined according to traditional expectations. She is expected to be the ideal wife—obedient, accommodating, and silent. The constant

pressure to adjust in order to maintain a “happy family” gradually silences her and erodes her sense of self. These expectations are rarely enforced explicitly; they are normalized within society, making resistance both difficult and almost imperceptible.

One of the most significant consequences of this system is the gradual loss of Jaya’s voice. Her silence becomes both a learned behavior and a survival strategy. She avoids expressing her true thoughts and emotions, fearing that honesty might disrupt marital harmony. Over time, this silence is internalized, leading to emotional suppression and profound isolation. As a result, Jaya no longer communicates her desires or frustrations, resulting in a fragmented sense of self.

From Compliance to Conflict: Jaya’s Psychological Struggle Under Patriarchy

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya’s psychological journey vividly illustrates the deep and often invisible effects of patriarchal marriage on women. At the outset, she appears compliant, adjusting her behavior to fit the expectations of an ideal wife-obedient, accommodating, and silent. This compliance is not merely a personal choice; it is shaped by societal norms and traditional marital rules that define a woman’s role as subservient and self-effacing. Gradually, these expectations compel Jaya to suppress her individuality, desires, and voice, creating a persistent inner tension between her authentic self and the role she is expected to perform.

Jaya’s identity as a writer becomes a central site of this conflict. Writing, which once allowed her to articulate her thoughts, feelings, and worldview, is restricted under the scrutiny of her husband, Mohan. He discourages her from producing work that challenges societal norms or expresses strong personal opinions. This denial of creative freedom intensifies her psychological struggle. She begins to censor herself, doubting the value of her voice and questioning her own abilities. What was once an act of self-expression transforms into silent submission, symbolizing the erosion of both her professional and personal identity. The internal conflict deepens as Jaya navigates the expectations of domestic life. She continually adjusts her behavior to maintain household harmony, prioritizing her husband’s needs above her own. These repeated compromises lead to emotional suppression, anxiety, and a profound sense of invisibility. Her silence, initially a survival mechanism, evolves into an emblem of her lost autonomy. Over time, the cumulative effect of marital expectations and patriarchal norms leaves her isolated, fragmented, and constrained. Thus, Jaya’s psychological struggle in *That Long Silence* exemplifies the negative impact of patriarchal marriage on women. Deshpande’s novel

demonstrates how marriage, as a social institution, can suppress self-expression, undermine individuality, and erode a woman's sense of self, highlighting its function as a limiting and oppressive structure.

Internalization of Patriarchal Values

Jaya's oppression in *That Long Silence* is most powerfully sustained through the internalization of patriarchal values, whereby societal norms become part of her own thinking and behavior. Rather than being controlled solely by external authority, Jaya begins to regulate herself according to the expectations of an ideal wife-silent, obedient, and self-sacrificing. From childhood, Jaya is conditioned to believe that a woman's primary role is to maintain family harmony. These values appear natural to her, rather than imposed. Consequently, in marriage, she does not openly resist Mohan's expectations but willingly conforms, believing that silence and adjustment are virtues. This illustrates how patriarchy operates subtly-shaping a woman's mindset rather than relying solely on direct coercion.

This internalization generates profound psychological conflict. Jaya harbors an inner desire for self-expression, particularly through writing, yet she suppresses it because she considers her role as a wife paramount. When Mohan disapproves of her bold or critical writing, she does not challenge him; instead, she begins to doubt herself and withdraw. Her silence, therefore, is not merely imposed-it is self-imposed, rooted in deeply learned beliefs.

Furthermore, Jaya evaluates her worth through patriarchal standards. She prioritizes her husband's needs, avoids confrontation, and often blames herself for marital tensions. This demonstrates how deeply these values are embedded within her consciousness. Even when dissatisfied, she cannot fully challenge the system, as it has shaped her identity and perception of self. Thus, internalized patriarchy functions as a psychological mechanism of control, resulting in self-censorship, emotional suppression, and the erosion of identity. Jaya's struggle is not only against her husband or society but also against her own conditioned mind, which reinforces her silence and perpetuates her oppression.

Silence as a Tool of Oppression

In *That Long Silence*, silence emerges as a central motif, representing both compliance and conflict. Jaya's silence is not merely the absence of speech; it reflects the societal pressures and patriarchal norms that constrain her self-expression. From childhood, she is taught that a "good" woman endures hardship without complaint. This belief is reinforced within her marriage, where speaking out is often equated with defiance or rebellion. Consequently, Jaya suppresses her thoughts, emotions, and personal

aspirations, conforming to the expectations of an obedient and self-effacing wife. Yet, this imposed silence generates profound inner turmoil. Her inability to articulate her feelings leads to frustration, alienation, and a fragmented sense of self. In this way, silence functions paradoxically: it serves as a survival strategy to navigate a restrictive social environment, while simultaneously becoming a source of psychological suffering and repression.

Research Findings

- Patriarchal Marriage as a Restrictive Institution
- Silence as Both Compliance and Conflict
- Internalization of Patriarchal Values
- Psychological and Emotional Impact

Conclusion

In *That Long Silence*, patriarchal marriage emerges as a deeply entrenched social institution that systematically restricts women's freedom, identity, and self-expression. Through the character of Jaya, Shashi Deshpande demonstrates how traditional norms and marital expectations function not merely as external constraints but also at a psychological level, shaping a woman's thoughts, behavior, and sense of self. Within this system, women are compelled to adopt silence, obedience, and self-sacrifice as virtues, normalizing their subordination and limiting their autonomy. Jaya's experiences illustrate that the impact of these norms is both gradual and profound. Her transformation from an independent, expressive individual into a silent, self-doubting woman reflects how deeply internalized patriarchy erodes identity. Her inability to assert her voice—particularly as a writer—underscores the extent to which creative and personal freedoms are curtailed. The denial of self-expression is not merely a social limitation but a psychological burden, resulting in emotional conflict, isolation, and fragmentation of self.

Thus, *That Long Silence* offers a critical feminist perspective on marriage, portraying it as an institution that perpetuates gender inequality and psychological suppression. By centring on Jaya's inner struggle, the novel emphasizes the urgent need to question and challenge these deeply rooted norms, advocating for the restoration of women's autonomy, identity, and voice.

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