



# UNVEILING THE LAYERS: SOCIAL MARGINALISATION OF JAYA AND OTHERS IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THAT LONG SILENCE*

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**Abstract:** Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* artfully unravels the intricate layers of social marginalization experienced by the central protagonist, Jaya, and other characters within the narrative. The methodology employed in this study is a textual analysis of the novel using the feminist theory framework, shedding light on the pervasive gender-based inequalities that shape the characters' lives. Through the lens of feminist analysis, Deshpande intricately examines the societal constraints and patriarchal norms that subject Jaya to multifaceted forms of marginalization. Through a tapestry of interconnected characters, the author portrays the ripple effects of societal biases, emphasizing the collective impact on marginalized groups. The narrative unfolds as a heartfelt reflection on the constraints imposed by societal norms and the toll they take on individual agency and fulfilment. Feminist theory serves as a powerful analytical framework, allowing the narrative to navigate the complexities of Jaya's experiences within the broader context of women's struggles for agency and recognition. Deshpande's narrative not only captures the external manifestations of gender-based marginalization but also delves into the internalized struggles and psychological ramifications for women like Jaya. *That Long Silence* stands as a reflective mirror, compelling readers to confront the reality of women in society. This study contributes to the understanding of social marginalization as portrayed in Deshpande's work.

**Keywords:** Social Marginalization; Patriarchal Norms; Gendered-based Inequality; Societal Expectations; Women's Struggle.

## Introduction:

Marginalization is a social phenomenon in which particular individuals or groups are marginalized to the peripheries of society, resulting in their exclusion, constrained access to resources, and diminished opportunities. This can occur due to various factors such as discrimination, prejudice, socioeconomic status, gender, race, ethnicity, or other factors that lead to the unequal distribution of power and resources within a community or society. Marginalized individuals or groups may face barriers that hinder their full participation in the social, economic, and political aspects of life, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and inequality. One such instance of marginalisation is the marginalisation of women. The marginalisation of women encompasses the systematic societal, economic and political marginalisation or disadvantage experienced by women relative to men. This widespread issue is rooted in ingrained gender prejudices and stereotypes, which constrain women's opportunities and ability to access resources. Over time, women have endured unequal treatment, resulting in discrepancies in areas such as education, employment, and decision-making authority. Marginalisation has been described as an intricate system of relegating particular human segments to the lowermost or peripheral fringes of society.

In general, the term marginalisation refers to the exclusion of individuals perceived as undesirable or lacking useful features from a group or community, often referred to as marginalised agencies, which limits their opportunities and survival methods, thereby affecting their safety and integration within the group.

Social marginality is defined as being outside the scope of social activity or social reproduction, according to Peter Leonard's book *Personality and Ideology*:

"Marginalized individuals lack sufficient access to opportunities, which in turn diminishes their self-confidence and self-esteem and fosters a sense of negativity, ultimately culminating in feelings of alienation."

Across societies, various forms of marginalisation are influenced by economic, historical, societal, judicial and spiritual factors. Often affects women, the most vulnerable and marginalised groups. Gender inequality manifests itself in the manner of exclusion

from certain jobs, inclusion in others, and overall marginalisation in compared to men, which is evident in a variety of countries and cultures. Women from lower classes, castes, lower literacy levels, and economically disadvantaged regions face distinct levels of marginalisation compared with their more privileged counterparts.

## Women and Society in India

What is the role of women in Indian society? A second-class citizen in a male-dominated society. Over the centuries, Indian society has been male-dominated. Women in this society are treated as a lower class because of their gender and biological construction. At some point in the past, women experienced spiritual dogma, inequality, and masculinity because of patriarchal ideology. Women in Indian society have been marginalised because of various customs and beliefs. The Indian lifestyle, where women are portrayed as precious goddesses, views women as inferior members of the community. Women are the suppressed half of humanity. The roots of their servitude lay within the narrow circle of domestic chores that a person-ruled society has condemned. This dominance and suppression cut her off from the outside world. Consequently, there is a need for a feminist movement.

Feminism is a broad term that refers to a variety of political, cultural, and economic movements that work to provide women with equal legal protection and rights. Rooted in political, cultural, and sociological theories, feminism addresses gender-related issues and advocates gender equality. It is both a theoretical framework and a proactive movement campaigning for women's rights and interests. Scholars often categorize the historical development of feminism into three waves.

The first wave unfolded during the 19th and early 20th centuries, primarily focuses on women's suffrage movements. This phase was principally concerned with securing women's right to vote, a pivotal step towards gender equality and political representation. The second wave emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, was characterized by the women's liberation movement. This wave expanded its scope beyond suffrage and advocated for legal and social rights for women. Issues such as reproductive rights, workplace discrimination, and societal expectations became central to the discourse during this era. The third wave of feminism started in the 1990s, representing both a continuation of and a response to the perceived shortcomings of the second wave.

Feminist theory, a product of these feminist movements, serves as an analytical framework for understanding and challenging existing power structures, societal norms, and gender roles. This study delves into issues such as patriarchy, sexism, and gender inequality, offering insights into how these dynamics impact individuals and society at large.

## Social Marginalisation of Jaya and Others

Shashi Deshpande is a well-known figure in Indian literature, particularly among contemporary women writers in English. She started gaining recognition in the 1970s, carving out her place among Indian women novelists. Deshpande is notable for depicting educated middle-class Indian women exposed to liberal Western ideas. However, her greatness lies in showcasing how these women struggle with traditional male-dominated thoughts ingrained in patriarchal society. Her novels delve into the challenges, frustrations, and enduring silence that characterise the lives of these women in an authentic Indian context.

In Shashi Deshpande's books, such as, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), and *That Long Silence* (1988), she talks about how women often feel excluded or not as important. In these stories, she explores things such as treating women unfairly, keeping them under control, and following traditional ideas where men are more powerful. In India, women are often expected to be excellent mothers, obedient to their parents, and be submissive to their husbands. Women play important roles in society from the time they are born until they die. Even if a woman does everything well, she might still be seen as weak because men usually have more power. Society thinks of women as needing protection from their fathers, husbands, or sons all their lives. Sadly, even in modern times, men still mistreat women. The most common and lasting type of unfairness is treating women and girls differently, including violent acts based on gender, economic unfairness, and harmful traditions.

*That Long Silence* won the "Kendriya Sahitya Academy Award" in 1990. In my perception of social marginalisation in the novel, Jaya and other characters experience a profound impact on their lives due to societal norms and expectations. Jaya, as the protagonist, faces subtle yet pervasive discrimination as a woman navigating traditional gender roles. Other characters (Kusum, Jaya's mother-in-law, Vimla, and Jeeja) also struggle with one or other forms of social marginalisation.

## Jaya

In the novel, Jaya is the principal and sturdy protagonist. Jaya is raised with care and contentment, but her genuine distress begins during her period of matrimony. Sadly, her family does not consider Jaya's opinion or her likes and dislikes regarding choosing a life partner. Even though she was raised to be modern, well-educated, and independent, she does not have the freedom to choose her spouse. It seems that her parents are educating her solely for the purpose of marrying her to well-settled groom. Her brother decides to marry her to Mohan without considering what Jaya wants; everyone is expects a positive reaction from her. Jaya's grandmother also restricts her, thinking that women cannot make decisions about their own lives.

Her grandmother says,

“Look at you—for everything a question, for everything a retort. What kind of husband would be at ease with that?” (Deshpande 1989, 27).

After marriage, Jaya is not happy with Mohan because he sees her as an object. Her father named her Jaya, a symbol of victory; however, after marriage, Mohan changed her name to ‘Suhashini’, representing a submissive, lovely, passive girl and devoted wife. Despite being capable of being a writer, Jaya’s married life forces her into a traditional housewife role. She experiences a sense of regret. She says:

“I can’t cope, I can’t manage, I can’t go on... Is this all I have?” (Deshpande 1989, 70).

Jaya could not even express herself freely through writing. Mohan controls what Jaya writes and decides what she can or cannot create. He intentionally or unintentionally hurts Jaya by affecting her creativity. Following the conventional, patriarchal notion that “a husband is like a sheltering tree,” Jaya has never stepped out of his shadow, forgetting that a sheltering tree also deprives the plant growing beneath it of sunlight. She has convinced herself that she has no personal interests or desires.

## Jaya’s Mother-in-law

When Jaya arrived at Mohan’s house after getting married, she discovered the real reason for her mother-in-law’s death. Mohan’s mother has to suffer a lot because of his father’s egoistic nature in addition to his male dominion attitude. Despite facing considerable anguish at the hands of Mohan’s father, she chose to endure in silence, believing that strength lies in sitting quietly by the fire. However, Jaya perceives this silence as despair. She understands that the woman’s struggle is so bitter that remaining silent becomes her only defense—a silent surrender.

Jaya thinks:

“Being a woman, so I can empathise with her more, but he is a man and might not grasp it as well.” (Deshpande 1989, 37).

Mohan’s father never misses a chance to hurt his wife’s patience, emotions, or feelings. Besides herself, everyone else finished their dinner and dozed off. No matter how late he was, Mohan’s mother had to wait for his father. At night, she has to feed their children and then cook fresh rice for him because he needs his rice clean and hot from an untouched vessel. One day, when she is waiting after the second round of cooking, his father arrives too late and asks for fresh chutney without even looking at her. She mumbles something, and in the subsequent moment, he angrily throws up his heavy brass plate and walks out of the house.

Vimla, Mohan’s sister, shares that she remembers their mother being pregnant almost throughout her childhood. She did not want the last child, having lost several babies already, and nobody was there to help except Vimla. Vimla used to help her mother with household chores alongside her studies. One day, Vimla left her share of the work for her mother. As she prepares for school, her mother is making *bhakries*, and suddenly there is a pause, followed by her mother’s thin, frightening voice. Vimla watches as her mother starts hitting herself in the face. Her mother’s health worsens, and Vimla realizes that a week earlier, her mother went to a midwife to try to get an abortion, which tragically led to her death.

## Vimla

When Jaya and Mohan visited Vimla’s home for a regular visit, they discovered a hidden struggle within Mohan’s kind-hearted sister. Vimla, despite suffering from a gynecological issue, specifically an ovarian tumor, chose to keep it to herself.

During the visit, Vimla’s mother-in-law expressed her concerns, saying:

“Who knows what’s bothering her? She’s been lying in bed for more than a month. Sure, go ahead and take her away if you want to. I’ve never seen women go to the doctor for such things. Like other women don’t experience heavy periods! What a fuss! But women who haven’t had kids are always like that.” (Deshpande 1989, 39).

So, they take her to the doctor, but the doctor says it’s too late for surgical treatment or anything else.

Mohan cries out:

“Why did she fail to send me a letter to?” (Deshpande 1989, 39).

But Vimla, like her mother, chooses ‘silence’. She goes into a coma and dies a week later, her silence intact. Jaya discovers something common between mother and daughter that links the destinies of the two—the silence where they died. At this moment, Jaya recalls Vanita Mami’s words regarding the societal and personal significance of a husband’s role and even in her life:

“A husband is like a sheltering tree; without the tree, you are dangerously unprotected. So you have to keep the tree alive if you have to water it with deceit and lies.” (Deshpande 1989, 32).

## Jeeja

Jaya is incredibly content with Jeeja's silence. Initially, Jaya misunderstood Jeeja's silence, thinking it was unfriendliness or a reluctance to work. However, as Jaya got to know Jeeja better, she realized that Jeeja was a realist. However, Jeeja has her own oppressive and wretched story. Once Jaya tried to peek into her life and ask her about her silence, she determined that Jeeja had suffered frequent beatings from her husband, and her inability to have a child led him to marry someone else. Despite all these hardships, Jeeja does not protest against her husband's actions. She thinks that she has wronged him by no longer giving him a male child, which causes her great sorrow.

Jeeja laments:

“He didn't have any children, which is both his and my misfortune. I can't blame him for marrying again since I couldn't give him any kids. How can I blame that woman for marrying him? Who should I be mad at?” (Deshpande 1989, 52).

## Nayana

Nayana is a sweeper who also suffers at the hands of her husband. A mother of four children—two girls who survived and two boys who died shortly after birth—is now carrying her unborn child for the fifth time, a child-producing machine. She tenderly passes her hand over her swollen abdomen and says to Jaya,

“This time, it is going to be a boy... Why give birth to a girl who will spend her entire life suffering at the hands of men? No, no, it is better to have a son.” (Deshpande 27-28).

Though she despises and curses men, her husband, her brothers, and her father as wasters, good-for-nothings, and drunkards, she has a strong desire to have a son, whom she believes will be her solace and support. Jaya is shocked to read about how baby girls were killed and buried alive. She is bitter towards her mother, who lavished special affection on her sons, of whom she was deprived.

## Conclusion:

*That Long Silence* is one of the precise works of Shashi Deshpande, which signifies the pathetic or miserable circumstances of Indian women. It additionally reflects how women suffer deeply and finally end up existing silently, bearing the molestation of male power. The novel depicts women within middle-class households, highlighting their predicament as they navigate between traditional cultural norms and the forces of modernity. Jaya talks about married women in India using the examples of Sita and Gandhari from mythology. By shedding light on the social marginalization of Jaya and others, the novel serves as a powerful call to break the silence, dismantle oppressive norms and strive towards a more inclusive and equitable society.

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