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Unveiling Domestic Realities: Exploring Kitchen Sink Realism in *That Long Silence* and the Illustration of Jaya's Challenges in a Patriarchal Society

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande is a Kannada-based writer and Indian novelist who won the Sahitya Academy Award for her work *That Long Silence* in 1990. Her writings are rooted in her culture, and she highlights the issues of third-world Indian women living in a patriarchal society. She mostly discusses the everyday, unremarkable lives of common people and women's domestic environments. The kitchen sink drama sought to bring ordinary working-class people's real lives and social inequality to the stage. These people's lives were caught between struggles of power, industry, politics, and social homogenization. (Farooq 2469). However, almost all the major kitchen sink works produced in the mid twentieth century are centred on a masculine point of view, and these plays rarely centred on the emotions and tribulations of their women characters.

The kitchen, traditionally a symbol of domestic confinement, became a stage for raw emotional and social struggles. Many scholarly works have analysed *That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande, focusing primarily on themes such as gender roles, feminist struggles, silence and repression, and the intersection of domesticity and patriarchy. This research paper is focused on kitchen sink realism as it provides a unique framework to contextualize Jaya's everyday struggles, her constrained life, and the novel's raw depiction of domestic oppression in a patriarchal society.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Women Subordination, Domestic violence, Modernism, Kitchen Sink Drama.

In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande uses Jaya's physical surroundings, especially the claustrophobic Dadar flat, to illustrate how her physical confinement impairs her mental

and emotional well-being. The small, restricted space mirrors Jaya's sense of powerlessness and domestic entrapment, capturing the essence of kitchen sink realism by highlighting the

suffocating nature of everyday life for women. Concentrating on small, restrictive domestic areas, where the characters feel as though they have little room and are confined to the kitchen and house, is one characteristic that distinguishes kitchen sink drama. Jaya's lack of freedom is called into question by the move to Dadar, as she was compelled to go with her husband, Mohan, "a pair of bullocks yoked together." (Deshpande 7). Jaya's financial reliance on her husband and her household responsibilities are linked to her physical captivity, which has an emotional and psychological impact on her. Alison, trapped in an unpleasant relationship with Jimmy in the one-room attic apartment play, embodies the cramped domesticity, emotional instability, and gender conflicts, much like a female character in kitchen sink plays like *Look Back into Anger*.

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* echoes that limited space and isolation exacerbate feelings of entrapment in societal roles through Jaya's confinement in the Dadar flat, which becomes a symbol of her lack of autonomy, intellectual suppression, and physical entrapment. Jaya's home is a site of confinement, where her domestic role traps her in silence and obedience, restricting her agency. As Betty Friedan describes, the home can be a "comfortable concentration camp" (296), a setting in which women experience physical security yet psychological confinement, exemplified by Jaya, whose individuality is obliterated by societal expectations of domesticity, illustrates that a woman's role as a homemaker equates to her imprisonment. Jaya and her husband, Mohan, move into the Dadar flat after Mohan faces a professional crisis, a place described as, "A trail of garbage on the soiled cement stairs, cigarette butts, scraps of paper, bits of vegetable peel. And red stains squirts of paan- stained spit on the wall, macabrely brightening up the dinginess. I can see those two now, as one sees other people, their existence confined to that one moment, the man climbing gingerly, almost on tiptoe, the

woman walking with the steadiness of familiarity, the dirt and ugliness obviously for her a normal part of the surroundings." (Deshpande 7) As a middle-class woman, Jaya has been told from her childhood days, stories about Sita, Savitri and Draupadi, depicting the sharing of their husband's travails and their silent sufferings and therefore she thought she does not associate the space with herself and felt alienated had to move with her husband like "Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails" (11). Jaya experiences a deep sense of displacement due to her lack of agency in important decisions. The cramped and shared living space emphasizes her lack of privacy and autonomy, underlining her seclusion within her own home. This sense of suffocation symbolizes the broader issue of patriarchal norms limiting women's roles, reducing them to duties tied to motherhood and marriage, and confining them both socially and physically. The obligations of domestic life place limitations on professional and personal growth, and her limited space reflects the social norms that restrain her, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman." (Beauvoir 14). This famously states that no one is born a woman, but instead becomes one through the environment she is raised and treated by society. From her childhood, she was taught that men are the sole protectors of the family, and the notion that "a husband is a sheltering tree" (37) depicts women living in a patriarchal culture where men are expected to earn the bread and women are expected to take care of the house. Her physical entrapment, accentuated by the restricted living space, burdensome domestic responsibilities, and financial limitations, is a pivotal dimension in the narrative. She is similar to the female characters in kitchen sink dramas, like Jo and Alison in *A Taste of Honey* and *Look Back in Anger*, two famous kitchen sink plays.

The repetitive cycle of cooking, cleaning, and caregiving consumes her time and

energy, leaving little room for personal growth or introspection. These duties, emblematic of traditional gender roles, measure her worth by her ability to maintain the household. "There's no room for anger in my life, no room for despair, either. There's only order and routine – today, I have to change the sheets; tomorrow, scrub the bathrooms; the day after, clean the fridge ..." (Deshpande 147-148) shows her daily routine, which becomes a metaphorical trap, leaving no space for freedom and change. A recurring theme in kitchen sink drama is financial instability, particularly as it affects women. Financial constraints resulting from her husband's reliance diminish her voice, authority, and agency, which is in tune with Virginia Woolf's argument in her seminal work *A Room of One's Own* that women need financial independence and a private space to think and create freely. Woolf's assertion, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (4), highlights the social and economic constraints that have historically denied women intellectual freedom. Jaya's ongoing financial reliance on Mohan, despite her education, highlights her lack of autonomy. She is unable to challenge or resist her husband's domination due to her financial reliance, which makes her voiceless and powerless in their marriage, much as the females in kitchen sink tragedies. Jaya's physical entrapment in *That Long Silence* serves as a powerful critique of patriarchal structures that confine women within the domestic sphere, limiting their autonomy, aspirations, and self-expression. Her restricted living conditions, burdensome household duties, and financial dependence on her husband mirror the struggles of female characters in kitchen sink realism, highlighting that domesticity becomes a site of both physical and psychological oppression. Through Jaya's experiences, Deshpande exposes the suffocating nature of gender norms, reinforcing the need for financial independence and personal agency to break free from societal constraints.

In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande intricately weaves Jaya's internal conflicts, portraying the psychological barriers formed by societal pressures and familial responsibilities. According to Chansky, domesticity in kitchen sink realism reinforces the idea that women's roles are tied to household labour (4). Similarly, Mohan internalizes the belief that an ideal wife should be gentle, quiet, and submissive, influenced by his mother's silent endurance of her husband's mistreatment. With this mindset, he names his wife Suhasini, a name symbolizing compliance and restraint. Deshpande, through this portrayal, critiques the deep-rooted gender injustices and the patriarchal power structures that dictate women's roles in marriage and society (Anuradha 18). Her loveless marriage becomes yet another limitation as a result of this ongoing struggle and external gender expectations, which negatively impact her psychological well-being. Jaya's emotional imprisonment, powerlessness, and frustration stem from the pressures placed on her by society; her persistent labour, despite her loveless marriage, leads her to accept that her entire existence revolves solely around her husband and children, leaving no space for self-expression.

One of the most significant aspects of Jaya's struggle is this psychological repression of Jaya's, which aligns closely with Freud's theory of the unconscious. Freud suggests that repressed emotions do not vanish but manifest in other forms, often leading to psychological distress (128-131). Jaya's inability to express her frustrations and desires results in a profound emotional conflict that manifests through anxiety, inner turmoil, and self-doubt, which develops a feeling of powerlessness in her. Consequently, she opts for silence, and this suppression of emotions and entrapment results in frustration and rage, rendering her powerless. Jaya's identity is distorted due to the clashing expectations imposed on her. The external pressure to be the "ideal wife" (Deshpande 61) directly affects her sense of self.

As Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex*, women's lives are highly shaped by their society (14). Similarly, Jaya does not simply grow into her role; it is thrust upon her by societal and familial demands. The suppression of her dreams, including her writing, mirrors Beauvoir's notion of women being the "Otherness" (14), an identity defined only in relation to men. There is repression of her desires, and her own identity revolves around her husband, and her identity was limited to being Mohan's wife. "my husband, around whose needs and desires my own life revolved. There was nothing he needed, so there was nothing for me to do, nothing I had to do. My own career as a wife was in jeopardy." (Deshpande 24) Her inability to advocate for herself, despite her education and the influence of a patriarchal environment, leads her to question her identity and surrender to her stifling circumstances.

Gender norms, along with external factors, promote internalised expectations, which has a negative impact on mental health outcomes. The external reason for Jaya's psychological confinement is her separation from her birth family, which negatively affects her wellbeing and impedes her identity. When she is told, "You don't belong to this family! You're married, you're now part of Mohan's family. You have no place here" (20), it highlights how marriage severs a woman's ties to her former home, leaving her in a space where she neither fully belongs nor feels emotionally secure.

The novel reveals Jaya's upbringing and marriage shaping her into a submissive wife, stripping away her individuality affecting her mental health, as Devashanthi in her journal cited Abilas Nayak's comments on the suppression of women as follows, "Indian women, unlike the western counterparts, have always been socially and psychologically suppressed, sexually colonised and biologically subjected against a male-dominant social set-up." (33) The external reinforcement of gender

roles intensifies Jaya's emotional struggle, which also leads to the killing of their third child without letting Mohan know about it. In the realm of kitchen sink realism, women's voices are often stifled by their domestic circumstances, reinforcing the notion that personal aspirations must be sacrificed for familial stability (Chansky 5). Mohan's expectation of her unwavering support and silent compliance fuels her internal conflict, which hinders her behaviour. Jaya's psychological turmoil in *That Long Silence* is a product of deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and internalised expectations that dictate a woman's identity, confining her within the roles of wife and mother while erasing her individuality. Her emotional imprisonment reflects the essence of kitchen sink realism, where domestic life becomes both a source of stability and a site of psychological restraint. Deshpande reveals the cause of a woman's psychological confinement, which is exacerbated by gender norms, familial detachment, and marital oppression, collectively contributing to a woman's psychological constraints, leading to self-doubt and repression. The novel critiques these structures, highlighting the devastating impact of gendered silence and submission on women's mental well-being. Jaya's journey supports the larger feminist conversation on autonomy and identity by reinforcing the importance of self-expression and defiance.

Jaya's silence in *That Long Silence* is a reflection of her internal struggle, shaped by societal expectations and personal repression of her desires. From the moment she realizes that Mohan sees anger as "unwomanly" (Deshpande 83), she begins to suppress her emotions, torn between fulfilling her expected role and her unfulfilled aspirations. This conflict mirrors the essence of kitchen sink realism, where domesticity serves as both a source of stability and a form of entrapment. Her silence is not just a passive response but an active consequence of a system that denies her agency. This repression

manifests in three key ways: first, through her inability to express her frustration; second, through her submission to societal norms out of fear of judgment; and third, through the emotional distress caused by suppressing her desires as a wife, mother, and writer. Her internal turmoil leads to silence, reflecting her inability to express her rage and frustration. Jaya's silence is further reinforced by her struggle with Mohan's justification of his actions. She recalls, "I had said nothing. Perhaps mistaking my silence for accusation, Mohan had burst out with - 'I did it for you, for you and the children.'" (10) "I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender" (36). This moment encapsulates her feeling of powerlessness, where her silence becomes both a response to and a reflection of her entrapment. And there was no room for expression: "A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated" (147), illustrating the internalized belief that women's voices are unimportant hinders their ability to express themselves, leading to emotional imprisonment of her feelings. Jaya's emotional reactions show her powerlessness since she feels constrained by the roles and is afraid of being judged and seen as a worthless wife, which prevents her from expressing her frustrations. She resigns herself to the roles assigned to her, "Even a worm has a hole it can crawl into. I had mine - as Mohan's wife, as Rahul's and Rati's mother" (148). Her identity becomes enmeshed with Mohan's, reinforcing her lack of autonomy, leading to her silence as a defence mechanism. Sigmund Freud explains that repressed emotions manifest indirectly, leading to anxiety and displacement (130-31). This is reflected in Jaya's silence in *That Long Silence*; Jaya represses her discomfort and uses silence as a shield against marital and social norms, which results in emotional numbness. Jaya's silence, therefore, becomes a defence mechanism, shielding her from the pain of confronting her reality. Gayatri Spivak in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Discusses women living in patriarchal environments and

their silence as subalterns (92). While Jaya is not a subaltern in the traditional sense, she is deeply oppressed by the patriarchal structures that silence her voice and desires. Within the domestic space, Jaya's thoughts, feelings, and ambitions are suppressed, mirroring Spivak's argument that subaltern women are systematically silenced and lack power and agency within the social setup. Jaya's yielding to social expectations is driven by her persistent fear of judgment and social repercussions in a patriarchal setup, reinforcing her self-repression. Therefore, her emotional constraint then is not simply personal; it reflects the systemic oppression that conditions women to believe their voices lack value.

As Devashanthi observes, Jaya's sense of self is moulded by a culture that systematically silences women, driving her further into emotional isolation (33). Her emotional constraints are not entirely self-imposed but are shaped by the internalization of societal pressures. Her grandmother frequently reprimands her for being too inquisitive and warns her that "for everything a question, for everything a retort. What husband can be comfortable with that?" (Deshpande 5). Additionally, Jaya's dependence on Mohan is a direct result of her social conditioning. She admits, "without Mohan, I'm ... I don't know, I don't know what I am". (22). This uncertainty reflects her inner turmoil, despite lacking love for him, she remains emotionally tethered to him because society has conditioned her to define her identity through marriage.

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* embodies the essence of kitchen sink realism by portraying the raw, unembellished struggles of a middle-class woman, Jaya, trapped in the confines of a patriarchal society, emphasizing the suffocating realities of domestic and socioeconomic constraints. Through Jaya's physical confinement, psychological restraint, and emotional repression, Deshpande presents an intimate exploration of a woman's silent endurance in a rigid physical and social

structure much like the female characters in kitchen sink dramas. By incorporating kitchen sink realism, Deshpande highlights that everyday struggles often dismissed as mundane are deeply oppressive. Jaya's experiences resonate with countless women who navigate domestic spaces that restrict rather than empower, exposing the ongoing struggle of women within patriarchal structures. In this way, Deshpande's work resonates with the themes of kitchen sink realism, presenting an unflinching look at the suffocating domesticity that defines many women's lives. In doing so, *That Long Silence* serves as a powerful commentary on gender roles, agency, and the silent suffering that defines the lives of many women.

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