

Comment on the symbolic significance of the title 'That Long Silence.'

[K.U.K. 2005]

Or  
Comment on the metaphysical and metaphoric significance of the title 'That Long Silence'.

[K.U.K. 2006]

Or  
"Silence in The novel functions most meaningfully and artistically as a metaphor encompassing diverse implication." Examine the appropriateness of the title of Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* in the context of this view for the novel.

Ans. Shashi Deshpande's eminence as a 'thinking novelist'—Shashi Deshpande is one of the foremost novelists active in the literary arena. Her fame rests as much on her artistic credentials as on her acute and perceptive powers of observation of contemporary Indian society from the perspective of an 'involved' and 'concerned' intellectual. *That Long Silence* raises pointedly some very disturbing questions about some aspects of life in India. The novel in its title uses the expression 'silence' to carry lots of meaning. It also has a role in bringing different aspects of the novel and various characters together in a bond of artistic coherence. Because of these considerations, the title assumes added significance and it is worthwhile to examine it at length to judge its appropriateness or the lack of it.

Jaya's silence defines her dilemma—'Silence' is an expression most obviously and explicitly used for the protagonist Jaya in the novel. She is a modern, educated woman who had been rather rebellious and of a questioning nature as an adolescent. She faces an acute dilemma when, as a married woman, she is expected by her orthodoxly-inclined husband to play the dutiful wife. He had been suspended from service on a charge of bribery and now out of his own sense of insecurity, he expected his wife's vocal and active support. But Jaya—a morally conscious and sensitive woman—can neither condemn him nor support him openly. Her silence is mistaken as brazen defiance by her husband who suspects that she has been spreading word of his complicity in wrong-doing among her relatives. He therefore, in a mood of extreme pique and provocation, leaves the flat, threatening never to return to her. Jaya's silence becomes most excruciating and intolerable as she comes to know of the sudden disappearance of her son, Rahul, who had accompanied their neighbours—Ashoka and Rupa—on a trip to the South during the vacation. It is against this background that the expression "that long silence" gets currency and meaning for silence virtually defines the self and soul of Jaya—it, in a way, becomes the very synonym of Jaya. The title thus can be taken to convey the sheer helplessness, loss of self, passivity and mental enslavement to old moth-eaten orthodoxy and conventions. This implication of the title of the novel has been further reinforced by the example of other characters who are destined to be chained in a similar manner.

The 'long silence' of Mohan's unnamed mother—It is through Vimla, Mohan's unnamed mother that one comes to know, the 'long silence' of Mohan's mother. Her husband, i.e., Mohan's and Vimla's father, was a sadistic and cruel-hearted person. He would come home late and insist on his wife's cooking food for him there and then, unmindful of what the time was or what she had been engaged in. The mother used to submit passively to such inhuman treatment. Often while cooking, she would have painful seizures when her limbs would get locked and she would not be in a



position even to move them. Later it was learnt that she was seeking the help of a midwife for terminating an unwanted pregnancy and the medication administered to her led to her death in great agony and pain. But although she bore her fate in total silence without uttering a word of pain or anger. The novel *That Long Silence* is about Jaya's as well as the unnamed mother's 'long silence'.

**Vimla too is given 'that long silence'**—The fate of Vimla, Mohan's sister, is no different from her mother's. She died of a most painful tumour in her ovaries. She was aware of her condition but she refrained from seeking a cure and went on bearing the pain phlegmatically and stoically. She was without an issue and therefore she did not want to seek medical help. She feared lest her ovaries be removed for that would have rendered her incapable of bearing a child. It is this 'long silence' too which Shashi Deshpande seeks to capture in her portrayal of Indian society in the novel.

**Kusum's 'long silence'**—Kusum is another relevant character here from this perspective. She is a niece of Jaya's Vanita man. She has been deserted by her husband and she is taken by her own relatives as a burden. She is sent to stay with Jaya at the Dadar flat and Mohan, Jaya's husband, gets very much irritated by her forced presence there. Kusum has lost all interest in everything around her. She is most unmindful of her own dress and bearing. Her own children ridicule her. She dies later unwept for, unlamented, unloved. Even after her death, her parents do not miss her at all. It seems as if Kusum walked through life unseen, unheard. 'That Long Silence' of her existence is also part of the story of the novel of that title.

**The 'self-imposed' silence of Aiji**—One can perhaps include Aiji also in this discussion, even though she seems perfectly at ease with the conventional and orthodox role assigned to her in Hindu society. She is a widow and she has retreated to the interior of the house, leaving her elder son, Ramu to be the head of the family. She is deeply attached to Vasu, her other son—Jaya's father. But she remains silent and allows him to shift to his own house, even though she dies, presumably of a broken-heart, a few months later. Aiji has interiorized the social norms and values assigned to 'the other sex' in conventional society and she silently and passively plays the role expected of her. She advises her grand-daughter, Jaya, also to give up her questioning attitude or else she would invite problems for herself in her later life. This is how she exclaims to her :

*"Look at you, for everything a question, for everything a retort.  
What husband can be comfortable with that?"*

Even though it is 'self-imposed on her part,' that long silence on Aiji's part is also a constituent of the thematic framework of the novel.

**Other silences**—As contended earlier, Jaya's is not the only silence under focus. There are other silences too. Besides Mohan's mother and sister, Kusum and Aiji we also have the woman in the Nair family and Asha, the wife of Jaya's younger brother, Ravi can also be roped in while talking of the justification or implications of the title of the novel. Of course, the whole Nair family entered into a suicide pact, tied themselves with a rope and drowned themselves. The daughter in the family instinctively attempted to save herself but she could not. Jaya often thinks of the different members of the family, how they could all come to such a fatal agreement when one cannot agree even on simple things of life. Then killed themselves for they could not face poverty and deprivation but what role did the woman in the Nair family have in the whole process of decision-making? Did she silently go along with the decision taken by her husband? Her silence, if any, has also to be seen as part of 'that long silence' taken up by Shashi Deshpande in the novel. Similar is the case of Asha, the wife of Ravi, Jaya's younger brother. He meets Jaya one day and talks of his marital problems in which he would like Jaya to intercede on his behalf. Or else, he is



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categorical, he would divorce her. Obviously the wife, Asha, is to be seen as somebody who has no role whatsoever in the whole discussion and her fate has to be decided ex-parte i.e., without any consultation or discussion with her. The novel may not have given prominence to Asha's silence in the matter but that is very much a part of the overall ambit of the novel and 'that long silence' as it pertains to Asha has also to be seen as relevant in discussing the scope of the title of the novel.

**Jaya breaks out of the silence-syndrome**—It is Jaya who finally breaks out of the paralyzing silence-syndrome, graphically represented in the novel. She has to go through a process of excruciating soul-searching before she can assert herself. She is helped immensely by the emotional support she gets from her neighbour, Mukta. The act of confiding in Mukta releases the pent-up feelings in her heart and she can breathe easy. She is capable of taking control of the situation had earlier been revealed by her helping her sweepress, Jeeja, whose son needed immediate medical care. Jaya had spoken to the attending doctor and every thing had been arranged to Jeeja's satisfaction. It is in this spirit that she assures her son, Rahul, when he returns from Ambegaon that all would be well and that Mohan would soon be back.

**Jaya evolves a new, mature self**—Towards the close of the novel, Jaya seems to have evolved a new and mature self. She has developed a sober outlook and seems to have delved deep into her own being and made certain discoveries about herself. In this new mood she seems capable of defining her new role in relation to the world. This new Jaya has, after much introspection and thought, resolved to "plug that hole in the heart". She tells herself, "I will have to speak to listen to ease that long silence between us." Jaya cites the Gita to suggest that every individual has his/her own independent existence and nobody is without a role in the scheme of things. As such she and Mohan stand on equal footing. She would seek to forge that relationship on par with him and start life afresh. This new found assurance would work to erase the silence between them. She feels it incumbent on her to break "that long silence" for the realization of her own potential. That way she would be offering to her other sisters a way out to snap out of the mould which stifles and suffocates them. It is with this larger purpose that she has pieced together all her memories to reinforce the message that silence is a sure killer.

**The title brings together different characters and pinpoints the thrust of the work**—On the basis of the foregoing discussion, one can easily see the appropriateness of the title, **That Long Silence** for not merely does it bring together the stories of a number of characters like Kusum, Asha, Vimla, Aiji, Mohan's mother and others, it also takes one straight to the very heart of the matter. There could not have been a more suggestive and apt title than the one given to the novel by Shashi Deshpande.



□ Underline the significance of the ending of 'That Long Silence'.

Or

That Long Silence as a 'self-begetting novel'.

Or

The circular movement or structure in the Novel.

Ans. A Most Artistically Structured novel—That Long Silence is one of the foremost Indian English novels dealing with the social and psychological plight of ordinary Indian middle-class women caught in a transitional phase. Its structural distinctiveness enhances its thematic import for it has been taken in critical circles as 'a self-begetting novel' viz., a novel with a circular structure—one which ends from where it begins all over again. The ending of the novel therefore assumed added importance. But one has to see what comes before the ending in order to fully appreciate the suitability or unsuitability of the ending.

A story of self-chosen or imposed silence—That Long Silence can very well be taken as a story of self-chosen or imposed silence on the part of the women presented herein. Conventional Indian society would like to have women as an object to be seen and desired not as an individual to be heard or consulted. We have in the novel Kusum who has been deserted by her husband and even her own children, not to say her relatives or parents. Mohan's mother who passively submits to brutal and sadistic treatment at the hands of her husband, her daughter, Vimla who leaves a most painful ovarian tumor unattended for she years for an issue. Mrs. Nair who enters into a suicide pact with her husband and children for life in poverty is a curse worse than death. All these women die in silence for no other honourable option was open to them. Perhaps silence in case of Ajji, Jaya's grandmother, is partly self-chosen for she has imbibed successfully the role expected of a woman in Indian society. Jaya's silence is the result of her acute dilemma. She can not openly support her husband who has been suspended from office for he is charged with accepting a bribe. But Jaya cannot condemn or criticise him also because that is unthinkable in a conventional society. She chooses to remain silent and be a passive spectator.

But Jaya ultimately assumed control of the situation—In an extremely agitated sequence, Mohan, Jaya's husband, questions her repeatedly believing that she has been spreading word about his humiliation among her relatives. Under extreme provocation, Jaya happens to burst out into hysterical laughter. Mohan flies into a



rage and abruptly leave the flat, threatening never to return. Jaya undergoes a severe emotional trauma, feeling shaky and uncertain of her future. But with the help of her neighbours, she ultimately at her strength and assumes control of her life. When Mohan's brother, Vasant and her son, Rahul, return from Saptagiri she assumes them that everything would be alright and that Mohan has sent a telegram informing her that he would soon be back. She also takes a forthright decision that she would go to Ambegaon first for Vanita Mami and her own mother are both, not well. She would go to Saptagiri—her in-laws place—later. It is with this new found understanding of her chooses to go over in her mind the whole past to have a fuller understanding of her and her circumstances. The fact that it is a conscious act of remembrances has specifically been emphasised by the narration of some incidents which had been omitted earlier by Jaya or which had not been given in full earlier.

The novel is narrated with this new-found assurance—It is with this new found assurance that the whole novel seems to have been narrated. Thus That Long Silence can well be taken as a novel in a quintessential recapitulative mould, or a mould of remembrance. The presiding consciousness of the novel, i.e., Jaya, puts together the bits to explain how she got shaken to open up and face all the facts by narrating them, the narration is none other than the novel That Long Silence itself. It is thus a novel that ends on a note on which it has begun.

The ending is most apt and artistic—Not merely is the ending most apt artistically. It is also so thematically for Shashi Deshpande introduces a strong note of feminism and assertion of womenfolk, though it is down in a most subtle manner in the ending. Without being strident or propagandistic, the novelist conveys her point most effectively and artistically through the way she ends the novel.

feminist discourse.

**Other aspects of man-woman relationship from a feminist perspective—** Placing the novel in the feminist framework as outlined by critics like Elaine Showalter, Toril Moi, Kate Millet and Simon de Beauvoir explains a few other aspects of the man-woman relationship as presented herein. Aiji and her grand-daughter, Jaya reveal the truth of Simon de Beauvoir's statement that "one is not born a woman, one becomes a woman". While Aiji has unknowingly cultivated the values associated with her sex, Jaya—because of the changed socio-cultural environment in her case—has not been forced to do that. Toril Moi's assertion that the female voice is missing in literature which has all along been dominated by male-writers has been validated by Shashi Deshpande for the only language which the women in the novel have accessible to them is the, language of silence. Women have 'that long silence' as the idiom in which they respond to the happenings around them. Elaine Showalter's belief that the woman is regarded as 'the other'—as a strange, incomplete being is proved by the treatment of women in the novel. The women in the novel are used, abused, marginalized, ignored or taken as non-individuals by male characters in varying degrees. One does not come across a mutually satisfying instance of man-woman relationship in the novel. That Long Silence also reveals some aspects of quintessentially feminine response which perhaps a male-writer would not have been able to articulate. It is the special bonding that is portrayed between women characters. We have Jaya having a kind of close 'sould-intimacy' with other women characters like Kusum, Vimla, Mukta, even Jeeja, the sweepress. Though she has only



reduces her to silence. When Mohan finds the situation getting absurd and she bursts out into a fit of rage, Mohan leaves the flat abruptly, threatening never to return. The effect of this sudden development is predictable enough. Jaya undergoes a grave emotional trauma. She believes that life has come to an end for her. She feels as if she is trapped and there is now no way out for her. She screams and howls and attempts to break open the door, even though she has the key in her own purse. Jaya's experience thus provides a graphic picture of the plight of women, even from the educated and respectable sections of society.

**Other women and their tales of woe**—Shashi Deshpande has provided a most comprehensive picture of Indian society from this sociological perspective. She has portrayed a number of other women character who corroborate through their own experience what Jaya's sad story reveals. Vimla, the sister of Jaya's husband, Mohan, tells Jaya the suffering Mohan's and her mother faced at the hands of her husband. She died as a result of some medication she took to abort an unwanted pregnancy. Even though it was a most painful death and her limbs usually got numb and paralysed, she bore the torture in silence. Vimla herself left her ovarian tumour untreated even though it caused her agonizing pain. She was issueless and she did not want to have the ovaries operated upon because that would have made her incapable of conceiving. Kusum, the deserted wife, gets closer and closer to insanity and ultimately dies pathetically and not to talk of her husband or mother, even her children do not miss her. Mrs Nair entered a suicide pact with members of her family and drowned herself along with others for a life of poverty and degradation was worse than death. All such instances put together create a very depressing situation in which women find themselves placed mainly because of the male-centred world they lived in.

**The patriarchal set-up is the culprit in most cases**—Shashi Deshpande reveals her feminist bearings when her portrayal of the plight of women reveals the patriarchal set up as the culprit in most cases. Women have only two options—either to imbibe the orthodox values associated with their gender or suffer in silence. Aiji, Jaya's grandmother, represents the first option. She has adapted herself to play faithfully the role assigned to a Hindu widow in an orthodox society. She has convinced herself that a woman is meant to be seen and desired and not heard and consulted. She chides Jaya for violating the role assigned to her sex. This is how Aiji exclaims: "Look at you, for everything a question, for everything a retort. What husband can be comfortable with that?" In the case of other women mentioned earlier, it is solely the patriarchal set-up which consumes all energy and



Indian society. Comment.

Or

Discuss 'That Long Silence' as a feminist text.

[K.U.K. 2004]  
[K.U.K. 2007]

Ans. The Rise of women-centred novels in Indian English literature—One of the most prominent aspects of post-independence Indian English literature is the rise of women-centred novels. The phenomenon began in the late nineteenth forties, and fifties itself with novels like Mulk Raj Anand's Gauri, R.K. Narayan's The Dark Room and Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve but it gathered momentum in the later decades with the arrival of a number of women novelists and the focus shifting from social and political realism to psychological 'case-studies'. Shashi Deshpande fully reflects in a most artistic and authentic manner these trends in Indian English literature. That Long Silence by her is one of the foremost novels dealing with the plight of women from a subtle feminist perspective.

The novel is set in the modern socio-cultural context—That Long Silence is set in a clearly recognizable socio-cultural context. All the characters of the novel belong to the lower or the average middle-class, fully steeped in conventional values. Jaya, the protagonist and the presiding consciousness of the novel comes from a rural, ordinary background and her marriage with Mohan, coming from a similar background and a neighbouring village, has been arranged by the elders in the family. The main story in the novel is woven around the marital relationship of Jaya and Mohan. On being suspended from his official post as a Junior Engineer in a government office because of a charge of bribe-taking, he becomes irritable, suspicious