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**Marginalization of Women in Marriage: A Study of  
Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *That Long Silence***

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*Abstract*

Marginalization in society is not confined to limitations of opportunities to grow independently and lack means of endurance. It refers to the creation of an environment in which the individual is made to feel pride even in slavery. Marginalization in the case of women is more pronounced as it is not limited to any caste, creed or religion. It is a universal phenomenon and marriage as an institution is one of the basic foundations on which the marginalization of women is culturally strengthened. Marriages are a pivotal part of every society. By conforming to the institution of marriage, two distinct minds take oaths to stick by each other's side lifelong. But in reality, the institution of marriage replicates the other side of patriarchal domination which contributes to the peripheral status of women. They are subjected to inevitable suppression, subjugation, and oppression in the environs of the marital frame regardless of the renunciation and forsaking of individuality by the woman for the sake of family. They are the victim of sheer oppression and violence due to their vulnerable status from time immemorial. In this paper, an attempt has been made to bring forth the hardships of marital life and how it assists in the marginalization of women with reference to the works of Shashi Deshpande. Her works of fiction, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) and *That Long Silence* (1988) aptly elucidate the issues of marital discord and disharmonious conjugal relationships which career-oriented women experience in their day-to-day existence. Women helplessly oscillate between traditional codes and modern aspirations, bearing the pangs of dead desires and unexpressed thoughts in public as well as domestic spheres. Characterization of women like Sarita and Jaya delineate the marginalization of women in a poignant and powerful manner.

**Keywords:** marriage, marginalization, patriarchy, discrimination, women, marital discords.

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The process of marginalization indicates the cornering of a particular group of people by depriving them of their identity. According to John Scott and Gordon Marshall's *A Dictionary*

of *Sociology*, marginalization is, “A process by which a group or individual is denied access to important positions and symbols of economic, religious or political power within society” (Scott and Marshall 437). It refers to the unfavourable position of an individual, group, or community in society. Women are ostracized because they are not allowed to access significant roles in politics, religion, economics, and education. The status of an individual or group in society can be influenced by a variety of factors, including gender, culture, race, sexual orientation, way of life, and socioeconomic status. It is a process of domination and subordination. In addition to the above-mentioned elements, gender sexuality dominance—which consistently places men above women in society—is thus synonymous with marginalization.

Feminism ardently believes that women are marginalized because they are subordinate to patriarchal hegemony. The peripheral status of women is quite evident from Simon de Beauvoir’s statement, “The situation of woman is that she, a free and autonomous being like all creatures-nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of other” (Beauvoir 29). A woman’s entire life relentlessly gyrates around the dependence syndrome of protection and authorization of male patriarchal society. As a daughter, her father acts as her protector. Her decisions are heavily tied up with the prestige of her father and family members. After marriage, her husband takes up that place and then her son when she ages. Whatever she does, she does it by keeping herself restricted to these pre-defined boundaries, and as a result, turns a blind eye to herself and her desires.

One such unit of patriarchal dominance is marriage which is considered a sacramental duty in any religion or society and comes with its privileges and limitations. It is deemed to be a sacred union between a male and a female which provides legitimacy to a relationship. In Indian society, marriage is more public than an individual affair. It needs the validation of each living soul to make it legally sound. Even though it usually works according to the mutual exchange of consent and privileges, many a time, women become convenient scapegoats of the family. She is unquestionably bestowed with the responsibility to make changes in her life if the circumstances so warrant. From a very tender age, she has been prepared for this day as if this is the sole purpose of her life. Her inner psyche is continuously bombarded with various sets of established ways that she has to adhere to for the smooth course of her marital life. Her parents infuse her with the pre-defined feminine traits of self-denial, subservience, endurance, patience, and forgiveness, which collectively act as the initial stage of patriarchal dominance. Simon de Beauvoir aptly questions the construction of gender identity in her seminal work *The*

*Second Sex* (1989) by saying, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 330). The social conditioning of a girl child within the environs of the family indicates how the family is a patriarchy’s key institution. Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* argues, “The chief contribution of the family in patriarchy is the socialization of the young (largely through the example and admonition of their parents) into patriarchal ideology’s prescribed attitudes toward the categories of role, temperament, and status” (Millett 35). It is the same place where young girls are taught their place and learn their duties by observing the hierarchical relationships between their mother and father.

The institution of marriage is the pinnacle among all the institutions which has yanked women on the periphery of society. However, this is not the case if we take a look at our religious scriptures which emphasize the equality of partnership between the husband and the wife in terms of marital relationships. According to Hindu scriptures, a woman as a life partner is addressed as *Ardhangini* which means ‘one-half of the husband.’ Together, a husband and wife are referred to as *Dampati*, meaning ‘joint owners of the household’ who share work and responsibilities in terms of their biological, psychological, and individual *dharma* for harmonious conjugal life to approximate to Joseph Addison’s definition, “A happy marriage has in it all the pleasures of friendships, all the enjoyment of sense and reason, and indeed all the sweets of life” (Addison 400).

Somehow, the concept of a harmonious conjugal relationship finds itself hard to become a reality because women are still treated as submissive and marginalized by their male counterparts. Therefore, women always long for a sympathetic, affectionate, benevolent, amiable kind of spouse but the failure of which brings devastation to marital bonds. A woman strives for freedom primarily for individual space which somehow gets compromised in the intricate union of two different minds when she steps into the institution of marriage as Germaine Greer acknowledges, “After marriage woman’s life has changed radically but not her husband” (Greer 78). Household liabilities become a meaningful obstacle in the path of self-formation as Betty Friedan claims, “It is urgent to understand how the very condition of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness in woman. There are aspects of the housewife role that make it almost impossible for a woman of intelligence to retain a sense of human identity, the firm core of self or “I” without which a human being, man or woman, is not truly alive” (Friedan 293). In this quagmire of womanly obligations, she is also expected to compromise with her dreams, education, occupation and rights. Conversely, men are not bound to forgo anything alongside marital privileges. Being the head of a

patriarchal society, they ensure women have unequal socio-cultural rights to ensure they remain subordinate or oppressed creatures. Sarah Grimke has traced down the most vicious sin that a male has ever committed against a female by voicing out that: “Man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasures, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort; but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill” (Grimke 11).

With the emergence of a host of women writers as Kamala Markandaya, Kamala Das, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai on the creative scene in India, the focus has shifted to the portrayal of the feminine world. Shashi Deshpande is a significant novelist of contemporary times whose works are sprinkled with the stories of women characters who struggle to make themselves heard in the patriarchal society. Deshpande’s *oeuvre* explores numerous sensitive issues related to gender discrimination and social conditioning of the girl-child, husband-wife relationship: the superior and the subordinate, and the sexual exploitation of women within and outside the environs of the marital frame. She believes in the emancipation of women but does not negate the possibility of healthy and happy family life. She also talks about the difficulty of womanly roles by saying, “It comes out of the knowledge that I am something more and something different from the sum total of these roles. My writing comes out of a consciousness of the conflict between my ideas of myself as human being and the idea that society has of me as a woman” (Prasad and Paul 182). She celebrates freedom of women by creating strong female characters who defy patriarchal control and assert their individuality. Deshpande believes, “Until women get over the handicaps imposed by society, outside and inner conditioning, the human race will not have realized its full potential” (Ray and Kundu 135).

Shashi Deshpande explores multiple dimensions of the question what it means to be an Indian woman suspended between traditional and modern roles. She portrays the pitiable plight of women who are educated but get tortured physically and mentally in the male, chauvinistic society. Shashi Deshpande’s novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1990) narrates the tale of a disruptive marital rapport between Sarita and Manohar. The novel unfolds the doleful condition of its protagonist Sarita (Saru) who is a modern, erudite doctor by profession but gets nagged by her significant other Manohar because she garners more money than he does. Being a segment of the male chauvinistic society, Manohar (Manu) gradually feels pangs of ignominy when his colleagues and neighbours start ridiculing him for his scanty income. His egoistic approach compels him to disparage his wife by wreaking vengeance in the form of sexual sadism which he unconsciously inflicts upon her every night though the next morning he will

be a normal husband. Saru becomes a convenient target of marital rape to be reminded of her rightful place within the marriage. She laments “He attacked me like an animal at night I was sleeping and I woke up and there was this man . . . this man hurting me with his hands, his teeth, and his whole body” (Deshpande 201). *The Dark Holds No Terrors* casts light on the heinous crime of marital rape. In a country like India, it is absurd that our laws were and still are confused about marital rape. As in the novel, just to quench his male ego, Manohar does not find it crucial to take Sarita’s consent. He channels his authority over his wife viciously and makes it evident to her that she is still in a subordinate position regardless of her professional pursuits. Even though Sarita tries to escape this situation but she ultimately realizes that she cannot be heedless towards her responsibilities and decides to reunite with Manohar.

Sarita’s feminine struggle gets accentuated when she pays a visit to her maternal house after a gap of fifteen years. Her visit to her father’s house is driven by the urge to flee from sexual sadism which her significant other inflicts upon her every night just to satisfy his male ego. During her sojourn at her father’s house, the reader gets acquainted with Saru’s troubled relationship with her father, husband, and dead mother. Since her adolescence, Sarita dodged gender-based separation not only in public consciousness but even in the domestic sphere. She grows up facing sexual bias as she is consistently reminded that she is mediocre in comparison to her sibling, Dhruva. Her mother’s indifferent behaviour toward her, makes her feel undesirable, unfortunate, and terrible. She gets reprimanded by her mother whenever she does something unusual, not in consonance with the codes of feminine traits, thus signifying the obstacles in the path of socio-cultural moulding of a young lady in Indian households. This void between the mother and the daughter gets extensive with the untimely demise of her younger brother Dhruva as her mother censures her by saying, “...why didn’t you die? Why are you alive when he’s dead?” (Deshpande 191).

Sarita’s hostility toward her mother reaches its pinnacle when she decides to betroth Manohar against her mother’s will. Saru had high hopes for her marital life and thought that she would live happily ever after with Manohar. But their relationship starts deteriorating when Sarita becomes a medical specialist. She gets so immersed in enjoying her newfound autonomous position that initially she does not locate any unusual change in Manohar’s behaviour. Gradually, it dawns upon her that Manohar is no exception to the male-centric culture.

Shashi Deshpande has analysed how women are systematically cornered and smothered in a male-dominated society by using the deterrence of marriage. “A wife must always be a few

feet behind her husband. If he's an M.A., you should be a BA. If he's 5'4" tall, you shouldn't be more than 5'3". If he's earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety-nine rupees. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage" (Deshpande 137). These lines aptly shed light on the concept that women are nothing but others. They get suppressed, and marginalized in every possible way. The institution of marriage, which represents equality for both the partners in all walks of life, becomes a drag for the female partner as she hopelessly wriggles for 'space' in marital life. Sarita's aspirations become the genesis of discord in her married life as she recalls: "He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband" (Deshpande 36).

*That Long Silence*, like *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, meticulously narrates the pathetic story of its protagonist Jaya Kulkarni, who finds herself caged in married life. Through this novel, Deshpande brings out the pitfalls of the institution of marriage by focusing on the tussle between traditional limitations and modern aspirations. The novel exhibits the story of Jaya Kulkarni who tries to strike an equilibrium between her individual self and the roles that are pre-defined by society on the basis of gender. From a tender age, she is continuously advised by her mother not to disobey her husband. She must act according to the wish of her husband, which she does by playing the position of an affectionate mother, dutiful to her in-laws, her spouse, and her children. In the whirlwind of responsibilities, she loses track of her own identity. Therefore, she feels neglected and subjugated in her married life and descends into despairing silence which further deteriorates her relationship with Mohan. Through this simple yet intricate storyline, Deshpande tries to dive deep into the perilous issues which are associated with marital discords, and raise concern about the very notion of love and marriage. S.P. Swain reiterates it: "A sensitive and realistic dramatization of the married life of Jaya and her husband Mohan, it portrays an inquisitive critical appraisal to which the institution of marriage has been subjected to in recent years" (Swain 87).

Though the story of the novel circles around the chaotic wedded life of its protagonist Jaya Kulkarni, it alludes to the shaded life of other minor female characters who are maltreated in marital relationships. To facilitate this, Deshpande showcases these female characters at two parallel levels in the novel - the plebeian women indulged in ignoble domestic chores for the sake of livelihood; and middle-class women of some pecuniary certitude. The novelist further dissects middle-class women into two classes: those who meekly capitulate themselves to their marriage and never raise their voices against the patriarchal atrocities; and those who do not yield to their fate by becoming mute spectators. Jaya falls under the second category of middle-

class women. Initially, she is not an exception in comparison to those subjugated women but as the story proceeds, we witness a drastic transformation in her personality.

The plebeian female characters are more vulnerable to marital atrocities as depicted in the novel. Their struggle commences even before they step into the marital setup due to hostile monetary circumstances. They are married off to anyone without their consent which brings unpropitious changes in their lives. The lives of Jeeja and Nayana, housemaids of Jaya, are quite pitiable. Their life is an unending tale of blood, sweat, and tears because they both are married off to drunkards, and are victims of maltreatment. Nayana is completely shattered and wants a son instead of a daughter because she does not want her daughter to face the same kind of humiliation and torture at the hands of some drunkard. Nayana says to Jaya, “Why give birth to a girl, behnji, who’ll only suffer because of men all her life? Look at me! My mother loved me very much, she wanted so much for me ... a house with electricity and water, shining brass vessels, a silver waist chain, silver anklets ... and what have I got? No, no, behnji, better to have a son (Deshpande 28).” Jeeja’s husband deserts her and ties the knot with someone else because she fails to give him a male heir. Jeeja happily yields to it without any protest. Tara is another such character who suffers the same fate because her husband is also a boozier who beats her. Her wedded life is so miserable as she always censures her husband by saying “So many drunkards die ... but this one won’t. He’ll torture us all to death instead” (Deshpande 53).

The plight of middle-class women is no better, they are educated and financially stable yet are the victims of socio-cultural domination in the marital frame. They are conditioned in such a way which demands them to be obedient and submissive to their husbands. Jaya used to be bubbly, jocular and inquisitive. But she gradually imbibes wife-like qualities and advises how a woman has no identity of her own other than her husband when Vanita mami exhibits, “Remember, Jaya ... a husband is like a sheltering tree .... Without the tree, you’re dangerously unprotected and vulnerable” (Deshpande 32).

After Jaya gets hitched to Mohan, she refrains from everything which hinders her from being Mohan’s model wife by transforming herself into a “stereotype of a woman: nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support” (Deshpande 76). Mohan expects his wife to compromise the way his mother does. He lectures Jaya by giving the example of his mother and how she never raised her voice against the bad behaviour of his father. As a result, Jaya succumbs to Mohan without revolt and chooses the mode of silence to show her frustration.

She mutely accepts when Mohan renames her Suhasini. The name 'Jaya' stands for 'Victory' and 'Suhasini' means "a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped" (Deshpande15-16). Jaya has to suppress her desires and aspirations after her marriage to Mohan. She wants to be a writer but ultimately gives up when Mohan advises against it. She feels quite helpless when she says, "I had relinquished them instead, all those stories that had been taking shape in me because I had been scared – scared of hurting Mohan, scared of jeopardizing the only career I had, my marriage" (Deshpande144).

At the end of the novel, Jaya ultimately realises her worth by breaking that wall of silence. She comes to terms that a significant conjugal relationship can only be obtained through discernment and empathy, not through domination, suppression, and rejection. Sarala Parker eloquently sums up the idea when she says: "The important insight that Shashi Deshpande imparts to us through Jaya is that women should accept their responsibility for what they are, see how much they have contributed to their victimization instead of putting the blame on everybody except themselves" (Parker 169).

### **Conclusion**

In brief, marriage as an institution under the rubric of patriarchy, aids in the submissive, subjugated, and marginalized position of women. Throughout life, a woman is consistently instilled with traits which make her an ideal for a good wife. Stepping inside the territory of wedded life impedes her growth as a woman. She is subjected to subordination and confined to performing gender roles which are designated by the society, and suffers humiliation and exploitation silently. The marginalization of women in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *That Long Silence* reflects their miseries, tumultuous experiences, and endurance which confine them to auxiliary levels, thus excluding them from the social, political, or economical spheres of life. Their glorious and admirable stature as reflected in religious scriptures is rendered ordinary and subjugated as manifest in the personas of Sarita and Jaya. Sandwiched between tradition and modernity, Deshpande's protagonists search for identity within marriage and moderately accept marginalized positions as ordained by tradition and patriarchy instead of assertively raising their voice, thereby signifying that the fight against the system is persistent, though long and arduous.



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