



# The Well and the Attic: Mapping Madness, Trauma, and Gender through Kusum in *That Long Silence*

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**Abstract**— This paper presents a critical re-reading of Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* through the theoretical framework of Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady*, the madwoman in the attic trope as depicted in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and contemporary feminist trauma theory. Focusing on the character of Kusum, the paper examines how madness in Deshpande's writing is not a personal or medical condition but a product of patriarchal oppression, familial betrayal, and the systematic silencing of women's suffering. By identifying Kusum as the Indian Bertha Mason, this analysis reveals how the archetype of the madwoman is reimagined in the Indian context to expose the cost of asserting agency and the consequences of non-conformity. The paper further investigates the intersection of class, gender, and trauma, underscoring how characters like Kusum - with limited agency - are marginalized within Indian families and society, their madness pathologised and their suffering erased. This study views Kusum's madness simultaneously as a symptom of insidious traumatising at the hands of a patriarchal society and as a form of resistance to it.



**Keywords**— *Madness, Patriarchy, Oppression, Trauma, Feminism, Pathologisation, Resistance.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Historically, the concept of madness has had an intertwining relationship with gender and power. In the Middle Ages, madness was viewed with a complex mixture of fear and awe, the causes of which were believed to be demonic possession or divine punishment, leading to the marginalisation of those deemed mentally deviant (Foucault 8). In the modern era, madness has been widely medicalised and pathologised, and its treatment and perception have exposed society's own notions of power and control (Scull 406). Michel Foucault, in his seminal work *Madness and Civilization*, propounds that madness, instead of being a natural phenomenon, has been societally constructed, driven by the need to define, exclude, and control that which escapes dominant notions of rationality. Those who were deemed 'mad' were not only physically separated and confined but also symbolically silenced by the dominant discourses of knowledge and power (Foucault 38).

This exercise of exclusion and control was by no means gender neutral. Elaine Showalter, in *The Female Malady*,

argues that madness had become a distinctly feminised condition in Western culture. Women were frequently labelled as hysterical, insane, or irrational, and their suffering was pathologised to reinforce patriarchal authority (Showalter 7). The archetype of the madwoman, as popularised in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* through the figure of Bertha Mason, embodied the cost of nonconformity but also emerged as a powerful symbol of resistance to oppression. Gilbert and Gubar's landmark study *The Madwoman in the Attic* extended this reading, positing that the madwoman is not merely a Gothic figure of horror but a double for the repressed and silenced woman writer herself. It is the repository of all that patriarchal culture refuses to name or accommodate.

This trope of the madwoman is further complicated in the Indian context, where it intersects with dominant structures of family, caste, class, and tradition. Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* forms a compelling lens through which the intersection of gender, madness, and trauma can be explored in modern Indian literature. While critical

attention has largely centred on the narrator-protagonist Jaya, the character of Kusum who is her neighbour and implicit counterpart has remained substantially underexplored. Throughout the novel, Kusum embodies the marginalisation, pathologisation, and erasure that women experience when they fail to conform to the patriarchal expectations of the dutiful Indian wife. This paper portrays Kusum as the Indian Bertha Mason: a figure whose destruction is engineered by the same social and familial forces that confine Jaya, yet who lacks the class and educational privilege that allow Jaya even the possibility of articulation. Drawing upon Showalter's *The Female Malady* and Gilbert and Gubar's madwoman trope, and in conversation with feminist trauma theory, the paper argues that Kusum's madness is both symptom and resistance. It is a legible, if painful, response to the insidious violence of a society that has no language for women's suffering beyond pathology.

## II. THEORISING THE MADWOMAN: SHOWALTER, GILBERT AND GUBAR, AND THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady* remains a foundational text for any feminist engagement with the history of psychiatric discourse. Showalter demonstrates that the asylum in Victorian England was a space not merely of medical treatment but of social discipline: a mechanism through which women who transgressed the boundaries of femininity — through anger, desire, independence, or grief — were removed from the social body and rendered speechless (17). The diagnosis of hysteria, in particular, was routinely applied to women whose only discernible 'symptom' was the refusal or inability to perform the domestic and emotional labour demanded of their gender. Madness, in this framework, is not a neutral medical category but a technology of patriarchal control (76).

Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* extends this framework into the domain of literary criticism, arguing that the figure of the madwoman in nineteenth-century women's writing functions as the author's own enraged double. Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* is the paradigmatic instance: locked in the attic, denied speech, characterised as bestial and monstrous, Bertha enacts, in the register of Gothic excess, everything that Jane is forbidden to feel or express. She burns, destroys, and finally hurls herself from the roof; her violence is the displaced violence of every woman who has been confined, controlled, and silenced. Gilbert and Gubar's insight is that this figure of monstrous excess is not the opposite of the domesticated, 'normal' woman but her dark twin who bears the cost of the very femininity that patriarchy demands (78).

Transposing this framework to the Indian context requires attention to the specific cultural mythologies through which women's conformity is enforced. Deshpande makes this conditioning explicit through Jaya's own internalised cultural archive. As Jaya reflects on the mythological ideals of 'Sita', 'Savitri', and 'Draupadi', she registers the weight these figures of wifely endurance place on her own choices. The 'Indian ideal woman' embodied in these mythological figures is defined by self-sacrifice and unwavering loyalty, and their stories, passed down across generations, have cumulatively normalised subjugation and self-effacement. Showalter's insight that society pathologises women who do not conform to socio-cultural norms finds its Indian corollary here: the woman who diverges from the Sita-Draupadi model is not merely unconventional but is perceived as deviant or mad.

## III. KUSUM AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF OPPRESSION: CLASS, GENDER, AND BETRAYAL

Kusum enters the narrative of *That Long Silence* as a peripheral but deeply unsettling figure: a woman already marked as 'difficult', already beyond the pale of respectable femininity. Her husband, Narayanrao, is a gambler whose failures are systematic and spectacular, and his neglect maps directly onto Kusum's progressive unravelling. Yet the novel refuses the comfortable reading in which Kusum is simply the victim of an individual bad man. Deshpande is meticulous in showing that the structures enabling Narayanrao's behaviour are entirely social. His neglect of Kusum is witnessed by the community, and yet its moral censure falls not on him but on Kusum — for not managing him better, for not bearing her suffering with sufficient grace, for eventually failing to maintain the performance of normalcy that is the primary obligation of the Indian wife.

The texture of Jaya's interactions with Kusum reveals how this community censure operates at the most intimate level. Jaya recalls visiting Kusum's flat and reacting with unconcealed disgust: "My God, Kusum, why have you let the place get so dirty? It stinks. Can't you at least open the window? And flush each time?" to which Kusum responds, "I pull the chain, but nothing happens" (Deshpande 14). It is a confession not merely of domestic failure but of complete physical and psychic depletion; she cannot manage even the most basic tasks. What is striking about Jaya's recollection of this moment, however, is the note of triumph and pleasure she registers in her own condescension. Jaya recalls "both my triumph and my pleasure in it" alongside Kusum's "crushed, bewildered face" (14). This moment crystallises Showalter's argument about the role of social policing in producing female

madness: the community's belittling attitude, its judgmental tone, its inability to perceive Kusum's incapacity as a symptom of distress rather than a moral failing, actively participates in Kusum's deterioration.

The question of class is inseparable from the question of madness here. Kusum lacks the cultural capital to manage and conceal her suffering in socially acceptable ways; her distress erupts visibly, and the community then mobilises that visibility to dismiss and pathologise her. Jaya's complex feelings towards Kusum, moving from childhood friendship to discomfort to pity, illuminate how class and gender intersect in the production of the 'madwoman'. Jaya, with her education and relative economic security, can internalise her suffering; Kusum, with no such resources, cannot. Betrayal by husband and family, and by society at large, has left Kusum disempowered and unable to engage with the mundane realities of life, and this disempowerment is itself then read as further evidence of her unfitnes.

The community's response to Kusum's illness reinforces this dynamic with particular clarity. Even after her death, Jaya notes, Kusum "aroused so much antipathy" (Deshpande 19). Jaya recalls Mohan's discouragement of taking Kusum ill when she fell ill on the grounds that she was not "our responsibility" (19). This refusal of care is framed not as callousness but as reasonableness: the family's burden is invoked, its limits acknowledged, its obligations defined narrowly enough to exclude a woman who has become inconvenient. The language of 'burden' and 'responsibility' here is precisely the language Showalter identifies in Victorian psychiatric practice. It is the language through which women are rendered manageable by being rendered disposable.

#### IV. THE INDIAN BERTHA MASON: CONFINEMENT, SILENCE, AND THE ERASURE OF SUFFERING

The parallel between Kusum and Bertha Mason is structural as much as thematic. Both figures represent the woman whom the dominant social order cannot accommodate, whose non-conformity must be confined and rendered invisible in order for the domestic order to continue. The community's characterisation of Kusum as "a maniac", overheard by Jaya and registered without challenge, is the moment at which Kusum's suffering is definitively converted into a diagnosis, her interiority extinguished by a label (Deshpande 20–21). This is the precise gesture that Showalter anatomises in *The Female Malady*: the conversion of a woman's suffering into a symptom of disorder, which simultaneously explains and dismisses her.

What distinguishes Kusum's confinement from Bertha's is its diffuse, informal character. There is no attic, no lock, no

single jailer. Instead, there is the accumulated weight of social pressure, economic dependency, familial indifference, and cultural expectation. The community remarks with disapproval that Kusum is "moaning and crying" and of "no use" (Deshpande 22). Her femaleness itself becomes the object of judgement: she is characterised as "unattractive" and "flat-chested", her body read as evidence of her inadequacy (Deshpande 20-21). These characterisations recall Showalter's observation that Victorian medical discourse routinely sexualised the pathologisation of women; the 'mad' woman was often also depicted as physically deficient, as if her mental deviance were written on her body.

The motif of silence is central to both Deshpande's novel and to the feminist theorisation of women's madness. Showalter argues that the Victorian psychiatric institution systematically stripped women of speech; in *That Long Silence*, this dynamic is reproduced through social rather than institutional means. Kusum's voice is suppressed not by a male doctor or a locked ward but by the accumulated indifference and shame of her community. Crucially, the novel also implicates Jaya in this suppression. Jaya's narration in the book also registers the violence of Kusum's situation with a clarity that is simultaneously sharp and limited. It is sharp because Jaya is herself a woman subject to many of the same forces but also limited because her own psychic survival depends, at some level, on not fully confronting what she sees. The 'long silence' of the title is not only Jaya's silence but Kusum's. It is the silence of every woman whose suffering has been rendered unspeakable by the social order that produced it.

#### V. MADNESS AS RESISTANCE: BEYOND PATHOLOGY

To read Kusum's madness solely as victimhood, however, is to reproduce the very interpretive violence that the novel critiques. Feminist theorists from Showalter to Phyllis Chesler have insisted on the double character of women's madness: it is simultaneously the product of oppression and a form of resistance to it. In *Women and Madness*, Chesler argues that the woman who 'goes mad' refuses, at some level, the demand that she continue to perform her own erasure. Her breakdown is a kind of terrible declaration that she will no longer absorb, without remainder, the violence directed at her (93).

In Deshpande's narrative, Kusum's eruptions constitute a form of counter-testimony. The community's verdict is that she is "of no use" and ought to be managed, contained, removed (Deshpande 22). But what Kusum's breakdown actually reveals, as Jaya records it, is a "vital truth" that Kusum's visible deterioration, her "moaning and crying",

her refusal of the composure expected of a dutiful wife, insist on being witnessed even when the community refuses to witness them (22). This is what Dori Laub, writing on trauma and witnessing in her essay “Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening” calls the testimony that takes place in the absence of a proper addressee: a speaking that cannot be heard within the available frameworks of understanding but that nonetheless constitutes a refusal of imposed silence. (57)

It is also significant that Jaya's own trajectory in the novel is shaped, in part, by her relationship to Kusum. Jaya's discomfort around Kusum, specifically her condescension, her instinct to distance herself, is a register of her own fear that Kusum's fate mirrors her own potential. Deshpande positions Kusum as Jaya's dark double in much the same way that Gilbert and Gubar position Bertha Mason as Jane Eyre's. Kusum embodies the fate that awaits a woman who has no language for her suffering and no social resources to sustain the performance of wellness. By refusing to let the reader rest comfortably in Jaya's perspective and by insisting on Kusum's presence even as the community erases it, Deshpande makes Kusum's suffering into an indictment of the same social structures that constrain Jaya.

Deshpande's deliberate refusal of narrative resolution for Kusum is itself a political gesture. Kusum does not recover, is not reintegrated, finds no redemption through suffering. Her fate is left suspended in ongoing, unresolved suffering that mirrors the unresolved violence of the conditions that produced it. The novel thereby refuses the double erasure that sentimentality would enact: the erasure of suffering through its neat narrative containment. Kusum's story ends not with resolution but with echo: the echo of a suffering that the community has chosen not to hear, and that the text insists the reader cannot unhear.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Kusum occupies a position of singular importance in *That Long Silence*, yet she has been largely overlooked in the critical literature on Deshpande's novel. Reading her through the framework of Showalter's *The Female Malady* and the madwoman trope illuminates not only the mechanisms of her oppression but the ways in which Deshpande's text uses her figure to expose the systemic violence that underlies even the most apparently ordinary domestic arrangements. Kusum is the Indian Bertha Mason: a woman whose non-conformity cannot be accommodated by the social order and who is therefore pathologised and rendered invisible. But she is also, in her refusal of silence and in the terrible visibility of her breakdown, a figure of oblique, costly resistance.

The intersection of class, gender, and trauma in Kusum's representation reveals the selective character of the community's sympathy and the class bias of its pathologisation. Women with education, economic security, and cultural capital, like Jaya, can manage their suffering in ways that remain socially tolerable; women without these resources, like Kusum, are left exposed to the full weight of the community's need to distinguish the 'normal' from the 'mad.' The community's language — ‘burden’, ‘responsibility’, ‘maniac’, ‘of no use’ — is not merely descriptive but constitutive. It produces Kusum's madness as a social fact by denying the suffering that underlies it.

Deshpande's novel insists, however, that this distinction is fictive: what separates Jaya from Kusum is not sanity versus madness but the unequal distribution of the social resources required to maintain the performance of sanity. The long silence of the title belongs to both women, and to every woman whose suffering has been rendered unspeakable by the social order that produced it. In recovering and reinterpreting Kusum's silenced voice, this paper seeks to contribute to a richer critical engagement with Deshpande's work and, more broadly, to the ongoing feminist project of retrieving the madwomen from the attics, and from the chawls, the neglected flats, the neighbourhoods of studied indifference, to which patriarchal literary and social history has consigned them.

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