

**MAI: SILENTLY MOTHER: SHOWCASING THE INTERNAL
STRUGGLE OF AN UPPER MIDDLE -CLASS WOMEN IN INDIA IN
GEETANJALI SHREE'S NOVEL**

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Abstract:

This research paper sincerely attempts to analyse the suffering of upper middle-class women in patriarchal societies, which is often characterised by quiet endurance, unrecognized sacrifices, and an imposed sense of duty. A middle-class woman's suffering is rarely loud or dramatic. It does not announce itself through rebellion or tragedy. Instead, it quietly settles into the fabric of her daily life- woven into unspoken expectations, endless responsibilities, and unnoticed sacrifices. Thus, suffering does not demand attention; rather, it is accepted, normalized and often expected. She bears the weight of an entire household on her shoulders, yet her existence often goes unnoticed. Her struggles are dismissed as mere duties, her sacrifices mistaken for love, and her silence assumed to be a sign of contentment. Though she is not physically beaten into submission or chained, she lives within an invisible prison built from expectations, obligations and the quiet erosion of her identity.

A woman experiences not only overt violence or clear oppression, but her suffering is also embedded in the everyday aspects of her life. Her identity is influenced by societal norms that dictate her role within the family, where love and duty often blend with oppression, making them difficult to distinguish. From the moment she wakes up, she enters a world that does not feel like her own. She moves through the kitchen, preparing meals before anyone else is even awakened. She tidies up the house, ensuring everything is in its proper place, although her efforts go unrecognised. The food appears on the table as if by magic, the clothes are washed and folded as if they cleaned themselves, and the household runs smoothly as if it requires no effort at all. Her labour is unpaid, unseen, and unappreciated. She is the backbone of the home, yet she remains in the background. If she falters, her work's absence is noticed- but not her suffering. In her suffering, there is also strength. She endures, loves and gives. Though the world may not always recognize her struggles, she continues on- not out of obligation, but by choice. This choice in itself is a testament to her resilience.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Oppression, Suffering, Identity, Resilience.

Introduction:

The suffering of middle-class women in patriarchal societies, emphasizing how their struggles are often marked by silent endurance, unrecognised sacrifices, and an imposed sense of duty, is widely prevalent in the contemporary world. Unlike suffering that manifests through rebellion or dramatic events, their pain is quiet, ingrained deeply in the fabric of their daily lives. Their struggles are not always visible and do not demand attention, instead, they become an accepted and normalized aspect of their existence. Women's suffering encompasses the physical, emotional, psychological, and social hardships that arise from systemic inequality, cultural expectations, and gender-based oppression. It is not always characterized by overt violence or dramatic events; instead, it often appears as silent endurance, unrecognized sacrifices, and the internalization of societal norms. In patriarchal societies, women's suffering is deeply ingrained in their everyday experiences, influencing their roles within the family, workplace, and public sphere. Women's suffering in patriarchal societies is deeply rooted in their roles as caretakers, nurturers, and bearers of responsibilities. One of the most persistent forms of this suffering is domestic and emotional labor, where women are often expected to manage household chores, childcare, and the emotional well-being of the family, frequently without recognition or compensation. Their contributions are viewed as natural duties rather than conscious efforts, which makes their labor invisible and unappreciated. Beyond the domestic sphere, gender-based oppression further limits women's autonomy by restricting their access to education, career opportunities, and decision-making power. Despite advancements in gender equality, women continue to face systemic discrimination that forces them into subordinate positions, reinforcing male dominance in both private and public realms. Adding to this burden are social and cultural expectations that link a woman's worth to her ability to fulfill the roles of a wife, mother, and caregiver. These traditional norms often suppress personal aspirations, making it difficult for women to pursue independent goals. The conflict between personal ambition and societal duty compels many women into lives where self-sacrifice is not only expected but also demanded. Such expectations lead to unrecognized sacrifices, where women give up their dreams, desires, and personal identities to fulfil societal roles. Their contributions—whether in the home or beyond—are often overlooked, reducing them to mere functions within a family rather than recognizing them as individuals with personal agency. Their sacrifices are frequently misconstrued as acts of love or duty, further obscuring their struggles. Additionally, psychological and emotional suppression conditions women to view silence as a virtue. Their resilience is often expected, their endurance normalized, and

their struggles rarely acknowledged. Over time, this suppression erodes their sense of self, making suffering seem like an inevitable part of their existence rather than a social injustice that needs to be challenged. Together, these interconnected forms of suffering define the lived experiences of many women, particularly in middle-class societies, where patriarchal values continue to shape their realities.

Geetanjali Shree's novel *Mai: Silently Mother* deals with the silent suffering of middle-class women in patriarchal societies. The novel originally written in Hindi and translated into English by Nita Kumar. It won the Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize in 2002. The novel is about a middle-class joint family. It represents three generations of women and their men living different strategies of adjustment and achievement to accommodate or challenge patriarchy. The novel shows a powerful literary representation of this reality. Middle-class women's suffering is often marked by quiet endurance, unnoticed sacrifices, and an ingrained sense of duty rather than overt rebellion or tragedy. It does not manifest in dramatic outbursts but instead weaves itself into their everyday existence, subtly eroding their identity while remaining largely unrecognized. '*Mai: Silently Mother*' epitomizes this quiet suffering through its protagonist, Mai, whose life reflects the struggles of countless women who exist within an invisible prison of expectations, responsibilities, and unspoken sacrifices.

Mai, like many women in patriarchal households, carries the burden of her family's well-being. Despite her relentless efforts, she often remains in the background, her presence recognized only when something goes wrong. Her struggles are dismissed as mere responsibilities, her sacrifices misinterpreted as expressions of love, and her silence mistaken for contentment. Although she is not physically restrained, she is constrained by societal norms that dictate her existence. Her suffering does not arise from a single act of oppression; rather, it is rooted in the very fabric of her daily life. Her labour is unpaid, unappreciated and expected rather than acknowledged. The novel vividly depicts how Mai's life is entirely consumed by the needs of others. From the moment she wakes up, she enters a world that is not her own. Her daily routine revolves around the kitchen, as she ensures that meals are prepared before anyone else rises. She tidies the house, maintaining a space that operates seamlessly, even though her contributions often go unrecognized. The household runs smoothly, not through magic but through her constant efforts- efforts that remain invisible to the family. They do not see her exhaustion; they only notice when she falters, such as when the food is late or the house is not as orderly as expected. Through the perspective of her daughter, Sunaina, the novel highlights how even those closest to Mai fail to understand the depth of her suffering. It is only later, with the passage of time and distance, that Sunaina begins to recognize her mother's pain- the way Mai's silence was not a sign of acceptance but of resignation. Sunaina's gradual realization serves as commentary on how society at large views women like Mai, acknowledging them only in retrospect when their suffering has already taken its toll.

Mai's oppression is not characterized by open rebellion but by quiet suffering and endurance. It is shaped by the expectations of her husband, children, and the larger social

framework that dictates how a mother should behave. Her struggle is internal, woven into the fabric of her daily life, where silence becomes both a burden and a strategy for survival. The novel presents Mai as a woman whose voice is often overlooked, whose desires are secondary to those of her family, and whose existence is defined by her ability to serve others. One of the most significant aspects of Mai's oppression is her silence. She rarely speaks for herself, allowing others to dictate her actions and emotions. However, her silence is not merely an act of submission; rather, it is a mechanism to preserve her dignity in a world that does not value her voice. Sunaina, the narrator and Mai's daughter, gradually comes to realize that her mother's silence is filled with meaning. She learns to read the unspoken words in Mai's expressions, gestures, and restrained body language, understanding that these communicate far more than spoken language ever could. In this way, the novel critiques a patriarchal system that forces women into silence, rendering their suffering invisible. Mai's struggle is further emphasized when she falls ill.

In a just society, illness should elicit care and concern; yet for Mai, it is treated as an inconvenience rather than a legitimate need. Despite her weakened condition, she is expected to continue her household duties as though her role as a caregiver is permanent and unchangeable. This moment is deeply symbolic—it underscores the relentless demands placed on mothers and reflects the emotional and physical exhaustion that Mai has long endured. Her sickness is not merely a bodily ailment; it is a manifestation of years of unacknowledged labour, representing the weight of responsibilities that have drained her, leaving little room for self-care. Mai's experiences are not isolated; they are part of a generational cycle of oppression that she has inherited from her mother-in-law. She has been shaped by a legacy in which women are conditioned to prioritize their families over themselves, sacrificing their needs for the comfort of others. The women before her suffered in the same way, bound by the same traditions, and in her silent endurance, Mai continues this cycle. However, the presence of Sunaina introduces a shift in this narrative. As a modern woman, Sunaina begins to question these deeply ingrained roles and struggles with the idea that her mother's suffering is not inevitable but constructed by societal expectations. This realization leads to an internal conflict between tradition and change—between the inherited endurance of Mai's generation and the growing awareness of Sunaina's. Through Mai's experiences, *Mai: Silent Mother* presents a powerful critique of the patriarchal structures that confine women to roles of self-sacrifice and silent suffering. Though Mai does not openly resist, her quiet endurance exposes the nature of her oppression, revealing the deep-rooted expectations that shape women's lives. Her illness, silence, and relationships with the other women in her family illustrate the cyclical nature of this struggle, making her story a poignant reflection on motherhood, sacrifice, and the search for self-identity. Sunaina's perspective offers hope for change, suggesting that while breaking free from these roles is not easy, awareness and questioning are the first steps toward challenging and dismantling them. The novel presents the story of Mai and her children, Sunaina and Subodh, as they try to help her. Mai is Babu's wife and the daughter-in-law of Dada and Dadi. She is also Sunaina and Subodh's mother, but to no one is she

more than these roles. Mai is always busy working and taking care of others without recognition.

The novel opens with the line, "We always knew Mother had a weak spine" (P-1). This could indicate a health issue or physical frailty. It also symbolises Mai's role in a patriarchal family structure. She is portrayed as bearing societal burdens and expectations, reflecting views of women as inferior.

"She was bent over right from the start, a silent spectre moving around, taking care of everyone's needs" (P-1). The phrase "bent over" symbolises the physical and emotional burdens Mai carries, reflecting her subservience and sacrifices for her family. This posture represents the weight of societal expectations placed on her as a mother and wife in a traditional household. Describing Mai as a "silent spectre" highlights her invisibility within the family. Despite her efforts, she remains unacknowledged, evoking the image of someone who exists but is not truly seen. Her silence raises questions about whether it is a form of quiet resistance or a result of societal norms. "Taking care of everyone's needs" emphasizes Mai's selfless dedication, prioritizing others over her desires and well-being. This dynamic reflects traditional expectations of mothers in patriarchal societies.

"Her helplessness hurt us even in our early childhood. Slowly, we begin to rescue her from everyone- from Dadi, from Babu, from Dada. But we could not save her from herself. When her spine failed her, the doctor also declared defeat. She would always be in pain, he said. We, of course, had known about this problem of hers with her backbone from the very beginning. The rest was later" (P-8). Mai felt helpless, especially when her children were young. This had a lasting effect on them. As they grew older, they tried to protect her, not just from people like Dadi, Babu, and Dada, but also from the weight of her responsibilities. Despite their efforts, they couldn't save her from her own habits of silence and self-sacrifice. Her health worsened, especially her back, which showed the struggles she faced throughout her life. When treatments didn't help, the doctor confirmed what the children had always sensed—Mai's pain never seemed to end. The final diagnosis showed a truth they had known since they were kids: her suffering had always been there, and the official acknowledgement of it was just a deeper understanding of her reality.

The narrator, Sunaina, reveals how society imposes restrictions on women, expecting them to conform to traditional roles. However, Mai, unlike others, does not enforce these limitations on Sunaina. Instead, she unintentionally allows a moment of freedom, symbolized by her pushing the curtain open before others can seal it shut. "Everyone was worried. Only Mai did not seem to care where I was, what I did. Everyone was anxious to put me behind the 'real parda', and she, as it were, accidentally pushed the curtain open before it could be stretched shut and closed tightly" (P-56). Her mother saved her from all the people who forced her to live behind the parda.

"This was yet another difference between Mai and me. Her flame went inwards, mine outwards. But there was a fire that burned in each case....." (P-56)

Mai and the narrator feel a similar pain, even though they are different. Both women struggle because they live in a society that limits them. They respond in different

ways, but the emotional burden they carry is the same. It shows how these pressures force women to either stay silent or rebel. No matter how they react, they will face challenges in their lives. This line presents how women are repressed and resisted in a patriarchal society. It shows that women cope with their struggles in different ways. Mai keeps her feelings inside and endures in silence, while the narrator shares her emotions and challenges social norms. The fire metaphor highlights their different reactions to oppression, representing the inner conflict and outward defiance women face in restrictive cultures. It points out generational conflict. Older women like Mai show endurance, while younger women seek change. Sunaina wants to convince her mother to leave their strict family situation so that Mai can find freedom. While Sunaina and Subodh criticise their mother for accepting traditional gender roles, they also follow these same roles by acting like typical children. Both siblings love their mother deeply and want the best for her, but they have trouble seeing her as a person beyond her roles as a wife, daughter-in-law and mother.

This novel powerfully depicts how the protagonist, like many married women in patriarchal societies, is forced to cut ties with her paternal family. Mai's in-laws strictly control her, discouraging any contact with her relatives to maintain their dominance over her life. This separation is not just physical but also emotional, as Mai is pressured to abandon her roots and identity.

When Mai's family tries to visit, they are met with insults and humiliation. Her in-laws openly question her loyalty, reinforcing the belief that a married woman must devote herself entirely to her husband's family. This deliberate isolation highlights the power imbalance in traditional Indian households, where women often lose their independence and connections to their birth families after marriage.

Despite her struggles, Mai's endurance stands as a testament to her quiet resilience. She does not openly rebel against her circumstances, nor does she vocalize her suffering. Instead, she continues to fulfil her responsibilities with unwavering commitment. Her perseverance is not merely a result of external pressure; it arises from an internal sense of duty and love. Mai does not view her sacrifices as imposed upon her but rather as an integral part of her identity—a role she has come to accept without question. However, the novel subtly challenges this notion of acceptance. While Mai appears to make these sacrifices willingly, it raises the question of whether her choices are truly voluntary or shaped by lifelong conditioning. Her silence, endurance, and devotion reflect not just personal traits but also deeply ingrained societal norms dictating how a woman should behave. The blurred line between choice and compulsion is central to understanding Mai's character. Through this nuanced portrayal, the novel compels readers to question the nature of agency in a patriarchal world. While Mai's endurance may be seen as a strength, it also highlights the quiet tragedies faced by countless women who mistake societal conditioning for personal will. Her resilience, although admirable, reveals the subtle ways in which oppression disguises itself as tradition, duty, and even love.

Geetanjali Shree's writing style is crucial in highlighting the struggles and silent endurance of Mai's life. Instead of presenting a straightforward narrative, the novel is

structured in a fragmented manner, moving between different memories and perspectives. This disjointed structure mirrors Mai's reality—she has lived a life where her emotions, desires, and individuality have been suppressed for so long that they only surface in scattered moments. Just as her identity has been shaped by societal expectations, the novel's structure reflects how her story is pieced together through the perspectives of others, particularly her daughter, Sunaina. Occasionally, glimpses of clarity regarding Mai's inner world emerge, but they are quickly overshadowed by the societal norms that have influenced her life. Shree's language is both poetic and deeply realistic. She captures the emotional turmoil of Mai's existence through a stream-of-consciousness style, particularly in Sunaina's reflections. This technique allows readers to experience Sunaina's shifting emotions as she tries to understand her mother's quiet suffering. Through this internal monologue, we witness Sunaina wrestling with the contradictions in Mai's life—the contrast between her quiet, obedient exterior and the unspoken pain she has endured. Mai's speech is often simple and restrained, but beneath it lies a depth of emotions that remain unexpressed. This contrast between her spoken words and her unspoken thoughts emphasizes the silent resilience that defines her character. One of the most striking stylistic choices in the novel is the recurring imagery of confinement. Mai is frequently depicted within enclosed spaces, such as the kitchen, the bedroom, or the narrow boundaries of her marriage and societal role. These physical spaces serve as symbols of her restricted autonomy. The kitchen, for instance, is not merely a place where she prepares food; it represents the traditional domestic role she has been assigned—a space where she is expected to serve others rather than nurture her own desires. Similarly, her bedroom, which could have been a space for rest and personal reflection, becomes another site of constraint, reinforcing her role as a wife within the limits of her marriage. Even as Mai moves through different phases of her life, she remains confined within the invisible walls created by social norms and family expectations.

Through these stylistic choices, Shree allows readers to deeply empathize with Mai's struggles. The fragmented structure, poetic yet stark language, and imagery of confinement work together to create a powerful representation of her reality. By experiencing the novel through these shifting perspectives and reflections, readers not only witness Mai's oppression but also gain insight into how she silently navigates and resists her constrained world. Shree's storytelling does not offer easy resolutions; instead, it invites readers to reflect on the deep, often unnoticed struggles of women like Mai, who endure, resist, and exist within the margins of a patriarchal society.

Conclusion:

"Mai: Silently Mother" offers a powerful reflection on the entrenched struggles middle-class women face in India. Geetanjali Shree's portrayal of Mai reveals the oppressive grip of patriarchy and societal norms that dictate a woman's life. Mai's journey is not characterised by overt rebellion or dramatic acts of defiance; rather, it showcases a profound resilience, where resistance manifests in subtle and often overlooked ways. Her character embodies the multitude of women who, despite their sacrifices, continue to

navigate a world where they often feel invisible and voiceless within their own homes. The novel highlights the pervasive influence of patriarchal structures that confine women to predefined roles, such as dutiful daughters, obedient wives, and self-sacrificing mothers. These roles, glorified by tradition, strip women of their individuality, forcing them to find their worth in serving others rather than in pursuing self-fulfilment. Mai's life, dictated by the needs of those around her, mirrors the experiences of many women who have been conditioned to believe their identity is secondary to their familial duties. Her silence does not signify contentment; instead, it reflects a centuries-old expectation that women must endure without complaint.

"*Mai: Silently Mother*" is not just a critique of oppressive structures; it also highlights the resilience and quiet strength of women. Mai does not conform out of weakness; rather, she demonstrates a profound understanding of survival. Her endurance, often overlooked, serves as a form of defiance—a refusal to succumb to the overwhelming weight of expectations. The novel illustrates the complexity of this endurance, emphasizing that suffering and strength can coexist. Mai, like many women, continues to exist, function, and hold her family together, even as her contributions often go unrecognized. As contemporary society evolves, the themes in 'Mai' remain strikingly relevant. Although gender roles are changing, women still face core struggles in seeking recognition, autonomy, and personal freedom within their families and society. Today, many women find themselves navigating the challenge of balancing personal aspirations with traditional responsibilities. They often feel torn between their duties and desires, as well as the expectations of societal approval and their own need for self-expression. In this context, "*Mai: Silently Mother*" serves as an important exploration of identity and agency, encouraging readers to examine how cultural norms influence women's lives. By shedding light on these silent struggles, the novel urges society to acknowledge the sacrifices of middle-class women and to reconsider the systems that maintain their invisibility. It challenges readers to go beyond mere sympathy and advocate for active change. We must recognize that women's endurance should not be romanticized but questioned. A woman's worth should not be determined by her ability to suffer in silence; rather, it should be based on her right to exist as an individual with her dreams, desires, and voice.

In conclusion, *Mai: Silently Mother* is not just a depiction of the struggles faced by middle-class women; it is a call to dismantle the structures that enforce their silence. The work advocates for the creation of a world where a woman's identity is defined not by her sacrifices but by her agency. It emphasizes that women should not merely be supporting figures in the lives of others but the protagonists of their own stories.

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