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The Sound of Silence in Shashi Deshpande's that Long Silence

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Abstract

The emergence of women novelists has considerably influenced Indian life and society. The depiction of women reflects a shift in the sensibility of the writer as well as the reader. Indian writers in English have made the most significant contribution to the field of fiction. The representation of women in literature is felt to be one of the most important forms of socialization. Women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Anita Desai, Gita Mehta, Githa Hariharan, Namita Gokhala, Bharati Mukherjee, Nina Sobal, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De and Manju Kapur have successfully and skillfully captured the Indian ethos. They deal with the various themes of clash between tradition and modernity, identity crisis, east west conflict and traumatic experience of women under the pressure of patriarchy. Shashi Deshpande is a well known social critic. Her novels disclose her social concerns. Her novels discuss the feminist issues and their silent struggle for their identity. Her novel *That Long Silence* focusses on psychological, emotional and social implication of being a wife in the patriarchal culture. The novel portrays the psychic journey of a women called Jaya. She strives hard to create a female space for herself in a male dominated world.

Key words :Emergence, Social concerns, Feminine issues, Psychic journey, Female space

Research Objectives

- * To examine the representation of silence as a metaphor for women's oppression and self-expression in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*.
- * To analyse the psychological and emotional journey of Jaya in her search for identity within a patriarchal social structure.
- * To explore the ways in which patriarchal family structures shape the roles, identities, and aspirations of women in the novel.
- * To interpret the novel from a feminist literary perspective by examining themes such as identity, gender, marriage, and self-realization.
- * To evaluate Shashi Deshpande's contribution to Indian feminist literature through her portrayal of women's lived experiences.

Shashi Deshpande occupies a prominent position among Indian women writers. She has sensitively treated typical Indian themes and portrayed contemporary middle class women with rare competence. Deshpande was born on 19 August 1938 at Dharwar, India. She is the daughter of a famous Kannada playwright Adya Rangacharya. She had her early education in Dharwar. She graduated from Elphinstone College, Mumbai. She took her M.A. in English Literature from Mysore University. Initially she worked for the magazine "Onlooker". She wrote her first short story "The Legacy" for the "Onlooker Annual" in 1970. She received the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for *That Long Silence* in 1990. Deshpande identifies *That Long Silence*, as the most autobiographical of all her writings, not in the personal details but in the thinking and ideas. She pinpoints specifically the autobiographical element.

There's Jaya's feeling that she has had to suppress the intellectual part of herself. She knows that she is very intelligent young woman in a very conventional marriage; she wants to make her marriage a success, fit into the role of wife, so she cuts out those parts that do not fit. All that to some extent is autobiographical. The struggle not to reveal oneself in one's writing as in *That Long Silence* is partly autobiographical as well (19).

The search for a new identity is at the centre of a feminist viewpoint and Deshpande states that her novels "reflect [ed] feminist ideas right from the start" (19). G.S. Amur also points out in the preface to 'The Legacy and Other stories' "woman's struggle, in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find her identity as wife, mother and, most important of all, as human being is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer, and this appears in all her important stories." (313). The question of identity never faced the Indian woman in the manner it does now, because tradition has defined her roles as daughter, wife and mother, always under the protection and power of a man. The educated Indian woman feels suffocated in this constricting social set-up. Despite her changing social status the social demands impinge upon her and so she finds it difficult to break away from these relationships. But with the chang-

ing scenario women writers like Shashi Deshpande have become aware of the new Indian woman's position and through their writings and have tried to show the need for social change. Social conformity has always been more obligatory for a woman than for a man. Generally, a woman's identity tends to be defined by others in terms of her relationship with men, i.e., as a wife, as a mother, etc. The question "what a woman does" is never asked, but "who she belongs to" is always considered important. She doesn't have an identity of her own. Her name keeps on changing according to the wishes of others. In *That Long Silence* the writer has presented this phenomenon through the character of Jaya, the protagonist.

The novel opens with Jaya and her husband Mohan shifting from their well-settled, comfortable house to their old house in Dadar, Bombay, where they had stayed immediately after getting married when their condition was not good. They shift into their old apartment in order to escape the scene as Mohan has been caught in a business malpractice and an inquiry is in progress. Here, in a small old flat, Jaya gets out of touch with her daily schedule and becomes an introvert. She sits deep in contemplation, thinking of her childhood and tries to analyze herself. As Adele King in her book review says: "Jaya finds her normal routine so disrupted that for the first time she can look at her life and attempt to decide who she really is." (97). Dissatisfied with her married life, she recalls her past days, her upbringing, the environment in which she was brought up.

Memories plunge in often linked by the ambivalent association of ideas. Each incident, a mini-story, a fiction in itself, imparts an unexplored vision to the narrative. The dejections and disappointments of unrequited selfhood, the illusions and pining of love and the yearnings for companionship make up the stream of Jaya's consciousness. Recalling the ions of her split self-entangled in her memory, she creates a world of harmony, a world of fantasy. Understanding, authentic selfhood and a composite self: "Ours has been a delicately balanced relationship, so much so that we have even snipped off bits of ourselves to keep the scales on an even keel". (TLS 7).

It's customary in Maharashtra to change the name of the Bride when she gets married

which means a change of identity. Jaya's father named her Jaya which means victory. He wanted her to be different from the other girls who are trained to be wives and mothers. But her husband rechristens her as Suhasini a 'soft, smiling, placid motherly woman.....who lovingly nurtured her family....a woman who coped. (TLS 16). Both the names symbolize two traits of her personality. The former symbolizes revolt and the latter submission. The dreams of her achieving her goals, are shattered by the environment, the surroundings, childhood, to change the ascribed situation of woman resulting in and above all by the society which imposes all sorts of restrictions on women. She is absolutely helpless and is unable to do anything to improve her situation. She revolts in silence. Ultimately, she tries to adapt herself to the main current. She comments on a situation when her husband talks about women being treated very cruelly by their husbands and he calls it "strength": "He saw strength in the women sitting silently in front of the fire, but I saw despair. I saw despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender". (TLS 36)

Indira Bhatt says that Jaya is basically a modern woman rooted in tradition, whereas her husband Mohan is a "traditionalist rooted in customs" (40). Her husband assumes that she would be with him through thick and thin. Though Jaya has been educated and influenced by the modern thought of the west and other advanced countries, and is herself a writer, she still wants to compare herself with the image of sita, Draupadi, and other ideal mythological characters. She has exemplary mythical women who she is expected to emulate. Her acquiescence in her husband's fraudulent dealings is taken for granted. She has to be Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupati stoically sharing her husband's travails' (TLS 11). The self is stifled in her conformity to traditional models of womanhood and female ethics. Society has given them a language of symbols of defining their identity on the basis of gender.

Male dominance and authority are represented through Mohan, Jaya's husband. Mohan is

described as the 'head', the 'Sturdy oak' of the family. He prefers to marry Jaya because she could speak good English and make "an educated cultured wife" and would help his success in society. Jaya has to adjust all her life-style to suit Mohan's tastes. She has cut her hair short and follows the modern trend in dressing. Her original style of writing has given place to fashionable and frivolous writing. Jaya's talent, according to Mohan, is not her personal trait, but his own asset to raise his social status. His image of a wife is what he had seen in his mother in his growing years, silence and surrender. Jaya's marriage is a string of long silence. Mohan is a dutiful son, husband, father and brother. But Jaya does not have such identifies. She is assigned to stay, look after her babies and keep out of the world that is safe. Her art of writing becomes a world of illusion to her after marriage. She regrets: "To Mohan I had been no writer only an exhibition (TLS 144).

The question, "Who am I?" (TLS 24) haunts her so obsessively that she fails to find herself. She is "an utter stranger, a person so alien that even the faintest understanding of the motives of her actions seemed imposes impossible" (TLS 69). Hence she cries. "I can't cope, I can't manage, I can't go on" (TLS 70). In such a stifling and suffocating domestic ambience and patriarchal set-up, she finds her female identity effaced. Her feminine dilemma is expressed in her vacillating state of mind: "I could and couldn't do, all the things they were womanly and unwomanly [...]" (TLS 83). Jaya is Suhasini and also "Seeta." The pseudonym she assumes to write columns about the plight of the middle-class housewife. Both "Suhasini" and "Seeta" are as Jaya says, "the many selves waiting to be discovered [...]" each self-attached like a Siamese twin to self of another person, neither able to exist without the other" (TLS 69). Hence if life is "to be made possible" (TLS 193), she is to live neither a "Suhasini" nor "Jaya," nor as "seta" or "antikusum." She is to live but not in fragments.

The fact that Jaya is rechristened as Suhasini by her husband on their wedding day confuses Jaya in her search of identity. The pseudonym under which she operates as a writer further complicates the issue. 'Jaya' stands for revolt and 'Suhasini' symbolizes submission. Jaya's

identity is never certain. She is torn between being Jaya herself and Suhasini the good wife; between building a self as a writer, a wife and mother. Through the process of reliving the past in her mind, she gets the guidance for her future. She decides to break her long silence and gives up being passive and silent partner to Mohan. She decides to assert herself as an individual and also as a woman, a wife and a mother. Though she chooses to remain in the family, a change has been wrought in her situation. She comes out of the confining slots allotted to her by the patriarchal society. Earlier she denies certain parts of herself that doesn't fit into jacket of 'wifedom' she asserts:

I am not afraid anymore. The panic has gone. I'm Mohan's wife I had thought cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife now I know that kind of fragmentation is not possible. The child hands in pockets, has been with me through the years. She is still with me. (TLS 191).

It seems as if her identity as a woman, a wife and mother had only been linked to acquisition and caring for possessions and the house. Deprived of a house with artifacts, and without children, Jaya loses the one identity she had constructed to please and conform to the notion of wife and mother, "My own career as a wife was in jeopardy. The woman who had shopped and cooked, cleaned, organized and cared for her home and her family with such passion... Where had she gone? We seemed to be left with nothing but our bodies and after we had dealt with them we faced blankness... nothingness with this 'clean slate and freedom, Jaya tries to find her real self, difficult and bewildering because 'ten different mirrors show you ten different faces'". (TLS 192) At the end of the novel she realises to relinquish her halo. She ponders:

A mother? Despairingly I relinquished my halo. No, I had been unfit to be trusted with the entire responsibility of another human being. How had I dared to take on it? Mohan's wife, Rahul's and Rati's mother - I can crawl into that hole, I had thought, a warm and safe hold; but here I was prodded out of it by cruel, sharp staves (TLS 173)

That Long Silence is an individual's journey in search of one's self who confronts the gen-

der oriented tradition. It portrays the conflict in the mind of the narrator and Mohan's traditional outlook. It deals with Jaya's self realization, stripped bare of the construct of wife and motherhood, starting on a 'clean slate. She reflects on her identity of being a woman and of ending a long silence. The seventeen long years of silence of Jaya is a period of self-introspection of the woman to explore her identity.

Jaya looks for happiness and self-fulfilment within the family itself. She asks for her individuality to be valued equally along with that of man. Jaya is confident of her individuality and hopeful of a change in Mohan's attitude. She moves beyond cultural stereotypes with the firm conviction that life has always to be made possible. The novel has such an optimistic ending. *That Long Silence*, shows that the day is not far off when men and women are valued equally and they are complementary to one another in a world where life sans gender, inequality ensures unsullied dignity, individuality and self-respect to women. Deshpande portrays the new Indian woman and her dilemma in her novels. She concerns herself with the plight of modern Indian woman trying to understand herself and to preserve herself and to preserve her identity as a wife, mother and above all a human being.

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