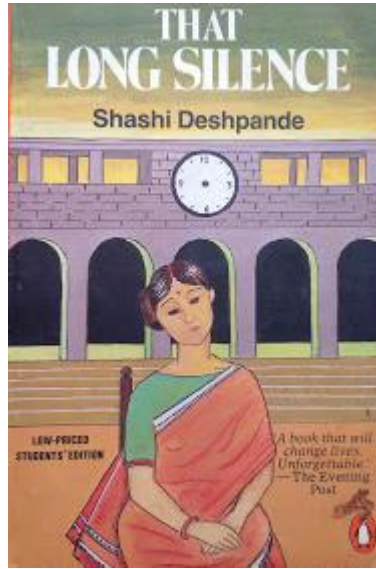


Resonance of the Silence in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande occupies a prominent place among the Indian English Novelists through her vivid portrayal of middle class Indian women and their sufferings. She focuses mainly on the career women and their quest for identity in the male chauvinistic Indian social set up. *That Long silence* is not an exception to this.

Jaya, the protagonist of this novel, goes in search of individuality, but feels helpless within the family itself which excludes her. Though she is an educated woman, she is not exempted from patriarchal domination. She leads a life of a victim after her marriage. Her marital life also places her in the narrow space where she is swiftly caught in the trap. Eventually she prepares herself to face life as it is. In the novel *That Long Silence*, we see how Deshpande skillfully depicts Indian middle-class educated women with a note of realism and optimism. The novel also implies a vital symbolic suggestion that the silence is not in the inner mind, but within

one's own conscience. This paper attempts to look deep into the problems of educated Indian women of the middle-class, especially as presented by Deshpande.

Key words: career women, male chauvinistic, patriarchal domination, feminism, Long Silence

Literature – Art, Morality and Social Reform

Literature is a truthful expression of life through the medium of language. Its success lies in blending both art and morality in such a beautiful way that art, in the long run, becomes the thought. It reflects not only social reality, but also shapes the complex ways in which men and women organize themselves and their perception of the socio-cultural reality.

Over the centuries, literature has been used as a social forum in which gender based discriminations in the society and the torture inflicted on women in general are expressed. The writers who have expressed such problems of suffering women are, Kamala Markandeya, Ruth Jhabvala, Kiran Desai and Shashi Deshpande. These women writers constitute a major segment of contemporary Indian Writing in English and most of them have used fiction as a medium of expression to present the plight of women.

Feminism and Feminist Literary Criticism

The term *Feminism* was first used by the French novelist-dramatist, Alexandre Dumas, in the nineteenth century in a pamphlet 'L' Homme Femme' to designate the then emerging movement for women's rights. It emerged to be a worldwide cultural movement for women's right to secure a complete equality with men in the enjoyment of all human rights - moral, religious, social, political, educational, legal, economic, and so on.

The feminist's literary criticism has developed as a part of the women's movement and its effect has brought about a revolution in literary studies. The objective of feminism is to wake up the female gender and it is the right time to come out of the shadows. As a part of feminism, the concept of 'new woman' came into existence. The 'New Woman' is primarily a woman of awareness, who is conscious of her low position in the family and society.

Shashi Deshpande's Novels

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Unlike other writers, Shashi Deshpande shows variations in her novels. She does not want to decorate the unreal happenings. The main motive of Shashi Deshpande is to bring out the sufferings of middle-class women by probing deep into the understanding of their known and unknown problems. She has shown the differentiation in a clear manner. Through her novels, she deliberately insists freedom for the Indian women within the Indian socio-cultural value system and institutions. Her feminism doesn't uproot the woman from her background but tries to expose the different ideological elements that shape her. The protagonists of Shashi Deshpande's novels are modern, educated, independent women, and aged between thirty and thirty-five. They search for freedom and self-identity. All her novels follow an identical structure. Her focus point is mainly on the woman within the marital and domestic relationship.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the renowned novelists writing in English in the sub-continent. She has added a new dimension to the Indian novel in English by expressing the inner reality of women. She is the second daughter of the famous Kannada dramatist and writer, Shiranga. She was born in 1938 in Karnataka and was educated in Bombay and Bangalore. Her first collection of short stories was published in 1978, and her first novel is **The Dark Holds No Terrors** in 1980. Almost all her novels deal with a crisis in the heroine's life - Saru (**The Dark Holds No Terrors**, 1980), Indu (**Roots and Shadows**, 1983), Jaya (**That Long Silence**, 1988), Urmi (**The Binding Vine**, 1993), Sumi (**A Matter Of Time**, 1996), Madhu (**Small Remedies**, 2000), and Manjari (**The Moving On**, 2004). She maintains a unique position among her contemporaries through her vivid portrayal of characters and their inner conflicts.

Focus on Women

Deshpande has won the Sahitya Akademi Award, for her novel *That Long Silence*. Her works also include children's books. Her novels present a social world of many complex relationships. In her novels, many men and women live together though they belong to different age groups, classes and they perform different roles. Her attention is mainly on the Indian Woman, her routine role in the household and society. Deshpande firmly believes that a change will take place in the mind of women to fight against the domination of men. In depicting Indian middle class educated women, Deshpande shows a note of realism and optimism.

Focus on Female Psyche

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Shashi Deshpande, has emerged as a writer possessing deep insight into the female psyche. Focusing on marital relationships, she seeks to expose the tradition by which a woman is trained to play her dumb role in the family. She writes about the situation of women and their failures in the fast changing socio-economic atmosphere of India. She writes about the conflict between tradition and modernity in relation to women in middle class society. She portrays modern, educated and career-oriented middle class women, who are quite sensitive to the eternally changing time and situations. Deshpande's protagonists plan to assert their identity from patriarchal society. Shashi Deshpande, through her novels, shows women willing to take their share of the blame for their problems and courageously face the situation. Most of her women characters are able to transcend their identity crisis by analyzing their childhood and the process of their upbringing.

Socialization of Indian Girls

In the Indian social set up, the 'socialization' of a girl for her future part as wife and mother begins in early childhood. This process has been imposed on women through myth, legends, folklores and rituals. Women are forced to accept the patriarchal domination from their childhood to death. This imposition of power becomes more powerful after marriage. A woman is supposed to break up all the ties between herself and her family. She cannot claim her right over the family property in reality, as it is a traditional practice of the family to make its male members inherit its property and enjoy it. The reason is that the property should not go outside of the family. This sort of ideal thought was shown in the early novels of Shashi Deshpande. The girl child was asked to practice the household activities, do all the chores, whereas the boys were free to do as they pleased. The story of Deshpande's protagonists always start at the critical point where despite 'total' freedom and total surrender to the expectations of their husbands, they stay disconnected and are made unhappy. They wish to fine-tune themselves. They are in the need of a change. Shashi Deshpande wants her character to give expression to her mind and self. Her characters are not mouthpieces of her, but emerge as real women. It is worthy to note that Indian women are also voicing their desire to emancipate, to get rid of the restrictions imposed on them and the prevailing discriminations against them. She is the one of the contemporary writers who concentrates more on the dual oppression experienced by career-women.

Focus on Modern Indian Women in *That Long Silence*

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is mainly concerned with the state of the modern Indian woman who is constantly trying to know herself. The silence of an Indian housewife is the major concern in this novel. The inner conflict in Jaya is expressed in the novel, at the same time there is a quest for identity. Shashi Deshpande's success lies in her representation of real life experiences. Jaya is a well-educated and cultured woman. She leads a quiet life. The novel is about a married couple, Jaya and Mohan. Jaya is the heroine as well as hero of the novel.

That Long Silence could be read as crystallization of memory and catharsis. It is an autobiographical narrative of Jaya. Jaya's stream of consciousness forms the novel. Jaya is in a crucial point, when the novel begins. Her husband Mohan suspected of business malpractice, has withdrawn with her to a small suburban flat in Bombay. Despite her marriage to Mohan and subsequently becoming the mother of two children, she was lonely. Her husband could not understand her feelings as a result of which she was torn from within. She describes her marriage as a "a pair of bullocks yoked together... A man and woman married for seventeen years." (*That Long Silence*, 8)

Jaya's Life-story

When Jaya begins her married life, she strives hard to bind herself into the traditional mold. (*Akther*, 53) Shashi Deshpande shows Jaya assume two different roles to represent her real self and assumed personality. After marriage, Jaya looks very different. Even her name is changed to Suhasini. Jaya has been leading a fancy and luxurious life with Mohan. They were a good couple with two children. Jaya was a good wife for her husband. Jaya is a bold young woman before and after marriage. Mohan and Jaya set family in Church Gate, the fashionable square. Mohan is forced to make certain compromises with his superiors to further his career. But his main ambition for all career adjustment is the happy success of his family. Mohan puts the blame on Jaya for all his difficulties. Jaya is flummoxed by his reaction. Jaya's knowledge of Mohan's crisis makes her wonder about their future.

There is vagueness. Jaya and Mohan have sent their children for a family tour. The children are unaware of the family's crisis. Jaya's son Rahul is missing from the family. He has

run away somewhere. Jaya is deeply in worry about the school after vacation. Jaya becomes terribly ill. She recovers by friendly nursing by her servant. Jaya also remembers the many happy moments with her family as well as ancient members. She recollects her nice blending with Mohan in her married life. Jaya is fair to her family. She is an ideal wife in her environment. At the height of her troubles, she receives news that Rahul is back and gets a telegram stating 'All's Well' from her husband Mohan.

'Two bullocks yoked together –that was how I saw the two of us the day we came here. I have always thought – there's only one life, no chances of a reprieve, no second chance'. (*That Long Silence*, 191-92)

Marriage – Almost an Enslaving Institution

Marriage becomes almost an institution enslaving women to a lifetime of male dominion- "marriages never end, they cannot – they are a state of being" (*That Long Silence*, 127). Jaya was deeply distressed to know that the writer in her could not come to the light because of her husband. She says: "I had known then that it hadn't mattered to Mohan that I had written a good story." When she writes a true story, her husband protests: "Jaya how could you, how could you have done it? They will all know now, all those people who read this and know us, they will know us, and they will know that these two persons are us." (*That Long Silence*, 143-44)

Waiting in Silence

Therefore, she quits writing. Jaya had taught herself to wait in silence, to accept her husband's desires mutely. After this mental inactivity, she feels bewildered when faced with the challenge to be herself: "To know what you want I have been denied that Even now I do not know what I want." (*That Long Silence*, 25) Jaya's creativity provides her an outlet for her frustration. Mohan also takes pride in his writer wife, but wants her to write non-controversial neutrals only. The thought of failing as a writer had enfeebled her, but she blames it on the restrictions imposed on her creativity by Mohan. Suppression of creativity frustrates her. She is not able to go beyond the social conditioning and somehow believes that a woman's choice, independent of that of her husband, should not have a significant role in her life. Her thwarted

creativity and attempts to acquiesce to Mohan's desires generate a feeling of guilt in her, which makes her social poise, somewhat artificial.

"We don't change overnight. It's possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything to know now it is this: life has always to be made possible." (*That Long Silence*, 193)

Consequence of Repression of Anger

Psychologically speaking, when repression of anger continues for a long time, ego-self crisis reaches its climactic point (i.e., ego's identification, with self is at its climax) and there is a danger of extinction. Encounter with death is the possibility. It may sometimes lead one to suicide. This stage may also result in the re-orientation of the total personality. A new consciousness may emerge. In psychological terms, a fresh relationship between ego and self may be established.

A Victim of Ego-inflation

Jaya in *That Long Silence* is a victim of "ego-inflation" on account of the lenient way her parents in brought her up. She is a convent-educated girl with a sense of being unique and extraordinary. In her childhood, there was her father's commitment to her demands and encouragement to her as a privileged daughter, on the one hand; and on the other, the traditional archetypes of Sita, Gandhari and Maitreyee, which reside in her unconscious mind, having been indoctrinated as a growing girl by mother and others, clash with her other self. This creates tensions in her married life. She feels let down by her family and by her husband. Jaya undergoes the same experience when Mohan angrily leaves the house. She feels deserted. An utter loneliness darkens her life and she is miserable. Silence fails to be the protective shield and there is close contact with the idea of death. But she is conscious of Kusum, her alter ego whose madness led her to death. Jaya escapes suicide but goes hysteric: "I must not laugh. I must not laugh." (*That Long Silence*, 122) It is at this stage that the tension formed out of two disparate selves, dissolves. Out of her anguish, her long suppressed anger, she goes out of her house and in an unconscious state walk aimlessly in the streets of Bombay. But her hysteria as a defense

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mechanism fails and ends in futility. "Finally totally exhausted, I'd gone back home." (*That Long Silence*, 191)

Education of Freedom of Action

Being a convent-educated, English-speaking girl, encouraged to be a free person by a loving father, she feels suffocated and trapped in the traditional Sita role, defined in the patriarchal society. The transformation of a shrewd and creative woman like Jaya is a great loss to society as her innate talents are confined to the kitchen and household chores where she becomes "a soft smiling, placid motherly woman. A woman who coped", (*That Long Silence*, 15-16) the role suggested by the mellifluous name "Suhasini" given to her by her husband Mohan at the time of her marriage. She refuses to surrender her name Jaya (victory) for Suhasini (*Tamanna*, 622). However, she cannot afford to insist on that for long because, quite at an early age, she was taught that her husband is a tree of protection, a security, and the master. Jaya, therefore, shuts her door from outside darkness and disaster and confines herself in the straight-jacketed role of a traditional wife, repressing her disappointment and resentment.

"Bandaged My Eyes Tightly"

In Jaya's case, expression of anger is not a direct outburst as it is with Saru and Indu. Her first and the only outburst with Mohan, soon after she had bandaged her eyes earlier, to become blind like her husband. She says: "I bandaged my eyes tightly. I didn't want to know anything. It was enough for me that we moved to Bombay, that we could send Rahul and Rati to good schools, we could have the things we needed". (*That Long Silence*, 61-62)

Rebellion and Anger in Silence

But all her rebellion against things is done in silence. The difference in their outlooks, and upbringing fails them in understanding each other and the lack of communication damages their relationship. Jaya suffers silently. She would not express her feeling, lest it spoil her relationship with her husband. She had been brought up with love and care: "she was a child who used to get angry very soon. But after her marriage she tempered down her anger. She realized that to Mohan anger made a woman 'unwomanly'." (*That Long Silence*, 83) When Kamat points out

lack of anger in her writings, she replies: "Because no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman?" (*That Long Silence*, 147)

Expression of anger in silence is best evident in an incident when Mohan accuses her for no fault of hers. She wants to burst out in anger. But she fails to break her silence: "I was full of a sense of angry confusion. What was he charging me with? And, oh God, why couldn't I speak? Why couldn't I say something? I felt foolishly inadequate having nothing to offer him in exchange for all the charges he was pouring on to me. ... I could say nothing. I sat in my place, pinned to it by his anger, a monstrously huge spear that grandfather - and here is father, and then us - Laxman, Vasu and me. And here are the boys - Shridhar, Jaanu, Dinkar, Ravi." Jaya questions this patriarchal tree: "I'm not here!" Ramukaka gets irritated and says: "How, can you be here? You don't belong to this family. You have no place here". (*That Long Silence*, 142- 43) The loss of place in the family tree is symbolically the loss of identity, which wounds her. She wants to find a place in Mohan's family and heal up her wound. To her surprise, she finds that she is taken for granted and Mohan fails to be a "sheltering tree".

Inner Voice of Self-assertion in Long Silence

During this period of long silence she has articulated the inner voice of self-assertion. She has progressed a long journey in silence to find the real spark in her. Her mind is clear and she has come out of her fears, her doubts, and all that she had suppressed during the seventeen years of her married life. She pours out her experiences in words and then she decides not to be passive and silent thereafter. She has come out of the cocoon and feels the free air around her. She has to act as she wishes. Her expression will be true without thinking of the expectations of Mohan. Jaya's decision to erase the silence which had defined and distorted her communication with her husband should be interpreted as the harbinger of a new hope. A woman's desire to succeed like an individual is not incompatible with the desire for love and the small pleasures of domesticity. If marriage or love without independence dissipates a woman's personality into nothingness, independence without love also exhausts her sensitivity in a constant tussle with the self and the society.

Sensitive to the Emotional Needs of Husband

Jaya's awareness of her own incompleteness makes her more sensitive to the emotional needs of her husband. She realizes that her failure to establish normal reciprocal relationship with her husband had enhanced her self-alienation. Negation alone can never lead a woman towards selfhood. A wife's relation with her husband must take form within the totality of her life as a woman; only then it can lead to a harmonious existence. In her search for a positive response from her life and surroundings to obtain a self-actualized individuality in a world of pre-fixed norms and standardized behaviour, Jaya concludes that a holistic approach towards life is essential and one must be resilient in approach. That Long Silence is very close to real life experience and achieves its credibility from the fact that the protagonist Jaya is a well-educated person possessing a literary sensitivity corresponding with her fictional role.

Focus on the Root-cause of the Fragmentation

The novel ends with her resolve to speak, to break the long silence. Therefore, Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer is her women characters, their plight, their suffering, and their own solutions to the problems created by the world. She knows that the silence has been too long, but somebody has to break it. Her characters have positive attitudes towards life, though the world around them is sometimes unfriendly towards them. They help others, but without sacrificing their own values. Shashi Deshpande's concern is to explore the root-cause of the fragmentation and the dichotomy of her characters and explore what happens in the psyche of these heroines in the process of individuation. Thus, Deshpande has been successful in creating strong women protagonists who refuse to get crushed under the weight of their personal tragedies and face life with great courage and strength.

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