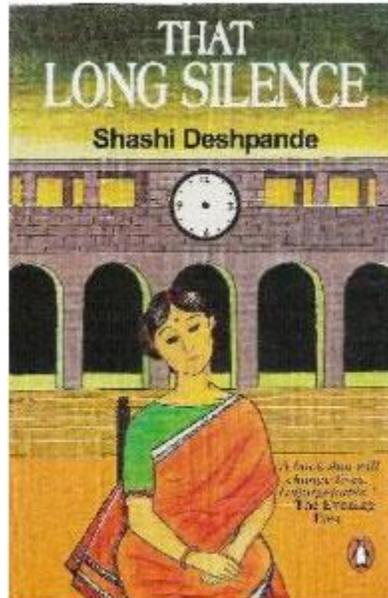


Identity Crisis of Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*
K. Mahalakshmi, M.Phil. Scholar



Abstract

Shashi Deshpande (1938 -) is among Indian English women writers in the sense that she deliberately refrains from the temptation of give away to literary fashion in the West. Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988) deals directly with feminist narratological preoccupation with the context of how a woman writes. Jaya, a failed writer, is haunted by memories of the past. Differences with her husband, frustrations in their seventeen-year-old marriage, disappointment in her two teenage children. In her small suburban Bombay flat, Jaya fight with these and other truths about herself - among them her failure at writing and her fear of anger. Shashi Deshpande gives us an exceptionally accomplished portrayal of a woman trying to erase a 'Long Silence' begun in childhood and rooted in herself and in the constraints of her life.

Keywords: Shashi Deshpande, *That Long Silence*, Feminism, Subservient, Solidarity, Patriarchal

Introduction

Feminism, as a new way of life, as a new perspective came into existence in India. Feminism in Indian English fiction has a series of counters and ordeals on the part of woman to strike at the roots, to belong and assert her ideality in a transitional society. Many Indian writers now present a picture of women which is totally different from the image of the past. Change in the economic conditions has brought a remarkable change in our attitude towards gender, and as a result, woman has substantially consolidated her position as she has shed off her servile attitude

towards her husband. This has led to the creative writers to re-define the husband-wife equation, as depicted in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal, Bharati Mukherjee and Shashi Deshpande. Shashi Deshpande, an eminent novelist has emerged a writer possessing deep insight into the female psyche. Her novels reveal the man-made patriarchal tradition and uneasiness of the modern Indian woman in being a part of them. Shashi Deshpande uses this point of view present social reality as it is experienced by women. Her young heroines rebel against the traditional way of life and patriarchal values.

Novels of Shashi Deshpande

Roots and Shadows her first novel highlights the pain and suffering experienced by women in male-dominated and tradition bound society. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, her other novel, rejects the traditional concept that the sole purpose of a wife's existence is to please her husband. It reveals a woman's capacity to assert her own rights and individuality and become fully aware of her potential as a human being. *The Binding Vine* depicts how the educated earning woman helps poor women inculcating the spirit of solidarity among women. The novel is about the suffering of a wife who is the victim of marital rape; the plight of women raped outside marriage, who would rather suffer in silence in the name of family honor. *A Matter of Time* portrays a woman who is more mature and dignified than her predecessors. When others cannot think of themselves outside the familial bond, she, finding herself in, is unperturbed. She is little detached, but manages herself admirably almost becomes self-independent.

That Long Silence

That Long Silence traces the passage, a woman through a maze of doubts and fears towards her affirmation. Looking at the man-woman relationship objectively, the novelist does not blame entirely the men for subjugation of women. She sees how both men and women find it difficult to outgrow the images and roles assigned to them by the society. The novel has three distinct phases of feminism. In the first phase it is seen as the imitation of role models, whereas the heroine has crossed the limits. Right from her childhood days, Jaya, the protagonist has been told stories about Sita, Savitri depicting the sharing of their husband's travails and their silent sufferings. Jaya refuses these role models because they have lost all relevance in Modern period Sita, Savitri and Draupadi; the legendary women followed their husbands willingly, but Jaya followed her husband Mohan because of compulsion.

In the early days of her marriage, she wants to create a gleaming fairy tale home by shutting out her fears, ambiguities and suspicions. She treats her husband as a "sheltering tree". To come across as an ideal wife and mother, she suppresses her own emotional needs. Instead of sharing her feeling with her husband she is more concerned with the external gloss or sheen, "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". The suppression of self and emotions, and worry to keep the exterior smooth, gradually create a strain in her mind. The fear of failure to conform to the stereotyped model of ideal woman makes her restless.

The major concern and thrust of the novel is the second phase of feminism in Jaya's life. At the beginning she was silent, to accept her husband's desires and to sustain the harmony of her family. When she is forced to live in Dadar flat in Bombay because of Mohan's corrupt means of

money making, again she mutely follows him. “She, like Gandhari of Mahabharatha symbolically bandages her eyes and grows blind to his weakness. Like Sita, who followed her husband into exile, she follows Mohan into the concrete jungle – Bombay”. But when he justifies, “It was for you and the children that I did this, I wanted you to have good life. I wanted the children to have all those things I never had”. For the first time in her married life, Jaya feels a strong, strange emotion of anger at this unjustified accusation mode by Mohan. The accusation further leads to further re-assessment, self-interrogation of seventeen long years of married life in the mind of Jaya. Even now she is silent but she uses silence as a weapon to revolt against the patriarchy. Now she analyses her life with her husband Mohan and in the process resolves to change in the future.

Mohan

Right from day one of her marriage, Mohan never accepts her as Jaya (victorious) but he renames as ‘Suhasini’ which means “soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman”. Ever since she is named as Suhasini, she feels that her identity is in dilemma and feels disoriented. ‘Suhasini’ becomes the symbol of pain taking and fastidious house wife, to only care and look after her children, maintain the home well in order. Jaya is a gifted writer. But Mohan does not like her writing and nurtures an idea that through her writing, public will know their personal life and hence restricts her writing career. Jaya, deliberately gives up her creative aspect which is close to her heart and fits into the traditional role of an ideal wife. He keeps on finding fault with her- for not caring his profession and calls her completely selfish. He further criticizes her that she had married him because of her elder brother Dinkar. Repeated accusations and allegations of Mohan force her to react sharply.

Relationship with Kamat

Her relationship with Kamat, her neighbor is an important aspect in her process of introspection. He is somehow different from other men. He pays due respect to women. He encourages her like her brother, sometimes compliments her like an ardent lover and dares to chide her like her father. It is in his presence that she becomes uninhibited and sheds all her identities as a daughter, wife, and a mother. It is her relation with him makes her realize her real self. Besides analyzing her own self, she also explores the other women characters like Mohan’s mother; Kusum, her cousin; her sister-in law and Jeeja, her servant. They are the victims of this patriarchal society. They never raised their voice against this domination and instead lead a slave like life. By completely analyzing the agonies of various women in her life, she discovers the root cause of this problem. She comes to the realization that it is not the men folk but the patriarchy in the society which prevents women from attaining their identity. So she resolves to erase the silence and rebel against the pre-set social dogmas.

Third Phase of Feminism

The third phase of feminism in the novel is Jaya’s life- her articulation and assertion is hinted at the end of the novel to be the future possibility for Jaya. Though being silent for many years she realizes her own power only after seventeen years of her married life. She shapes her broken identity by breaking the fetters of a father’s daughter, as Mohan’s wife and as her children’s mother. The novel ends with her resolution to speak, to break her long silence now. She has discovered an answer for the most haunting question “Who am I?” When she receives Mohan’s

telegram from Delhi informing her that everything is fine she pays least importance to that. It reflects her realization that:

You are your own refuge.
There is no other refuge.
This refuge is hard to achieve.

Now she realizes that she cannot be a complete woman if she remains a wife or a mother and ignores the other equally important self, namely a writer. She finally decides to go on with her writing career and would not look up to, Mohan for an answer she wants. The same pattern of discontent and retaliation, the desire and demand for freedom is evident in Gita Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*.

Resurgence of Hope

The novel ends up with a resurgence of hope. A woman's desire to succeed like an individual is not compatible with the desire for love and small pleasures of domesticity. If marriage and love without independence dissipate a woman's personality to nothingness, independence without love also exhausts her sensitivity in a constant tussle with the self and the society. Jaya's story proves that a balanced fulfilled life is not merely a utopian fancy for a woman if she decides to realize her creative energy to erase her conditioning and free her from her psychic fears and the bondage of centuries. In short, self-actualization is possible if a woman decides to be herself, to exhibit the genuine significance of her free, innate and uninhabited personality in its totality.

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K. Mahalakshmi
M.Phil. Research Scholar
Arignar Anna Govt Arts College
Villupuram
Tamilnadu
India
vyshali1006@gmail.com