

The Quest for Female Identity in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract

The woman, neither biologically nor intellectually inferior to man, is often predetermined as the second sex and has been given the secondary status in the society. She is not recognized as a human with an identity of her own who has faithfully adhered to male supremacy and is made to strictly play her role in upholding the traditions of the family. Though there have been various efforts to emancipate women from male oppression, it is a reality that gender disparity still exists. Women in Indian society encounter lots of troubles and problems within their households, workplaces and society. They are psychologically affected, stressed and exposed to various issues such as loss of identity, male domination and marital disharmony. They are unable to make their own decisions in life and are confined within the four walls of the house, with no one else to share their distress. Many women writers come out to articulate the anxieties, focusing on the feelings of marginality and expressing their revolt against the masculine world. Shashi Deshpande is one among the famous contemporary Indian novelists who took an earnest step in exposing the submissive women through her fiction. The present paper attempts to highlight how Deshpande, through the character Jaya in *That Long Silence*, seems to convey a significant truth that women have the power to control and improve their lives, by being determined to break their silence and fight oppression.

Keywords: Shashi Deshpande, *That Long Silence*, Female Identity, Patriarchy, Self-identity, Marginality, Oppression, Defiance

Shashi Deshpande is one of the famous contemporary Indian novelists in English. She is an award winning eminent novelist with a deep insight into the psyche of middle class Indian women. At the very outset the problem of identity crisis comes to the fore in *That Long Silence*. The dilemma faced by the protagonist is highly intriguing when she says the words come to her freely, but self-revelation is a cruel process. For her “the real you” never emerge. She has presented in her novels modern Indian women’s search for the definition of the self and society and the relationship that are central to women. With more than a dozen fictional works to her credit, she has successfully captured the true emotions of Indian women. She writes of the conflicts and predicament of the Indian middle-class women. She published her first collection,

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of short stories in 1978. She is a winner of the Sahitya Academy Award, for the novel *That Long Silence*. Her novels present a social world of complex relationships.

The present paper focuses on the study of suffering of women in the works of Shashi Deshpande. Life is full of suffering, full of choices, full of compromises and an adjustment. Jaya is the heroine of this novel. She can be called as the mouthpiece of Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence*. The way of thinking and opinion of Jaya is undoubtedly that of Deshpande. Her fifth novel *That Long Silence* give some message for the reader that the empowerment comes from your inner will and the capability to reach beyond restricted and guarded forts. Deshpande successfully makes her readers realize that all path-breaking discoveries are the outcome of faith, which helps, mankind like a ladder to reach the zenith. The journey to wider horizons requires an innovative effort. What she has said in *That Long Silence* is true of all times in the history of mankind.

Male characters do not have any prominent role in Deshpande's novels. The reader can easily find out resemblance in Deshpande's heroes and sometimes they even look monotonous. She presents these characters only as dominating male characters and seems to produce them only to trouble the women in her fiction. As Sara Grimke puts it: "Man has subjugated woman to his will used her as a means of selfish gratification, to minister to his sexual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort; but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill" (Grimke 10). Jaya's husband, Mohan was that sort of a man and he married her for his social betterment. Jaya had lost her father at the age of fifteen and her brother considered her a burden, and this leads her to marry Mohan. Before her marriage, Jaya had been taught the importance of the husband in the life of a woman. Vanitamami tells her that a husband is a sheltering tree. Ramukaka reminds her of the thing that the happiness of her husband and home depends entirely on her. When Jaya is leaving her home after her marriage, Dada has advised her to "be good to Mohan". Jaya's brother brought Mohan with money and gave him to Jaya, and she tried to be good to him. This was the beginning of Jaya's lifeless kind of married life.

The entire novel brings out the stale married life in a middle class home and Deshpande tells the story from the point of view of a wife. The women in Mohan's family were so definite about their roles and duties. But Jaya has no clear cut idea about her role in that family. Her life before marriage and after marriage shared little similarity. Her father gave her the name "Jaya" for "victory". But her in-laws gave her a new name "Suhasini" pointed to a docile but efficient housewife. Concerned only about the tastes and interests of Mohan, Jaya has lost her authenticity as a human being. She has shaped herself to the wishes of Mohan. Mohan kept her away from her likings. She was forced by Mohan to give up the job she wanted to take, the baby she wanted

to adopt and the anti-price campaign she had wanted to take part in. Jaya's journey through the rough road of her nuptial life, she learns at last: "no questions, no retorts: only silence". In accepting everything mutely, she thinks she resembles Sita or Draupadi. In her view, the truth is that it was Mohan, who had a clear idea of what he wanted; the kind of life he wanted to lead, the kind of home he would live in, and she went along with him.

Deshpande's woman-centered novels and short stories give us a psychological insight into the working of a woman's mind. Ever since Jaya got married, she has done nothing but wait. "Waiting for Mohan to come home, waiting for children to be born, for them to start school, waiting for them to come home, waiting for the milk, the servant, the lunch-carrier man..." (TLS 30) This mechanical process of waiting fills her life with existential nothingness. Related to the theme of nothingness is the existential theme of death. Her monotonous, boring and isolated days made her to realize this and above and beyond this, there had been for her that other waiting fearfully for disaster, for a catastrophe.

Deshpande's heroines do not give too much importance to sexual encounters unless it serves an urgent physical need. She feels that "love" is an overworked word, overburdened by the weight one put on it, just another word for human contact. Jaya's loveless sexual life with Mohan was mechanical and gives her no satisfaction. Jaya's relationship with Kamath was the result of her search for a human being who can understand, console and support her. Jaya's judgment about this relation proves it. "Physical touching for me a momentous thing. It was only Appa who hugged me as a child, and after him there was Mohan. We were husband and wife and he could hold me, touch me, and care me. But it was never a casual or light-hearted thing for either of us. And then this man... I can remember how his gift of casual, physical contact had amazed me. His unawareness of my shock the first time he did it had told me what touching meant to him. And yet that day his dispassionate tone, his detached touch, had somehow angered me." (TLS 15)

The entire novel brings out the stale married life in a middle class home. The married life of Jaya seems to have lost its freshness. As a typical Deshpande's heroine, Jaya does not decide to walk away from marriage or think about a divorce. Instead she has decided to tackle her marital problems in her own way, and make her husband realize that she has to be treated on an equal footing, without destroying the statuesque of her family life. As she has nothing to do in the Dadar flat, Jaya gets plenty of time for introspection. In the process of analyzing herself, she discovers her true identity. She realizes that she had been a divided self- one for the world and another for herself. But in a middle class society it is a must for a woman to fulfill the roles of wifehood and motherhood before their own identity. Deshpande's women break out of their conventional lives and attitudes and seek an identity of their own.

Shashi Deshpande's achievement lies in the depiction of her central character, the introspective and inward probing Jaya. She is representative of girls brought up in middle-class families in post-Independent India, a time when most parents strove hard to provide their children with English education and exposure to Western modes of living and thinking. Parents inculcated in their girls a certain duality, sometimes quite unconsciously. On the one hand, an impulsive desire to be temporary, he has no work to do. And, because he has no work, to do, Jaya too has nothing to do because, as she observes, "Deprived of his routine, his files, his telephone, his appointments, he seemed to be no one at all, certainly not that man, my husband, around whose needs and desires my own life revolved., There was nothing he needed, so there was nothing for me to do, nothing I had to do." (TLS 24)

The most trying moment comes in Jaya's life when she finds two male accomplices fondling the breasts of a narcotic-smoking well-to-do girl at the bus-stop. This experience shocks all her romantic ideas of "woman as the victim" out of her and she finds "Mohan's beliefs, when I listed them, were like a pole that pulled me out of a quagmire of doubts" (TLS 127). She realizes that she is secure only with Mohan, the man who provides for all her comforts and her children's needs. In his absence, which is temporary but full of uncertainty, she becomes rudderless and others are no substitute.

Deshpande tries to focus not only on the patriarchal set up which is responsible for silencing the women but also the responsibility of women lies within the victim to refuse, to raise a voice and to break that silence. The novel traces the dilemma and the quest for identity of Jaya from the feelings of existence, freedom, resilience and adjustments. In the quest for identity, Jaya is trapped in the dilemma, firstly trying to be a suitable wife for Mohan and secondly, struggling to express the emotions of women's experience in the male-dominated society. She is a silent sufferer in finding out herself very different with noble vision as a writer. She represents the middle class educated woman in India during 1990s who tries to find her identity throughout the novel. She searches her identity as an individual and where her emotions are getting subdued. It suggests that the endemic imbalance in a marriage causes the frustrations, disappointments, failures rather than the endurance and solace.

Shashi Deshpande's novels contain the seed of definite quest for a true and authentic self. By making her heroines undergo stages of self-introspection and self-reflection, Deshpande makes them evolve themselves into more liberated individuals that what their gender of culture have sanctioned. The self-quest of these women is triggered off by some crisis in their lives. These women strive heroically and overcome their cultural conditioning and the barriers created by society in matters of tradition and manners. They finally emerge as free, autonomous individuals, no longer content to be led but desirous of taking a lead. Rather than falling into

Western Feminist slot, these strengthened Indian women, work out their own individual paths towards liberation and in the process discover new facets to their selves which had been latent in them. In this discovery of selves and consequent self- fulfillment, these women pave the way for a better understanding of themselves as well as others. In charting the course of such unconventional women, Deshpande seems to make an obvious plea that traditional society must re-mould itself in order to accept these emerging new women.

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