

Discovering the Self in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract: Shashi Deshpande, a feminist with a difference, is a well known writer who shares the feminist platform with writers like Jane Austin, George Eliot, Kamala Markandaya and Virginia Woolf in articulating woman's pain, because she believes that a woman writer understands the life, career and maturity of a woman with in a family fold better than anybody else. Shashi Deshpande portrays her heroines realistically in her novels, highlighting the inner world of Indian women. In general, she discusses the status of women in India and their conflicts in a fast-changing socio-economic environment. When it comes to women in middle class society, she discusses the conflict between tradition and modernity. Women are at the centre of her fiction, which focuses on the desires, efforts, and disagreements of women in traditional Indian society. According to her, her feminism is not strident and militant, as it implies that all problems are man's fault. The way she depicts the world of women is authentic, realistic, and credible.

Key Words: Self-Discovery, Identity, Self-Realization and Independence.

Introduction:

The early years of Shashi Deshpande's marriage were spent in caring for her two young sons and her writing career began in 1970, at the age of thirty. It was not the conscious decision on her part to become a writer; it was the boredom from the role of housewife that she made efforts in this direction. Only then she found that she loved writing and felt at home with it. The words of Jaya in *That Long Silence* (1988) can also be applied to Shashi Deshpande's writings: "Strange – I've always found writing easy. Words came to me with a facility that pleased me; sometimes shame me, too – it seemed too easy." (1)

While writing short stories during her stay in England led to her early publication of short stories in leading Indian magazines, which led to her literary career. Her first collection of short stories, *The Legacy*, was published in 1978. She has also published four collections of short stories, two crime novels, four books for children, and nine novels. Her novels are *The*

Dark Holds No Terrors (1980), *If I Die Today* (1982), *Come Up and Be Dead* (1983), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Vine* (1992), *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Small Remedies* (2000) and *The Moving On* (2005). Her best known novel *That Long Silence* (1988) received the Sahitya Academy Award. Two of her other novels *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) and *Roots and Shadows* (1983) have also received major awards. Her work has been translated into various Indian and European languages.

After a close examination of Deshpande's short stories and novels, one realizes that she is an intelligent, articulate author who rarely harbors gender prejudice. However, she also demonstrates a high level of understanding of issues affecting women. It is the author's relentless exploration of man-woman relationships that intrigues the reader enough to question her feminism. In spite of her vehement denial of being a feminist, Deshpande is perhaps the only Indian author to have made the bold attempt to convey the frustrations and disappointments of women.

Shashi Deshpande refuses to be called a feminist writer; instead she focuses on women occupying a secondary position in an oppressed male-dominated society and the degradation they suffer as a result. She says in an interview that she isn't affiliated with any movement; rather, she's just an ordinary woman who writes at home. Having a unique understanding of women's minds, she is able to analyze them in excellent detail. She tells S. Prasanna Sree in an interview:

But as a writer I'm not going to use my novels to carry the message of feminism. Then it becomes propaganda.... There are struggles of being a woman, in this patriarchal society, it is hard. So this is the picture I present in my novels. I am not a feminist writer. If you call me a feminist writer, you are wronging me, because I see people as human beings. (98)

That Long Silence (1988), the four part novel is about Jaya, questioning of herself, her relationship with her husband Mohan and others, and her writing career. Throughout her life, Jaya has tried to understand herself as a wife, a mother, as an individual and as a human. In this novel, Jaya indicates at the very beginning that self-discovery is a cruel process, since it never leads to a full understanding of oneself. As a writer, Jaya has never faced problems because she has written about other people's lives. She is fearful writing about herself, her own life. Self discovery by all means is a mature act. Such writing seems to her painful as well as

risky like the process of childbirth. She makes it clear that the real picture of the novel can be obtained if “the reader operates at the same wavelength as that of the author”. (Pathak, 126)

The novel describes the contrast between the developing crisis and the past until the resolution is reached; it is a mixture of memory and current happenings. The protagonist Jaya recalls her married life and by looking into the past prepares herself for the future to erase the long silence spread during the whole period of her married life and comes out of the confining slots allotted to her by the patriarchal society.

The very title of the novel *That Long Silence* (1988) brings Shashi Deshpande close to the feminist thinkers. The title is derived from a speech given by the American actress Elizabeth Robins in 1907, “If I were a man and cared to know the world I lived in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy, the weight of that long silence of one-half of the world.” Against the backdrop of this statement, the novel is a protest against the limitation of women’s life. The novel achieves great credibility from the fact that Jaya not only delves into the memories of her own past but also notices the condition of other married women around her and realizes the extent of suffering a woman has to undergo in marriage.

That Long Silence is a psycho emotional study of step-motherly treatment given to the daughters, wives and mothers by a male dominated society where women are crushed the very first day of their birth. Jaya is given a heavy dose of advice all the time that for a woman, husband is like a sheltering tree to which she must not leave or preserve by all possible means as if she being a woman does not have her own identity and her individuality. The protagonist, Jaya, who represents Indian women, is no longer fierce (aggressive). Instead she turns into a passive, docile housewife, representing a stereotype of a woman who is nervous, incompetent, and needs male support all the time. She is distinguished to go on waiting throughout her life as if she has no independence will and power to regulate her life.

She bitterly realizes that a marriage is nothing more than an imposed servility for woman and acquired sadism for man where husband and wife are like, “a pair of bullocks yoked together” (7) who are supposed to move in the same direction. Jaya sacrifices at the very outset of her marriage when she forgoes her career as a fiction writer as it annoys her husband and he tells her, “I never can imagine you writing this. This you, I mean, I can see the woman who writes this. She’s plump, good humored, pea brained but shrewd, devious, skimming over life.” (149)

The novelist describes her predicament, like a worm crawling into a hole - a gift artist dwindling into a stereotype Indian housewife. She feels her life a total failure as both of them are drifted away, “we live together but there has been only emptiness between us” (185). After being accused of bribery Mohan tries to justify his act by saying that I did it for you and the children. Mohan wanted Jaya to support him and justify his act; however the attitude and approach of Jaya was informed and defined by her independent views. When she leaves the Church Gate residence for an ordinary Dadar flat, she tells Mukta that for so many years she thought she was married to Mohan, but he now tells her that this wasn’t the case.

When after a minor quarrel, Mohan left the house and disappeared and the children Rahul and Rati had gone on a picnic to the South, Jaya was haunted by unbearable slings of uncertainty and confusion which eventually made her mad in a state of delirium. Later, Rahul returns and she receives a telegram from Mohan that all is well. Outwardly, therefore, the story has a happy ending: the problems of the protagonist are somehow removed and she is supposed to return to her initial condition. But in reality, there was a drastic change in the protagonist’s attitude to life, “The knowledge of what had happened to us was terrifying. Even if Mohan came back, and even if this trouble blew over, could we go back to being what were? Something had been lost, only an illusion may be, but its loss had left such a rent in our lives that it seemed impossible for us to be able to mend it so that nothing showed. And yet I knew no life but this one” (182). So, what we find at the centre of the book is neither a Sita who suffered exile for the steed of her husband, nor a Savitri, dodging the God to reclaim her husband’s sufferings, but an educated middle class woman whose predicament is like the individual caught between two currents of traditional patriarchy and modern independence.

When Jaya lives alone in her room, her mind shuttles between the past and the present, and it covers the entirety of her life. In order to make the story more authentic and real, Shashi Deshpande employed the stream of consciousness technique to project the psychic reverberations of her character. Now Jaya analyses her life through the process of thinking and writing down her thoughts. Retracing her life back to her childhood, she journeys through the disorderly, chaotic sequence of events and movements that made up her life. She sanitizes herself of her burdens. She gave up the role of passive and silent partner after long hours of contemplation. Her thoughts turn to the words that Lord Krishna tells Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra as he delivers a sermon. Jaya interprets Krishna’s words, “I have given you knowledge. Now you make the choice. The choice is yours. Do as you desire.” (192)

This implies that she will henceforth be more objective, ready to take the blame where it is due rather than finding convenient scapegoats, whether in the form of Mohan or someone else. She understands that she has also contributed to her victimization. She now comprehends that darkness of herself and has learnt to express her female identity.

Shashi Deshpande advocating the rights of Indian women makes a strong plea that she should be given her due place in society by recognizing her role to be a blend of tradition and modernity as finally after introspection, retrospection and contemplation. Jaya comes to believe that self-reliance, self confidence, moral courage and inner strength is the only remedy. So *That Long Silence* is a powerful expression of an educated intelligent and independent woman who revolt against the traditional morality and outmoded institutions of human relationships by making a self-discovery and learning a few tricks of the trade as Jaya herself says that she has to learn a lot of tricks and silence is one of them. So that both men and women are treated at par in society.

Shashi Deshpande does not allow her female characters to take their own ways in her novels. Rather she portrays them as they are. Her female characters have strength of their own and in spite of challenge and hostilities, they remain uncrushed. While undergoing a traumatic experience, Jaya remains calm and temporarily seeks shelter in neurosis, which evades her adult responsibility toward her without her realizing it. In the end, her suffering benefits her in that it leads her to self-discovery, which leads to a fresh perspective on life. As a result, Shashi Deshpande's novels are about finding one's identity, exploring the psychological landscape of females. A maze of self-doubts and fears leads her protagonists through an arduous journey to discover themselves. Women in her novels are depicted in a variety of roles- wives, mothers, daughters, and individuals. The present study is an attempt to explore the discovery of self of Jaya in *That Long Silence* (1988).

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