

“Identifying self amid air of loneliness” In Shashi Deshpande’s That Long Silence

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“Alone, alone, all, all alone,/ Alone on a wide wide sea!” Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Abstract: Shashi Deshpande is an acclaimed Indian author known for her works in English literature. She has made significant contributions to Indian literature, particularly in the realm of fiction. Her writing often explores the complexities of family relationships, the status of women in Indian society, and the challenges they face. Deshpande's narratives are known for their nuanced portrayals of characters and their exploration of social issues. Her works often provide insights into the lives of Indian women and the evolving socio-cultural landscape through her women characters like Jaya in *That Long Silence*, Indu in *Roots And Shadows*, Saru in *Dark Holds No Terrors*. Her one famous novel *That Long Silence* has taken career of Shashi Deshpande to the pinnacle. This novel is a powerful exploration of the complex world of an Indian housewife, grappling with societal expectations, personal identity, and the challenges of her domestic life. The book won the *Sahitya Akademi Award* and the *Padma Shri*, two prestigious literary honors in India. "That Long Silence" delves into the psychological and emotional dimensions of Jaya's journey. The narrative captures her internal monologues, doubts, and reflections as she confronts societal norms and expectations. Jaya was brought up in open environment in a family where boy and girl had a level playing field. But she was married in an orthodox Brahmin family where her voice was subdued and she was never able to give vent to her heart and mind. Jaya as a writer tries to give air to her inner feelings but her pen is restricted by her husband Mukesh in the name of societal norms, saying that giving a tinge of their personal life in her writings may lead to catastrophe in their conjugal love. Deshpande skillfully weaves the character of Jaya who is lost in her inner conflicts and thus creating a narrative that is both introspective and socially relevant.

Key Words: Orthodox, Patriarchy, Loneliness, Silence, Struggle, Relationship, Stereotype, Predicament, Marriage, Consciousness, Oppression, Personality, Freedom, Alienation, Creativity, Feminine, Sex, Intimacy

It took Shashi Deshpande a long time, “six years” to complete *That Long Silence*. At that time, she had to face many struggles in her personal life— "A struggle to find time, a struggle to keep going in the midst of all that was happening in our lives, including my father's death, a struggle to pick up after long breaks, a struggle with health problems, and a struggle to continue to believe in my novel" (Deshpande, *Listen to Me* 180). But even after completing the novel with much struggle, she was not happy with it. She was not certain, It seemed to her that there was a problem somewhere still. So, for the first time, she sent the manuscript to her bosom friend *Shama Futehally* for feedback on her novel, and after getting *Futehally's* views, she re-wrote the novel and was finally satisfied (Deshpande, *Listen to Me* 172). Actually in the beginning she was in dilemma regarding the issues raised in her novel. So, In one of her writings, she expresses her concerns as to very novel.

Many first novels are autobiographical. But That Long Silence was not autobiographical in the personal details.... Above all, it was an attempt to penetrate the dense forest of lies and half-truths in which we live our lives, the lies and half-truths which make life possible (Deshpande, Listen to Me 180–81)

The epigraph of the novel *"If I were a man and cared to know the world I live in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy –the weight of that long silence of one-half the world,"* tells the very underlying theme of the novel. Though, all her novels work through feminine consciousness, Shashi Deshpande never attempts at focusing only on the feminine perspective. "I am not a feminist", insists Shashi Deshpande. "I am a human being and I write about all other human beings who happen to be women" she said. However she places her writings within an overtly feminist framework when she states—"My own writing comes out of deep involvement with the society I live in, especially with women. My novels are about women who try to understand themselves, their history, their roles and their place in this patriarchal society. I rejected stereotypes and re-questioned the myths which have so shaped the image of women in this country. In this way, through my writing, I have tried to break the long silence of women in our country. Though alleged by many as radical feminist, Deshpande guards her stand saying "How can feminism be anti-men when it is really working for better, a more meaningful and companionable relationship between man and woman." Her feminine perspective does not entirely oppose the patriarchal strictures but also perceives men as victims of patriarchy. *"Women are not born 'feminine' but they are shaped by a thousand external processes"* (Book II *"Woman's Life Today"* *Second Sex, De Beauvoir, Simone*). *That Long Silence* re-emphasizes Deshpande's passion for these issues as she weaves a simple ingenious tale of the contradictions of male ambivalence and cruelty, female stoicism and shame and human desire and decision. It is against this backdrop that novel describes the patriarchal impositions on women to the extent of cramping their space. The novel realistically articulates the silence of the feminine world. Talking about *That Long Silence*- Shashi Deshpande herself says- "And then I wrote *That Long Silence* almost entirely a woman's novel, nevertheless a book about the silence of one half of humanity. A lifetime of introspection went into the novel, the one closest to me personally; the thinking and ideas in this are closest to my own."

Jaya, the protagonist commences the novel with an acknowledgement of the ruthless process entailed in the self revelations of the autobiographical mode she employs. There is the literal silence of the many women of Jaya's circle whose stories are never told or if they are, have too limited a currency to make impact on the symbolic field. In *That Long Silence* Shashi Deshpande reveals an intriguing picture of an ordinary middle class woman. The protagonist, Jaya lives with her husband Mohan and two children Rahul and Rati. She is well brought up and educated yet confined to restrictions posed by the conservative society. Shashi Deshpande's describes and dissects the life inside the cage, behind the veil, under the bell jar from the vantage point of inner space. The novel centers on the inner perception of a woman who is subtly drawn from inside, a woman who can look at life and attempts to decide who she really is. The novel is shrewdly presented by Shashi Deshpande as Jaya's own series of memories, a first person account of both her past and present life, written only for herself, and thus a direct and truthful statement of one woman's introspective analysis, her concrete existence. Playing the role of an ideal wife, Jaya follows her husband into exile. They shift into their small flat in Dadar. In the silence of this flat and in the absence of her usual domestic routine, Jaya broods over her situation and fondly recalls her past. But with Mohan's job in jeopardy, which precipitates the move

to Dadar, the middle class dream is endangered and Jaya has to re-evaluate her comfortable personae as wife and mother of middle class family when these are threatened by her husband's involvement in fraudulent activities. As Jaya goes over past, she realizes in how many different ways Mohan has pushed her and appropriated her space and her relationships and also in how many different ways he has limited her. When novel's main lead story starts we come to know that Mohan is a Junior engineer working in a cement factory in Lohanagar but over there due to some issues he got into trouble. He tries his best to please Chief engineer to get transfer, he even asks his wife to make good contacts with wife of CE so that he, Mohan, can be in good books of his senior and eventually he gets successful in persuading his CE. And he gets posting in Purchase Department and is transferred in Bombay where he shifts to a good bungalow. Mohan was born in orthodox Brahmin family. He spent his childhood in utter poverty. Since childhood, to be rich one day was his coveted dream. He participated in a program in Saptagiri at Crossword House where he saw three English speaking women and the lifestyle of these women had deep impact on Mohan's thinking and he also wanted to enjoy the same lifestyle. Mohan always desires to live luxurious life since then. He is not satisfied in the amount of money that he gets as salary which he thinks is meagre. He has high standard dreams which he wants to fulfill by hook or crook. In Purchase Department he is involved in fraudulent activities. He embezzles money and against him official inquiry is initiated by the department. To save himself, lest he is detained, he shifts to Dadar flat of Jaya which was given to her by her family. And here readers, see the predicament of Jaya, Mohan does not ask her will to shift in cramped flat. Rather he takes her for granted and orders her to follow him.

Through the character of Jaya, Deshpande shows how in Indian patriarchal system women have no freedom of their own rather they compulsorily have to follow their husbands though wrong they are. Jaya had full freedom of expression at her maternal home. Her father never thought that a daughter was a burden to get over by handing her over to a man. He invariably motivated Jaya to pursue her dreams. He named her Jaya, "Jaya means victory" (p.156). Attitude of Jaya's mother was also different as to other women, Jaya's mother was also different in attitude from other women. While others worried about their daughter's future, Jaya's mother was not worried. She was not even happy of Jaya's marriage to Mohan initially because she knew well about family of Mohan as she lived in the same area, she said that "they're orthodox, old-fashioned people" (p. 94). Later on, due to Mohan's orthodox nature and attitude to different situations according to his beliefs, liberal-minded and free-spirited Jaya gradually becomes silent. Even on most domestic burning issues, she was silent.

Jaya silently recollects how her husband gave a new name 'Sahasini' on her wedding day. Though she remains silent, she does not use the name Suhasini she remains Jaya, the name given to her by her father, meaning victory. Suhasini name, meaning a soft smiling placid motherly woman, is not accepted by Jaya. Her not accepting the new name is manifestation of resistance and assertiveness. However even when hurt of being accused, she stays dumb and also wonders---"Oh God, Why couldn't I speak? Why couldn't I say something?...I could say nothing"(p.120). Her husband described woman being treated very cruelly by their husbands and he calls it strength. She comments---"He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fires" (p. 36). When she scrutinizes her life closely, she realizes that to achieve this state of fulfillment as wife, she had deliberately suppressed many traits of her personality. However, Jaya doesn't suppress her writing career and her relationship with Kamat, her neighbour at one time.

In the early years, Jaya's writing was a matter of pride for her husband Mohan. But a particular story about—"a couple, a man who could not reach his wife except through her body" (p. 144) makes Mohan intolerant. Jaya's imaginative writing is condemned by her husband who asks—"How could you have done it? How can you expose our life to the world in this way? (p.144)." Jaya loses her identity as a writer and she compromises with writing silly things for a woman's magazine which doesn't satisfy her intellectual hunger. She had neglected her real self but now at the end, she decides to come out of the limitations because life has become intolerable for her. She suffers from alienation and mutters in anguish. "I was Jaya but I had been Suhasini as well, the Suhasini who was distinct from Jaya, a soft smiling placid motherly woman, a woman who coped", (p.16).

She reappraises her own identity putting the sacred icons of marriage and family life under the light of a mercilessly honest scrutiny. Through her protagonist, Deshpande is fulfilling an implicitly feminist's function, a consciousness. The protagonist Jaya had to suppress her emotions as Mohan warns her---"My mother never raised her voice against my father, however badly he behaved with her" (p. 83). Another striking trait of Jaya's personality which comes into conflict with her role as wife and mother is her association with Kamat, a widower who lives in apartment above Jaya's flat in Dadar. An advertiser by profession, Kamat analyses Jaya's problems objectively. Jaya confides all her problems to him: "Jaya's thwarted creativity and attempts to acquiesce to Mohan's desires generate a feeling of guilt in her, which makes her social poise somewhat artificial. Her relationship with Kamat, which is never very precisely defined in the novel, is an escapade to find some humane empathy and sharing. "This relationship imparts an inner fulfillment to Jaya, which her relationship with Mohan has failed to provide her"(p.94). She feels physically attracted to Kamat but she felt that by "the equally overwhelming certainty of my mind that I could not do so" (p.157). Even when Kamat dies, she doesn't pay homage to him, remains silent as it might have resulted in threatening her marriage.

Stream of consciousness that emerges out of predicament of Jaya, is a silent stream of thoughts and feelings, which she is able to express only through her writing. But after a point of time, her writing stuff was controlled by her husband. Jaya silently succumbs and surrenders to Mohan without revolting. She does as Mohan pleases. She never says 'Yes' when her husband asks her whether he has hurt her. She bears everything and tolerates all kinds of masculine oppression silently in the emotion that governed her behavior to him, there was still the habit of being a wife of sustaining and supporting him. Shashi Deshpande creates exquisite imagery to describe Jaya's married life---"*a pair of bullocks yoked together*" (p. 8). Jaya wants to escape the confines of an incarcerated domestic life in her quest for selfhood. There is no communication between Mohan and Jaya ---"Nothing between us...nothing between me and Mohan. We lived together but was only emptiness between us" (p. 185). To Mohan, to be angry was something absolutely unfeminine: "a woman can never be angry she can only be neurotic, hysterical frustrated. There is no room for expression, either. There is only order and routine, today. I have to change the sheets tomorrow, scrub the bathrooms, the day after, and clean the fridge....."(p.147-148). Enmeshed in the Indian family system, Jaya has lost her authenticity as human being. She has shaped herself according to the wishes of Mohan. She has given 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. Since Mohan accuses her of not caring about the children, she has stopped writing. She learns at last, "*no questions, no retorts, only silence*". Unable to communicate her anxieties to the unapproachable, incommunicable, indifferent Mohan, she is engulfed by a sense of loneliness. Ever

since she gets 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*” (p. 30)

Jaya’s sexual life too gives her no satisfaction. Unable to endure “*a silent wordless lovemaking*”, she says—“I could stay apart from him without a twinge, I could sleep with him too, without desire”(p.97). Mohan’s indifference after sex fills her with a sense of loneliness and of illusion: “But, lying there my body still warm and throbbing from the contact with his, it had come to me in one awful moment that I was alone” (p.98). Gradually, Jaya’s identity is completely lost into her role of wife and mother and from a fiercely independent woman that she once was, Jaya is ultimately reduced to a mere stereotype of a woman: nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support. Her silent suffering reaches its climax when Mohan leaves home silently and stealthily without a word to his wife after she has uncontrollably laughed at him. His absence unnerved her and she begins to ruminate. As she doesn’t want her family to disintegrate, she is rather longing to break her silence. Wandering in the streets of Mumbai she could not bear the crushing burden of her marriage and the responsibility of her children on her shoulders alone. She could not bear the thought of losing her husband —“The thought of living without him has twisted my insides. His death had seemed to me the final catastrophe. The very idea of his dying had made me feel so bereft that tears had flowed effortlessly down my cheeks. If he had been a little late coming home, I was sure he was dead. By the time he returned, I had in my imagination, shaped my life to a desolate widowhood (pp.96-97).

Towards the end of the novel Jaya stands as a bold and mature woman. She wants to break out of the yoke. At length she resolves to break that silence by putting down on paper all that she has suppressed in her seventeen years silence—that long silence which had reduced her to fragments. She erases the silence and asserts herself. (p. 192)—“I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us”—says Jaya. She breaks the silence, writes her story and concludes: “We can always hope without that life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know it is this; life has to be made possible” (p. 193). She stands for hope, for change ---“We do not change overnight. It is possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope without that life would be impossible” (p. 193). The long silence which had reduced her to fragments is broken at last. She realizes that fragmentation of ‘self’ is not possible —“I am not afraid --any more. The Panic has gone. I am Mohan’s wife. I had thought and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan’s wife. I know that kind of fragmentation is not possible.

The novel is beautifully summed up thus: “ The novel which is more a woman’s novel than any other novel of Deshpande, and which is full of minute details of everyday life, the hopes and dreams and the insignificant happening, end on a positive note. The crisis has forced a whole lot of rethinking. And there is a hope for new beginning. Jaya has recovered her lost self and along with that her capacity to dream. She has decided to get rid of the silence which women have lived with for ages.” That Long Silence, therefore remains “ a muted and essentially sympathetic treatment of the problems of marital relationship, maintaining a credible balance between sexes” For a writer most significant thing is to find a voice and Deshpande through her fiction breaks the silence of women and redeems them from their linguistic exile. All her women protagonists- Indu, Saru, Jaya, Urmilla and Sumi reorganize themselves in new kinship patterns with every change and when their woman’s space is

eroded within these changing patterns, they revolt against the traditions and in their quest for liberation.

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