



## **Protest within Family: A Feminist Analysis of Sashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence***

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### **Abstract**

A family without a woman is incomplete and unstable. Deshpande believes that family is an essential unit of the society and the disintegration of the family leads to disintegration of the society. Deshpande's women are modern, yet engulfed in traditional values. They show a profound state of confusion at the beginning, their ties with family shake violently, but slowly they self-introspect themselves and emerge out as more confident women at the end. They do not break the familial bonds, but reassure themselves that they can succeed within the family unit. They do not compromise with the threatening situation, but change for the better. Deshpande seems to look positively at the younger generation to restore partnership with more equality.

### **Keywords**

Sashi Deshpande, Moderate Feminism, Patriarchy, Suppression of women, Protest within Family, *That Long Silence*.



Family is not an important thing; it's everything.

-Michael. J. Fox

The family in India, during the last few decades has been under a strenuous process of social change, substantially affecting the various relationships in a family unit. There is a conspicuous change in the domain of role and values. Due to growing awareness and enlightenment and social movement for women's emancipation and empowerment, socio economic conditions have changed and so have the patriarchal attitude to gender. This in turn has affected the family unit considerably and there is now a wide threat to this institution. The rate of divorce cases in the last few decades in India is quite alarming. Whether it is the metros or the semi-urban areas, whether it is upper class or the middle class, or state or city in the country, the divorce problems persist and hence there is considerable increase in the divorce rate.

The main reason for this alarming divorce rate is that people today, tend to have a comparatively more casual approach towards marriage and do not work as hard to save it in case of problems in the relationship. Stress as well as lack of time for life partners is yet another factor leading to the increasing divorce rates. The family unit, principally a man and women living together in harmony and peace forms the basic social organization. When this harmony is disrupted, life becomes chaotic.

One of the greatest disadvantages prevailing in the present scenario, uprooting the harmony of a family is the suppression of women. Though women constitute half the world's population they are not treated on par with men, in all the spheres of human activity. A detailed overview of the status of the world's women, issued by the UN in 2001, noted that women and men live in two different worlds. Due to the western influence and education, women have achieved awareness about their rights and this is not digested by the patriarchal society. This leads to the lack of understanding, respect and trust between the spouses. Richard Schaefer, the renowned sociologist says: 'Regardless of culture,

however, women everywhere suffer from the second class status. It is estimated that woman grow half the world's food, but they rarely own land' (283)

But woman is always considered as Divine Mother and epitome of patience, suffering and forbearance. A prominent Indian woman writer Shashi Deshpande gives a clarion call to the deliverance of the suppressed women. Her take on women's issues is quite interesting, because she feels that male is not sole root-cause for women's sufferings. The fault lies with the women, who submit to the male sense of superiority. She highlights the oppression, gender differentiation and male dominance, operating within the institution of family. She brings out all the possible familial ties with their strengths and weaknesses. Her take on women issues, does not uproot the women, from her grounding, but deals with different elements associated to it. Her protagonists' search for their identity and freedom within their marriage, and this is actually the recurring theme in her novels. A woman's role is pivotal in running a family. According Functionalistic theory in sociology, the mother provides the moral and emotional support and plays the expressive roles.

Deshpande's women are modern, yet engulfed in traditional values. They show a profound state of confusion at the beginning, their ties with family shake violently, but slowly they self-introspect themselves and emerge out as more confident women at the end. They do not break the familial bonds, but reassure themselves that they can succeed within the family unit. They do not compromise with the threatening situation, but change for the better. Deshpande seems to look positively at the younger generation to restore partnership with more equality.

Women have enough confidence to meet the challenges that they face and at the same time they can preserve the family unit. A family without a woman is incomplete and unstable. Deshpande believes that family is an essential unit of the society and the disintegration of the family leads to disintegration of the society. This theme is rightly treated in Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence*. Jaya, the protagonist, having caught in the current of the traditional role of women – wife and mother, has suppressed her original self, right after her

marriage. In the very beginning of her married life her husband Mohan, changes her name to Suhasini. The first step to losing her identity.

Though she has a happy home with her well earning husband and two children, she becomes upset with the monotony to her life. She is angered when her husband gets involved in a malpractice at his office and asks her to move with him to Bombay, to escape from the punishment. Mohan also expects his wife to be silent in difficult situation just like his mother and sister. According to him his mother is a phenomenal woman, her silence being her strength. But for Jaya that is a state of despair and hopelessness, an induced slavery, voluntarily taken by his mother. So, when Jaya is reluctant to go with him to Bombay, her husband accuses her for failing in her duty to support him at the time of crisis.

Jaya also has the passion for writing. One of her prize winning stories mentions that a man cannot reach out to his wife, except through her body. Mohan is petrified with this, thinking what people may comment on him and his wife. He accuses his wife and Jaya stops writing, thinking that the writer in her can no longer live. These kinds of predicaments and mental anguish make Jaya very submissive. She is unable to communicate and articulate her thought processes to Mohan. Jaya reflects a state of thorough hopelessness. This kind of depression is echoed in Ambai's short story "*Forest*": "Is there a goal at all? I know how to overcome the obstacle that stand in my way. But I don't understand the quest. What do I seek and how?" The same restlessness is undergone by Jaya. When Mohan leaves her out of depression, she tries to introspect herself. The root cause for her unhappy married life is her silence in the form of submissiveness. Silence or lack of communication is the cause for marital incompatibility. Shoba De opines:

With little time and too many unfinished tasks, couples bicker constantly, or lapse into sullen silences, that soon become a permanent feature of their deadened-by-pressure marriage. Once their silence stretches into a habit nobody misses conversation. And if you skip conversing, you skip sharing. It's as simple as that. (32)

Jaya's self-analysis nudges her to break the silence that has been dwelling in her for years. She reaffirms herself to restore peace and happiness in her family. She waits for her husband to return, rather than breaking away from him. She decides to exercise her rights in her family, with her husband and children. The novel ends with an optimistic chord. Deshpande is well aware of the truth that breaking of the bonds of family would result in loneliness and disintegration of the larger social set-up. Jaya looks for peace within her family itself. She is convinced of her individuality and hoping a change in her husband's attitude, she moves towards a better life.

Nijole V. Benokraitis in his '*Marriages and Families*' quotes the Boston Quarterly Review which said that family in its old sense, is disappearing from our own land and not only our institutions are threatened, but the very existence of our society is endangered. Marriages are in the state of 'extreme collapse'. Some critics were little optimistic a decade ago, but they have changed their perception, due to the recent data on family changes. Nijole says,

... high rates of divorce, millions of latchkey children, an increase in the number of people deciding not to get married, unpredicted number of single parent families are the conditions in the present society due to changing families. (216)

Deshpande says 'I write because I want to change the world. I would like to change it, certainly in some areas, especially where I see grievous wrong'. (Deshpande 2001: 31-32). She wields her pen so dexterously and through '*That Long Silence*' she makes the readers to understand the grieving problem which exist among women, and at the same time, gives them the solution to face the challenges that come on their way. The novel shows that the day is not far away when women and men will be valued equally, where life without sex determination will ensure dignity, individuality and self-respect to women.

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