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From Innocence to Experience: Jaya in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988) presents a realistic image of educated middle-class women. The novel gains authenticity from the fact that Jaya, the protagonist, is a well-read woman, blessed with literary sensibility though nurtured in silence which corresponds with her fictional role. She is unable to find out whether she lives for herself or for her family. She is taken for granted by everyone in the family and so feels that she has no identity of her own. She is a typical wife with love and affection for her children, respect and sense of duty for husband and her in-laws but in return nobody in her family understands her feelings and emotions. Her silence is symbolic of most of the women of the world who are unable to express themselves as individual. Her introspection and memories are a part of every woman's life and like every other woman she is not encouraged to take up a profession. After seventeen years of troubled life in silence, Jaya pens her story revealing her feelings, incidents of

ups and downs that caused her despair and disappointment, and endangered her marital life. The writer brings an unexpected turn in the plot at the end of the novel. Shashi Deshpande probably wants us to draw the inference from Jaya: women should accept their own responsibility for what they are, see how much they have contributed to their own victimization, instead of putting the blame on everybody except themselves.

Keywords

Feminism; Self-Assertion; Innocence; Experience; Shashi Deshpande; *That Long Silence*.

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Women are always oppressed, suppressed and marginalized by men. They have been ill-treated and exploited in all walks of life. After independence, many Indian women novelists have raised their voices against the exploitation of women. Fiction by women writers contributes a major element of the contemporary Indian Writing in English.

Shashi Deshpande came into limelight with the publication of her novel *That Long Silence* (1988) which won her prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1991. As a novelist Shashi Deshpande's area of expertise lies in her realistic presentation of the life of women in general and the educated, modern, middle-class women in particular. She makes an attempt to explore the inner 'psyche' of the modern women who are at the crossroads between tradition and modernity. Their problem lies in their inability to discard the traditional values at once and follow their newly acquired values. Most of her novels reflect predicaments and struggles of this type of women.

As a contemporary author, Deshpande presents through her works, the realistic picture of the male-dominated middle class society of India. Her protagonists are caught between the tradition and modernity but they try to strike a balance between the two. Deshpande is of opinion that marriages are

not based on love but convenience. She has created ripples in the society of male domination by taking her readers inside the consciousness of her women characters to present their plight, fears, dilemmas, contradictions and ambitions.

The novel, *That Long Silence* presents a realistic image of an educated middle-class woman. The novel gains authenticity from the fact that Jaya, the protagonist, is well-educated, blessed with literary sensibility though nurtured in silence which corresponds with her fictional role. Jaya is a modern, convent-educated, fluent-English speaking woman and a creative writer who symbolizes the emerging new woman conscious of her status in the society. After seventeen years of troubled life in silence, Jaya pens her story revealing her feelings, incidents of ups and downs that caused her despair and disappointment, and endangered her life.

As the title of the novel indicates, Jaya for very long in her past life tried to play the role of traditional woman, the embodiment of tolerance, suffering and courage. However her courage deserts her and she becomes the modern, egotistical, self-assertive, rebellious woman - all these being marks of modern feminist awakening. But the desertion of the traditional submissive role and adoption of the new role do not leave the psyche of Jaya unstinted and intact. She faces great emotional turmoil. Her situation is summarized as, "A dumb submission... a mute bondage of personality ... and unconditional devotion, a life-long slavery, a brute and savage killing of identity and never ending series of mental, emotional and physical sacrifices are in the lot of a woman" (Apter 71).

But the novelist has chosen a psychological solution to Jaya's problem. She is allowed to retrospect her own silence and indulge in her own egotistical feelings. The smouldering fire of suppressed feelings, the maintenance of self-control, the pursuit of mechanical role of mother and wife, the need to cater to the physical and emotional needs of husband and children must remain

suspended for a while, or be forgotten and her real feminine soul, her pent up sufferings and feelings must find an outlet.

Jaya has grown up in a family where she could develop her individuality under the indulgence of her father and was educated in a convent school. Her father named her 'Jaya' which means 'winner.' Having high opinion about his daughter her father tried his best to inspire Jaya assuring that she is not like others and that Jaya will flourish in life. Unluckily, Jaya's father died of heart attack at an early age before she completed her graduation. It was a great blow to her career, as she had never developed a friendly relationship with her mother who often opposed her father. Jaya prefers to stay in the hostel rather than being with her mother who hardly felt the death of her husband. Jaya is surprised at her mother's careless attitude. Jaya's mother leaves for her parental home after her husband's death simply ignoring her twenty years of life with her husband in Saptagiri as an interlude. Jaya's decision to marry Mohan is an out-come of her defiance attitude against her mother and her willingness to get freedom from the control of parental home. Mohan also chooses Jaya because he wants to marry a well-educated and cultured girl who can speak good English with an impression that she can understand him and cooperate with him to lead a happy and peaceful life. He never bothers her for dowry, money and other practices of marriage. Jaya's brother explains it to her; "I believe what he wants is an educated, cultured wife. He says he isn't bothered about dowry, money and all that an educated cultured wife" (Deshpande 81). He decides to marry Jaya when he saw her speaking English fluently.

Jaya writes realistic stories for the newspapers and magazines apart from her domestic duties. The readers, editors and even her husband Mohan love her writing dealing with man-woman relationships. A realistic story of her even won her a prize that narrates about "a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body" (Deshpande 141). But Mohan gets hurt assuming that the story is about their personal life and it is revealed to the world, He says: "They

will all know now, all those people who read this and know us, they will know that these two persons are us, they will think I am this kind of a man, they will think I am this man, How can I look anyone in the face again? And you, how could you write these things, how could you write such ugly things, how will you face people after this?” (Deshpande 143-44)

Kamat, Jaya’s neighbour and a widower with whom she could freely discuss her stories, remarks that her writings are lacking in emotion and anger. She replies that expressing anger is not a womanly trait. A woman can never be angry. She can only be neurotic, hysterical frustrated (Deshpande 147). Kamat says contemptuously: “I never can imagine you writing this. This you, I mean. I can see the woman who writes this . . . she’s plump, good humoured, pea brained, but shrewd, devious, skimming over life” (Deshpande 149). The novelist unravels the mental conflict of both Jaya and Mohan in the small Dadar flat. They have run into “stormy weather” and their secure sheltered life washes away like a water colour in a rainy storm. The reactions of both Jaya and Mohan to the situation are different. Jaya feels normal in keeping house in the flat. But, Mohan becomes inconsistent and feels restless and insecure. He moves restlessly in the house unable to sit down at one place as if waiting for something. He says the waiting is getting him down. Jaya reacts that it is really hard for Mohan to wait as he is not used to it. She distinguishes between the nature of a man’s waiting and a woman’s:

He did not know what waiting was. He had always moved steadily from one moment to the next. But for women, the waiting game starts early in childhood. Wait until you get married. Wait until your husband comes. Wait until you go to your in-laws’ home. Wait until you have kids. (Deshpande 30)

The element of tiredness and disgust, the bearing of many types of burdens while playing the role of ideal wife, the discarding of her selfhood and identity as a writer and subordinating everything to the wifely role accumulate, tell upon

her nerves and weaken her emotional equipoise, the effort fully maintained all along. But Mohan, under the pressure of his suspension and social complications arising from it, the nervous irritations caused by humiliation, and the need to hide facts from family and friends accuses Jaya of changed behaviour in days of adversity: “He accused me of not caring about the children, of isolating myself from him and his concerns, even of some obscure revengeful feelings that were driving me to act this way” (Deshpande 24). At the moment of crisis, Jaya and Mohan are total strangers to each other, a silence pervades over their relationship. The pressure of irony and bitterness, the agony of being misunderstood, overtake her and she giggles fiercely on Mohan's accusations, “I had to control myself. I had to cork in this laughter. But it was too late” (Deshpande 26). When silence fails as a protective cover, hysteria becomes the only shield. After the dramatic exchange Mohan walks out of her and leaves the house. His act forces Jaya to realize what lies between them is not silence. If it is, it is not speechlessness; it is a loaded silence.

Silence, in the novel comes to suggest not the absence of communication, but the failure of signs to signify. Mohan does not understand Jaya, or any woman, because their sign system does not carry any value for him. Women avail themselves of language, they register their voices send forth the signs into circulation that remain un-decoded within the normative male institution of communication. “The women reside within a language the users of which do not understand their language. Women inhabit a discursive space which is constituted by patriarchal language and which renders women's articulations insignificant” (Menon 30). It is thus that Mohan cannot comprehend ‘all women’ as within the patriarchal linguistic structures that form him, what women ‘say’ remains un-signified.

Despite her fighting spirit, Jaya is absolutely uncertain about herself. She is always in conflict with tradition and modernity in her mind. It reflects in the

two names—Jaya and Suhasini by which she has been called. The former is given by her father which means ‘victory’ and the latter given by her husband Mohan meaning “a soft, smiling, placid motherly woman” (Deshpande 15-16). Thus she has two selves—Suhasini deeply rooted in tradition and Jaya attempting to overcome the constraints of tradition. She does not want to be a Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dodging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband’s travails. She understands that there is pain in hostility and anguish in rebellion. This is an echo of her unhappy condition. Hence, she chooses a submissive attitude: “No. what I have to do with these mythical women? I can’t fool myself. The truth is simpler. Two bullocks yoked together . . . it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful” (Deshpande 11-12).

Shashi Deshpande has made the revelation of Jaya's real nature the very core of the novel. Jaya is in conscious pursuit of self-knowledge. Thus, various discordant notes meet and unite in her complex nature. She is a model of patience, endurance, devotion, integrity, rebellion, defiance and disobedience at the same time. She is, all along, pursuing the idea of a separate female identity. She finds it difficult to put together the different discordant facts of her personality. Thus, the young bride Suhasini, is at loggerheads with the mature and seasoned Jaya who is both restrictive and destructive. The tradition-bound docile woman in Jaya is irreconcilable with the modernist individuality seeking Jaya. The loyal, loving Jaya - the devoted wife of Mohan is irreconcilable with the epicurean Jaya, relishing a momentary embrace with Kamat. So, the novelist has imparted a complex identity to Jaya, focusing at the same time on the altruistic aspects of womanhood.

Self-revelation is a cruel process. The real picture, the real ‘you’ never emerges. “Looking it is as bewildering as trying to know how you really look, ten different mirrors show you ten different faces” (Deshpande 101). Now she shakes off all her panic. After her self-analysis, Jaya becomes fearless. She asserts: “The

panic has gone. I'm Mohan's wife, I had thought, and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife. Now I know that kind of a fragmentation is not possible" (Deshpande 191). Overcoming her turmoil, she attempts to come to terms with herself by trying to write about herself and family and thus decides to break a 'long silence.'

Shashi Deshpande thus portrays the image of a new woman in Jaya who silently accepts everything and then breaks off silence. As a woman of maturity, she redefines her identity and relationship with her husband. Her inner turmoils are so bitter that she is unable to speak them out and remains silent in order not to be frustrated and disappointed after the disapproval of her actions by the society. Her maintaining 'long silence' denotes that the influence of the tradition is still there on the newly acquired professional roles of modern women. Jaya revolts in silence which is her natural condition.

The gendered subjects in the novel are traced through their class and gender matrix. Within the narrative universe of the novel, the construction of the gendered subjects in their class environs represents a collective identity whose voice is discursively silenced. As against her 'secure' middle class life, Jaya witnesses the fragile life of her servant Jeeja. Jeeja and her husband used to live in a chawl. The husband had a good job in a mill, but after a strike in the mill he lost his job. The husband had since become a drunkard and Jeeja was suffering due to his atrocities silently and supporting the family by working as housemaid. In viewing Jeeja's life, from feministic point of view one can find gender solidarity across class divisions. There is in the novel a very vigorous questioning of patriarchal constructions and the systematic devaluation of women's selfhood.

The devaluation can be analysed from both social and economic frameworks. In the social framework, Jeeja has to perform the role of dutiful wife, a dumb puppet which performs in accordance to the will of the instructor and in the economic framework she has to bear the burden of providing bread and

butter to the family. Thus, the novel suggests the intertwining of tradition and modernity as perpetuating, instituting, and reconfiguring the apparatuses that effectuate the subordination of women. A subordination that suppresses them to the extent of spending a life time before realizing, as Jaya does, that they have not begun their life yet, busy as they are playing the feminine role assigned by the society. It is this subordination that through and affective mechanism has obtained women's consent and renders them silent. Patriarchy is presented as the common enemy, without class, caste or other specificity.

Towards the end of her reflective narrative Jaya remembers how in Sanskrit drama, women characters spoke not in Sanskrit but in Prakrit. With this, she also comes to the realization that her reading of her own subjectivity had been wrong. All along in the narrative, Jaya has been afflicted by the silence imposed on her. Her perception of herself as silenced subject is now revised. She realizes that what had been imposed on her is not silence, but a 'different language': "I have been speaking Prakrit myself" (Deshpande 22). If, she has all along felt herself unheard, it is not due to 'silence', not due to muted subjectivity. It is because the patriarchal institution of communication, the 'normative' discourse, is at variance with her speech which is conducted in a 'different language'. In that sense with this realization she comes to see her reflective narrative of her subjectivity as conducted in the patriarchal discourse. If she has been speaking in Prakrit and has been rendered silent it implies that her language is 'unheard', made not only incomprehensible but also 'unsounded' by the male discourse. Now, if she herself viewed her life as silenced, "I will have to erase the silence between us" (Deshpande 23), it is so because she too had not recognized the nature of her language.

The reader is given sufficient hint that she is going to break her passivity after the realization of this fact. Having realized her position, Jaya would not accept the earlier image of a pair of bullocks yoked together, signalling a loveless couple. She comes to realize that life can always be made possible. Deshpande

tries to establish that is not only the patriarchal set up which is responsible for silencing the women, but also the victim to refuse, to raise a voice and to break that silence. The novel traces the growth of the protagonist from a state of weakness, feeling of failure to that of relaxation. She accomplishes this through self-assessment and self-criticism.

Through Jaya's character, Shashi Deshpande has expressed the confused state of contemporary educated Indian woman who can neither reconcile herself in a loveless marriage nor cast off her husband from her life as she still considers him like “a sheltering tree” (Deshpande 32) she cannot afford to live without.

All the events lay emphasis on the gender-inequality and injustice as the central theme of *That Long Silence*. Sarla Palkar remarks that these are the “victims of patriarchy and also of their own silence” (163). Shashi Deshpande says about *That Long Silence* “...and then I wrote *That Long Silence* almost entirely a woman's novel nevertheless, a book about the silencing of the one half of the humanity” (Prasad 58). Undeniably, Deshpande presents the suppression of women “with greater self-consciousness, a deeper sense of involvement and often with a sense of outrage”. She depicts the inner turmoil of the women vividly in a cool and sensitive prose.

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