

A study of Women's Struggle in Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence

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Abstract

In the context of modern Indian society, Shashi Deshpande's greatest concern is the struggle for women, her efforts to find and maintain her as a wife, mother and most of all as a human being. Deshpande usually has a heroine as a narrator and uses a kind of perceptual strategy. In 'That Long Silence', Deshpande introduces the story of Jaya and Manohar, who live together as husband and wife despite a feeling of despair in some of the basic issues of life. It is the idea of the author that women often bear the tyranny of men silently in middle-class families in India and if anyone suffers from a specific illness, they can be ignored and left dead. The female character in the novel is Jaya, who decides to break her silence after seventeen years. Shashi Deshpande succeeds in this novel to turn Jaya's misery into a revolutionary thought to gain her identity. It is clear that suffering is a woman's permanent insecurity. Our family and community impose a great deal of responsibility on their shoulders without caring about their desires, wills and aspirations. Shashi Deshpande never intended to go against men but in the depiction of reality. She is also called passionate feminist.

Keywords: *Feminine, Suffering, Identity, Dominance, Woman's Struggle*

Introduction

Indian English literature has gained much popularity and recognition. It is no longer considered an English standard. Several internationally acclaimed awards have been held by its most talented authors. Shashi Deshpande is the winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award in those specific times (1989). She has emerged as a writer with deep experience in the psyche of women. Focusing on marital relationships she wants to expose the culture of the woman

who is being trained to play her part in the family. Her novels expose the patriarchal traditions and dislikes of a modern Indian woman for being part of them. She uses social truth as it is experienced by women. Her heroes rebelled against the traditional way of life and the patriarchal heritage.

Deshpande has gifted with an inborn literary bent of mind which matured with her experiences in life. Shashi Deshpande is at her best, writing about the secrecy and extraordinary sensitivity about men and women trapped in relationships and situations that are not usually their own. Her stories are about women; her suffering and independence, tension and anger, pain and misery. Her stories suggest that compromise is what characterizes the life of the common run for middle-class women in India. Unable to defy social conventions or traditional behavior, middle-class women are themselves plagued by lust and despair, fears and hopes, love and hate, withdrawal and dissociation, suppression and oppression, marital discord and male violence.

Her genuine concern for women their share of oppression is most evident in all her novels and stories. Each of Shashi Deshpande's novels is unique and offers food for thought through human relationships and feelings. Deshpande is an expert writer on how she expresses the feelings of men, the fears and feelings experienced by men, by women. Reading her books is like climbing into the hidden corners of her mind. Deshpande usually has a heroine as a narrator and uses a kind of stream of consciousness technique.

The title of the novel, *That Long Silence*, shows the inability to communicate one's self. When one reads an epigraph from an essay by Elizabeth Robins he will find that this silence refers to the return of a female character. In Deshpande's *That Long Silence* we can see Jaya's belated rebellion after seventeen years of her married life. During her solitude, Jaya undertakes a sojourn towards her own self. She searches for her identity, which seems to be missing somewhere during such long years of marriage.

Deshpande's novel is prevalent in the quest for women. Her novels are often narrated by female protagonists who try to find themselves in novels. They succeed in doing this in their own writing to achieve a solution in their lives. Undoubtedly, they enjoy the memories of the past and feel nothing, but to the end they experience it for themselves. Women are experiencing space, vacuum in their lives. They look like they are succeeding on the outside, but they seem to have no direction and feel worthless.

Deshpande got success in her representation of real life experiences through *That Long Peace*. She literally portrays the inner tension of Jaya, who suffered from the beginning to end her longing for her own will. She saw the frustration, isolation and all the painful

emotions she had been experiencing and her youthful dreams shattered. Initially, after her marriage, she is apparently a satisfied partner who is married to a responsible man of social status. For a while everything went well and Jaya adapted to the new environment according to her husband's wishes.

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is an award-winning novel depicting the lasting peace of women in society. She literally depicts the inner conflict of Jaya protagonist and her quest for herself. Jaya represents women who are silenced, silenced by man-made traditions and laws. Shashi Deshpande says of *That Long Silence* as:

And then I wrote *That Long Silence* almost entirely a woman's novel nevertheless, a book about the silencing of one-half of humanity. A lifetime of introspection went into this novel, the one closest to me personally; the thinking and ideas in this are closest to my own. (Sidhartha Sharma, *Shashi Deshpande's Novels a feminist Study*, 38)

The problems of Indian women of different strata was analysed by Shashi Deshpande. Her genuine portrayal of women and their internal troubles makes her writing sensible and in nature leads to feministic thinking.

Although Shashi Deshpande says it is natural to write women's problems and feelings, the very title of the novel, *That Long Silence* leads to the idea of womanhood. It is derived from a speech delivered by American actor Elizabeth Robins in 1907. Deshpande quotes Robin's words in the Epigraph in this novel, "If I were man and concerned about knowing the world I lived in, I probably would think it would always make me a carefree seam, the weight of that silence for a long time" Sunita Reddy, *Novels of Shashi Deshpande*, Shashi Deshpande uses this silence as an epithet to her protagonist's surrender as well as defiance to the existing system of suppression.

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya is not only peaceful but also suffering. Her 'peace' is social in nature. She is an object of intense empathy. The novel goes on to determine into Jaya's personality through her long tests - social, economic, political, psychological, spiritual and religious.

There is no strong female voice against patriarchy but only intellectual debates are shown. She revolts, but in silence. Jaya is introduced not as a rebellious woman who has a desire to revolt but the one who reconciles her helplessness. She is of the opinion:

A woman can never get angry. She can only be neurotic, hysterical and frustrated. There is no room for despair, either. There is only

order and routine today. I have to change. She sheets tomorrow, shrubs the bathrooms the day after, and clean the fridge (That Long Silence- 147-148)

Deshpande describes the reality as in this regard, she says:

“My characters take their own ways. I have heard people saying we should have strong woman characters. But my writing has to do with women and how they are” (Vishwanath-1987:12).

That Long Silence

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* tells the story of Jaya and Manohar, who live together as husband and wife to promote their dispersal in the face of some of life's challenges. It is the idea of the author that women often bear the tyranny of men silently in middle-class families in India and if anyone suffers from a specific illness, they can be ignored and left dead. Jaya is an example of women who have no choice but to submit to being led by their husbands like Sita and Draupadi of yesteryears in the woods and bushes, and in mire infamy and deserted finally. “But for me, now that I had abandoned ‘Seeta’, there was nothing; or, if there was, I had to search for it.” (69)

After all, she yoked with her husband inextricably. The victim used the appropriate metaphor of being bound as bulls to convey the idea that marriage is indisputable and that the wife is bound by agreement to follow her husband. She is as blind as Gandhari when the husband is blind, or she has to lose her 100 sons as a result. “I remember now that he had assumed I would accompany him, had taken for granted my acquiescence in his plans. So had I.....”(11) “Two bullocks yoked together.....it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful; and what animal would voluntarily choose pain?”(12)

Jaya's father named his daughter Jaya, meaning victory. He instilled the sense of superiority in his daughter. He once pulled out, his daughter from the circle of her friends, saying that those girls “asked for nothing more than the destiny of being wives and mother”. “..... ‘You're going to be different from the others, Jaya,’ Appa had assured me.”(136) Jaya moaned, “I had known then that it was all Appa's fault. What had he made me feel I was someone special? Why had he made me feel different from others?”(136)

Jaya's health deteriorated rapidly when her husband was asked to leave her job while allegations of business misconduct against him are investigated. Her family's presence has

disrupted her husband's reputation in question and their future as a family in risk, Jaya, a failed writer, is remembered by memories of her past.

The difference in her husband, the frustration in their seventeen-year marriage, the disappointment in her two teenage children, the claustrophobia of her childhood - all begin to make sense. In her small apartment in Bombay, Jaya faces these and other facts about her amidst her failure to write and the fear of being angry. Shashi Deshpande gives us a depiction of a woman achieving the ideal that basically strives to eradicate the 'long peace' that started in childhood and focused on her and the pressures of her life.

That Long Silence of Shashi Deshpande shows that women have been silent for a long time even though they are not subject to human rule. Jaya was obsessed with the life of an independent girl but it was not appropriate because women in India were under the pressure of circumstances, customs and traditions, all of which were stopping women. "I had learnt it at last no questions, no retorts, only silence"(143). These lines revealed the oppressive, depressing life of a housewife, who has gone from ignorance to knowledge, through suffering. Jaya, the protagonist in That Long Silence, directly confronts the enlightened creature.

Deshpande's novel That Long Silence told a story to convey the fact that a woman was offered a second job and was offered a second position. She believes that women often suffer because of male violence and defeat. The title of this novel, That Long Silence itself, means that women do not raise their voices against oppression. The woman puts down her personality for the sake of her husband and children, yet she continues to submit to them.

The centuries-old shelter has made women too weak to lead independent lives. We call this the women's issue that makes Jaya realize peace for so long though she is a writer. There is actually a conflict between the author and the housewife. The author is expecting her to present her ideas and experiences in public; but the housewife wants her to be quiet. In this time of war the wife of the home lives and is silently researching her history and fighting for her gift. As a result he gets to go back to her writing career. Publishers reject her manuscripts because they do not bring the fire of her experience to play her writings. She is discouraged by her husband "I have given up my writing because of you". She further says: I had known then that it hadn't mattered to Mohan that I had written a good story, a story about a couple, a man who could not search out to his wife except through her body. For Mohan it had mattered that people might think the couple was us, that the man him". (144)

Since she was trapped in this problem, she had died. She does not become the ideal woman she tries to be, or she complains or rebels against the patriarchal yoke to free herself.

Jaya is deeply distressed as Mohan discouraged her to write blaming that she “only an exhibitionist”(144) “I gave up my writing because of you,”(119) she told Mohan. But she did not take the risk of annoying him though he had crushed both the woman and the writer in her. She confesses that she had relinquished “.....all those stories that had been taking shape in me because I had been scared-scared of hurting Mohan, scared of jeopardizing the only career I had i.e, being Mohan’s wife”(144) The mere thought of annoying her husband and consequently desertion by the husband, unnerves Jaya, for she could not cast off the role of a traditional Indian woman. “Even a worm has a hole it can crawl into. I had mine-as Mohan’s wife, as Rahul’s and Rati’s mother.”(148)

With Jaya's character, Shashi Deshpande has voiced the confused status of a well-educated Indian woman who will not retaliate against a loveless marriage or abandon her husband in her life as he views her as “a sheltering tree”(32) she cannot afford to life without.

When Jaya gets married to Mohan, Jaya got a new name ‘Suhasini’ and surprisingly her personality also changed from ‘Jaya’ which means ‘Victorious’ to ‘Suhasini’ which means “a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman’(15-16) when Kamat suggests her to express the real anguish in her writings, she replies, “because no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman?”(147)

It shows how a husband’s will and social conformity become most obligatory for a woman. Jaya also strives to be the best house wife. She never questions Mohan’s ways rather she offer subtle resistance through silence.

Jaya’s Character in That Long Silence

Deshpande describes Jaya's misery with a picture or of a woman going into a ditch. Insecure and problematic, Jaya feels distant from real life. She's afraid of writing, she's afraid of failure. She cannot face the challenge and wants to return to her safe family life. That Long Silence focuses on an important theme, namely, gender segregation and strengthening of the male categories, as well as the peace and commitment in which women are held in our society. With this idea Adesh Pal comments,

“This too, is true that they revolt against the social taboos, the cramped wrinkled traditions arid value of their ancestors and ceaselessly question the very concept of love, marriage and sex and feel an urge to redefine human relationship and behavior”

The novelist has revealed tragic stories of Jaya and Mohan's relationship with his friends in the use of the novel. Jaya talks about the intersection of love and sex. She speaks her mind,

“First there’s love, then there’s sex that was how I had always imagined it to be. But after having with Mohan I had realized that it could so easily be the other way round.”

Mohan had crushed both the woman and the writer in Jaya as he did not love her and did not encourage her. Her silence is characterized by grief and enslavement. Her mental anguish is so great that her desire to speak properly fails. Jaya decides to break that long silence by putting on paper everything she has suppressed for seventeen years - that long silence that has reduced her to pieces:

“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. Now I know that kind of fragmentation is of possible. The child, hands in pocket, has been with me through the years, she is with me still.” (That Long Silence, 191)

So, by the end of the novel, Jaya's self-understanding was brought out very skillfully. A woman wants a home with her family and not at the cost of her identity. She wants the freedom to use her talent and the respect she has to give to family members. When she is denied freedom and ownership, she has the power to rebel by arrest. That Long Silence, therefore, teaches women to fight for silence and express themselves. A woman according to Deshpande can be better understood if she is trampled and shown by love. As their hearts are tender they deserve tender love.

Conclusion

Shashi Deshpande is undoubtedly a writer who looked into women's problems. She charts women’s emotions starting from the pangs of a growing up girl to the void created because of the non-fulfilment of a woman’s yearnings. Jaya comes to the conclusion that marriage is subjective and abusive to women. She is forced to follow her husband's wills and wishes. That she has no right to have her own independence. Shashi Deshpande succeeds in this novel to turn Jaya's misery into a revolutionary thinking in order to find out for her own identity. It symbolizes Jaya's attempt to reveal and inform herself. By the end of the novel, the protagonist within the family's power matrix and undergoes a radical change: her fears and insecurities have been replaced by self-esteem that is an important ingredient of

happiness in the human life. Now she wishes to exercise her choice; her confidence drives her to break the silence while her skills, make her talk about her writing. Thus, narrative records Jaya's movement from the feminine phase as she dissolved the patriarchal system, while still being a part of it.

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