

SILENCE THAT SPEAKS: A TALE OF HUSHED EXISTENCE IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S 'THAT LONG SILENCE'

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Abstract

Indian fiction in English has a formidable and huge line of women novelists. Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Shashi Deshpande, Attia Hosain, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Meena Kandasamy and Manju Kapur are a few prominent writers who have emphatically written about Indian women, their conflicts and their predicament against the background of contemporary India and its patriarchal society. These women novelists have vehemently explored the psychic and moral dilemmas of the situation in their women characters in a bid to achieve a new harmony of relationship with themselves and their surroundings. Shashi Deshpande is one of the foremost voices to deal with this crux. Her chief thematic concern is with a woman's struggle in the contemporary Indian society and her main effort is to probe and preserve her identity as a wife, a mother and most of all; a human being. Deshpande generally picture's her protagonist as a narrator and employs the stream of consciousness technique to reveal her innate agony and anguish. Her novels reveal a real world of complex human relations that entangle together in an inextricable familial bond. The novelist actually projects modern Indian woman's quest for self and her role in the society and family because her relation with them is central to her living. Here we are reminded of Simon de Beauvoir's observation that the factors that unite us are far more important in our lives than the gender differences that divide us.

Key words: Conflicts, Predicaments, Contemporary, Dilemmas, Crux, inextricable, Quest

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The canvas of Indian English fiction is quiet wide and Shashi Deshpande has, with her meticulous effort, proven herself a master writer in the way she projects and articulates human emotions, their fears and their feelings. Reading her books is synonymous to peeping into the hidden corners of one's own mind and traversing the unknown regions. Being a woman her focus is concern for female, the most thwarted in Indian society, and thus she places them on the anvil of the situational crisis and makes them suffer through a series of uncanny events so as to test and prove their endurance. She engages herself in a definition of woman as a biological entity for reproduction and tries to establish a separate identity and autonomous relation with others on equal footing with men by subverting patriarchal ideology and social tradition to view women in India. By rejecting the romantic notion of an artist as a hero, which excludes women, she emancipates the artist and the feminine spirit and depicts the woman's situation and her struggle in all spheres of life. The novelist strives to show that in a society it is only through relationship with others that a woman can preserve her true identity. For women these relational ties are so strong that it is difficult to violate some of the bonds without yielding to patriarchal norms since Indian society is chiefly male dominant and all social ties are measured in terms of women's sense of subordination by men. The structure of social pyramid is framed in such a manner that women, the soul of the soil, are placed at the bottom of it shouldering and enduring the entire burden singly. Men are the shapers and moulder of their lives; so they occupy the top most station.

In her novel '*That Long Silence*' Deshpande presents the story of Jaya and Manohar, who live together as husband and wife in spite of their despairing attitude towards some of the fundamental issues of life. The novel brings to the fore the view of the novelist that women, in Indian middle class families, generally endure the tyranny of men silently and if any of

them happens to suffer from some ailment, they are callously hushed and neglected and left to die unsung and unattended. 'Jaya', the protagonist, of the novel, is an absolute example of such an untold destiny. The novelist attains success in transforming her mute suffering into '*revolting thinking*' in order to attain her identity. Thus the novel succeeds in giving voice to the silenced and the voiceless is found striving to attain a new identity. The present paper is an attempt to study the novel from the point of view of *marginalisation of Indian women* in the patriarchal society. It attempts to focus on Deshpande's bold presentation of the voice of the silenced.

Shashi Deshpande's '*That Long Silence*', which won her the Sahitya Academy Award for 1990, tells the story of an Indian house wife who maintains her silence throughout her life in the face of hardships that threaten to break her. The novel is a recalling of Jaya, the heroine, who is a writer. For her, writing is like childbirth, both painful and risky. She says: '*I am not writing a story of a callous, insensitive husband and a sensitive, suffering wife. I'm writing of us-of Mohan and me. And I know this-you can never be the heroine of your own story. Self-revelation is a cruel process. The real picture, the real you never emerge. Looking for it is as bewildering as trying to know how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces*' (Shashi, *That Long...*, p.01). The novel begins with the intricate and sensitive presentation of the loneliness of Jaya and the haunting question of the ultimate purpose of her life in the context of her familial relationships. She wants to understand her own bare self, devoid of all the embellishments, as that alone can prove to be a reservoir of strength in her tedious, lonesome journey towards self-actualization. Oscillating between desire and disgust, she constantly tries to bridge the gap between the mythic wife and the mother and her own experiences of being a wife and a mother and is often racked by pangs of guilt and inadequacy. In a bid to prove an ideal wife and mother, she suppresses her own emotional needs. The fear of failure to conform to the stereotyped model of ideal women makes her restless and she is afraid to acknowledge her desires decisively in petty day-to-day affairs. She is afraid that a frank admission of her desires may disturb the delicate balance of her relationships. She realises the futility of a life lived only for the sake of others

by suppressing her own passions, preferences, strength and calibre. In this subjugation of desires; she proves a saintly figure who sacrifices her feelings giving priority to the emotions of those whom she considers an integral part of her being.

Jaya is a typical heroine of Shashi Deshpande. She is not the least different from the female characters of Kamala Markandaya. Like other women characters she too is fed up of a pressured life and appears a scapegoat. These Indian women are actually the stereotyped images of weak, timid and sacrificing ones, who are comfortable with a blind faith in patriarchy. The height of irony is that they are forced to lose their faith in themselves. Through Jaya, the protagonist of the novel, the author has striven to give us a new image of the Indian woman who tries to stand on her own feet and seeks to break the old age silence by refusing to dance to the tune of her husband. It is with Jaya's assertion of life that ultimately the long, frigid silence is threatened to be shattered. In a way, the protagonist Jaya is a modern woman who resents her husband's callousness and becomes the victim of circumstances. By implicating the character of Jaya the author represents modern women's ambivalent attitude to married life. Shashi Deshpande hints at the modern woman's refusal to comply with the wishes of the husband. The conflicts are vividly projected when Jaya says, *'If I were a man and cared to know the world I lived in, I almost think it would make a shade uneasy – the weight of that long silence of one half of the world'* (epigraph, *That long....*).

The weight of the silence maintained by Jaya to this point in her life becomes unbearable. In the process of stretched silence she succeeds in realizing and discovering herself. The need to establish herself as an individual and acquire her identity comes to her after a long span of seventeen years of marriage. The silence that culminates into a hushed voice after a long hiatus stunts the readers. The whole novel is actually fabricated around a grave silence which unfortunately is the destiny of an uncountable majority. Mohan, Jaya's husband, complains that his mother never raised her voice against his father, however, ironically, his father behaved in the same manner as he behaves with her. This statement is a confirmation of a settled life lived by Indian women to which nobody had an objection. But those were the old days, the times when women endured in silence and wept quietly. Times

have changed for the better; now the women have gained courage to free themselves from the age old bondages and shackles. They have learnt to voice their grievances. They are no more termed *Abala* who silently suffers the tyranny of the patriarchal male in their lives. The change in the scenario has evolved due to education which places women equal to men, making them intellectually and emotionally strong.

The novel is not only about Jaya's efforts to obliterate the silence that is suffocating her, but also about the despair and resignation of other '*Victims of patriarchy and also their silence*' (Palker, *Breaking the Long Silence*....., p.168). Deshpande has a knack to articulate and toy the words according to the needs of the story. In this novel '*Silence*' has become an insistent metaphor. To her female protagonist it has become an integral part of her existence, a distinguishing mark. It's an irony that most women in India lead a neglected life and leave behind them a deep silence. Deshpande does not extol this Indian habit of silence on the part of women, but shows how it can become a weapon in the hands of men by inflicting punishment upon women. Marriage is a tool for them to subjugate and make women dumb. Silence, in simple words, is an acceptance of the torments; the neutralisation of pain. Alice Walker in her essay '*In Search of Our Mothers' Garden*' has dwell on the difficulties and hardships that black married women had to endure. They were not allowed to express their creativity and intelligence through art and writing. They had no opportunities, no careers or jobs to show what they were capable of doing. They were nothing more than bodies that were used for hard labour or getting pregnant. These women lived in silence and died in isolation with no one to mourn over their dead bodies and soon they were replaced too. Be it India or abroad, the condition of women seems similar, pathetic and painful.

Shashi Deshpande's novel can also be read in the light of the theory of the feminine mystique, put forward by the American feminist critic Betty Friedan. When we read the novel from the point of view of Friedan, we find that Jaya is confronting with the problem of identity. She is an educated middle class woman who has an employed husband and two children. According to Friedan, the root of women's troubles is that they envied men, and tried to be like them, instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfilment only

in sexual passivity, male domination and nurturing maternal love. Jaya is forced to accept this idea since her childhood. She has always been advised by the elderly women in her life to be passive and sacrificing for her husband and children. Her husband, her family, and the society she lives in compel her to a puppetry life. Her uncle Ramukaka shows her a family chart and says: *'Look, Jaya, this is our branch. This is our grandfather, your great grandfather and here's father, and then us- Laxman, Vasu and me. And here are the boys-Shridhar, Jannu, Dinker and Ravi'. 'But Ramukaka.. .' I had exclaimed, 'I'm not here'. 'You!' He had looked up, irritated by the interruption, impatient at my stupidity. 'How can you be here? You don't belong to this family! You are married; you are now part of Mohan's family. You have no place here'. But I had said nothing....'* (Deshpande, *That Long Silence*, p.143). Jaya was speechless. Ammu in Arundhati Roy's *'The God of Small Things'* had to struggle hard to prove her worth in her maternal house after her divorce. She wasn't willingly accepted in the house where she had spent golden moments of her life before marriage. She was always rated a second grade citizen in her maternal abode. She was divorced like her brother but her freedom of survival was snubbed and curtailed. She did not enjoy the liberty of choosing a life style of her brother. The condition of female child in India seems constant.

Jaya, being a creative writer, is forced to renounce her job as a columnist due to her husband's interests. Women are human beings, neither stuffed dolls nor animals. Behind the story of the novel lies the ground swell of frustration in married life of the protagonist. She suffers from isolation, abandonment and alienation despite her marriage to Mohan and subsequently, even after becoming a mother of two, she is left lonely. Her life partner could not understand her emotions due to which she was in shreds from within. The novelist has presented Jaya as an example of the women who have no choice but to yield to be led by their husbands like Sita and Draupadi. *'But for me, now that I had abandoned 'Seeta', there was nothing; or, if there was, I had to search for it'* (p.69). After all Jaya yoked with her husband inextricably. The novelist has used a very apt metaphor of being yoked like bullocks to convey the idea that marriage is irrevocable and wife is bound by a covenant to follow her husband. She blindfolds herself like Gandhari if the husband is blind, without least caring about her own identity and the consequences. *'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?"(p.12) Here we are reminded of Meena Kandasamy's *'When I Hit You'* where the protagonist is trapped in her own house by her husband and compelled to endure his highly rude and aggressive behaviour. The situation becomes evidently pathetic when she finds out that her husband is a psychopath. She is unable to drag herself out of the fearsome situation. She yearns to leave but is pressurized and reminded of the age old Indian taboo. Tragically, when she informs her parents, over the phone that her husband rapes her and beats her, the narrator's father responds with the fervour of a self-involved Indian patriarch. He urges his daughter to rethink her decision to exit the marriage as it would defame their reputation in the society. He casually says, *'If you break off your marriage, everyone in town will mock me'* (Meena, *When I Hit...*, p.158).

Jaya, unfortunately, is not the only one to be trapped in the vicious cycle of marriage which expects sacrifices from a female. Marital torture at the hand of in-laws is quite common in Indian society. The recurring physical and mental trauma that the author mentions brings shivers in the readers' hearts. Her scripts provoke vicious personal attacks which, in themselves, speak to the cultural critique she puts forth. Manju Kapur's novel *'Custody'* unfolds similar unbelievable uncertainties of matrimony in today's modern society. Her novel truly highlights the fear looming over every marriage in modern India. Since the emergence of patriarchal family the role of 'men' has been to manipulate, exploit, abuse and subjugate through a complex network of norms, conventions and institutions. Round the world women studies and feminist theory agree that the hegemonic patriarchal family is the centre of gender based discrimination. In India the multiplicity is not only in past but also in contemporary times; where the northern Indian family that arises as domineering has actually marginalised the kinship patterns of non- Hindu and tribal communities, following principles of matrilineal or bilateral descent.

On analysing the other novels of Shashi Deshpande, like *Dark Hold No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows*, *The Binding Wine*, *Small Remedies* and *A Matter of Time*, we find that she presents similar character in all of them. Heroines with tongues to articulate their traumatic married

life but forced in the complicated web of society to stay as mute sufferers. Though education elevates the status of Saru, the doctor protagonist in *'Dark Hold No Terrors'*, the decaying silence enters in to her married life and her education fails to alter her status in the family. The split personality springs from the sourness resulting in silence that pervades her marital life. She shelters under her silence for an articulation of her nightly terror which certifies her mother's prophecy against love marriages. Indu of *'Roots and Shadows'* too feels the pain, anger, frustration and disappointment over the absurdity of her life which develops an emotional polarity with her husband. The determination to remain silent is to avoid conflict and to keep the façade of a successful marriage before the indomitable marriage which prophesied catastrophe for an inter caste marriage. Thus, like other protagonists of Shashi Deshpande, Indu too uses silence as a weapon to carry on her life.

To any perceptive reader the relation between Jaya and Mohan is an epitome of failure and an emblem of disgust, disappointment and depression. Mohan has crushed, both, the writer and the woman in Jaya as he never loved her. Jaya has every reason to be bitter with him, for he has been responsible for her misery. Similar experiences are reflected in Urmi of *'The Binding Vine'* and Madhu of *'Small Remedies'*. Sumi of *'A Matter of Time'* presents how a female child is indoctrinated to be passive, submissive and silent right from childhood. It is the same parental partiality that conditions them to mask their feelings and remain silent. As writers, Indu and Jaya succumbed to dance to the tune of others, either the husband or the editor. On the threshold of establishing herself as a successful writer; Jaya is forced to masquerade behind a safe *'Seeta Column'*, because her husband fears a close resemblance between her stories and their life. In a way it proves an obstacle for Jaya to speak her silence through writing.

Differences with her husband, frustrations in their seventeen-year-old marriage, disappointment in her two teenage children and the claustrophobia of her childhood; all begin to show their ugly face. In her small suburban Bombay flat, Jaya grapples with these and other truths about herself, her failure at writing and her fear of anger. Actually there is a commotion between the writer and the housewife in her. The writer in her expects her to

express her views and experiences before the society; but the housewife demands silence on her part. In this internal tug of war the housewife wins and she remains passive, silently probing into her past and struggling with her present. Consequently, she receives a setback in her writing career. Publishers refuse her manuscripts because she does not bring the fire of her experience into play in her writings. She is discouraged by her husband. Being caught in this dilemma, she is withered. She neither becomes an ideal wife who she tries to be, though complainingly, nor revolts against the patriarchal yoke to liberate her. Jaya is deeply distressed as Mohan continuously discouraged her to write blaming that she's '*Only an exhibitionist*' (Shashi, *That Long...*, p.144). She held Mohan responsible for her failure but takes care not to annoy 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*' (p.144). The mere thought of annoying her husband and consequently desertion by him, unnerves her, 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*' (p.148). Through Jaya's character, Shashi Deshpande has expressed the confused state of a contemporary educated Indian woman who can neither reconcile herself in a loveless marriage nor shrug off her husband from her life as she still considers him '*a sheltering tree*' (p.32) without whom she cannot afford to live.

From the traditional gender based role Deshpande's protagonist struggles to emerge as individual. Reconciliation with her own self enables her to discard her silence too which is a strong symbol used by the author for submission, anger, pain and frustration issuing out of helplessness. The novel is, thus, not a mere documentation of female resistance to patriarchal ideologies but also an attempt made by women to forge an identity of their own and to voice them. By the end of the novel she has decided that she shall no longer be the subservient silent wife rather she would break her long silence. The force of Deshpande's indictment of women's lives lies in the way she is able to quote their condition as endemic, chiefly by drawing similarities among Jaya and variety of other female figures, in

generations of women in her family (Jaya, her mother, her grandmother), among different classes of women of the same class and generation (Jaya, her cousin Kusum, her widowed neighbour Mukka) who have all been trained in Silence. Although Jaya's creativity provides her an outlet for her frustration, she is not able to go beyond the social conditioning and somehow believes that a woman's choice, independent of that of her husband, should not have a significant role in her life. Her indefinable relationship with Kamat imparts an inner fulfilment. According to *Charu Chandra Mishra*, Jaya's need for Kamat also reinforces the truth of Maslow's theory of sequential motivational hierarchy. Expression of anger in silence is best evident in Jaya's revolt in silence in an incident when Mohan accuses her for no fault of hers. She wants to burst out in anger but fails to disown her silence. She was fed up with the routine work like changing the sheets, scrubbing bathrooms and cleaning the fridge, and so on. Shashi Deshpande uses an apt image of a worm crawling in to a hole to describe the state of Jaya, a budding writer doomed to dwindle into a stereotyped Indian house wife.

Shashi Deshpande gives us an exceptionally accomplished portrayal of a woman trying to erase a 'long silence' begun in childhood and rooted in her and in the constraints of her life. '*That Long Silence*' of Shashi Deshpande shows that women have been keeping silence since long in spite of being under the dominance of men. Jaya had imagined for herself a life of an independent girl but it was not to be because women in India have been under the pressure of circumstances, customs and traditions, all of which put restraints on them. She accepts, '*I had learnt it at last... no questions, no retorts, only silence*' (p.143). This line reveals the oppressive, debilitating life situation of a housewife, who journeys from ignorance to knowledge, through suffering. Jaya is exactly the opposite of the enlightened creature with discretion. Deshpande's novel has woven a story to present the truth that woman is assigned a secondary role and relegated to secondary position. She believes that women very often suffer due to male chauvinism and their own defeatism. The title of this novel itself implies that women do not raise their voice against suppression. They lose their personality for the sake of their husbands and children, yet they remain subordinate to them. Centuries old sheltering has made women too weak to lead an independent life. This

is what we call a feminist dilemma that makes Jaya observe such a long silence despite being a writer. Shashi Deshpande in her writing has tried to see and define what an Indian marriage is. Getting the daughters married is a sense of achievement for the parents. There are no emotions involved in bringing the two different entities together. By this, the highly talented girls become silenced puppets - statues ready to bear anything. Thinking about these predicaments of women, Betty Friedan remembers the German phrase "*kinder, kirche, kurche*", a Nazi slogan for confining women to the biological role. Both Deshpande and Friedan wonder, why the patriarchal society limits women to one role, one position and one occupation. They conclude that the feminine mystique is so powerful that women grow up no longer knowing that they have the desires and capacities that mystique actually forbids.

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