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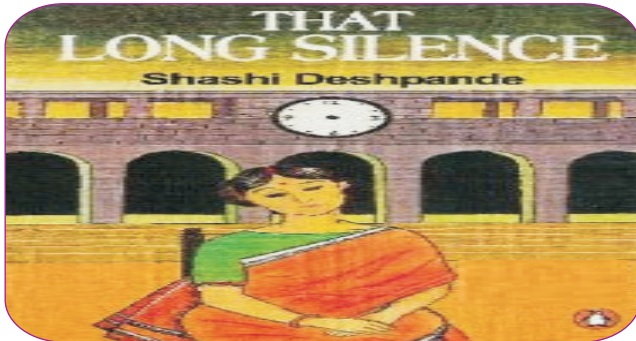
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## ERASING THE SILENCE: QUEST FOR FEMININE IDENTITY IN SHASHI DESPANDE'S *THAT LONG SILENCE*

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### ABSTRACT :

**F**eminism emerged as a worldwide movement with the purpose of defining, establishing, and defending political and socio-economical rights and equal opportunities for women, establishing gender justice and gender equity. Woman's individual self has very little recognition and self effacement and self denial has been a woman's normal way of life for ages. Women, no doubt, have acquired constitutional rights of equality with men, but the change in social attitudes towards women is yet to be achieved. Indian women have always been socially, psychologically, emotionally, sexually and biologically oppressed and exploited in a patriarchal society. Quest for feminine identity is basically a post-independence social phenomenon in India, a Phenomenon influenced by various changing forces of reality- freedom movement, progressive education, increasing contacts with the west, urban growth etc. Many writers in Indian English fiction have portrayed these silent sufferers and offered a voice to these individuals to rebel against the traditional role breaking the silence of suffering to move out of the caged existence and

asserting the individual self. This paper is an attempt to explore Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* as a novel which illustrates the image of an educated woman in the middle-class family and the way she is sandwiched between tradition and modernity, illusion and reality, mask and face in quest for her feminine identity. The novel explores the emotional world of the protagonist, revealing a rare imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and a profound understanding of feminine sensibility as well as psychology.

**KEYWORDS :** Feminism, Rights, Gender Equity, Self, Patriarchy, Feminine Identity.

### INTRODUCTION

The novel opens with Jaya and her husband Mohan moving back into the old Dadar flat from their house. Her husband is involved in a financial malpractice and an inquiry is set up. Mohan is consoled to find that the children, Rahul and Rati, are away on a long tour with their family friends, and expects Jaya to go into hiding with him, which she refuses to comply with. It is in the silence of the Dadar flat and in the absence of her usual domestic routine that Jaya goes through a period of intense introspection, placing her marriage and herself under the scrutiny of a merciless examination. Adele King opines: "Jaya finds her normal routine so disrupted that for the first time she can look at her life and attempt to decide who she really is" (King 97). She is flooded by the memories of the past- her earlier life, her marriage with Mohan, the frustrations and disappointments in her seventeen years of married life, her personal failures, all these begin to haunt and torment her. By her journey into the past, Jaya gets the guidance for her future. Her narrative moves deliberately to encompass a horde of other women, all victims of an imbalance between male power and female powerlessness within marriage.

The women characters in Deshpande's novel are, like the colonial women, have been reduced to certain stereotypes and society denies to sanction them an identity. So her women characters crave for an identity - to establish a space of their own. In her novel *That Long Silence*, there are ample of examples

to show how women are denied of any identity. For instance, at one point in the novel, Jaya discovers that she does not figure in the family tree that her uncle, Ramukaka, had prepared with great pains and of which he was so proud. When Jaya asks her uncle why her name is not included in the family tree, she is given to understand that she now belongs to her husband's family and not to her father's. But this is only half of the truth. Neither her mother nor her Kakis, i.e., her uncle's wives, not even her grandmother, Ajji, that indomitable woman, "who single handedly kept the family together" (Despande 143) find a place in the family tree. Jaya, to her dismay, finds that her name and existence, along with those of other women in the family, are completely blotted out of the family history. While defining women's place in the globally prevalent patriarchal set up, Virginia Woolf in her novel *A Room of One's Own* rightly voices the position of women in these words:

A very queer, composite being thus emerges. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She provides poetry from cover to cover: she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband. (Woolf 41)

Apparently, Jaya, the protagonist seems to be a satisfied housewife. Having married to a responsible man of social status, Mohan, and blessed with two children, Rahul and Rati, and a comfortable home, and material comforts, she seems to have almost nothing to ask for, in her life. To achieve this stage of fulfillment as a woman Jaya has systematically suppressed every aspect of her personality that refused to fit into her image as wife and mother. Her diaries, which she ironically calls "the Diaries of a Sane Housewife", are the records of her submissiveness surrender and compromises, because it is accepted that a woman's sanity lies in following her husband. Her dress and appearance are also a proof of her submission to Mohan's liking. She tries to make herself attractive simply to make her husband happy. Like a faithful wife she takes to wearing huge dark glasses, gets her eye brows shaped and hair cut short to look exactly like the wife of an executive. Jaya recalls the *pativratas* - Sita, Savitri and Draupadi – mythical symbols of ideal wifehood, ironically comparing herself to them: "Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging death to declaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails . . ." (Despande 11).

Jaya also takes up the role of Gandhari, who had bandaged her eyes so that she might be denied eyesight like her husband Dhritarashtra since the day of her marriage. Gandhari's feigned blindness also kept her unaware of the evil doings committed by her sons and supported by her husband. Jaya also poses to be blind for just to be an ideal wife. She doesn't bother about the ways adopted by Mohan for getting a better quarter and then a transfer to Bombay, as she says: "Mohan had managed to get the job. I never asked him how he did it. If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly. I didn't want to know anything" (Despande 61).

Though a woman suffers a lot on account of male ego and dominance, she considers herself incomplete without man. Jaya is so much attached to Mohan that she is not ready to be separated from him even for a moment. As Jaya says:

The thought of living without him had twisted my ideas. 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 had been sure he was dead. By the time he returned, I had in my imagination, shaped my life to a desolate widowhood. (Despande 96 - 97)

#### **In this connection, we may refer to Simone de Beauvoir's opinion:**

Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees . . . she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex-absolute sex, no less, she is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. (Beauvoir 25)

To Jaya, Mohan has been, as Jaya says: "My profession, my career, my means of livelihood" (Despande 75). She has been "Mohan's wife, Rahul's and Rati's mother not myself" (Despande 173). Indira Kulkshreshtha rightly opines: "Generally, a woman's identity is defined in terms of her relationship with man as a daughter, a

wife and a mother; it means virtually a woman doesn't have an identity of her own" (Kulkshreshtha 8)

Marriage is the patriarchal weapon that finalizes the complete subversion and social obliteration of woman. Although constructed as the apotheosis of fulfillment for both man and woman, it acquires centrality in woman's life only and contains both her space and her identity. This institution determines her code of behavior, and the boundaries of her space, exclusion and invisibility become strategic devices for patriarchy to foreground the image of ideal woman. At the time of Jaya's marriage, Ramukaka tells her that the happiness of her husband and home depends on her. Dada advised her to be good to Mohan. And Vanitamami tells her about the importance of being with a husband: "Remember, Jaya a husband is like a sheltering tree . . . Without the tree, you're dangerously unprotected and vulnerable" (Despande 32). These words keep on echoing in the ears of Jaya and she realizes that since a husband is like "a sheltering tree," he must be nourished and nurtured adequately even if the wife has to suffer to give it nourishment. So marriage not only hinders Jaya's intellectual growth, but also undermines her sense of self. Even Jaya blames the institution of marriage rather than her husband, "it was not Mohan, but marriage that had made me circumspect" (Despande 187).

From the day of her marriage Jaya suffers from an identity crisis as her name is changed from Jaya to Suhasini. It is a tradition in most of the Indian families to change the name of the bride. The same thing happens in case of Jaya. The name "Jaya" which means "victory" was given to her by her father and "Suhasini", the post marital name given to her by her husband, symbolizes as Jaya says-"a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A Woman who coped" (Despande 15). Both the name symbolizes the traits of her personality. Jaya and Suhasini are the two facets of the same coin.

As for her married life, there lies the smell of frustration in Jaya, who failed to be closer to her husband mentally and emotionally. She pines for emotional communication between her and her husband but as a husband, Mohan never tries to understand her emotions and psychological needs. A mechanical relationship and artificial love are the consequence of her marriage. She finds in her relationship with Mohan nothing except emptiness and the suppressed silence as she tells Mukta: ". . . nothing between me and Mohan either. We lived together but there had been only emptiness between us" (Despande 185). Jaya had dreamt about her marital life that she would love her husband first and then sex: "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" (Despande). Unable to endure, "A silent wordless lovemaking" (Despande 85), she says, "I could stay apart from him without a twinge, and I could sleep with him too, without desire" (Despande 97). Jaya realizes that despite seventeen years of married life, they have not become one, only their bodies occasionally meet, not their souls.

The character of Mohan conforms to the standard feminist description of a middle class husband who is insensitive, egoistic and sometimes over ambitious. Mohan is a modern man who is rooted in traditional Indian society. On the one hand, he wishes his wife to be modern and educated, but on the other hand he also expects her to have traditional qualities like submissiveness and flexibility. Mohan's desire to have an English speaking wife makes him marry Jaya, a convent educated girl. He has grown up seeing his mother silently submit to every erratic demand of his father. In Mohan's mind the roles of submissive wife and domineering husband had deeply ingrained and with such deep rooted thoughts he enters into matrimony with Jaya. Mohan even warns her: "My mother never raised her voice against my father, however he behaved to her" (Despande 83). Ajoy Ashirwad Mahaprashasta, in his article "Man's World", rightly points out:

Feudal patriarchal norms are so firmly entrenched in Indian society that any assertive and independent creation of space by women is violently resisted . . . Feminists believe that this subconscious sense of displacement has made even modernist men uncomfortable as they themselves are born into traditional Indian families that are fed on ideas that differentiate sexes by patriarchal virtues. (Mahaprashasta 26)

Despande's creative self makes her woman characters creative also. But their creativity doesn't get ample scope to flourish. That is why they have an endless search for their identity. Jaya is a gifted writer. Her entity as a creative writer helps her to find a space of her own. For her, writing is an act of self expression and liberation which leads to self knowledge. Meenakshi Bharat says, "Jaya's writing is a function of the heightened consciousness, the education, the leisure and privacy to which her class portion gives her access" (Bharat 85). The little self, which she achieved and accumulated, the real part of her identity, her creative genius faces a blow.

Her career as a successful writer is jeopardized right in the early years of her marriage. She wins the first prize for one of her short stories which gets published in a magazine. When on the threshold of getting recognition as a creative writer of some merit, Mohan expresses his displeasure at that particular story written by her. The story is about "a couple, a man who cannot reach out to his wife except through body" (Despande 144). Mohan thinks that the story portrays their own personal life, and he is very apprehensive of the idea that the people of his acquaintance may assume that he is the kind of person portrayed in the story. Mohan asks Jaya: "How could you, how could you have done it? . . . How can you reveal us, how can you reveal our lives to the world in this way?" (Despande 143-144). This creates tension in their relationship. To keep Mohan happy, Jaya annihilates the creative aspect of her personality as she says, "Looking at his stricken face, I had been convinced I had done him wrong. And I had stopped writing after that" (Despande 144). In order to make, the sacred vow of married life, strong and more visible, she stops writing real stories and tries her hand for imaginary ones. She adores a fictitious name 'Seeta', completely foreign to both, Jaya and Suhasini.

In transforming Jaya from her mute suffering to rebellious thinking, Kamat plays an important role. He encourages her like a brother, sometimes complements her like an ardent lover and even dares to chide her like her father. Jaya's relationship with Kamat is never very precisely defined in the novel. He acts as a friend, philosopher and guide to her. He says to her, "I'm warning you – beware of this "women are victims" theory of yours. It'll drag you down into a soft, squishy bog of self pity. Take yourself seriously, woman. Don't skulk behind a false name" (Despande 148). It is in his presence that Jaya becomes uninhibited and sheds all her identities as a daughter, wife and a mother. It is her relation with him that makes her realize her inner self. This relationship imparts an inner fulfillment to Jaya which her relationship with Mohan had failed to provide. As Jaya says: "But this man . . . it had been a revelation to me that to people, a man and a woman, could talk this way. With this man, I had not been a woman. I had been just myself- Jaya" (Despande 153). But in our Indian society, such a relationship between a married woman and another man is always looked upon with suspicion and disapproval. That is why, perhaps, when Jaya had found Kamat lying dead on the floor of his flat on one of her visits to him, she had panicked and left the place in silence. Jaya cannot even stay for a few moment and pay homage to this man in his death for the fear of ruining her marriage.

Besides analyzing her own self, Jaya also explores the other female characters in the novel. Other female characters are aware of their condition but they constitute the group known as "the gendered subaltern". Women are no doubt at the margins and men at the centre. But as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has pointed out, even some of the females join hand with males to exploit the other members of their sex and in a way try to draw privileges by moving a step towards the center and leaving the margins behind. This is true of this novel also. There are hierarchies among women and women like Vanita Mami, Jeeja, Nayana and Tara indirectly reinforce patriarchy as they behave like a silent spectator and do not oppose the wrongs done on the other members of their sex.

Jaya remembers Sanskrit words from the Bhagwadgita, the words she saw in Appa's diary, the final words of Krishna's long sermon to Arjuna: '*Yathēcchasi tatha kuru*' (Deshpande 192), the words that mean, 'Do as you desire'. She interprets these words in her own way. For her, the words mean: "I have given you knowledge. Now you make the choice. The choice is yours. Do as you desire". (Deshpande 192). She, now, realizes that she has to make choice on her own. Now Jaya comes to know that the reason of her depressing condition is not the society alone, but she has to take the responsibility of her own state and work according to it. The idea of marriage as "two bullocks yoked together" is rejected by her. Understanding that life cannot be lived in vacuum, she no longer looks at Mohan and herself as two bullocks, rather as two individual with independent minds. She realizes that meaningful co-existence can be achieved only through understanding and compassion, not through domination, subjugation or rejection. Now she is determined to live her life with courage and confidence. She resolves to break that long silence by putting on a paper all which she had suppressed in her seventeen years silence:

I'm not afraid any more. 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 fragmentation is not possible. The child, hands in pockets, has been with me through the years. She is with me still. . . Two bullocks yoked together - that was how I

saw the two of us the day we came here, Mohan and I. Now I reject that image. It's wrong. If I think of us in that way, I condemn myself to a lifetime of disbelief in ourselves" (Deshpande 191).

She decides to find means to live life afresh. She is ready to start a life anew with Mohan when he returns. She decides to speak out and to listen, to erase the silence between her and Mohan, between her and their children. She, armed with new outlook, and enthusiasm, decides to face her marriage. She confesses: But we can always hope, without that life would be impossible. And if there is nothing I know now, it is this: life has always to be made possible" (Deshpande 193). Sarala Parker beautifully sums up the idea when she says: "The important insight that Shashi Deshpande imparts to us through Jaya is that women should accept their own responsibility for what they are, see how much they have contributed to their victimization instead of putting the blame on everybody except themselves" (86).

Thus, *That Long Silence* traces Jaya's passage through a plethora of fears, guilt, self-doubts, smothered anger and silence towards articulation and affirmation. She is resolved to erase the silence both between herself and Mohan, and between herself and her art of writing, and, thus, emerges as a 'new' woman ready to assert her individual identity. Here Jaya emerges as an educated woman in a middle-class family who is sandwiched between tradition and modernity, illusion and reality, mask and face in quest for her feminine identity. Here the emotional world of the protagonist reveals a rare imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and a profound understanding of feminine sensibility as well as psychology. A far cry from the feminine world is emerged here.

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