



FEMININE MARGINALIZATION IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THAT LONG SILENCE*

S. Nancy¹ and Dr. A. K. Polson²

¹Research Scholar, St. Peter's University, Avadi, Chennai.

²Professor, St. Peter's University, Avadi, Chennai.

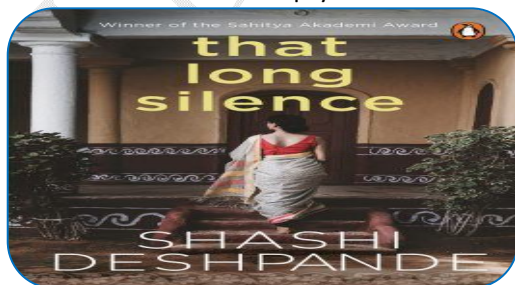
ABSTRACT :

This article proposes Deshpande's That Long Silence provides a critique of Indian marriages which prevents the free communication and expression of women. It reveals how the prevalent patriarchal practices help in feminine marginalization, and how women's mind has been tones through centuries of biased conditioning. It imagines on the protagonist's dilemma in this typical Indian milieu, which binds her like an octopus and at the same time, expects her to "perform" effectively and competitively in her allotted orbits. It reveals the alluring picture of ordinary middle class educated women Jaya who is trapped in the institution of marriage. Throughout the story the female protagonist Jaya is searching for her own identity. Jaya lives with her husband and two children Rahul and Rati. Her life revolves around them. She plays different roles in her life-that of a dutiful wife, an obedient daughter-in-law and an affectionate mother. She submits herself to patriarchy. But in fulfilling her duties and responsibilities her true self is lost. In the novel she tries to search her identify. She confronts a situation where she questions her role clarity-her life-is she living for her or for someone else or for her husband or for her children.

KEYWORDS : Patriarchy, feminine, marginalization, frustration and self-identity.

INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande has occupied a prominent place among Indian Women writers in English. She portrays modern, educated and career-oriented middle class women who are sensitive to the changing time and situations. They are aware of the social and cultural disabilities to which they are subjected in the male-dominated society. They want to rebel against them in their search for freedom and identity, but they find themselves up against well-entrenched social inertia. She finds them caught up in a conflict between their family and professional roles, between individual aspiration and social demands. A glimpse of her novels reveals how poignantly she expresses the frustration and disappointments of women experience social and cultural oppression in the male-dominated society. Through her novel she brings forth the problem of identity crisis which is predominant motif in modern Indian society. Her novels highlight the image of middle class women squeezed in between tradition and modernity. She portrays her heroines in a realistic manner. She deals with a woman's psyche which is made to feel inferior and a burden on the family. Her heroines are



courageous enough to revolt against the marginalization of women by men and society as revealed in *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors*.

JOURNEY TOWARDS SELF-ACTUALIZATION

That Long silence is an acclaimed novel by Shashi Deshpande, published in Britain by Virago, has won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award and it has been

translated into the French and the Dutch languages. The novel is based in the context of contemporary Indian writing in English. Shashi Deshpande explores the universal and individual predicament through the female psyche. The novel *That Long Silence* tells a haunting tale of how Jaya is disillusioned with her marriage and her life, rediscover her.

In *That Long Silence*, the protagonist Jaya journeys towards self-actualization. The novel embarks on with the receptive appearance of the solitude of a woman and the poignant question of the eventual purpose of her life in the milieu of her familial bond. The novel is an individual's journey in search of one's true self who confronts the gender oriented tradition. It depicts the plight of a wife who suffers silently in the name of family. Marriage is still a social necessity, where women seek security and men respectability. In her early married life, Jaya had yielded her decisions to her husband. The forced isolated stay in Dadar flat facilitates her to reconsider her life built around the needs of a husband only. Jaya's creativity provides her an outlet for her dissatisfaction. The novel ends with a renewal of faith. Jaya's decision to wipe out the silence and have a balanced contented life is a decision in the right direction. Self-actualization is possible if a woman decides to be herself, to reveal the genuine value of her free and inborn individuality in its entirety.

It is a complex story about a woman who rediscovers herself after seventeen years of marriage and comes to term with her failure as a writer. Deshpande uses this story to paint clearly how the life of a woman like Jaya is. She says that the life of woman is confined within the boundaries of her husband's home. She must stay at home, look after her babies, keep out of the rest of the world, and then only she is safe. Jaya's life was happy one as she had a happy family, her husband was in a top position, they had two children one boy and one girl and she was yet another wife and mother whose life middle around her family and her home. The novel conveys the confusion, disappointment and subjugation of middle class educated Indian women.

JAYA AS A MUTE SPECTATOR

The issue of identity crisis is strongly rooted and integrated Indian consciousness since ages in spite of the fact that Indian women did enjoy equal status and rights during the early Vedic period. The behavioral pattern of females in India can be traced to the ancient days. It is said that "In childhood, a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; women must never be independent." In this context, Simon de Beauvoir's argument of 'The Second Sex' is quite appropriate. Women have never shared the world equally with men for they are dependent on men, which are not a natural or biological characteristic but forced upon them by social tradition through their conditioning.

Jaya's character in this novel is a magnificent creation. Jaya is a middle class educated woman, born and brought up in a family with liberal views. After marriage, she becomes the part of a typical Indian conservative middle-class family where the wife is known by her husband. Just before she got married to Mohan, her aunt had told her, "Remember Jaya, a husband is like a sheltering tree." After marriage, she has given up her individuality and molded herself to suit the needs of Mohan's family. Her identity is that she is Mohan's wife. She is Rahul's and Rati's mother. She was a writer who had given up writing and had taken up writing a weekly column on Seeta. Deshpande's Jaya is a mute spectator to whatever is persistent in the Indian society. She doesn't have the habit of questioning rather she is not allowed to pose questions in a male-dominated society. Mohan was an ambitious person He did not have time for Jaya as he was busy realizing his dreams. He was an Indian husband who cared very little about her likes and dislikes. He did not understand his wife as a person. Marriage has changed Jaya and it has resulted in the death of Jaya as a writer. Jaya once wrote a story about a couple, about a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body. Her story won a prize in a magazine. Mohan was upset that people might think the couple was them, that the man was him. Jaya thought that she did him wrong. And she stopped writing after that. She thus kills the writer within her. Jaya's search of identity brings when Mohan is under suspicion of having done something dishonest. Both of them leave their posh church gate home and enter the simple Dadar flat of Jaya's uncle. She takes the first step towards this reawakening by taking the key of the flat and opening

the door herself. It is at that moment that Mohan's authority is shaken and Jaya starts reassuring control over herself and her life.

The loveless married life which causes the wife and the husband to drift away from each other results in total failure. By implication, the character of Jaya represents the modern woman's ambivalent attitude towards married life. It is only by negating her own personality that a woman who is powerless in the patriarchal order and society. Jaya in order to maintain her marriage as a happy one slowly transforms herself to this idea of womanhood, where she learns to repress her anger. Jaya always works up to please her husband. Jaya even transforms her appearance to suit his idea of a modern woman-cuts her hair and wears dark glasses. She ultimately gets so completely absorbed into the family fold that from a fiercely independent woman, she is transformed into the stereotype of a woman. Jaya desperately clings to her husband as if her life depends on him. Jaya's story, in the larger context, is the story of generations of women. She does not wish to look outside; she wants to be safe looking after her husband and children. The outside world has so far not affected her life though at times she feels dissatisfied with her life. The relationship between a wife and husband is expected to be not only cordial but intimate and enduring. But this relation between Jaya and Mohan is an epitome of failure and an emblem of disgust, disappointment, and depression. This is so because there was no love between them. This disgust of living with a man who does not love the woman the way she expects him-is a burning problem the educated woman has to face in the contemporary society. Marriage in India means marrying the husband's family traditions. The psychological and social realities in which women live have remained virtually unchanged. Jaya makes a powerful statement on the totally unfair system prevailing in our society of the subjugation of women. As she realizes, it is fear on the part of the woman that has allowed the subjugation to continue. Women need not succumb and assume the roles cast upon them. She says, "...in this life itself there are so many crossroads; women have allowed victimization instead of bargaining for partnership".

Jaya understands that she has also contributed to her victimization and that she has to fight her own battle and work out her own solution. Accordingly, she feels the necessity to break the silence, articulate her predicament, and establish her identity. She knows that there is always room for discussion and compromise. It is not the fault of men alone that has caused the feminine discontent. A patriarchal order can be subverted if only women take their armor in the order of intelligence and individuality. She decides that she will live from now onward without sacrificing her identity or individuality. She will make an adjustment but it will not be a servile one. Her giving up writing for the newspaper column 'Seeta' symbolizes giving up her traditional role-model of wife, now she will write what she wants to write and will not look up at Mohan's face for an answer she wants. To write and will not look up at Mohan's face for an answer she wants. This makes her voyage of discovery complete. She decides to break the ice between her and Mohan. She marches ahead with renewed energy. According to Jaya discovering one's self does not mean to stand aloof from the rest of the world.

Deshpande's major apprehension in *That Long Silence* is to search deeply into the psyche of a woman who is made to face all kinds of mental tortures. The question is what a woman never asked, but "whom she belongs to" is always considered important. She never has an identity of her own. Her name changes as per the wishes of others. In *That Long Silence*, the writer has presented this fact through the character Jaya, who is recognized by two names: Jaya and Suhasini. Jaya is the name given by her father when she was born which has the meaning "victory"; and Suhasini is the name given after her marriage which means a "soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman". Both the names stand for the persona of her individuality. The earlier one symbolizes revolt whereas the final one symbolizes submission.

To make the story a reliable one, Deshpande has made use of the first-person narrative to represent the psyche of the modern middle-class learned woman. To appeal to the readers, she uses the flashback technique. The first chapter deals with the present, but the remaining chapters are more in reminiscence with the final chapter ending in the present. The narrator in this novel is Jaya, the protagonist herself. While narrating her heartbreaking experiences, her mind wavers and she unfurls her whole life – from her

childhood days to her father's death. She is a typical modern woman who has her roots in tradition, while her husband Mohan, a traditionalist has his roots in customs.

Their outlook is different and they fail to understand each other. Due to differences in their attitude, their marital life grows shaky and gloomy. It becomes more of a compromise than love based on social fear rather than the mutual need of each other. The choice may be rooted in their choice of a partner. For example, from the very beginning, Mohan wanted a wife who was well-educated and cultured and never a loving one.

PATHETIC CONDITION OF A MARRIED WOMAN

The story that has created a rift between Jaya and Mohan is about "a couple, a man who cannot reach out to his wife except through her body" (144). Mohan thinks that the story tells about their personal life and he is very scared that the people of his acquaintance may assume that he is the kind of person portrayed in the story. His apprehension is enough to threaten Jaya's career as a writer. Though she knows there is no truth in what her husband thinks, she does not argue with him. She says:

Looking at his stricken face, I had been convinced. I had done him wrong and I had stopped writing after that. Perhaps if Mohan had been angry, if he had shouted and raged at me, if he had forbidden me to write, perhaps would have fought him and gone on. But he had only shown me his heart, and I had not been able to counter that. I had relinquished them instead, all those stories that had been taking scared-scared of hurting Mohan, scared of jeopardizing the only career I had my marriage. (144)

These words of Jaya painfully depict the pathetic condition of a married woman who is devoid of choices. She feels as if she has no right to express her real self even in fiction.

To Mohan, a woman sitting before the fire, waiting for her husband to come home and eat her food is the real strength of a woman, but to Jaya, it is nothing more than despair. "He wanted his rice fresh and hot, from a vessel that was untouched. She had just finished cooking this second cooking and was waiting, hoping, perhaps that he would not be too late, for it wouldn't do to allow and as for lighting the fire again, that was unthinkable" (P.15-16). "Her Ajji along with silence had taught her to "wait" the waiting game" (30). For a man waiting brings in restlessness but for a woman the game of waiting starts quite early in her childhood "wait until you get married, wait until your husband comes, wait until you go to your in law's home, wait until you have kids. Yes, ever since I got married I had done nothing but wait" (30) Women are blamed unfeminine and unnatural if they break the social system and so they are enforced to adhere to be termed feminine.

She tries to analyze the reason behind the series of rejections. Then, her neighbor, Kamat, comes to her rescue and makes her realize that her writings lack the intensity of thought and expression. Jaya is forced to write articles on the subjects that she hardly takes interest in. Her predicament resembles the predicament of many educated women who are compelled to curb their thinking due to social or family pressures. Jaya forces herself to write what she does not want to. She states:

Seeta had been the means through which I had shut the door firmly on all these women who had invaded my being, screaming for attention, women I had known I could not write about, because they might, it was just possible, resemble, Mohan's mother or aunt or my mother or aunt. (149)

As a result, her writings lack the original or individual touch. She knows about the falsity of her expressions yet she feels helpless. Here Shashi Deshpande seems to observe that sometimes women do not get an appreciation for their services even when they work tirelessly. Any creation that seems to defame the family is considered a crime. Simon De Beauvoir rightly observes:

A husband regards none of his wife's good qualities as particularly meritorious . . . He fails to realize that his wife is no character from some pious and conventional treatise, but a real individual of flesh and blood. (492)

Deshpande reveals the consciousness of Jaya through an account of her mind in the process of thinking, feeling and reacting to the stimuli of the moment and situation. In doing so, she goes on to assert the feminine psyche of the protagonist, to break away from the stronghold of a social framework rooted in

patriarchy which repels as it attracts. Jaya is a modern predicament and the flood of consciousness that ensue out of it is a silent stream of thoughts and feelings. She knows pretty well that in order to get by in a relationship one has to learn a lot of tricks and silence is one of them. Jaya surrenders Mohan without revolting. She never refuses or complains about anything. Her identity, personality is totally crushed which leads her to total confusion along with the loss of self-identity. We get a glimpse of Hinduism in the numerous fasts observed by women for the well being of husbands, sons or brothers. "Generally, a woman's identity is defined in terms of her relationship with a man as a daughter, a wife and a mother. It means virtually a woman doesn't have an identity of her own" says Indira Kulkshreshtha (3).

The narrator Jaya, an upper-middle-class housewife with two teenage children, is forced to take care of her life when her husband is suspected of fraud. They shift to a small flat in a poorer locality of Bombay, leaving their luxurious house. The narrative reveals the futility of modern Indian life, where success is considered only with the upwardly mobile husband along with their children studying in "good" schools. The daily chores of the normal life of a woman with material comforts is significantly represented in the following lines, "the glassware that had to sparkle, the furniture and curious that had to be kept spotless and dust-free, and those clothes, God, all those never-ending piles of clothes that had to be washed and ironed, so that they could be worn and washed and ironed once again" (57). Jaya's creativity is muted by strong social and family pressures and holds all creative activities in submission to her role as a homemaker.

Though she is a writer, Jaya has not achieved true self expression. There is something almost overpowering about the restriction of the narrator's life. The story is unfolded by Jaya, ironically again symbolizing victory, while in the actual life situation, she is supposed to lead a traditional, passive life like; "Sita following her husband into exile, Savithri, dogging death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails....."(11). She turns down these role models because in modern life these characters are simply citation of the past with no application to the present. These legendary women followed their husbands willingly but Jaya is accompanying Mohan everywhere because of compulsion. There is a frank, even brutal, realization of this evil necessity in her marital life. "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).

That *Long Silence* is very close to real life experience and achieves its consistency from the actuality that the protagonist Jaya is a well-educated person with a literary sensitivity equivalent with her fictional role. Silence for her is a kind of Defense Mechanism, which helps her to express herself more comprehensively. But the repeated allegations and accusations of her husband compel her to react sharply. She (Jaya) once tells Kamat (her neighbor) ".....no women can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman? A woman can never be angry, she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated" (147). Mohan wonders how Jaya, a woman could be so rebellious and angry. To him, it is unwomanly to be angry. A woman can never be angry. There is no room for misery, either. There is only order and routine. Women pay for their happiness at the loss of their freedom. Marriage suppresses women and it leads her to "aimless days indefinitely repeated, the life that slips away gently toward death without questioning its purpose" (30).

The role restricts women's self-development. She feels that in the life of a woman, there are many crossroads and many choices but a married woman has a few or practically no choice left to her except what her husband wills and desires. She unburdens herself to trigger out the creative impulses in her artistic self. The novel deals with feminism at its core. In the beginning, the imitation of role models has been crossed by Jaya. Then it is followed by anger and protest. Whenever she looks back on her life, she has no nostalgia or yearning for the past; but it is exhibited as a feeling of suppressed anger which can burst out any time. Finally, articulation and assertion of the protagonist are only hinted at one of the future potentials for Jaya.

Determination of her Self

Jaya begins analyzing her life in a new situation. She knows in her heart that her marriage has come to an end. After a fight, Mohan leaves that flat and walks out. Jaya becomes miserable and ultimately falls sick.

She is taken care of by her neighbor Mukta, Mukta's daughter Nilima and the servant girl, Manda. It is through writing that she is able to cope up with the situation. Her life is meaningless without her Mohan. Ruminating on the past, Jaya sees how her marriage has reduced her to mere automation. She realizes how she washed away the most valuable time of her life in arranging and re-arranging things, dusting, polishing, washing, ironing, cleaning the fridge and changing the sheets. She is bewildered to find in her diaries that she had spent her life engrossed in such trivialities as what she bought, how much she paid for it, the dates the children's schools had begun, the servant's absence, the advance they had taken, etc.

Jaya, as a girl, was taught by her father to have confidence in herself. He named her Jaya which stands for Victory and has encouraged her to be resilient and courageous. He has made her feel that she is someone special and someone different from the other girls whose world normally ends up becoming housewives. He would dream that Jaya either bags an international award or goes to Oxford. However, his untimely death shatters her dreams and makes her to face the reality that she is after all like any other middle class girl destined to be a wife and a mother. There is no comfortable relationship. Her early training at home has made her obedient and passive towards her husband. Her relatives taught her the importance of being with a husband and husband is like a sheltering tree and without the tree, the wife is dangerously unprotected and vulnerable. Jaya profits to "keep the tree alive and flourishing even if you have to water it with deceit and lies". Jaya since her childhood has designed her life in according to her family member's desires. She marries Mohan not out of choice but out of convenience. He is from the same caste, decent, good looking and has a good job. Jaya has no reason to reject him. As a girl, Jaya is not very practical and she romanticizes love. But when she grows up into a young woman, circumstances make her look at marriage practically, not romantically.

Generally, a woman's identity is distinct in terms of her relationship with man as a daughter, a wife, and a mother. It means practically a woman doesn't have an identity of her own. In keeping with the ritual of re-naming the bride on the wedding day as in some Brahmin communities, Jaya also has been renamed as 'Suhasini' by Mohan. 'Suhasini' means a soft, smiling placid, motherly woman, who makes herself loving and also lovingly nurtures her family. With this new name, it appears that the light-spirited and courageous Jaya has been reduced to a mere proud housewife and mother. Jaya wants to retain her own name given by her father meaning victory. Her refusal to adopt the name 'Suhasini' becomes a manifestation of resistance to the Indian society. However, Jaya's rejection of the name 'Suhasini' now remains as a token of victory as she cannot afford to insist on for long as she has been thought to regard her husband as a tree of the projector and so represses her anger and resentment.

CONCLUSION

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya undergoes an ordeal because she has refused to go into hiding with her husband as an inquiry against his financial irregularities is on. She kept her eyes shut to her husband's illegal earning at the office like the mythological character Gandhari. Even her journalistic writings are hemmed in by her husband's likes and dislikes. Eventually, she is able to evaluate her prospects of life. After having cast off traditional role models, Deshpande's protagonists exhibit great strength and courage in evolving, as their own role models as per the prerequisite of their social milieu. Her characters go through a progression of self - examination before they attain self-actualization as stated by Indira Gandhi (Eternal India), "Woman must be a bridge and a synthesizer. She shouldn't allow herself to be swept off her feet by superficial trends nor yet be chained to the familiar. She must ensure the continuity which strengthens roots and simultaneously engineer change and growth to keep society dynamic, abreast of knowledge, sensitive to fast-moving events. The solution lies neither in fighting for equal position nor denying it, neither in retreat into home nor escapes from it". Thus, Jaya is one among Shashi Deshpande's victorious strong women protagonists who repudiates to get trampled under the influence of her personal tragedy and faces life with great courage and strength.

REFERENCES

- Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*. Noida: Penguin Books India. Ltd., 1989.
- Chandra, Subash. "Silent No More: A Study of *That Long Silence*". *Indian Women Novelists*, Ed. R.K.Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige, 1991.
- Figs, Eva. *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society* (London: Macmillan, 1986) P.125
- Indira Kulkshreshtha, "*That Long Silence*" Chapter 4 "Women in the novel of Shashi Deshpande", a Study.
- Sandhu, Sarabjit. "The Images of Woman in *That Long Silence*." *Indian Women Novelists*, Ed.R.K.Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige, 1991.
- Sharma, Siddharth. *Shashi Deshpande's Novels: A Feminist Study*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2005.
- R.S. Pathak (ed), *The fictions of Shashi Deshpande* (Creative Books 1988) P.202.

**S. Nancy****Research Scholar, St. Peter's University, Avadi, Chennai.**