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SUFFERING OF WOMEN IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THAT LONG SILENCE*

Neelam

Assistant Professor of English, DNM College, Kurukshetra.

Abstract :

Shashi Deshpande's approach to women's problems, as depicted in her novels, is quite distinct. It is possible to differentiate her approach from that of her contemporaries who either protest against the existing norms of the society or remain indifferent to the social system responsible for the oppression of women. Shashi Deshpande did not choose the way of protest as such, although she is loosely described as a feminist, one who is influenced by the individualistic feminism propagated by the Anglo-American feminist tradition. Deshpande's protagonists, who are educated women and most of whom are financially in-dependent, have not necessarily developed an anti-male attitude. When one such character suffers and the husband is blamed, her father, brother or some male friend is found to be her saviour.

KEYWORDS :

That Long Silence, individualistic feminism, Deshpande's protagonists, society.

INTRODUCTION :

As the tradition demanded, the women protagonists in Deshpande's novels usually start with their roles assigned to them by the society. While other women in their surroundings appear to be happy with their roles, they cannot be happy as they have a strong urge to make a free choice for themselves. This urge is very close to an existentialist's urge for making an independent choice.

The female characters in Deshpande's novels are basically Indian women; when they try to assert their individuality, emancipating from the age-old patriarchal pattern of thought, they exhibit their unique way which is sharply different from the western feminist movement. As Indira Nityanandam says about her:

Shashi Deshpande's primary focus of attention is the world of women - the struggle of women in the context of modern Indian society. Unable to fully defy traditional, patriarchal norms of society, these women characters attempt to realize and preserve their identity not only as women but also as human beings. Being trapped in this woman's world of experience, Deshpande hopes to emerge as a kind of female Tolstoy who can create real, rounded characters and not merely women characters created for men.

As Sarla Palkar says:

For a long time, woman has existed as a gap, as an absence in literature... This is not only true of the fiction

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created by men, but also by women, who have mostly confined themselves to writing love stories or dealing with the experiences of women in a superficial manner... (which) represses the truth about the majority of their sisters and their lives. (Nityanandam p. 40)

Her novel, *That Long Silence* is the story of its protagonist Jaya who belonged to a middle class family in North-West India, a family that was not ready to give equal status to man and woman. Thanks to her father, who had married against the wish of his family and lived in a separate house. Jaya and her brothers were educated in a convent school and Jaya could develop her individuality under the indulgence of her father. It was her father who gave her the name 'Jaya' that means 'winner'. He had very high opinion about her daughter and would try his best to inspire her with his conviction that Jaya was not like others and that Jaya must shine in life.

It was bad luck for Jaya that her father expired at an early age when she was yet to be a graduate and her father's death was an inexpressible sense of sorrow for her. She had never developed a friendly relationship with her mother.

Jaya's mother had learnt to live without her husband and after her husband's death she went back to her parental house at Ambegaon, as if her twenty years with her husband in Saptagiri had been only an interlude. Jaya being known as her father's child, her mother hardly tried to be friendly with her.

As it was quite natural in that situation, Jaya's relations persuaded her elder brother to marry her off at the earliest opportunity to complete the unfinished job of his father. And it was a coincidence that Jaya was selected by Mohan as his bride who could satisfy Mohan's special liking for a convent educated girl. Mohan was an engineer in a steel plant and Jaya was persuaded to believe that to reject such a groom would be sheer madness. Jaya did not object to the proposal and got married. At the time of marriage she was given a new name 'Suhasini'; and surprisingly, her personality got changed after marriage.

She found that in Mohan's home, a woman's work was sharply differentiated from a man's work. A man was never to sew or to mend or to cook even for his own sake. At first, Jaya could not follow the norms of her in-laws's home, but it took no time to get used to everything. And Jaya began to be happy when she was praised for her cooking and would feel ashamed if there was any flaw in her work. She tried to be a perfect housewife.

During the early years of their marriage, Jaya was so much attached to Mohan that she was not ready to be separated from him even for a moment. But gradually, a vacuum was created between them. To express herself, Jaya started writing stories. When her realistic story of man-woman relationship won a prize, Mohan was critical, for, according to him, Jaya had disclosed their personal relationship to the world, dishonoring thereby the sacred vows of marriage.

In order to keep up their relationship smooth, Jaya stopped writing realistic stories and tried her hand, instead, at imaginary incidents of a housewife's life under the pseudo name 'Seeta.' Surprisingly, Mohan liked those stories and even began to take pride in her wife's calibre as a writer. The stories under the 'Seeta' column were appreciated by the public and Jaya became famous as a woman writer. But Jaya was not happy inwardly; she knew that her Seeta column had nothing to do with reality or with her real self. Jaya could freely discuss about her stories only with Kamat, a widower, who lived alone in a flat in the building where her elder brother owned one and with whom she had earlier been acquainted. And it was Kamat who allowed her to use his address for mailing her stories. Kamat called the Seeta column an 'obnoxious creation,' and told that Jaya was meant for something higher.

It was gradually revealed to her that Mohan was basically self-centred and that he hardly bothered about morality particularly when his selfish interest was at stake. He did not like to help others if there was no hope of getting return. The story of Jaya and Mohan reached its climax when it was disclosed that Mohan had to go on leave as there were some serious allegations of business malpractice against him and those allegations were to be investigated. Mohan did not like to stay in their costly apartment at Churchgate for the time being, and the Dadar flat became their refuge. Their son Rahul and daughter Rati had gone on a holiday trip accompanied by their old friends. And thus the couple got the opportunity to leave their Churchgate flat without explaining the causes of leaving it to their children. The Dadar flat was indeed a very small place for a person like Mohan who was used to costly life-style. For Jaya the situation was quite unthinkable. She could never imagine that such an immoral act could be done by her husband. Moreover, she had to face the queries in the eyes of her neighbours and maidservants. Quite naturally, Jaya remained silent and her silence was misinterpreted by Mohan who thought that Jaya was accusing him for the discomfort. Mohan angrily said that whatever he had done was meant for Jaya and the children. He explained how he had to make his boss happy for getting a good quarter and for getting transferred. And all this was for Jaya's comfort. At this, Jaya felt shocked.

She felt that she had been wrong for remaining silent about Mohan's activities. She never questioned his ways, never argued with him, as she felt that Mohan was keen on doing what he had intended

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to do. Her self-analysis revealed her own flaws and she gradually prepared herself for facing the reality. Comparing herself with the well-known mythical figure Sita, Jaya finds that her role in life had been like that of Sita who always obeyed her husband without any question.

As she sat with her pen and paper, Mohan thought that she was trying the Seeta column, having little idea that both Seeta and Suhasini had died and a new self of Jaya was on its way to emerge. A serious quarrel broke out. Mohan accused her of not caring about the children, of isolating herself from him and his concerns.

And suddenly Mohan's face reminded Jaya of Rahul's when as a child he would cry after the milk bottle was pulled out of his mouth, and she could not help laughing loudly. This was like adding fuel to the fire and Mohan, left the flat without telling anything.

Jaya's misfortune took a complete turn after she was left alone in the Dadar flat. However, Jaya came back to her senses trying her best to get a grip on herself. Applying her knowledge of Mohan, she came to the conclusion that he had not left her that he would come back. But she had something more to increase her anxiety and fear. She received the message that Rahul had left the company of those persons with whom he and Rati had gone out. She could not trace Rahul in the relations' places and was out of her senses. Her neighbours took care of her then and tried their best to cure and console her. When her neighbour and friend Mukta asked her when Mohan was returning, she replied that perhaps he had left her.

It was quite natural for Mukta, who had known Kamat and had seen Jaya having relationship with Kamat, to think that Mohan must have suspicion about Kamat. But Jaya made it clear to Mukta that Kamat was never an issue in their case. Then came another revelation from Mukta who now accused Jaya of leaving Kamat alone the day he had died. Mukta had seen her go up to his apartment that day and also heard her come down. And when she went up a little later, he was dead. Some months before he died he had told Mukta that he had had a heart attack and also gave her a key of his room providing her instructions in case of eventualities. This revelation filled Jaya's mind with repentance. She remembered how Kamat tried to hold her hand and she just ran away leaving him alone, with no apprehension of his imminent death.

There was however no tragic incident in Jaya's life. Rahul had gone to his father's ancestral home at Saptagiri and along with his paternal uncle Vasant came back to Jaya after being assured that Mohan was not in the spot and that she was staying in Dadar. Mohan also sent a telegram with the message 'All well' which signifies that he was out of his problem in the office and that they were soon going to stay in their Churchgate apartment. Outwardly, therefore, the story has a happy ending. But inwardly, there was a drastic change in the protagonist's attitude to life.

Jaya the protagonist has no faith in afterlife. Nor is she a supporter of any particular party. She is a writer in the truest sense of the word and the novel records her self-analysis. The novel also contains her assertion that she would start a new life, making an end of her long silence. She was like Sita who never questioned her husband; and now she had decided to take up the role of Maitreyee who wanted to question everything and even challenged her husband.

Jaya, the protagonist in *That Long Silence*, is one of the rare narrative voices who possess remarkable literary sensibility as well as an awareness of the stifling social milieu. Shashi Deshpande's approach to man-woman relationship also displays her strong sense of reality. Instead of portraying any idealistic picture of love and sex, she shows what actually happens in life when a well educated girl with literary sensibilities faces situations, utterly different from her idealistic views.

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya is forced by events beyond her control to seek refuge at her first home, after marriage. Her husband, Mohan, has been accused of misappropriation of office funds and, on the advice of some friends, is in hiding for some time. Away from her children and atone with her husband, Jaya understands clearly many aspects of her life and relationships that she had avoided or failed to realize earlier. Her decision to write as she wishes to is rendered possible only after this homecoming: "Well, I've achieved this. I'm not afraid anymore. The panic has gone. I'm Mohan's wife, I had thought, and cut off bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife. Now I know that kind of a fragmentation is not possible" (*That Long Silence* p. 191).

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