



QUEST FOR IDENTITY: SHASHI DESHPANDE'S 'THAT LONG SILENCE'

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence is a portrayal of individual selves who are the victims of society and culture around with more emphasis on the woman protagonist. Jaya, a convent educated woman with a literary taste, is satisfied with her husband, children and a comfortable house without caring for her creative writing. She wants to be an ideal wife and ideal mother, but fails miserably. In the midst of a domestic storm, she reassesses her life with some objectivity. It leads her to a decision of giving up the role of silent and passive partner. She breaks the long silence and pursues the idea of a separate female identity.



KEYWORDS: Marriage, society, culture, subjugation, self-identity, emancipation.

INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande has taken up literature as medium to assert woman's voice freely and courageously in her novels and short stories. Deshpande's women protagonists are drawn from middle class. They are sensitive, intelligent, educated and career oriented. She tries to establish woman as an individual who breaks loose from the traditional constraints and redefines her identity in tune with the changed social ambience of the modern times. But they appear to be struggling to adjust in it rather than get free from the traditional world. Deshpande has seen the subdued and slave women living in the society since ages, uncared and least respected. She makes her arise, awake and find freedom for her development and stability in all her novels. In doing this, Deshpande portrays the plight of the so-called educated women still bound firmly by the shackles of tradition and conventions. She believes that "women have a great strength.... But for women the situation is more complex by the fact that they have been told they are weak, they are made to believe in their weakness. And often they learn to hide their own strength, because a woman's strength seems to weaken a man."¹

Jaya, the protagonist in *That Long Silence* tries for self identity. She progresses from ignorance to knowledge through sufferings. Going through a process of introspection, self-analysis and self-realization, she rises as a confident individual, significantly more hopeful and able to accept life with pragmatic understanding. "She tries to understand her own bare self, devoid of all embellishment, as that alone can prove to be a reservoir of strength in her tedious, lonely journey towards self-actualization."² Jaya is a convent educated, English-speaking lady possessing a literary sensibility. She is a successful columnist and an aspiring novelist. She willingly accepts her new identity of Mohan's wife, of Suhasini, and tries to become and remain "smiling, placid, motherly woman, a mother who lovingly

nurtured her family. A family who coped.” (TLS, p.16) She is a middle class woman who learns to suppress her own wishes and acts according to her husband's will. For seventeen long years, Jaya manages to suppress her feelings, thinking that it is more important to be a good wife than a good writer. In her strong desire to play out the role of a loyal wife and a caring mother she had suppressed her own emotional needs and her desires which would have otherwise lead to self-actualization and fulfilment.

Jaya perhaps would have remained in the shadow of her husband, Mohan, for the rest of her life if it had not been for the jolt received to her family. Unfortunately, he is caught taking commission and faces an enquiry for his crime. In order to hide from the crisis, he has to leave his Churchgate bungalow to Jaya's humble Dadar flat. She is not consulted about shifting the place and he takes it granted that his wife will go along with him into hiding. Jaya follows her husband into exile without any complaint.

As fortune has taken her to the ordeal in the small old Dadar flat, Jaya is perfectly at ease and goes in deep contemplation of her past and her childhood, and examines her relationship with her husband. It is here, Adele King observes, “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.”³ Jaya finds, to achieve this stage of fulfilment as a wife, she has suppressed many traits of her personality that refuses to fit in with her image as a wife and mother, besides a failed writer. She has two important features, one her writing career and the other her association with Kamat, her neighbour at one time.

Jaya is about to be recognized as a creative writer of some importance in early years of her marriage. She is an intense thinking woman with strong desire to confront life through her fiction. Mohan encouraged her to write as he assumes it quite harmless and even takes pride in being husband of a writer. One of her short story dealing with, “a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body” (TLS, p.144), gets published in a magazine and receives first prize for its realistic portrayal of life. Mohan expresses his displeasure at the story as he assumes that it portrays their own personal life. 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. Jaya knows that there is no truth in her husband's thinking, but she does not question him as she does not like to disturb her relation with him. She is aware that in the estimation of her husband, she “...had been no writer, only an exhibitionist” (TLS, P.144).

Kamat, her neighbour, finds her writing lacks strong emotions. He analyses her stories objectively and tells her how she could make them “more forceful and hitting” (TLS, p.144). Kamat knows that Jaya is capable of giving great credence to the roles as wives, mothers and aunts. He refuses to pamper her mood of self-pity, reconstructs her morale and guides her to send her writings to women's magazine.

Jaya gets encouraging response from the editors and readers and also a supporting approval from Mohan when she writes on middle class housewife in a column titled 'Seeta'. Jaya states:

Seeta had been the means though which I had shut the door firmly on all these women who had invaded my being, screaming for attention. 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 (TLS, p.149).

Jaya compromises to conform to the role of an ideal Indian woman. In order to become an ideal wife, she has lost the thinking faculty in her. As a result, she has been masquerading not only as a writer of 'Seeta' but also as 'Suhasini'.

The other aspect of Jaya's personality which clashes with her image of wife and mother is her association with Kamat. She feels totally at ease in his company because he treats her as his equals and offers constructive criticism to her on her writing. He even receives her mail at his address so that she could avoid a confrontation with her husband who disapproves her writing. In his company, she rids herself of all her inhibitions and opens up to him all her problems, than that of her husband. Kamat, however, refuses to let her stagger about in self-pity and asks her to pursue her literary career by giving

expression to her real inner-self. She is "brought out of her darkness into an open space by Kamat. She sees the hollowness and deceit in her relationship with Mohan."⁴ Her relationship with him cannot be placed into a particular category. Sometimes his behaviour is like a father, sometimes that of a lover. On one occasion, she even comes close to surrendering herself when she finds herself in his arms as he tries to console her at her remembrance of her father's death. In the seclusion of his apartment she had many opportunities for physical indulgence but she dare not do so for the fear that her marriage resulted in a climax. On one of her visits to his room, Jaya finds him lying dead on the floor of his flat. She remains helplessly passive as she does not want to endanger her marriage.

In her quest for self-identity, Jaya fails to show understanding. Moreover, she realizes that her behaviour is not a deviation from womanliness but an attempt for fulfilment. She tries to find her identity as an individual. She attempts to reorder the relationship with her parental family, her husband, children as dependent. Shashi Deshpande shows the plight of the so called educated young woman still bound by the shackles of tradition and convention. Her creative writing and her close association with Kamat are two vivid examples, which show her inability to construct her own identity. Moreover, other factors also hinder her development as a complete individual. In her anxiety to perform her roles as a perfect wife and loving and caring mother, her identity is pushed to the background.

The loveless married life, which causes the wife and the husband to drift away from each other, results in total failure. The relationship between Jaya and Mohan is a glaring example of failure, disgust, disappointment and depression. Jaya slowly changes herself to this ideal of womanhood, where she represses her anger. Jaya always works up to please her husband. She changes her appearance to suit his idea of modern woman. She cuts her hair, wears dark glasses. From a fiercely independent woman she is changed into the "stereotype of a woman: nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support" (TLS, p.76). She proves that "subtle indoctrination atrophies woman's desire to change her position as an object and to exercise her free will. She compromises her stand for she is taught the importance and necessity of stable marriage and family – family as security, as a source of emotional strength."⁵ She desperately clings on to her husband as if her life depends on him. The male Chauvinist ideas which are integral part of her culture, imposed upon her by the people around Jaya made her obedient and submissive. Her aunt, Vanithamani taught her the importance of husband in a woman's life. She advises: "a husband is like a sheltering tree.... Without the tree, you're dangerously unprotected and vulnerable.... And so you have to keep the tree alive and flourishing, even if you have to water it with deceit and lies" (TLS, p.32). Jaya controls her independent spirit to the desires of her husband and bows to the male superiority.

Jaya's paternal Ramukaka shows her the family tree he has prepared tracing the line of their ancestors. The boys of the family find mention in it but Jaya is shocked to find her name missing. She is also shocked to find no mention of her mother, her aunts and even *Ajji* "who single handedly kept the family together" (TLS, p.143).

Shashi Deshpande is very realistic in her suggestion that marriages are not based on love but convenience in the Indian context. Marriages in India "... never end, they cannot – They are a state of being" (TLS, p.127) Jaya is content to play the role of a caring wife as long as the economic and social conditions are fine. She happily plays out the role of Gandhari: "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" (TLS, p.61-62).

The sudden catastrophe of the corruption charges against Mohan and their exile to the Dadar flat, compel Jaya to "excavate her own truths and those of other women in her life and unlock *That Long Silence*."⁵ She remains struck to her husband and children. But after the crisis, she is not willing to go into the hiding with her husband. She is ashamed of the incident. Mohan tries to defend himself saying, "It was for you and the children that I did this" (TLS, p.9). Mohan wishes to use his wife "as a buffer, an opiate to soften the impact of the forces he has set into motion against himself. In fact, he is seeking emotional gratification for his insecurity created by his own deeds. He wants to hold hard to Jaya to whom he seeks an anchor in this tempest."⁶ She feels entirely lost as she is taken for granted by Mohan.

She realizes that her own feelings and emotions do not mean anything to him. Her realization is that she is a non-entity in his eyes and it hurts her. The enquiry against Mohan makes her feel insecure under that shaken 'sheltering tree'. Mohan accuses her saying, "Do you think I haven't seen how changed you are since we came here, since I told you about my situation" (TLS, p.12). At this remark Jaya loses her control and cannot understand what provokes her to laugh but she is unable to stop her: "Laughter burst out of me, spilled over, and Mohan stared at me in horror, as I rocked helplessly. When finally, I recovered myself I was alone in the room" (TLS, p.122).

Mohan is very much angered and he leaves the house in disgust as if he would never come back. His absence dejects Jaya and she thinks she would be isolated. To add to her despair, Rahul, her son, disappeared while holidaying and she feels totally shattered and lost as there is nobody to help her. The most trying moment comes to her life when she finds that two male accomplice kneading the breast of a narcotic smoking girl at the bus stop. Extremely shocked by the behaviour of the two men, Jaya suspects the credibility of her romantic ideas about the woman being the victim. All her revolutionary ideas fail to shoulder with reality.

Finally Rahul, her son, returns and she receives a telegram from Mohan that "All is well." Now she has come to terms with herself. For the two nights before the arrival of her son and husband, she pours out her innermost thought, her fears, her doubts and everything she had suppressed in her seventeen years of silence. Subhash Chandra comments, "By permitting her story, she has achieved articulation of her predicament, her constraints, her anguish and has already broken her silence."⁷ Jaya suffers from catharsis when she records her experiences. When she comes out of her emotional upheaval, she has sorted out a few problems with herself. She wants "to plug that hole in the heart," (TLS, p.192) and to speak in order to erase silence.

Jaya no longer wants to play the role of a passive wife. Perhaps, this is the hardness and ruthlessness that Deshpande talks about in the forward. A man is conditioned to it right from the beginning, a woman learns to experience.

She rejects the persistent image of her and Mohan as "two bullocks yoked together" (TLS, p.7) in marriage. Instead she looks at herself and Mohan as two individuals with independent ideals: "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 a disbelief in ourselves (TLS, p.191).

Jaya realizes that the fault is her own. In the Bhagwad Geeta, Krishna imparts knowledge to Arjuna, by uttering, *Yathecchasi Tatha Kuru* (TLS, p.192). [Do as you desire, I have given you knowledge. Now you make the choice]. It's for Arjuna to make the choice. So also it is Jaya. It is not that women are victims, but it is woman, who also can assert and change themselves. Moreover, Jaya realises that one cannot remain static throughout one's life; one must change and accept the men also to change.

There is discernible change in Jaya and the earlier impulsive nature of her is transformed into a matured woman. Now Jaya would not say what Mohan wants her to say. As Indira Bhatt puts it, she seeks "a reorientation of her relationship and also Mohan's new awareness of his relationship to her."⁸ Jaya emerges successful through the tension of the two worlds as she prepares herself to face life and accept her responsibilities without escaping from them. During the process of her articulation, Jaya also observes that meaningful co-existence can come only through understanding, respect and compassion, not through domination or subjugation. In this regard, Usha Tambe observes: "The confused and clumsy Jaya appears a contrast to the smiling, efficient housewife Suhasini. But finally come to grips with herself and realizes that her total personality will have to co-ordinate both of them and that fragmentation of self is not possible."⁹

Jaya makes a powerful statement on the totally unfair system prevailing in our society where women are subjugated. She realizes that it is the fear on the part of the woman that has allowed the women's subjugation to continue. They have allowed victimization instead of bargaining for

partnership. She understands that she has also contributed to her self-victimization and she has to fight her own battle and workout her own solution. She feels that it is necessary to break the silence, articulate her predicament and establish her identity so that she can survive in the world.

Jaya decides to live from here without sacrificing her identity or individuality. She will make adjustments but it will not be servile one. Her giving up writing for the newspaper's column 'Seeta' symbolizes her giving up the traditional role model of wife, hereafter she will continue to write what 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. Sumitra Kukreti remarks: "This realization that she can have her own way - *Yatteccchasi Tatha Kuru* – gives new confidence to Jaya. This is her emancipation."¹⁰ In her search for positive response from her life and surrounding to acquire a self-actualized individuality, Jaya concludes that a holistic approach towards life is essential and one must be resilient in approach.

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