

## Silence in Shashi Deshpande's that Long Silence

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### Abstract

The paper tries to understand and perceive the real dilemma of middle-class educated women in Shashi Deshpande's novels especially That Long Silence. Deshpande has not tried to make her women characters stronger than they are in real life. The educated women demand more sexual freedom and independence but are not very sure about what they should do with the same, which leads them to a bitter confusion, anxiety and tension. Their psychology is still wedded to tradition. They have started recognizing the need for change, but at the same time they continue to cling to the old values as they have been brought up with them. It is not that Shashi Deshpande has deliberately made women the focus in all her novels. She, in fact, wanted to portray the whole society in her writings; but somehow, as the characters took shape, the women characters turned out to be the protagonists.

**KEYWORDS** -Protagonists, marriage, oppression, individuality, stereotype, women.

That Long Silence has picked up the theme of women's subjugation and silence very emphatically. The novel takes ahead the issues of female subjugation which the earlier novel Roots and Shadows deals with. Moreover, here in the novel the writer wants to convey that it is not only the patriarchal system wholly which is sole responsible for the worsening condition of women but even women share the responsibility. If women allow men to subjugate them only then they are doing it. Women suffer everything without protesting which has caused their subjugation.

That Long Silence continues with the issues of women subjugation arising from marriage in an extended way. Due to its stylistic and thematic concerns, That Long Silence won the most prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for Sashi Deshpande in 1989. Sashi Deshpande has vigorously tried to paint the humiliating and stifling environment where women feel themselves fettered. She has protested against the several types of exploitations of women. In the present novel, silence has been used as a metaphor. Silence is a patriarchal symbol. A girl is socialised to be silent as being eloquent and loud are not the traits that society deems fit for them. Consequently they keep on being silent and bear everything with this weapon but gradually this very silence eats away the very vitals of their existence.

Jaya is a writer and she makes it quite clear in the beginning of the novel that she is writing a story but it is not the story of someone else's but rather it is her own story where she herself is the heroine and her husband the hero. But writing her story where she is her heroine is not an easy task. Generally a writer hides many of the factors which perhaps are not for the world to be known. So presenting an objective amount of one's personality is always a convoluted process. She says: "Self-revelation is a cruel process. The real picture, the real 'you' never emerges. Looking for it is as bewildering as trying to know how you really look. Ten different faces show you ten different faces." (01). Despite of it she resolves to write a factual account of their story by maintaining a right distance.

That Long Silence is about a couple Jaya and Mohan. Jaya finds her routine life so monotonous that she craves for a catastrophe something that would provide her a relief from the hum drum of boring life; something that would shake them out of their slumber and take them to the path of excitement and adventure. She often thinks about some war between the countries or some other happening to occur.

Mohan wants from Jaya complete obedience and unquestioning care. He cannot like the idea of Jaya avoiding him and his children. Mohan is a traditional man who has seen his father being quite dominating and abusing his mother time and again. He is an ordinary man who like all men attends his father's death ceremonies and also bears the expenditure. It is quite normal then that he would like the other Indian men demand complete solidarity from his wife. Consequently Jaya too provides him love and affection. Like a traditional lady she too picks up the threads of house holding and tries to connect them and strives hard to be an ideal wife as per the norms of the society but the same has been tiring for her.

Women in Shashi Deshpande's novels is initially an unconventional one. She willingly submit herself to the tradition, perhaps realizing the wisdom of the traditional ways at this stirring moment of the transitional phase of society. Ultimately, she is an appendage to man or family. Though economically independent, she is emotionally dependent on her husband. In Shashi Deshpande's novels, the protagonist's growth towards an honest acknowledgement of responsibility for her own repressed state is shown in her earlier novels as well as her later novels.

The protagonist' quest for identity gets largely accentuated due to their frustrating experiences in the Indian patriarchal society. In her novels, the host of male characters—husband, lovers, fathers and others relations— display different aspects of patriarchy and oppression. While the majority of the husbands are patriarchal in their approach, the older men, particularly the fathers, are broad-minded. Surprisingly, the male friends, are 'feminist' in their approach and sympathise with the protagonists' lot. Deshpande's male characters only serve to enable the protagonists to define their identities more fully.

Shashi Deshpande's exploration of female subjugation in patriarchal family structures takes on a larger dimension than the inner psychological world. In her novels she creates, in fact, a mosaic of marriage, women come and go, aunts, cousins, mothers, mother-in-law, friends, acquaintance, each providing a different slant on marriage, a dozen sub—text to the main text of a protagonist whose marriage is collapsing. Shashi Deshpande is a writer who can focus intensely and elaborately on a network of male repression and is concerned with making statements regarding the politics of male power and its effect on women.

The novel opens with Jaya and her husband Mohan moving back into the older Dadar flat in Mumbai from their cosy and palatial house. Her husband is involved in a financial malpractice and an inquiry against him 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.

Jaya is a middle class house wife. She had high potential of becoming a good writer though that dream came crashing with Mohan's interruption but nevertheless she becomes a successful columnist in a women's magazine. She was before marriage a confident and self—assertive girl who was named Jaya as her father's notions and encouragement always worked in her favour and she became very self—dependent.

Her father wanted to see her going to Oxford and winning huge prizes for the literary genius that she had. But as luck would have it, she became a nervous, nagging lady pettifogging about every minute detail of her house hold regarding the servants and the children's school. She gradually accepted her own fate as she got instilled with false notions of security. She kept believing that the family tree is what she must nourish as without her children and husband she has no identity of her own so she believed as she lived. She let go any emotion, any desire, any wish of her which posed even a slight threat to her family.

Jaya's father thought of her as in bold terms and tried to have high hopes on her. He named her as 'Jaya' - a Hindi language word that means victory. The name itself symbolises that her father had high opinion of her as a daughter. She got from father the best care and affection that any daughter craves for. He used to proudly say Jaya means victory and he believed in some corner of heart a victory for her; that she would scale heights unprecedented and make them proud. But to her bad luck, she was later renamed as 'Suhasini'—a word that means, “a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family” (16). Suhasini is a woman who coped with every solution to safeguard her family and whose sole intention in her life is to be good and serve her family by all means. When addressed by Kamat as Jaya she emphatically announces that her name is not Jaya rather Suhasini: “It's the name Mohan gave me when we got married” (15).

Shashi Deshpande is known for creating women characters who are contemporary. Deshpande's women protagonists are victim of the prevalent gross gender discrimination, first as daughter and later as wives. They are conscious of the great social inequality and injustice towards them, and struggle against the oppressive and unequal nature of the social norms and rules that limit their capability and existence as a wife. Fettered to their roles in the family, they question the subordinate status ordained to them by society. Her works have drawn great critical attention and acclaim for her sensitive and realistic representation of the Indian middle- class women. Her sincere concern for women and their oppressive lot is reflected strongly in all her novels and stories.

What really sets Shashi Deshpande apart is that her writings hold a universal appeal that clearly emanates from her rootedness in every India. She has steadfastly refused to compromise in order suit the global market, never eroticising India, never 'presenting' it—as she puts it, and certainly by not playing to the gallery. She is often compared to regional language writers—firmly entrenched in our social realities and grappling with our issues. Each of Shashi Deshpande's novels is special and offers food for thought on human relationship and emotion. Deshpande is a master writer in the way she articulates human emotions, the fears and feelings experienced by humans, by women. Reading her books is like peeping into the hidden corners of one's own mind. Recognizing oneself in her characters, one does not feel lonely in the world anymore. Reading her novels and stories is thus an immensely satisfying experience, as reading becomes a healing process.

Her novels are concerned with a woman's quest for self; an exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life and the protagonist's place in it. Shashi Deshpande uses irony in the majority of her stories and novels to satirize the morals and manners of our society although she is not an ironist. She employs situational, attitudinal and verbal irony to telling effect. Her language is

simple, direct and terse; close to the speaking voice. Sometimes, instead of full and long sentences, she uses words elliptically and minimally and this makes for force.

Jaya in *That Long Silence* gradually emerges as a confident individual fully in control of herself and refuses to be led by nose. A stereotyped housewife initially nervous and needing male help and support all the time, she understands that she also has contributed her victimization and that she has to fight her own battle and work out her own strategy. It also shows how with this new confidence Jaya becomes emancipated without rejecting outright the cultural and social background.

Most of the Deshpande's heroines belong to this category. This women is neither traditional nor radical in her ideas and practice. She might walk out of her home in protest against her suffering, but gradually realizes that walking out of does not solve her problems. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* broods over her agonies even after she escapes her in marital home. Indu in *Roots and Shadows* leaves her husband to seek refuge in her ancestral home, but she is unable to accept her fate as any ordinary women might do. These heroines suffer more because they are aware of the escape routes of two other types of women, the traditional and radical but hesitate to choose those options. Their initial positions is one of the remaining at the crossroads. It is towards the end of the novels, that Shashi Deshpande's female protagonist realises herself and learns to live up to the challenge. Saru decides to face her husband and not run away. Indu and Jaya decide to confront their husbands and talk the matter out in order to arrive at a solution.

Marriage and social setup in India contribute to the relegation of women to a large extent. This patriarchal structure proves to be an obstacle in assertion of women's individuality. Sometimes it happens that husband take the wives' consents for granted. They do not think it necessary to ask for their wishes. When Mohan gets entangled in problem, he decides to move to another flat and he takes this decision without asking Jaya and Jaya agrees reticently in order to avoid any kind of altercation between them. She recollects, "I remember now that he had assumed I would accompany him, had taken for granted my acquiescence in his plans. So had I" (11). The silence grows between them and both become too uncomfortable to communicate freely with each other. Deshpande has thrown light upon the marriage which becomes just a liability, a social demand that lacks companionship. Jaya, even though she is educated, finds herself entangled in the complex web of marriage. The Indian women find themselves caught into two worlds.

The novel reaffirms Deshpande's belief that a woman should assert their potential to achieve self—identity. It also shows that economic independence is an important measure to give confidence to a woman, helping her to understand her true potential. But Deshpande is also aware of the compromises that a woman has to make in order to make balance between personal and professional life.

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