

## Understanding the Psychological Self through Built Environment: A Study on Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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### Abstract

Environmental Psychology is the interdisciplinary field that highlights the interaction between individuals and the physical environment where the individual dwells. The word environment encompasses both natural and built or manmade environments. There are many important concepts that are discussed in this field and the concept of Place identity is one among them. This notion refers to a conglomeration of two significant ideas namely place and identity which help the individual to conceptualize his or her Self. Hence, the concept is always considered as the sub-structure of the self identity of an individual.

The theory of Place identity suggests that the surrounding of an individual has an immense influence to shape the characteristic of an individual. Through the interaction with the particular environment, the person is able to assess the attributes which satisfy the individual physically, socially, and psychologically. This satisfaction registers the place as the environmental past in the individual's psyche which can be reflected later by him or her as the associated feelings and personal values about the physical environment. The process of introspection of the past also reveals the attribute of the individual that has got shaped up due to the influence of the environment. This paper traces how Jaya (a) Suhasini of Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* understands her inner self identity by introspecting her psychological connections with two different built environments.

Environmental Psychology is the interdisciplinary field that highlights the interaction between individuals and their physical environment. The word environment encompasses both natural and built or manmade environments. Though the origin of this field is unknown, the credit is given to Willy Hellpach for mentioning Environmental psychology for the first time in his work *Geospace*(1935) in which he discusses about the effects of sun and moon on the activities of human beings. The other important exponents are Jacob Von Vexkull, Kurt Lewin, Egon Brunswik, Gerhard Kaminski and Friedrich Graumann. There are many important concepts that are discussed in this field. The concept of Place identity is one among them.

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Place identity refers to a conglomeration of two significant ideas namely place and identity which help the individual to conceptualize his or her Self. Hence, the concept is always considered as the sub-structure of the self identity of an individual. This notion suggests that the surrounding of an individual has an immense influence to shape the characteristic of an individual. It can be referred as an environmental experience and "the result of the relationships between actions, conceptions and physical attributes" (Uzzell et al. 27). Through the interaction with the particular environment, the person is able to assess the properties which satisfy the individual physically, socially, and psychologically. This satisfaction registers the place as the environmental past in the

psyche of the individual which can be reflected later by him or her as the associated feelings and personal values about the physical environment. The process of introspection of the past also reveals the attribute of the individual that has got shaped up due to the influence of the environment. This paper traces how Jaya (a) Suhasini of Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* understands her inner self identity by introspecting the psychological connections with two different built environments.

Shashi Deshpande is the renowned contemporary Indian women novelist who is the recipient of fourth highest civilian award Padma Shri for her contributions to the literary world. The critics align her with Anita Desai, the prominent women novelist as they both address the lives of modern Indian women. The problems faced by Deshpande's protagonists reflect the problems faced by many educated women of urban India. She focuses on psychological struggle of women within relationships which is expressed through fear, guilt, loss, loneliness etc.

The novel *That Long Silence* which has got Shashi Deshpande the Sahitya Akademi Award is about Jaya Kulkarni who is renamed as Suhasini by her husband after their marriage. She leads a cosy life as a submissive wife and a dutiful mother at her posh Church Gate residence. She happily serves her family sacrificing her passion for serious writing. Her droning life can be well understood from Simon de Beauvoir's master piece *The Second Sex* in which she says, "a gilded mediocrity lacking ambition and passion, aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently toward death without questioning its purpose" (500). Their life gets disrupted when her husband Mohan's act of corruption is unveiled. To escape from the enquiry, he flees out of his sophisticated Church Gate residence to the clumsy Makarandmama's Flat which is at Dadar along with his wife. This displacement disturbs Jaya's psyche and she bursts out in fit of anger, the emotion which her husband has not seen in her since the day of their marriage. On seeing her outburst Mohan leaves the Flat as he could not see his wife tearing her cloak of silence. In her loneliness, she begins to introspect her past life at the posh Church Gate residence sitting inside the four walls of clumsy Dadar Flat. The introspection helps her to understand her past from a different perspective. Thus these two built environments -- the Church Gate residence and the Dadar Flat -- play the crucial roles in the novel as they kindle her to re-examine her inner Self.

The protagonist begins to introspect from the eyes of Jaya which makes her wonder how she has transformed herself into a typical traditional wife. This question drives her into the quest of knowing how her inner self has got transformed from the identity of independent Jaya to dependent Suhasini. Her interaction with her past reminds her of how the sudden demise of her father has questioned the fulfilment of her ambition of doing higher studies in the foreign university. From then on, her family members presumed her to grow like a typical traditional woman. There was no one to nourish or stimulate her passion or aspiration to grow as a self-regulating individual. When she attains the marriageable age, the elders of her family advises her that husband is like a sheltering tree who is meant to protect the family and it is the duty of the wife to water the tree --- her husband --- with her servitude to help him to thrive. This serves as the source point from which the characteristics of the traditional dependent woman begin to evolve in her.

After marriage, the Self of the protagonist begins to grow with the characteristics of the traditional woman as she understands the desires of her husband that he expects a

placid woman and not a woman with victorious spirit (Jaya). As a part of tradition, he names his wife, Suhasini which vividly defines the characteristics that he looks forward to in his wife. His yearning for a wife which is influenced by the traditional thoughts is pronounced when he rechristens her. So, the characteristics of traditional wife which is evolving in her gets a name called Suhasini. From the day one of her marriage, she tries hard to stay true to the name given to her by her husband. In this process, Suhasini gradually begins to suppress Jaya psychologically in her subconscious mind.

Suhasini pledges her desires, her dreams and the attributes of Jaya just to get his look of approval. She curbs her feelings so that she might not hurt him by differing with him. During the process of introspection, she also flips through the pages of her old diaries in which she has recorded the details of the school fees, the dates of insurance payment, servant absences etc which reveal the commitment she has showed to her role as an ideal wife and a dutiful mother. Nowhere in the diaries she could find any detail pertaining to her individual self. So, she names the diaries as, the diaries of a sane house wife. The diaries give her a feeling of incompleteness with the roles she has played as an ideal woman.

When Jaya looks back at her life in the posh house at Church Gate, she realizes that it is not the equal contribution of her husband and her that has managed the family thus far but it is only her contribution in the form of sacrifice of her real Self that has helped the family to thrive. For the past seventeen years of her married life, she has made herself to believe that she has lead a happy and a contented life in serving her family but everything gets shattered when she contemplates her past at the Dadar Flat.

The protagonist also introspects the happenings of the day when Mohan left the Dadar Flat seeing her anger. The contemplation of the incident gives her a shocking inference of herself. Before marriage, Mohan had some expectations for his wife which he has expressed through the name Suhasini. The point to be understood is that by renaming his wife, he has articulated his desire but nowhere in the novel it is evident that he has forced her to get transformed according to his desire. It is she, who has willingly abandoned her real self to play the roles to satisfy his expectations. It is also clear that she has not even once given an attempt to explain her real characteristics to him. Instead, she has projected the image of conventional submissive wife so carefully that her husband believes it to be her true Self. So, he fails to see the hidden Jaya within her.

All this while, the protagonist has believed that she is a victim of her marital relationship. But the introspection plainly unravels that it is she who has victimized Mohan by the false projection of the self. It is clearly expressed through the following words of Jaya:

‘My wife . . .’ the words ran like a refrain through his outburst. And I could see her, the woman I had seen in the mirror the day of our wedding – a woman who had not seemed to be me, who had taken the burden of wifehood off me. . . . But Mohan’s eyes, as he spoke of her, were agonized, the eyes of a man who’d lost a dear one. Suhasini was dead, yes, that was it, she was the one Mohan was mourning, . . . the fact was that I’d finally done it- I’d killed her. (TLS 121)

She understands that it is she who has altered her characteristics for the sake of Mohan and it is not he who has instructed her to do so. It is she who has hidden her real characteristics and has exposed only the characteristics of Suhasini to please him. This

revelation helps her understand how Mohan would have felt to see his wife booming out with anger which he has not witnessed in the eleven years of their marital life. She says,

Even a worm has a hole it can crawl into. I had mine – as Mohan’s wife, as Rahul’s and Rati’s mother. And so I had crawled back into my hole. I had felt safe there. Comfortable. Unassailable. (TLS 148)

Jaya understands that Suhasini’s decision to gratify Mohan has become the source of conditioning her real self. She also realizes that it is she who has forced herself to lead a life with no questions, no retorts but with the esteemed tag --- his wife --- in the society. In support to this realization, Amara Rama Devi in her article “You are Your Own Refuge: Shashi Deshpande’s That Long Silence” 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 own victimization, instead of putting the blame on everybody except themselves. (133)

The process of introspection at the Dadar Flat helps Jaya to empathize with her husband and understand that he is not the reason for all the sacrifices she has made in her life. The new realization has made her eradicate the negativity which she had once conceived about her husband and the concept of marriage in her mind. This eradication helps her to get relieved from her psychological trauma.

At this juncture, Jaya receives a telegram which clearly states that Mohan would return anytime. On seeing the letter, she decides to plug the cosy hole in her heart, which has given her a warmth and comfort as an ideal wife and conventional mother. Baskaransays, After a long silence, Jaya finally comes to the phase of self-realization or the female phase. She stops blaming others for her failures. She examines her past life and comes to know the truth about her failures as a writer. She decides to plug that hole as said earlier by speaking and listening and erasing the silence between her and Mohan. It is this erasing of the silence that symbolizes the assertion of the feminine voice, a voice with hope and promise, a voice that articulates her thoughts. (325)

Thus, the novel ends with a positive note: We don’t change overnight. It’s possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know now it is this: life has always to be made possible (TLS 193).

This new hope which she gets introspecting her past in Church Gate residence within the four walls of the Dadar flat is the sign of psychological reconnection which would, for sure, help the physical reunion of her family. Her stay at the Dadar Flat helps her to understand how she has suppressed her real Self, Jaya in the sophisticated residence at Church Gate. Though the flat at Dadar has physical constraints it has removed all her psychological constraints. Thus the two built structures mentioned in Shashi Deshpande’s That Long Silence have helped the protagonist Jaya to understand her real self and the identity that are associated to it.

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