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From Solitude to Solidarity in Shashi Deshpande's Novel *That Long Silence*

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INTRODUCTION

Most of the Indian women in India remain silent throughout their life despite many problems and countless instances of atrocities committed against women at various stages. Shashi Deshpande's artistic and acclaimed novel *That Long Silence* is a portrayal of the silences of the Indian housewives in the late nineties. Many female writers either create unreal sentimental romances or finally succumb to the temptation of feminist ideology. But Deshpande has created characters based on the real-life experience in her novels. She shows how the women revolt against gender discrimination and try to search their own identity in the hostile world of male chauvinism. But at the same time, she also has consideration for a home – a home of peace and love that can provide security to women.

Everywhere, in each corner of the world, girls face discrimination. "We see in societies where a male child is regarded as more valuable to the family, girls are often denied the right to life; denied the right to name and nationality" (Maisnam, "Girls"). Moreover, girls are not allowed to go out freely like boys who roam about even at odd hours. "Traditions, customs and social practices that place greater value on sons than on daughters who are often viewed as an economic burden, still stand in the way of the girl child being able to achieve her full potential" ("Rights"). Shashi Deshpande is highly aware of this fact and rightly analyses the traditional gross gender discrimination in almost all her novels.

This paper attempts to focus on the psychological aspects of the protagonist Jaya, which passes from solitude to solidarity. Shashi Deshpande depicts the characters in a family set-up, with intricacies of how each member is related to one another. The main theme of this novel is domestic disharmony. In this novel, she makes an attempt to free the female psyche from the conventional male control. It also lays emphasis on the domestic chronicle of subtle tyrannies suffered by women and the pain of coming to self-knowledge. The protagonist Jaya journeys through the past and struggles with the present in order to establish a rapport with the future.

Her novel, *That Long Silence*, was awarded Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990. The title expresses the novelist's outbursts of the immense persecution that they have undergone. The pronoun 'that' refers to the past, 'long' shows the writer's sarcasm and 'silence' speaks of the innumerable sufferings that the womenfolk have borne. The silence of the second sex longs for voice, for choice and for noise and all that with a poise to make the male chauvinists realize that the females also are worthy enough to enjoy equal rights. The novel is not an imaginary story. It happens practically in every middle class and educated Indian woman's life.

That Long Silence is a combination of flashbacks and direct description of the present incidents. The theme of the novel is the self-realization of the protagonist. Jaya, though a modern woman is rooted in tradition, experiences an impulsive urge to be empowered, simultaneously with an instinctive urge to be traditional and conservative. Jaya as a woman writer earns name and fame as a contributor to a woman's magazine but later on chooses to change her outlook.

She accepts the normal conditions of the society where women also have a share in the plight of women. The elimination of the girl child from the family tree is perhaps the most miserable one. It reveals the total negligence of women in the Indian social set up. Deshpande attempts to project the 'silence' of all sorts of women facing different types of problems in family and society. 'Silence' that is present throughout the novel reveals different kinds of feelings like objection, fear, suffering, protest, pain, shyness, endurance, a difference of opinion and indifference towards each other. Silence is an ever-present theme in the novels of Deshpande. She efficiently makes its presence felt throughout the novel.

The silence of women represents silence of one-half of the humanity, which means the protagonist Jaya represents half of the humanity. Jaya is portrayed as a convent - educated English speaking lady with literary taste. The novel is about the conflict raging between the narrator's split self of the writer and of the housewife. Her husband Mohan has married her not for love but for her English speaking quality. Jaya expects more love and concern from her husband but she is treated as an object at home. They are at loggerheads with each other because of their difference in opinions. Mohan is pro-modern but has a traditional opinion in treating his wife. Mohan, an authoritarian temperamentally, is insensitive towards the sufferings of women. His mother being dominated by his father's oppression dies when she tries to abort her fifth child. Mohan calls his mother 'tough' in her submission while Jaya, as a woman, understands her despair':

He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire,
but I saw despair. I saw a despair so great that it would not voice
itself. I saw struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon.
Silence and surrender. (36)

Soon after the wedding, a quarrel between the two has led Mohan into silence altogether. The silence between them intensifies day after day. So she seals up her lips tightly and cocoons herself in silent fragmentation. She sacrifices all her personal wishes and desires for the sake of Mohan.

Throughout her married life of seventeen years, she manages to suppress her thoughts, feelings, and emotions. In her zeal to be a loyal wife, she suppresses her desire to be an eminent writer. When she is on the threshold of getting recognition as a creative writer, Mohan expresses his displeasure at a particular story written by her. It is about a man who cannot reach out to his wife except through her body. As the character in the story reflects his own character in real life, he could not tolerate it. So she thinks, "Looking at his stricken face I had been convinced I had done him wrong. And I had stopped writing after that" (TLS, 144). She had an inner urge to continue writing, and so she starts writing under a pseudonym. But this effort does not help her, and her stories are rejected one after another. But Kamat, her neighbour encourages her to be a writer and analyses the reason for her failure. He states that her stories lack strong emotions since she has suppressed her anger and frustration. Jaya had learned to control her anger as Mohan made her realize that this trait in a woman was "unwomanly." (TLS, 83) She tells Kamat, "No woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman?" (147). He also warns her for indulging in self-pity as it would be destructive to her in future.

So, she had been glossing over the reality of truth and smothering her inner conscience to avoid endangering her married life. She hesitates to write the reflections of her individuality to play the role model of a typical Indian middle-class woman.

She dresses herself like a typical Indian housewife. She has suppressed her free will as she has been taught the importance and necessity of stable marriage and family-family as security, as a source of emotional strength. But the same is denied to her. She is given a new name by her in-laws after her wedding, but she does not protest as there would be an emotional clash between them and it would not keep Mohan happy.

As her conflict reaches its zenith, she experiences a feeling of total disorientation and detachment from everything, even from her body. Her predicament is born of her split psyche. She represents the urban middle-class woman who is educated and exposed to liberal western ideas. The pain and sufferings in an Indian family life demand the suppression of the self so that social expectations would be fulfilled. Unable to free herself from the traditional code of conduct, her inner voice remains inarticulate even in her writings, and her pent-up feelings make her neurotic.

Jaya's husband Mohan is an engineer who lays importance on money, status, material comforts and worldly things. He works in an office and prospers well. Unexpectedly and unfortunately he is caught for his malpractice. He does not consult his wife about this matter and the idea of shifting his house from the Church gate bungalow to Jaya's humble Dadar flat. Jaya feels very bad about it but conceals her anger silently. She is now prepared to look at herself with utmost objectivity and examines her relationship with her husband. Adele King rightly observes: "Jaya finds her normal routine so disrupted that for the first time she can look at her life to decide who she really is"(King:97). Emulating her mother-in-law and sister-in-law, she tries to adjust and compromise with her lot. She realizes that at every compromise, she is losing her individuality. She shuts up everything as she is afraid of expressing her likes and dislikes.

In an earlier incident, when her paternal uncle Ramu Kaka shows her the family tree where only the men's names are mentioned, she was shocked and surprised to see the women's names missing in the family tree. She feels bewildered and desperate over such gross gender discrimination.

Her family life now faces rough weather. She is angry with her husband and so fails to accompany him in exile. She is clever in hiding the secret of her heart. But her aunt's counseling and her father's advice never to hurt Mohan, have made her bear problems silently.

Through her dreams, she unconsciously perceives her plight. As her husband has deserted the family, she is in the utter traumatic state for many days, but finally, everything becomes all right. Now she has come to terms with herself. During this period, in his absence, she articulates her long silence, thoughts, fears, doubts and all that she had suppressed during the seventeen long years of her married life. While penning down her experiences, she undergoes a sort of catharsis. Presently she decides not to be passive and silent, thereby realizing that she was in solitude all those years.

Now that she is in a state of realization, Jaya is caught between the reality of her life and the image she is trying to confirm. She has been brought up by her father with utmost love and care. She has also been treated as a very special child. So she could not remain indifferent to her inner urge of self - actualization. Being a writer she wishes to discover herself through her writings, but the set norms of the society prevent all her desires.

Jaya's creative urges free her from her cramped domestic and societal roles. It frees her from emotional turmoil also. According to Chandra

Shashi Deshpande's 'That Long Silence' engages with the discourse of patriarchy by interrogating the institution of family and points to the possibility of re-writing/ re-righting the unequal gender relations, within the patriarchal structures. By the end of the novel, the protagonist Jaya's positioning within the power of matrix of the family, vis-à-vis her husband undergoes a radical change: she exercises her choice becomes a writer despite her husband's disapproval and discouragement. ("Theory")

Living with frustrated expectations for a period of time seems to her like living in hell. It is a terrible agony to experience negative emotional momentum that continually haunts a person and sinks one in depression. It is highly sad too to watch the desires sprout and die.

Jaya had used the silence to protect herself from falling apart emotionally. As the saying goes, only the crying child drinks milk, she soon realizes that if she wants to survive in this world happily, she has to break the silence between her and Mohan and express her disagreement, dissatisfaction, discomfort and displeasure and all that. In order to be respected in the society, a woman has to fight her way even in trivial matters to prove her individuality. She has to get rid of her inhibition, inaction, and fear. Above all, she could achieve her freedom only if she overcomes fear.

She now feels that the image of two bullocks yoked together is no longer true. Life is no longer a burden, a set of rules for Jaya. Everyman is the architect of his own life. Life is wonderful to be lived. It depends on how and what one chooses in one's life. So, as a woman, one should choose to live fearlessly, boldly and determinedly. Jaya regrets about the way she has lived as a slave silently enduring all the insults, humiliations and hardships, etc. She comes to realize that sealing her lips is not the solution to all her problems. Now, as a new woman, she decides to wear the old hood of wife and mother, not silently as before but with a new attitude and a new outlook. Presently, she realizes her own feelings and emotions and becomes aware of herself. She blames the Indian culture which is highly partial, so she urges to come out of it to give expression and action to her thoughts, feelings, and emotions.

Ruminating on her past life Jaya realizes how her marriage has reduced her to a mere automation. She has now come to the state of realization; how she has wasted away the most precious time of her life in cleaning, washing dusting, scrubbing, polishing, ironing, arranging, re-arranging and in many other trivial matters. Now she has been caught and tormented between the storm of tradition and modernity, struggling to take strong decisions independently.

After a prolonged struggle in her search for identity, she takes her own decision and plans to break 'that long silence' which she has followed for seventeen long years in her married life. Jaya states, "If I have to plug that 'hole in the heart', I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us" (TLS, 192).

Therefore she decides and breaks the age-old image of woman which is meek, docile and submissive. Having been aware of the plight of women and the inequality in gender she goes through a phase of revolt and achieves her freedom. Thus she identifies the womanhood in herself.

Jaya is totally unhappy about the subjugation of women prevailing in the society. Without proper education and economic independence, women are afraid of men and remain silent. This fear in women has allowed the subjugation to continue. Thereby women have allowed victimization instead of bargaining for partnership. Sarala Parker keenly remarks:

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 victimization instead of putting the blame on everybody except them. (Parker, 169)

Jaya has been continuously oscillating between submission and assertion and the former is dominant in her. Analysing Mohan's attitude, she bursts out:

"Suhasini was dead; yes that was it; she was the one Mohan was mourning. . . . No, the fact was that I'd finally done it. I'd killed her" (Silence, 121).

Being aware of this fact that she also has contributed to her victimization, she decides to fight her own battle in life and work out her own solution. Instantly she feels the necessity to break the silence, articulate her predicament and establish her identity. When the wife happens to be an educated and intelligent one, definitely there is room for discussion and compromise. Men alone cannot be blamed for the gender discrimination but women who are brought up in the traditional patriarchal world are also to be blamed. The realization that she can have her own way gives a new confidence to Jaya.

The title, *That Long Silence* is symbolic as well as metaphoric. The silence of the protagonist is the silence which has been the destiny of the Indian women down the centuries. Women may be denied rights, abused, beaten, expelled and raped but still, the society expects them to remain silent. Knowing that one is denied rights and remaining silent is equal to death. Hence, it has to be broken ruthlessly and instantly. All the expression of concern for women is a raid upon the silence. But Shashi Deshpande does it by weaving the ideas into a metaphoric structure. It shows how Jaya, after long cogitation, decides to break the silence and give vent to her suppressed feelings. The life of Jaya that passes from a state of solitude to a state of solidarity is a solid example for the entire womankind which has kept its lips sealed without expression for centuries. Therefore Jaya decides that she has to speak, to listen and she has to erase the silence between them.

The novel seems to be of immense relevance to us in the present day scenario. Shashi Deshpande reveals her inherent abilities to tame up the feelings of women who are caught in the traditional web from tradition to modernity. It also reveals how the heroine is aware of her troubles as a victim of inequities. She sums up with a positive note: "I'm not afraid anymore. The panic has gone. I'm Mohan's wife. I had thought and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife. Now I know that kind of a fragmentation is not possible" (TLS, 191).

Jaya finally arrives at the solid conclusion that in the institution of marriage both men and women are equally important. They both play a vital role in the family. Neither of the sexes can be eliminated from a healthy family. Women especially need to express their inner thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Then all the problems could be solved through mutual understanding and discussion. Thus, it is obvious that silence and elimination are not absolute solutions.

In short, Deshpande has depicted women as victims of pathogenic misogyny and suffering the atrocities of men in silence. Their inner turmoil, emotional resilience, and relational bondage are portrayed in this novel. It is obvious that culture is employed as a tool in denying women their legitimate freedom. There is a nexus between culture and patriarchy that curtails the freedom of women and appropriates her space. Deshpande powerfully exposes the politics of culture that cripples women. Thereby she makes us think seriously about the social institution of marriage and exposes its hidden agenda. The central female consciousness picks her way to family relationships as existing in the society.

Ultimately, Jaya emerges as a determined strong willed modern woman who prepares to face life and accept responsibilities. During her process of self-realization, Jaya feels that meaningful co-existence can come only through mutual understanding, respect, and compassion and not through domination or subjugation. So, Jaya breaks her silence, articulates her predicament and establishes her identity. Ultimately she decides to live her life without sacrificing her identity and individuality. Thus Jaya compromises with her situation and faces life with more courage and confidence. Her decision to have her own way gives a new hope and confidence to her and this confidence brings her to solidarity to face the realities of life and leads a peaceful life with her husband thereafter.

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