

THAT LONG SILENCE: A WOMAN'S ODYSSEY

Sowmya K.N.

M.Phil Research Scholar
Bharathiar University,
Coimbatore, India.

Anish K. Joseph

M.Phil Research Scholar
Bharathiar University,
Coimbatore, India.

Abstract

Feminism is a movement which advocates women's rights. It is the voice of suppressed women. A voice of protest against the marginalized condition of women as a class is audible in contemporary women writers' works. Shashi Deshpande, a well known name in Indian English literature began her literary career in 1970 with the publication of a collection of short stories. Her famous novel *That Long Silence* was published in 1987. The novel combines retrospective narration along with direct description of present incidents. The theme of the novel is self-realization of the protagonist.

Keywords: Feminism, Self-realisation, Marginalisation

Novel as a distinct literary form developed in Britain in the twentieth century. Indian writers in English adopted this form skillfully and received national and international recognition. Until 1930s Indo-English novelists wrote with nationalistic orientation but after independence they shifted attention to individual's quest for personal meaning, his existential problems and social relationships. Novels in the last two decades provide a glimpse into the female psyche and experience. Indian women writers being influenced by Western feminist writers engaged themselves in devising a verbal strategy for rejecting historically accepted 'standards.' The galaxy of women writers includes Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandeya, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala and Anita Desai.

Shashi Deshpande daughter of an eminent Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit scholar was born in Dharwad (in Northern India) in 1938. She began her literary career in 1970 with the publication of a collection of short stories. Besides four books for children, she has written novels such as *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *If I Die Today*, *Come up and Be Dead* and *Roots and Shadows* before the publication of her Sahitya Academy Award winning novel, *That Long Silence*. Her later novels *The Binding Wine*, *A Matter of Time*, *Small Remedies* and *Moving on*

drew immediate critical attention. Deshpande is now considered as a representative of Indian women writers. Her works have been translated to different languages.

Deshpande has a hold on psychology, particularly female psychology and a deep knowledge of the Indian tradition. Contemporary women writers make a voice of protest against the marginalised condition of women. Deshpande's approach to women's problems as depicted in her novels is quite distinct. It is easy to distinguish her approach from contemporaries who either protest against the existing norms or remain indifferent to the social system. She did not choose that way of protest, rather she believed in the individuality of woman and her right for freedom. Her protagonists are educated women and most of them are financially independent.

The women portrayed in Indian fiction may be categorized into three. First, there are rural women who are poor, hardworking and sincere as portrayed by Kamala Markandeya. The most representative of these is Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve*. In the second category, there are middle class women who are married and working like Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and Jaya in *That Long Silence*. In the third category, there are women of the upper class society from the urban milieu. Most of them have easy morals and do not mind extra marital relations like Paro in Namita Gokhale's novel *Paro* and the female protagonists of Nayantara Sahgal and Shobha De. Deshpande, in her novels has depicted different aspects of middle class women.

That Long Silence was published in 1988. This novel displays her skill in narrative art; it combines retrospective narration along with direct description of present events. Theme of the novel is self-realisation of its protagonist Jaya, who won fame as a writer and contributor to a women's magazine, but later decides to change her point of view. The protagonist seeks to express her experiences not chronologically, but they flash during the moments of intensity according to her free choice. Like Virginia Woolf, Deshpande believes that the novelist must be detached from life while exposing the character.

The novel *That Long Silence* opens with Jaya and her husband Mohan moving back into the old Dadar flat in Bombay from their cosy and palatial house. Mohan is involved in a financial malpractice and an inquiry against him is set up. He is consoled to find that their children Rahul and Rati are away on a long tour with their family friends, and expects Jaya to go into hiding with him. It is in this old flat she becomes an introvert and goes into deep contemplation of her past and childhood. For the first time she makes an attempt to analyse who she really is. She started thinking about herself and about her individuality.

During her brief stay in the small flat, Jaya has to encounter both her past that comes in the form of memory, and her present in the form of rude shock received from Mohan's accusation that his malpractice was for the sake of Jaya and children's comfort. Mohan's accusation makes her realise the hard reality of life. She has to acknowledge that her role as Mohan's wife has been a passive one and that she has chosen to remain silent on Mohan's activities including his moral laxity, only to keep her detached from real life.

The novel displays the process of Jaya's self analysis and self recognition that help her to emerge from her cosy corner that she preferred so long to reality. Jaya wants to be a writer, not just one meant for a woman's journal. She knows that to be a successful writer, she has to detach her experience from her awareness of that experience, only then one can give the real picture of life. To emerge from her dumb existence to make her own free choices becomes the preoccupation in the Dadar flat. She decides to do so after she is rudely shocked by Mohan's accusation that she too is indirectly involved in the scam. For Jaya the only way out was writing. Whatever she wrote so far was not the expression of her real self but her poses.

Manusmriti Says: "*Pitha rakshathi koumare. Bhartha rakshathi Youvvane. Purthra rakshathi vardhakkie. Nah sthree swathnthria arhathi*". In ancient India, women were denied the right to study Vedas. The code of Manu was so rigorously observed that the role of women was confined to the family and they were denied most of the rights enjoyed by men. Though her role got modified and got enhanced over the ages, it invariably remained an inferior one. Freedom and self assertion remain a faraway dream for a large section of women in the Indian society.

Despite her marriage to Mohan and subsequently becoming mother of two children, Jaya was lonely. Her husband could not understand her feelings as result of which she was torn from within. Deshpande uses a beautiful image to describe Jaya's married life:

A pair of bullocks yoked together... a clever phrase, but can it substitute for the reality? A man and a woman married for seventeen years. A couple with two children. A family somewhat like the one caught and preserved for posterity by the advertising visuals I so loved. But we are two persons. A man. A woman. (TLS 8)

This image reflects their condition. It means that the bullocks so yoked shared the burden between themselves but no one knows whether they love each other or not.

The protagonist not only suffers from a loss of personality, but faces a dichotomy between the body and soul. Woman is socialised to believe that without her husband, she has no value in life. She broods over her life and decides to assert her voice through creative writing. She takes this step at the end of the novel. Earlier, when Jaya wrote a story, got published it in a magazine and won a prize, her husband reacted in an unexpected manner. Instead of appreciating Jaya, Mohan discourages her by saying what would people think about them. She observes about the hypocrisy of the institution of marriage: "A sheltering tree. Without the tree you are dangerously unprotected ... and vulnerable" (TLS32).

Jaya resents the role assigned to a wife in our country, who is called upon to stay at home, look after kids and do household works. She could not continue her writing as Mohan did not encourage her. She was deeply distressed to know that she could not come to light as a writer because of her husband. She did not dare to annoy Mohan or to break marriage. The values and ethos of society mould the female in a way that she is thought to feel guilty if she expressed resentment openly. Jaya's words reveal her helplessness. Jaya has every reason to be bitter with him. She recalls their relationships as wife and husband: "It seems to me now that we had, both of us, rehearsed the roles of husband and wife so well that when the time came we could play them flawlessly, word perfect" (TLS 81).

The differences in their outlook make them fail to understand each other and the lack of communication damages their relationship. Jaya suffers silently. She would not express her feeling lest it should spoil her relationship with her husband. She had been brought up with love and care, but marriage gave her only frustration. All that she could do was to suppress her anger. Mohan had told her how his mother had never raised her voice against his father. He was not ready to accept her as an individual and wanted her to live like a 'typical woman.' The disgust of living with a man who does not love her the way she expected him to do, is an issue that educated women have to face in the contemporary society.

The girl child is made to understand that she is a temporary resident in her natal home and she is a burden or liability and it is the responsibility of her parents to get her married. When she asks why she is not included in the family tree, she receives a shocking explanation that she is no more a member of her family since she has been married off. Jaya is shocked to find no

mention of her mother, or aunts who kept the family running. She is full of anger and desperation over such gender discrimination.

Jaya feels suffocated to fit herself into the pre-ordained rules that a woman has to follow. Mohan's expectation is that a woman should not be rebellious or angry, she has to be meek and passive to him. He says:

A woman can never be angry: she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There is no room for despair, either. There is only order and routine, today. I have to change the sheets tomorrow, scrub the bathrooms. The day after, clean the fridge. (TLS 147-148).

Expression of anger in silence is best evident in an incident when Mohan accuses her for no fault of hers. She wants to burst out in anger. But she fails to break her silence. She compares her helpless state to that of a huge spear. She cannot react to the pain, but only suffers in silence.

As the story progresses, the meek, docile Jaya of the early days, finally emerges as a bold, challenging and rebellious woman. She comes to grip with the problems and discovers the meaning of life. Jaya understands that by suppressing her emotions she had landed herself in a whirlpool of emotional turmoil. The mistake was that she had tried to be Mohan's wife and in the process lost her identity. "I am 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 fragmentation is not possible" (TLS191).

Jaya realises that women have to find their own freedom within the limits imposed by the society. In order to attain self-hood, a woman has to transcend silence, negation and self-alienation. The novel exhibits the opinion that women should have an assertive individuality which includes the capability to take decisions about her life and to carry them out with a sense of responsibility. Her decision to cease to be a passive partner and overcome the turbulence in her relationship with Mohan leads her to an uninhibited self identification.

The novel ends with a resurgence of faith. Jaya's decision to erase the silence which had defined and distorted her communication with her husband should be interpreted as the harbinger of a new hope. A woman's desire to succeed like an individual is not incompatible with the desire for love and small pleasure of domesticity. Jaya's story proves that a balanced fulfilled life is not merely a utopian fantasy for a woman if she decides to realise the capacity of her creative energy to erase her conditioning and free herself from her psychic fears and the bondage of centuries. Self actualisation is possible if a woman decides to be 'Herself,' to exhibit the genuine significance of her free, and uninhibited personality in its totality.

Jaya firmly resolves to break the icy silence which has ploughed her family since long. She wants to get back to her old, happy days by setting the present situation on a right track. This decision may not be so drastic or so startling, but it is of far-reaching significance in the conjugal life of Jaya and Mohan. It is to the credit of Jaya that she takes the initiative in this matter. The author believes that the reason for woman's subjugation is not only patriarchy or society but her own refusal to raise voice against injustices. Jaya as a person comes to the understanding that everyone is alone in life, one has to fight one's own fight, has to take responsibility for one's state and has to work accordingly.

The unexpected resource that Jaya finds in her is her capacity to do what she desires. A total change has occurred in Jaya's life. Earlier she was afraid to be alone, but now she wants to be herself. She wants solitude because she has to decide what exactly she wants from life. The novel establishes that it is not only the patriarchal set up which is responsible for the women's condition in the society. The responsibility also lies with the victim who refuses to raise a voice and achieve the goal. The novel also traces the growth of the protagonist from a state of

weakness, feeling of failure to that of relaxation. She accomplishes this through self-assessment and self-criticism.

Deshpande's protagonists display a tangible development during the course of the novel. They go through a process of self examination before they reach self-actualization. Thus Shashi Deshpande has been successful in creating strong woman's protagonists who refuse to get crushed under the weight of their personal tragedies, and face life with great courage and strength. Her heroines are courageous enough to revolt against the attempts of men to marginalize them. Comparatively, they appear to be more life-like and more akin to the educated, middle-class, urban woman of today. Deshpande's greatness lies in the fact that her protagonists seek and find harmony within the traditional social set up.

Deshpande's work is not only about finding the reasons behind female subjugation, but she throws light to a resolution in practical life. Her greatness lies in the fact that instead of blaming men or society her protagonists seek to find harmony within the social set up. Her heroines represent new generation women, who review everything with reason and intellect. The novel aesthetically communicates the essence of the creed of feminism along with contemporary realities.

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