

**FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S
*THAT LONG SILENCE AND THE BINDING VINE***

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande is the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award for the novel *That Long Silence* in 1990 and the Padma Shri award in 2009. She is one of the prominent female writers who voice the problems of middle class Indian women courageously. The themes of her novels are of marital incompatibility, identity crisis, imbalanced family relationships and the patriarchal gaze. The present paper investigates the struggle of the conscience of shackled Indian Women characters, their journey from darkness to light presenting the problems that majority of women are still faced with both at the domestic and social levels.

Keywords: Social predicaments, female protagonists, patriarchal dominance, women as silent sufferers, struggle, victimization etc.

Indian English Literature focuses on one of the important dimension- women marginality and their status in the contemporary society. Women are an integral part of human civilization, but they are regarded subordinate to men because it is believed that she was made out of man. Even Bible quotes, “*So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man. That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.*”(Genesis 2: 21-24)

In Indian society, Indian woman is portrayed as a silent-sufferer. Women are viewed as a social category as well as a culturally conditioned and constructed category. They need to follow Indian traditions and follow the set norms of holiness and surrender to the dictates of patriarchy. Shashi Deshpande’s heroines belong to the middle class society. They are all modern, educated, conscious and urban. All of them find marriage painful and tormenting but they do not break away from their marriage bonds rather they try to make a balance between tradition and

modernity. All her protagonist are career women, who are not satisfied with the rhetoric equality between Men and Women but want to see that the right to an individual life and the right to development of their individual capabilities are realized in their own lives. They want to come forward to bear the burden of work along with their fellow men in every walk of life. They try to make a balance between their family and career, seeing to it as far as possible, that their profession will not affect their married life.

Female Protagonists in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*:

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* presents a realistic image of educated Middle-class women. The novel gains authenticity from the fact that Jaya, the heroine, is a well read woman, blessed with literary sensibility though nurtured in silence which corresponds with her fictional role. Jaya is a modern, convent educated, fluent-English speaking woman and a creative writer who symbolizes the emerging new woman conscious of her status in the society. After seventeen years of troubled life in silence, Jaya pens her story revealing her feelings, incidents of ups and downs that caused her despair and disappointment, and endangered her life. She begins the novel by saying that she is not writing "a story of a callous, insensitive husband and a sensitive suffering wife. "I'm writing of us. A lot of discussion takes place in the house of Jaya whether Mohan ought to be Jaya's husband. Jaya ultimately makes up her mind to marry Mohan." The writer brings an unexpected turn in the plot at the end of the novel. The marriage of Jaya and Mohan is on the verge of a break. Shashi Deshpande wants us to draw the inference from Jaya: "*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.*" (169).

In the novel *That Long Silence*, the Phenomenon how a woman's identity is defined by others and her name keeps on changing according to the wishes of others. The protagonist is known by two names: Jaya and Suhasini. Jaya, which means victory, is the name given by her father when she was born, and Suhasini, the name given after her marriage, which means a "soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman." Both the names symbolize the traits of her personality. The former symbolizes victory and the latter submission. Jaya writes realistic stories for the newspapers and magazines apart from her domestic duties. The readers, editors and even her husband Mohan love her writing dealing with man-woman relationships. A realistic story of her even won her a prize that narrates about "a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body". But Mohan gets hurt assuming that the story is about their personal life and it is revealed to the world, He says: "*They will all know now, all those people who read this and know us, they will know that these two persons are us, they will think I am this kind of a man, they will think I am this man, How can I look anyone in. the face again? And you, how could you write these things, how could you write such ugly things, how will you face people after this?*" (143-44).

The movement Feminism originated in 1960's which demanded equal rights of women. This gave solid reason to Indian female writers to raise voice against female sufferings. They strongly believe that the concept of gender is not merely a biological phenomenon but it has a social construction. Simone de Beauvoir says, "*One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.*" A woman is commonly constructed as a submissive, surrendered and suppressed section of the society. Jaya, the heroine of the novel *That Long Silence* is not a born woman in this sense. The social taboos associated with marriage make her a woman: "*She was a child who used to get angry very soon. But after her marriage she tolerated her anger. She realized that to Mohan*

anger made a woman 'unwomanly.' (83). This process of becoming a woman is beautifully shown in the character of Jaya. When she was born her father named her Jaya, which means victory. But after the marriage she is rechristened as Suhasini which means "a soft smiling, placid motherly woman." (15) The former stands for a feminist figure and the latter symbolize submission, a traditional woman. She is brought up in a loving and affectionate care of the parents. On the one hand, she has been given modern education to the west and she evolves herself into a writer. On the other hand, her parents inculcate in her the image of traditional, ideal Hindu ladies like Sita, Savitri and Draupadi. She comes to learn that in this male dominated society, a woman has no independent identity. She is the daughter, wife, and mother of somebody. She has no name. She is defined in terms of relationship with men. One feels that that the modern, independent and equal partner of the society. The new roles lure her but the insecurity involved in it and deep rooted tradition in her do not allow her to give up the old guise completely. Centuries-old sheltering has made women too weak to lead an independent life. This is what we call a feminist dilemma, which is the root of *That Long Silence*. It is this dilemma which makes Jaya observes such a long silence despite being a writer. There is a clash between the writer and the housewife in her. The writer in her expects her to express her views and experiences before the society; but the housewife demands silence on her part. In this internal tug of war the housewife wins and she remains silent of which she gets a setback in her writing career. Publishers refuse her manuscripts because she does not bring the fire of her experiences into play in her writings. Her husband discourages her: "*I have known then that it hadn't mattered to Mohan that I had written a good story, a story about a couple, a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body. For Mohan it had mattered that people might think the couple was us, that the man him.*" (144). Being caught in this dilemma, she is withered. She neither becomes an ideal wife, which she tries not to complain or revolt against the patriarchal yoke to liberate herself. Deshpande's heroines in general lack the courage and strength to do so. They represent the modern women in transition. Jaya suffers from inner conflict, confusion and indecision and fail to express them. She longs to make her own identity for which she is competent enough. She is intellectually independent, too. But Mohan does not understand her feelings. He neither loves her nor encourages her. He does not adopt a violent means to tame her. Kamat, Jaya's neighbour and a widower with whom she could freely discuss her stories, remarks that they are lacking in emotion and anger. She replies that expressing anger is not a womanly trait. A woman can never be angry. She can only be neurotic, hysterical frustrated (p.147). Kamat says contemptuously: "*I never can imagine you writing this. This you, I mean. I can see the woman who writes this . . . she's plump, good humored, pea brained, but shrewd, devious, skimming over life.*" (149).

The novelist depicts the mental conflict of both Jaya and Mohan in the small Dadar flat. They have run into "stormy weather and their secure sheltered life washes away like a water color in a rainy storm. The reactions of both Jaya and Mohan to the situation are different. Jaya feels normal in keeping house in the flat. But, Mohan becomes inconsistent and feels restless and insecure. He moves restlessly in the house un-able to sit down at one place as if waiting for something. He says the waiting is getting him down. Jaya reacts that it is really hard for Mohan to wait, as he is not used to it. She distinguishes between the nature of a man's waiting and a woman's: "*He did not know what waiting was. He had always moved steadily from one moment to the next. But for women the waiting game starts early in childhood. Wait until you get married. Wait until your husband comes. Wait until you go to your in-laws' home. Wait until you have kids.*" (30). Despite her fighting spirit, Jaya is absolutely uncertain about herself. She is

always in conflict with tradition and modernity in her mind. It reflects in the two names—Jaya and Suhasini by which she has been called. The former is given by her father which means ‘victory’ and the latter given by her husband Mohan meaning “a soft, smiling, placid motherly woman”. Thus she has two selves—Suhasini deeply rooted in tradition and Jaya attempting to overcome the constraints of tradition. She does not want to be a “Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband’s travails”. She understands that there is pain in hostility and anguish in rebellion. This is an echo of her own unhappy condition. Hence, she chooses a submissive attitude: “No. *what I have to do with these mythical women? I can’t fool myself. The truth is simpler. Two bullocks yoked together . . . it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful.*” (11-12). She asserts: “*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.*” (191). Overcoming her turmoil, she attempts to come to terms with herself by trying to write about herself and family and thus decides to break a ‘Long Silence.’ As a matter of fact, Shashi Deshpande portrays the image of a new woman in Jaya who silently accepts everything in the bearing and then breaks off silence. As a woman of maturity, she redefines her identity and relationship with her husband. “Her inner turmoil’s are so bitter that she is unable to speak them out and remains silent in order not to be frustrated and disappointed after the disapproval of her actions by the society”. Her maintaining ‘long silence’ denotes that the influence of the tradition is still there on the newly acquired professional roles of modern women. Jaya revolts in silence, which is her natural condition. Sarla Palkar regards *That Long Silence* as a self-critique and says Shashi Deshpande probably wants us to draw the inference from Jaya: 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 (169).

In order to have a well-balanced conjugal life, it is very important that husband and wife be on a par with each other. They should supplement and not supplant each other. Further, they should know each other well physically as well as emotionally. It is this harsh reality that Deshpande tries to project through the female protagonist who, at the end, chooses to break her long silence of the past. It is not only Jaya's silence that Deshpande is highlighting but the silence of each and every character in the novel from different strata of society. The novel is not only about Jaya's efforts to obliterate the silence that is suffocating her. It is also about the despair and resignation of women like Mohan's mother; Jaya's servant; Jaya's mentally disturbed cousin Kusum. It also deals with Mohan's silence, which is the silence of a man who speaks but can find no one to listen to him. Thus, in the novel, Deshpande has presented not a woman who revolts openly in the beginning and later on reconciles to the situation, but a kind of woman who wants to revolt, but ultimately does not. Her inner turmoil’s are so bitter that she is unable to speak them out and remains silent in order not to be frustrated and disappointed at the disapproval of her actions by the society. She is unable to unfold the truth. Her image becomes like that of a bird who has got wings and knows that it can fly, but, somehow, does not. In the same way, Jaya is aware of her abilities and she knows that she can expose them openly, but somehow she does not. She always remains silent, which indicates that the traditional roles of women still have primacy over all the newly acquired professional roles (46-47). Thus *That Long Silence* traces the passage of a woman through a maze of doubts and fears towards her affirmations. Looking at the man-woman relationship objectively, the novelist does not blame entirely the men for

subjugation of women. She sees how both men and women find it difficult to outgrow the images and roles assigned to them by the society.

Female Protagonists in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*:

Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* (1993) sketches her middle-class female protagonist predicament in a male-dominated world, where she has very little scope to give voice to her concerns. In this novel, the minor characters play a very significant role; the protagonist Urmi plays the role of anchor. She cleverly exposes the sufferings of women from different sections of our society. *The Binding Vine* deals with the multidimensions of its central character Urmi. Urmi is an intelligent, educated middle-class wife, who is employed as a lecturer in a college. Urmi's vision towards life is quite different from other women of our society. She is one who affirms her independence and freedom in each and every judgment of her life. Urmi united in marriage with the man whom she preferred, but is desperate in her married life because of her ego and to some extent Kishore her husband is accountable for it. Since the beginning of her married life Urmi finds that the bond between her and her husband is not that of love, though she believes that the anchor to attach oneself to in this strange world is love. From the very first night of their wedding she feels distanced from Kishore. She realized that "he looked trapped." (137). Marriage, which was a spiritual bond in the olden times, has become only a sexual, legal bond in modern days. Each time she tries to reveal her emotional insecurity, Kishore asserts himself sexually. Kishore, the typical Indian husband, never understands the depth of her feeling. She openly reveals her emotional insecurity. She says: "Each time you leave me the parting is like death." (139). She tries to tell him twice, and both the times, he finds the solution only in the physical relationship. But to her, "sex is only a temporary answer, I came out of it to find that the lights had come back...I was afraid of what I would see, I turned round and fell asleep." (140) This incompatibility ends in alienation. She thinks, "Each relationship, always imperfect, survives on hope. Am I to give up this hope?" (141) Thus, a marriage that suppresses Urmi's human demand, a marriage that denies her the fullness of experience forces her to take refuge in Dr. Bhaskar Jain's friendship. She tries to find herself in the relationship with Bhaskar because he is a patient listener to her talk and gives her the talk and gives her the right response. He cares for her emotions and makes her feel complete. The problem with Urmi is that she is brimming with confidence, as is financially independent and well settled in her life. Due to this economic stability she has developed a kind of super ego in herself, which makes her reluctant to submit before her husband. Moreover, she cannot tolerate the submission of Vanaa (her sister-in-law) and her mother before their spouses. The main protagonist Urmi, in this novel is a clever, educated woman working as a lecturer in a college. Against the wishes of her parents she gets married to a man of her own choice but is desperate about her married life. Her problem is that being financially emancipated and having confidence in herself as she works outside the home, she has developed a kind of super ego, which enables her not to submit before her husband, Kishore. She cannot also bear the submission of Vanaa, her friend and sister-in-law, and her mother before their spouses. She says: "but her submissiveness, her willingness to go along with him in whatever he wants makes me angry." The novel focuses on the struggle of the inner mind and self of restricted women characters. Urmila, who struggles through her own gloomy domestic atmosphere not subduing but voicing and trying to sort out things for herself and for other women also be they her mother- in- law Mira or the rape victim Kalpana in the novel. The novel begins in Urmila's personal loss. She, having lost her daughter, fights the despair alone as her husband, Kishore, a sailor by profession remains out mostly. Urmila is quite different from

earlier protagonists in composure. She possesses a better control over herself and her relations also. Though being married to a man of her own choice, she is desperate of her marital life. Kishore and Urmila don't share the bond of love and understanding. The incompatibility results in alienation. Irrespective of being economically independent, Urmila requires Kishore by her side as a supporting oak to tangle herself around. The novel describes the trauma and anguish that she goes through and the stages through which she passes before coming to terms with the death of her daughter. While struggling, she comes across the poetry written by her Mira, her dead mother-in-law and through her diaries she gets to know about Mira's suffering as a woman and as a victim of forced marriage. Mira comes as a refuge to Urmila as she easily identifies with her and finds relief from the excruciating pain. Mira happens to be a silent victim of loveless marriage who faces death at a very young age but through her poetry is revealed her desire to be recognized as a writer and a poet. Mira happens to be a woman, who used pen as a vehicle for self-expression, to save herself from abuse, from anonymity and mutilation in the prison like house of her husband. Mira represents a multitude of women who are forced into marriages at a very young age and succumb to the lust of their husbands. Urmila gathers the courage to publish her poems and reveals Mira's suffering to the world. Through Mira Urmila gains a new insight into herself. Though accused of being a traitor to Mira, Urmila remains firm enough in her resolution to break the silence of women in the name of social taboo or family honor. She advocates love as the binding force in relationships. The present day worldviews marriage as a business institution and that is why the hollow marriages are dissatisfying both physically as well as spiritually. Instead they confuse a woman whether to revolt or submit because both end in discontent and it is this set up, which requires change. As Urmila herself says that "each relationship, always imperfect, survives on hope..." *The Binding Vine* is projection of woman's biological needs and raises the questions of woman's right over her own body even within the marital domain. There is an effort to restore the discarded reality of life. *The Binding Vine* depicts how the educated earning woman helps poor women inculcation the spirit of solidarity among women. The novel is also about the agony of a wife who is the victim of marital rape; the plight of women raped outside marriage, who would rather suffer in silence in the name of the family honor. Through her novel, she expresses the frustrations and disappointments of women who experience social and cultural oppression in the society. The story of Deshpande's protagonists always begins at the critical point where despite "total" freedom and sometimes total surrender to the expectations of their husbands, they are discontented and unhappy. Therefore, they wish to re-define themselves. A woman must give expression to her inner space and self; at the same time, she need not repudiate the social institution of marriage and family (and the duties that accompany it) or her basic human values. Deshpande presents the conflicts of her protagonists without presenting simple solutions. She lets the different choice speak themselves, the choice to conform path to break free. "Having a life outside the family is very important for women." Accordingly, all her women protagonists succeed in construction a self through individual professional achievement. They also come to terms with themselves by redefining their relationship, accepting at the same time social constraints and emerge as fully developed individuals doing justice in their domestic as well as professional fields.

In short, Shashi Deshpande's novels reveal her deep insight into the plight of Indian women, who feel restricted in a tradition-bound, male dominated society. She delineates her women characters in the light of their hopes, fears, aspirations and frustrations, who are aware of their strengths and limitations; but find themselves thwarted by the opposition and pressure from a society conditioned overwhelmingly by the patriarchal mindset. She highlights their inferior

position and the subsequent degradation in a male dominated society. Deshpande's women protagonists are victims of the prevalent gross gender discrimination first as daughter and later as wives. Shashi Deshpande's sincere concern for women and her craft as a novelist are reflected strongly in all her novels. Deshpande is not against the institution of marriage, as her woman protagonists strive to make their marriages work in their attempts to lead a meaningful existence. Shashi Deshpande keep her narratives female centered and gives an intimate insight into the psyche of the middle class Indian women who feel oppressed by their patriarchal socialization. She provides new ideals for better man-women relationship, there by broadening the scope of woman existence. She prescribes a balance between tradition and modernity as a working philosophy for the contemporary woman. To her tradition are the values of harmony and co-existence that symbolize the Indian way of life, and modernity is the assertion of the independent individual identity. Deshpande feels that the woman must venture out of the familial framework to give full expression to her individuality and identity. Shashi Deshpande's novels are realistic depiction of the anguish and the conflict of the modern educated middle class women caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand, and self-expression, individuality independence on the other, her protagonists feel lost and confused and explore way to fulfill themselves as a human being. Shashi Deshpande's concern and sympathy are essentially for the woman. She has given an honest portrayal of her fears, sufferings, disappointments and frustrations. Besides revealing the woman's struggle to secure self-respect and self-identity, the author lays bare the multiple levels of oppression, including sexual oppression. Shashi Deshpande's protagonists' quest for identity gets largely accentuated due to their frustrating experiences born of the prohibitive nature of the Indian Patriarchal Society. In her novels, the male characters husbands, lovers, fathers and other relations- display different aspects of patriarchy and oppression. While the majority of 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 sympathize with the protagonists a lot. Deshpande's male characters only serve to enable the protagonists to define their identities more completely. Shashi Deshpande states that she does not "believe in a simple opposition of bad men, I don't believe the world is like that at all" (Prasad 78). Thus she has constructed motifs of patriarchy and oppression by employing the method of negation and affirmation. Her protagonists are victims of the Indian Patriarchy and after initial submission resist the oppressive situation, there by reflecting the author's view that a woman must assert herself within marriage to preserve her identity. The protagonists in Deshpande's novels are on the road to self-discovery. Usually some domestic crisis propels them in this quest. Shashi Deshpande's novels also frequently ruminate over the condition of human alienation and the vicissitudes of time. The recognition of responsibility in choice (That Long Silence), the meaning of *Dharma* in one's life (The Binding Vine) is severe issues that cleverly enclose Deshpande's works and take them beyond feminist concerns and feminist dilemma.

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