

**BREAKING THE SILENCE IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S
*THAT LONG SILENCE***

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“I look for myself through the centuries and don't see myself anywhere”
-Sandra M. Gilbert

Since time immemorial woman has been the victim of uneven patriarchal social set-ups. They are treated like puppets in the hands of men or beasts of burden. Woman, the object for pleasure, entertainment was always considered as the weaker sex, as their property, servile to them. In patriarchal society a girl child is brought up under the vulture-eyes of her parents and then she handed over given a new master, her husband, the determiner, the demonstrator or the shape giver for the rest of her life. Parents groom her to become an object of others right from her childhood. She is not even fortunate to get encouragement for developing her independent individual self. Simone De Beauvoir observes that, “Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to woman by society” (445). Patriarchal practices have for years been dominating the stature of every woman. In Indian classical literature, a woman exists in relationship to man; conventionally a woman must be chaste, faithful and virtuous like Sita or Savitri. In scriptures and myths woman is portrayed either as a goddess or a subhuman creator but never as a complete human being.

Fiction by women writers marks a major segment of Indian fiction in English. The last quarters of the nineteenth century was a landmark in the history of Indian novels in English of emerging of women novelists, who gave a new direction to the literary world. Their creations prominently assume feminist significance for focusing the inner mind of Indian women from the feministic perspective. These novels give deep insights, a wealth of understanding, a reservoir of emotions and various meanings and a basis of discussion of various issues concerning women. Through women writers' eyes we can see a real world of women which is always covered with mask of tradition ssbound customs and rituals. Their pen allows them to create their own world which is free from the direct interference of men.

Among the Indian women novelists, Toru Dutt, Krupabai Sathianathan, Shevanthi Bai Nikambe, Cornelia Sorabji, Iqbal Lunnisa, R.P. Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Rama Mehta, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Kamala Das, Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy are the writers who concern themselves with the psychological crises in the lives of Indian women. Shashi Deshpande captures a distinctive place in contemporary Indian English literature because of her unequivocal feminist stance. She has been influenced partially by some of the Western feminists like Simone De Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer. Through her practice in short

stories Deshpande never missed the opportunity taking these vital issues as the main themes of the stories. She made her novels including *That Long Silence* (1988) women oriented opting for the ‘two inches of ivory’ like Jane Austen and allowing the leading role to her female protagonists. Deshpande confesses that, “only a woman could write my books – they are written from the inside, as it were” (139). She meticulously illustrates the situation in which a sensitive woman has lived and moved about. She has caught the characters between the powerful currents of tradition and patriarchy, of terror and suppression who are subjected to physical and sexual assaults in society. The loss of self-identity, voice or self-assertion, torment have shaken her mind and she makes her female protagonist’s search for ‘self’ or re-search for ‘existence’. This paper is an attempt to analyze *That Long Silence*, a Sahitya Akademy award-winning novel from the feminist perspective. In this novel Deshpande raises her strong voice of protest against the male-dominated Indian society, their rules and conventions.

Shashi Deshpande delves in portraying the crisis of the middle class Indian women. In her novel *That Long Silence*, Jaya, the protagonist is a sufferer since her childhood and right up to her adulthood. Being a girl, Jaya’s grandmother always scolds her. She is conditioned for the comforts of her future life-partner. Jaya is reminded repeatedly that, “a husband is like a sheltering tree” (137) and that “the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you” (138).

Jaya stands for the woman who has tolerated all sorts of misbehavior of her husband without a word of complaint. In Indian culture- once a girl is married- she is expected to be under control of her husband. As U.S.B.Gour quotes Manu:

No act is to be done according to her own will by a young girl, a young woman or even by an old woman though in their own houses. In her childhood she should be under the will of her father, in her youth, of her husband: her husband being dead, of her sons. A woman never deserves to enjoy her own will (103).

The novel begins with Mohan, the husband and Jaya shifting their old house in Dadar. Jaya comes to know about her husband’s corrupt practices at office and because of which there is a police enquiry against him. To avoid the exposure in public, Mohan shifts to Makarandmama’s flat in Dadar. Here the couple sinks in deep silence with frustration, depression without sharing their ideas, views with each other. Jaya is in domestic tension and she starts self-questioning her soul. Gradually Mohan, her husband loses his social status and she loses her identity, her selfhood. She starts to realize the fact as, “The real picture, the real ‘you’ never emerges. Looking for it is as bewildering as trying to know how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces” (1).

Jaya, a fragmented self does not enjoy the taste of her own individuality, the self-identity. Her identity bears always the stamp of someone’s daughter, wife and mother, having no status of her own. Jaya says, “I was born. My father died when I was fifteen. I got married to Mohan. I have two children and I did not let a third live (2). Jaya is flooded with the earlier memories- her earlier life, her marriage with Mohan, her frustration, suppression and disappointments in her seventeen year old married life. Her mind is tormented with her personal failure in writing. She is educated and has been influenced by the modern thoughts of west. In spite of all these, she always carries a balanced relationship with her husband. Jaya accepts a life of passivity for herself. She becomes the role-model of Indian dedicated wife, even at the cost of losing her own identity. Jaya says, “I’m Mohan’s wife. I had thought, and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan’s wife” (191). Her life becomes unbearable and monotonous and it moves in a fixed

direction. In her own words, “Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony (4).

Jaya and Mohan are passing the life of ‘a pair of bullocks yoked together’. They pretend the illusion of happiness. She has hardly stepped out of his shadow. Jaya forcefully forgets her desire of writing which was her pet hobby. She suppresses it to retain the peace of her family following her elder brother’s advice ‘to be good to Mohan’ (138). She becomes an ‘ideal wife’ and mother. Jaya always thinks of the comforts of her husband – of his breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner. Jaya is confined to look after her children very well and to complete the household chores efficiently. She considers herself as a mere travesty of the noble Gandhari who had wrapped her eyes with a piece of cloth to support her blind husband, Dhritarashtra, the king of Hastinapur. Deshpande’s all other female protagonists along with Jaya–Urmila in *The Binding Vine*, Sarita, in *The Dark Holds no Terrors* and Indu, in *Roots and Shadows* are also brought up in traditional Hindu families where the girls are taught to direct all their prayers, penances and rituals to the procurement of proper husbands, to their welfare and longevity.

Jaya is blessed with the talent of writing but she cannot do proper justice to her talents. She has given up her hobby of writing just because Mohan dislikes it. Again Jaya is bound to practice the traditional role of an ‘ideal wife’ allowing her talent to “rust in unuse” as Lord Tennyson would express it.. She even starts to ignore her husband’s illegal means of earning and corrupt practices.

Jaya spoils her creative talent because of her silent, blind support to her husband and her submissiveness. She stops writing about the oppressed women – a theme which stems out from her heart. But now she compromises with her thoughts, she writes about irrelevant issues for a magazine which do not fulfill her intellectual requirements but only because Mohan likes it very much. Carrying the role of a devoted housewife, she ignores her own ‘self’, her own identity. Obviously she can not be another Urmila of *The Binding Vine* but she can be another Indu of *Roots and Shadows*.

However, in due course of time, Jaya gets fed up with her artificial traditional life; she decides to emerge out of the cocoon. During her stay in Dadar flat, she realizes that she herself has killed her true inner self, desire, and talent. Since long time Jaya has worn a mask of being her father’s daughter, Mohan’s wife and her children’s mother without realizing that she also has an independent existence. Now she determines to come out of this problem because life has become intolerable and suffocating her. She realizes her defeat; her voice is being hushed up by the pressure of her ideal thought of being an ideal woman conforming to the expectations in a male dominated society. Now her conscience prompts her to break the icy silence to make her life fruitful. She wants to get back to her old, happy days. Consequently, she determines to, “...plug that ‘hole in the heart’... I will have to speak, to listen; I will have to ease that long silence between us” (192).

‘Silence’ is an invisible destructive device which cultivates shame, guilt, suffering, depression, suppression and even death in mind. Gradually it makes the human being life-less. Self-expression is the birth-right of every human being. This realization breaks Jaya’s long silence; she bursts her accent by sharing her problems between husband and wife. She discloses the pain of her last seventeen years journey with her husband. She feels lighter after reducing her burden of non-fulfillment and incompleteness of her wish. Now she writes her story and concludes, “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” (193). Jaya has got back her own identity in this world. Finally she has justified her name ‘Jaya’ which means ‘victory’. Vinay

Kumar Pandey quotes Rani Dharkar's comments, "The woman learns to adopt certain strategies in order to survive within marriage. These strategies conceal her true self much like *pardah* hides the line of the body" (62). This is the first time in her life that she has taken a self-supporting decision and has dared to step out of her *Lakshman rekha*. Positively, it breaks the ice in the relationship of the couple. The credit goes to Jaya that she collects courage to take the initiative in this matter. It turns a happy life of understanding between them. A. N. Dwivedi points out, "Jaya's initiative in breaking that long silence is decidedly a welcome step towards restoring normalcy and happiness in the family" (146). The novelist finally resolves the marital discord by bringing the wife and the husband close together. Through this novel she wants to convey the message of the roots of domestic joy and bliss to entire humanity.

That Long Silence is primarily a domestic novel like Jane Austen's fictional works. It does not deal with match-hunting or match-making as in the novels of Austen, but it deals with the peace-making between the couple: a sensitive wife and the pompous, self-centered husband. Lack of communication is the barrier between their relationships. The moment she decides to open her mouth and shares her thoughts with Mohan, like the heroine Elizabeth does in Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice* and the icy silence has been broken by her. In this novel there are doubts, fear; guilt, anger, lack of communication; misunderstanding and lack of emotional feelings intensify the crisis of human relationship. As a writer Deshpande focuses on the tortures and sufferings of middle class Indian women who are educated and sensitive with the knowledge of their legal, social and conjugal rights. She highlights the household conflicts between wife and husband. Deshpande is fully aware of the patriarchal set-up of Indian society, thus she has written *That Long Silence*, a justified feminist framework and has broken her long silence by opening Jaya's mouth. Jaya's voice is the voice of the new Indian woman- ready to break out of the chrysalis of domesticity to emerge as an equal to her male counterpart. It is clamor call; a trumpet heralding the change in the status of women and in the place they occupy in society especially in men's lives. I would like to conclude this paper on woman's voice with the words of Indira Gandhi quoted by Amar Nath Prasad:

Woman must be a bridge and a synthesizer. She shouldn't allow herself to be swept off her feet by superficial trends nor yet be chained to the familiar. She must ensure the continuity which strengthens roots and simultaneously engineer change and growth to keep society dynamic, abreast of knowledge, sensitive to fast-moving events. The solution lies neither in fighting for equal position nor denying it, neither in retreat into the home nor escape from it (1).

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