

## **SILENCE, STRUGGLE AND SURVIVAL: JAYA’S IDENTITY CONFLICT IN THAT *LONG SILENCE***

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### **Abstract**

As the title- *Silence, Struggle and Survival ; Jaya’s Identity Conflict in That Long Silence* - indicates, the article focuses on the attempts made by Jaya, the protagonist in Shashi Deshpande’s 1988 novel *That Long Silence*, to retrieve her lost female self. It analyses Jaya’s transformation from a silenced typical Indian middle class wife to a determined and self-willed female writer. The article is written in a feminist perspective with no strict adherence to any of the radical feminist theories. Jaya as shown in the beginning of the novel is an obedient wife of Mohan and a mother of two children. It’s around her mental conflict of being sandwiched between tradition and modernity, the whole story of the novel springs out. Her father, her modern education and her company with Kamat are the factors accelerate her urge for freedom from the patriarchal family set up in which her husband and his family is also a part of. As she finds no solution and solace in silence which is nothing but a coping up with the tradition, she attempts self-introspection. It gives a new dimension to her thoughts and thereby influences the future course of her life. What she decides is to speak for her and break the silence. Her growth from a passive sufferer to a self-asserted woman forms the base of this article. The article also tries to support the point that the efforts of woman to free oneself from the shackles of patriarchal society and family should come from within. Unlike her Western female counterparts whose freedom is marked by an ultimate individual freedom from family and society, what Jaya does is finding her missed self by remaining within her family. She shows that individual freedom is possible even without disturbing the peaceful family life. The paper ends with the re-assertion of this idea.

The influence of Western feminist thought and movement came to be visible in Indian English literature since 1970’s. The socio-psychological oppression and sexual subjugation of Indian women in a male dominated society like India were brought to light by the writers like Kamala Markandeya, Kamala Das, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande. They questioned the gender-role expectations which psychologically and physically ruined the life of Indian women. Shashi Deshpande all through the gamut of her ever expanding creative horizon always makes it

a point to provide a separate space for her characters. She basically reflects on the problems and concerns of the middle class Indian women which are born out of their predicament that placed between contradictory identities.

Her heroines being found them suffocated in their domestic, professional and sexual roles show an urge to free themselves from the conventions. But each their attempt to escape from it makes their situations even worse that they become irrecoverably lost. Sandwiched between their original and false identities, they lead a life where they do not exist at all. Progressing along the axis of delimiting restrictions, self-analysis, protest and self-discovery, they try to create both physical as well as psychological space for themselves to grow on their own. Deshpande's protagonists are all educated, proactive and progressive, moving on undaunted.

The quest for female identity is one of the themes on which Deshpande's most of the novels were built upon. Her female protagonists who initially live a worthless later assert their female identity through the constant struggles they carry out being within the male dominated society. Though, they appear to be successful outwardly, they seem to lack direction and feel a sense of futility. Deshpande's novels fit into such a scenario and help females realise their potential in a positive manner.

The quest for identity can be viewed as a protest against the male dominated conventions in society where men enjoyed and exercised power by restricting women to their gender oriented roles. Society has conferred more rights for men which sometimes they misused it for their own advantages. As he is the maker of the law, he has the right to alter it for his own needs. At the same time, it's beyond their imagination to let a woman live a life of her own. It's always 'she' who has to follow the rules and norms. The female protagonist, Jaya in *That Long Silence*, is not an exception. She is taught by the society to live according to 'his' needs. As she is educated, she is baffled to see the multiple roles she has to play but to none of which she can relate her own self. That is why she feels like searching for her identity. Shashi Deshpande describes the delicate swings of mood, the ups and downs of joy and despair, the feelings perceived and suppressed and the anguishes of the narrator protagonist Jaya, a housewife and a failed writer. The novel presents a picture of institution of marriage, which compels her to submit herself to patriarchy. It centers round the inner perception of Jaya, a woman who is subtly drawn from inside.

In a stifling and suffocating domestic ambience and patriarchal set - up, she finds her female identity effaced. Deshpande reveals the consciousness of Jaya through an exposition of her mind in the process of thinking, feeling and reacting to the stimuli of the moment and situation. In doing so, she goes on to assert the feminine psyche of the protagonist, to break away from the stranglehold of a social fabric rooted in patriarchy which repels as it attracts. Jaya has a modern predicament and the flood of consciousness that ensure out of a silent stream of thoughts and feelings. She knows pretty well that in order to get by in a relationship, one has to learn a lot of tricks and silence is one of them. Jaya surrenders Mohan without revolting. She never refuses or complains about anything. A dominating husband and a suffering wife – that is her tie with Mohan.

A woman is expected to be passive and docile in relation to her husband. Ramu kaka implies the same, in his parting speech to his niece; "Remember, Jaya, the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you" (138). Jaya tries hard to fit into this traditional mould. She seeks to become a 'soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman', a role suggested by the mellifluous name 'Suhasini', given to her by her husband, Mohan. The underlying credo is "stay at home, look after your babies, keep out of the rest of the world and you're safe" (17). Ever

since she is named as Suhasini, she feels her identity in dilemma and gets disoriented. ‘Suhasini’ becomes the symbol of pain taking and fastidious house wife, to only care and look after her children, maintain the home well in order. One is identified by their name and changing that name marks a change in the identity. He expects Jaya to perform the traditional roles of women just as his mother and sister had done as wives. In spite of his modern education, he still conforms to the traditional patriarchal set up where men are expected to be the bread winner of the family under whose shadow the women lived as passive sufferers.

A husband in such a scheme becomes ‘a sheltering tree’. And since a husband is the protector, woman should never complain or protest. The image of Saptagiri aiji also reinforces the traditional concept of docile wives and silent women. *That Long Silence* sensitively presents how a woman's existence is confined within domesticity and how all forms of oppression she has to suffer. The figures of Mohan's mother and sister can be quoted as examples. Mohan's mother doesn't complain, though his father piles humiliations up on her. Mohan idolizes her. He saw woman's strength in suffering silently. But Jaya, being a woman, sees it differently. She finds in Mohan's mother despair “so great that it could not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon [sic]” (36). Mohan's sister Vimala too, suffers without complaining. An ovarian tumor gradually destroys her. The other women in his household accept their roles with acquiescence too. Jaya, after a visit, reflects; “They had been a revelation to me, the women in his family. So definite about their roles, so well trained in their duties [sic]” I had never seen so clear, so precise a pattern before” (83).

No wonder Jaya also seeks to conform to the pattern. Jaya is a woman who adjusts and accommodates herself. Hence, she adopts a subaltern and subservient attitude. She learns to suppress her own wishes and acts according to her husband's. She, for example, likes to see the advertisements that precede a movie show, for they give her the ‘illusion of happiness’ within the wall of her home. Yet since her husband doesn't like them, they start late. Over the years, she shapes herself ‘so resolutely to his desires’ that in the end she is left with no identity of her own, “just emptiness and silence” (144) Concerned only about the tastes and interests of Mohan, Jaya has lost her authenticity as a human being. She has shaped herself to the wishes of Mohan. Mohan kept her away from her likings. She was forced by Mohan to give up the job she wanted to take, the baby she wanted to adopt and the anti-price campaign she had wanted to take part in. Jaya's journey through the rough road of her nuptial life, she learns at last: “no questions, no retorts: only silence” (143).

An engineer by profession and presently a technocrat, Mohan's concern is basically with the externals such as money, status and material comforts. He is businesslike and practical. He has a passion for neatness and order. He also has a clear cut idea about what he wants, the sort of life he wants to lead, and the kind of home he would live in. But Jaya is vague and non-committal. She confesses once; “To know what you want...I have been denied that” (25). It is Mohan who manipulates Jaya and her life, where her desires and likes are often neglected.

Mohan, who lived a life of want and poverty, had a desire in sub conscious to get wealth by hook or crook. He was initially a junior engineer in a steel plant at Lohanagar but he had to quit the job due to a union strike against the suspension of a worker ordered at his instance. Moreover he found his salary insufficient to provide a good living for himself and to meet the expenses of his home at Saptagiri. He attained another job at Bombay which was more lucrative. In order to fulfill his desires for a good living, he Okayed the substandard material which in course of time landed him in trouble. He feared the government action and subsequent ignominy. Therefore he was advised to get away from the scene for a while. As Jaya was Mohan's wife, she

had to follow him in his ups and downs. Though Jaya felt difference of opinion in Mohan's decisions, she kept it concealed because since her childhood, she was taught to follow the orders of men and she followed Mohan silently. Right from her childhood days, Jaya has been told stories about Sita, Savitri depicting the sharing of their husband's travails and their silent sufferings. Jaya refuses these role models because they have lost all relevance in Modern period. Sita, Savitri and Draupadi; the legendary women followed their husbands willingly, but Jaya followed her husband Mohan because of compulsion.

Jaya is a gifted writer. But Mohan does not like her writing and nurtures an idea that through her writing, public will know their personal life and hence restricts her writing career. Mohan mistook the characters in Jaya's stories as real life characters. She confronts life through her fiction and writes a story about a man "who could not reach out to his wife except through her body" (144). The story is considered to be an authentic depiction of life and it wins her a prize but her husband Mohan was deeply hurt by this story as he believed it to be a literal presentation of their married life. Mohan complained that those persons who would read the story would think that Mohan was a kind of man portrayed in her story. Jaya felt that Mohan was not angry but hurt. In fact, she had not related her experience in her story. Though some of the materials were taken from her life, yet it was a transmutation into something altogether different. She felt to confess her innocence and wanted to make Mohan understand that she had not revealed her private life to public, but she could not say. Jaya had not revealed herself. She saw clearly that Mohan was seriously hurt, and therefore, she stopped writing. She deliberately gave up her creative aspect which was close to her heart and made herself fit into the traditional mould of an ideal wife.

With Mohan it's mostly "a silent, wordless love-making" (85). This silent physical relationship gradually makes her totally detached from Mohan. As days and years pass by, she realizes the futility and worthlessness of such a dispassionate physical encounter. She becomes insensitive and inactive in bed and Mohan's touch could no more make any flutter in her. Her conjugal relationship with Mohan was purely mechanical where she always remained dumb and dissatisfied. Though they had been married for seventeen years, there were no 'bridges of understanding and love between them'. What there had been was only 'emptiness' between. This alienates her from Mohan and attaches to Kamat.

Jaya's relationship with Kamat was the result of her search for a human being who can understand, console and support her. Jaya's judgment about this relation proves it:

Physical touching for me was a momentous thing. It was only Appa who hugged me as a child, and after him there was Mohan. We were husband and wife and he could hold me, touch me, caress [sic] me. But it was never a casual or light-hearted thing for either of us. And then this man..... I can remember how his gift of casual, physical contact had amazed me. His unawareness of my shock the first time he did it had told me what touching meant to him nothing. And yet that day his dispassionate tone, his detached touch, had somehow angered me. (15)

Kamat was an intellectual, structured to loneliness and it is his intelligence that pulls Jaya towards him. Besides, he is very friendly, attentive and considerate towards her and he accepts her as an equal. He is altogether different from Mohan. While Mohan discourages Jaya from writing Mr. Kamat restores her with her lost 'self'. Jaya sheds her restraints in Kamat's presence who gives her reassurance and comfort in a fatherly way. He reads her stories with attention and provides her valuable suggestions, thus felicitating her intellectual progress. He



advises Jaya to be honest to self and realise her own faults. Her relationship with Kamat was an important aspect in her process of introspection. He was somehow different from other men. He paid due respect to women. He encouraged her like her brother, sometimes complimented her like an ardent lover and dared to chide her like her father. It is in his presence that she became uninhibited and shed all her identities as a daughter, wife, and a mother. It was her relation with him made her realise her real self.

In the early years of her marriage she utilised the training she had received at home to be obedient and submissive. Like “a pair of bullocks yoked together” (8) she and Mohan shared the burden of life together. People outside their world were left with no clues to understand whether there was love or hatred between them. The technicality of this image indicates the loveless life that many partners of marriage are forced to lead. Gradually she realised more and more that the wrong must be resisted. Though she seemed to be passive she continued the ‘guerilla war’ with her husband for many years, in course of time the covert fighter in her becomes an overt one with more confidence and strength.

Mohan has least concern for the family. But he poses himself or believes that he is an ideal husband and father. He wants to give his children what he did not get as a child. Jaya gets frustrated when he says, “It was for you and the children that I did this. I wanted you to have a good life. I wanted the children to have all those things I never had.” (9). Jaya is rather honest and she could not persist the hypocrisy shown by her husband. For anything that happens which is good, the credit is taken by him but if some harm happens Jaya is blamed for that.

Besides analysing her own self, she also explores the other women characters like Mohan’s mother; Kusum, her cousin; her sister-in law and Jeeja, her servant. They are the victims of this patriarchal society. They never raised their voice against this domination and instead lead a slave like life. By completely analysing the agonies of various women in her life, she discovers the root cause of this problem. She comes to the realisation that it is not the men folk but the patriarchy in the society which prevents women from attaining their identity. So she resolves to erase the silence and rebel against the pre-set social dogmas.

Jaya’s articulation and assertion is hinted at the end of the novel to be the future possibility for Jaya. Though being silent for many years she realises her own power after seventeen years of her married life. She shapes her broken identity by breaking the fetters as a daughter, as Mohan’s wife and as her children’s mother.

The novel ends with her resolution to speak, to break her long silence. She has discovered an answer for the most haunting question ‘Who am I?’ .When she receives Mohan’s telegram from Delhi informing her that everything is fine; she pays little attention to that. She herself admits, “I’ve always thought –there’s only one life, no chance of a reprieve, no second chances. But in this life itself there are so many cross roads, so many choices.[sic]” (192).

Instead of blaming Mohan for every failure of hers, Jaya attempts to be more introspective and she finds out the means to live life fully. She realises that everyone should fight his/her own battle, through a balance between ego and self. She is aware that changes don’t occur overnight but there is always scope for development. She admits at the end of the novel: “But we can always hope without that life would be impossible .And if there is nothing I know now it is this: life has always to be made possible” (193). She realises that she cannot be a complete woman if she remains as a wife or a mother alone where she has to ignore her other equally important self - a writer. So she finally decides to go on with her writing career and would not look up to Mohan for the answers she wants.

The novel ends up with a resurgence of hope. A woman's desire to succeed like an individual is not compatible with the desire for love and small pleasures of domesticity. If marriage and love without independence dissipate a women's personality to nothingness, independence without love also exhausts her sensitivity in a constant tussle with the self and the society. Jaya's story proves that a balanced, fulfilled life is not merely a utopian fancy for a woman if she decides to realise her creative energy and free her from her psychic fears and the bondage of centuries. In short, self-actualisation is possible if a woman decides to be herself, to exhibit the genuine significance of her free, innate and uninhabited personality in its totality.

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