

**JAYA'S QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S
'THAT LONG SILENCE'**

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In spite of the advances in technology and science, society still marginalizes women, based on gender distinction. In our society, there is a distorted notion that if somebody writes anything about women that would be a feminist work and it is against masculine supremacy. No doubt influenced by Western feminist writers the post Indian writers have engaged themselves in devising verbal strategies for rejecting 'male cold' literary conventions historically accepted as 'standards'. It is also noted that many of the feminist writers worked out on the exaggerated or fabricated troubles of women and at the end of the story the protagonist quarrels with the male characters and publicly challenges the male domination. Shashi Deshpande differs from other feminist writers on this angle. She does not write as a feminist but she has a woman's perspective on her works. She deals with the genuine problems of contemporary Indian women and conveys the depths of female psyche.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the prominent contemporary women writers in Indian writing in English. She has created ripples in the society of male domination by taking women as women seriously in her novels. She takes into account the consciousness of her women characters to present the plight, fears, dilemmas, contradictions and ambitions then protagonists are educated, middle class women who become hapless victims of marriage life and its responsibilities. Her women protagonists are in constant search for their 'selves'. They perform several roles – daughters, wives and mothers, exhibit several real selves. No doubt, they are haunted by the memories of past and feel a kind of worthlessness, but towards the end they realize their selves. This is one of the important needs and messages in today's world where women are facing a void, a vacuum in their lives. Though, they appear to be successful outwardly, but they seem to lack direction and feel a sense of futility. Deshpande speaks about this in her small remedies.

There are so many selves in us which are called forth by other human beings, selves which are dependent on others for their existence. I know how I changed because of Leela and Joe, how Aditi made me into a person. I could scarcely recognize myself how living with Som, some of the fine dust of his careless generosity, his ease with people, was sprinkled on me as well. Sometimes I wonder whether there is, in fact, a pristine self in us, which will be revealed only when we are totally isolated from others. Or, whether, without others, we are nothing. A blank state. But for all of us, there's a self inside which we recognize as our real selves.

The question for female identity has its roots in the patriarchal set up where man is given every kind of freedom. He has the right to choose his aim. His emotions are taken care of, blunders committed by him are ignored and are perceived as his past time, whereas women cannot afford a little digression from the set rules. She has to conform to norms. Otherwise, she is perceived as a woman of loose morals. According to Indian traditions, a woman must defer to

her husband in every possible respect. She must make the marital home pleasant for him. She must cook the meals, wash the dishes, and take care of the children. She must never enquire about money and she must acquiesce to her husband's every demand. But what happens when the old customs lose their power and the woman no longer believes her life should be determined in the narrow fashion? This prospect is the underlying theme of Shashi Deshpande's novel. There is a shift in values and women have started acknowledging themselves the co-equals of man. Though the high hopes of feminism have been washed away in the social milieu, the relationship between man and woman becomes one of structured interdependence. Still the woman has to work for the liberation without resigning herself to her destiny. Gender equality remains a myth. The finite dimension of the relationship between man and woman has been prescribed by man and not by woman. Man who is ruled by the mastery-motive has imposed limits on her. She accepts it because of biosocial reason. Very often, this lies underneath. Modern woman prefers to exercise her choice and break away from her traumatic experiences. Women are now portrayed as more assertive, more liberated in their view, and more articulate in their expression than the woman of the past. Instead of downgrading the elements of suffering at the hands of her lover or husband or man, she has started asserting her substantive identity in action, not in words. Shashi Deshpande's 'That Long Silence' is a story of protagonist, Jaya, undergoes profound changes against the backdrop of an India that is also evolving. At the very outset the problem of identity crises comes to the fore in 'That Long Silence' the dilemma faced by the protagonist is highly intriguing when she says the words come to her feely but "self revelation is a cruel process". For her "the real 'you' never emerges". "I had learnt it at last no question no retorts, and silence" quotation from 'That Long Silence', reveals the oppressive, debilitating life situation of a housewife, who journeys from ignorance to knowledge, though suffering. The silence and the silencing of the woman as a gendered subject is the focus of the narrative. This characterization of the silence in the patriarchal social order towards women, long silence is a result of patriarchy's refusal to comprehend women's 'language' in so far as women's work speech, acts, and is finally placed on the women in the by the novelist and it seems to imply that silence can be broken only if women 'learn' men's language. Her emotion turmoil can be summarized as, "A dumb submission ... a mute bondage of personality, ... and unconditional devotion, a life long slavery, a brute and savage killing of identity and never ending series of mental, emotional and physical sacrifices are in the lot of a woman". The novel traces the growth of the protagonist from a state of weakness, feeling of failure so that to relaxation. She accomplishes this through self-assessment and self criticism.

Jaya, the protagonist in *That Long Silence*, having got in the current of the traditional role of a woman – wife and mother has suppressed her existential self. Though she has a happy home with her well earning husband and two children Rati and Raghul and material comforts, she feels fed up with the monotony and fixed pattern of her life. Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, and unending monotony. In her attempt to rediscover her 'true self', she finds herself as an unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and a failed writer. She is named 'Jaya' by her father which means 'victory' then father has brought up her as an 'individual'. Late Mohan (her husband) has given her name 'Suhasini' which means a soft smiling, placid, motherly woman. Jaya loses herself and identity. When a magazine asked for the bio-data of Jaya the protagonist she could give only a few lines as her profile when she omitted what she thought as irrelevant facts.

“Finally when I had sifted out what I had thought were irrelevant facts only these had remained: 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).

The indifference shown by her husband to her was recurring process he never bothers to show interest in anything, which is of no concern to him. Though they are married for seventeen years with two children they ought to have been understanding couple for the outsiders. But in reality they were different person, “A family somewhat like the one caught and preserved by the advertising visuals I so loved. But the reality was only him. We were two persons. A man. A Woman”. Mohan has concern for the family. But he poses himself on believed that he the one ideal husband. He wants to give his children what he did not get as a child. He is clear about himself, “he was dutiful son, he is dutiful father, husband, brother”. Jaya gets frustrated when he says, “It was for you and the children that I did this. I wanted you to have good life. I wanted the children to have all those thing I never had”.

Jaya is rather honest and she could not persist the hypocrisy shown by him. For anything that happens, which is good the credit is taken by him but if some harm happens Jaya is blamed for that. Jaya’s husband is involved in corruption in office at the instigation of Agarwal in contracts, tenders and commissions. When they are not able to do favour for minister’s relative they are forced to face inquiry. He move from Church gate house to flat in Dadar to avoid shame and takes ensure by saying that he has engaged in malpractices to keep his wife and children comfortable. This creates a real sense of anger in Jaya. Her stays with Mohan in her married life, she discovers that she is not really happy. Jaya follows Mohan to Dadar flat. She thinks:

Two bullocks yoked together ... it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in different direction would be painful and what animal would voluntarily choose pain. (p. 12)

Jaya who is curious and shrewd and questions each and everything maintains absolute silence after marriage. She recollects her ajji’s words:

I feel sorry for your husband, Jaya whoever he is, she had said to me once ... What for, ajji? Look at you – for everything a question, for everything a retort. What husband can be comfortable with that? Though there is no question, there is no comfort in her married life. That silence seemed heavy with uneasiness. (p. 27)

The portrayal of Jaya as an awakened woman, thus, soon fades into that of a middle-class romantic heroine whose courage fails at the first encounter with reality. All her revolutionary ideas sag by the time the challenge presents itself. Her realization that her own children are distanced from her besides her husbands accusation of having let him down are sufficient to shake her dreams of glory for her, and revolutionary ideas. Jaya, thus, signifies the weakness of the servile mind of the service classes. She is not even a serving woman like Jeeja. She is the wife of a middle-man government servant whose dreamy castles and aspirations derive sustenance from one sources the job and whenever it can yield. The whole edifice collapse if the job is taken away on us in danger. Jeeja is more independent and less confused since she is not disposed to either day dreaming or entertaining apprehensions from any quarter. Jaya, - the product of all sorts of protection is on lacks the initial aggressiveness and that comes easy to uneducated and unrefined Jeeja. The novel seems to suggest no escape for the tradition bound Indian womanhood from her image of abala (helpless) even in the metropolitan setting of Bombay.

That Long Silence gives us a psychological insight into the working of a woman’s mind. Ever since Jaya got married, she had done nothing but wait.

Waiting for Mohan to come home, waiting for children to be born, for them to start school, waiting them to come home, waiting for the milk, the servant, the lunch carrier man ... (30)

This mechanical process of waiting fills her life with existential nothingness. Related to the theme of nothing is the existential theme of death. Her monotonous, boring and isolated days made her to realize this. And above and beyond this, there had been for me that other waiting ... waiting fearfully for disaster, for a catastrophe. I always had the feeling that if I've escaped it today, it's still there round the corners waiting for me; the locked door, the empty house, the messenger of doom bringing news of death. (30)

Deshpande's heroines do not give too much importance to sexual encounters unless; it serves an urgent physical need. She feels that 'love' is an overworked word, overburdened by the weight one puts on it just another word for human contact. Jaya's loveless sexual life with Mohan was mechanical and gives her no satisfaction. Jaya's relationship with Kamath was the result of her search for a human being who can understand, console and support her. Jaya's judgement about this relation proves it.

Physical touching for me a momentous thing. It was only Appa hugged me as a child and after him there was Mohan. We were husband and wife and he could not hold me, touch me, caress 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 that touching meant to him. Nothing. And yet that day his dispassionate tone, his detached touch, had somehow angered me (15). Kamath, a lovely young widower lives above Jaya's apartment. Jaya's waitings receive comments, criticism and encouragement from Kamath. Jaya enjoys her intimate friendship with Kamath by sharing her opinions and ideas about her stories which she could not do with Mohan. She admires him for treating her as his equal and only in his presence, she can be in her own self.

It had been a revelation to me that two people, a man and a woman, could talk this way: with this man. I had not been a woman. I had been just myself. (p 153)

No doubt Mohan encourages her to write but the way he expects. One of Jaya's stories has won the prize where she has made a mention that a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body. This hurts Mohan because he is afraid that people could think that the man is Mohan and the woman is Jaya, she doesn't want to jeopardize her marriage and thereby she changes her style of writing. As a result, all her stories were rejected and she stops writing. Kamath points out that her stories lack anger and suggests her to give her personal view and spew out her anger, Why didn't you use that anger in your story? There is none of it here. There isn't even a personal view, at personal vision. I'll tell you what's really wrong with your story. It's so restrained. Spew out your anger in your writing, woman spew it out. Why are you holding it in"? (p. 194) But Mohan thinks, for a woman, to be angry is to be unwomanly, Jaya set her mind not to be angry even in writing. She confines her thought and defines her role according to the expectation of her husband. Naturally she has lost her 'true self'. Angry which has been internalized has turned her to be nervous and incompetent. She says:

"... no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of angry young woman? ... A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated". (p. 147) Jaya has shaped her life according to the desire of Mohan. She admits:

It hadn't been Mohan's fault at all. And it has been just a coincidence, through it had helped that just then Mohan had propelled me into that other kind of writing. I encouraged you', he had said to me. He was right. But, I went on with my chest-beating out of penitence, Mohan

had not faced me to do that kind of writing. I'd gone into it myself with my eyes wide open (p. 148).

In a mood of frustration she feels for the loss of her selfhood. The real picture, the real 'you' never emerges. Looking for it is an bewildering as trying to know how your really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces (p. 1). Jaya's looking at herself as Mohan's wife, and his children's Mohan but not as an individual is pathetic, the sense of loss of her identity and self makes her say: 'I'm Mohan's wife. I had thought and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife' (p. 191).

Jaya contains the seed of definite quest for a true and authentic self. She undergoes stages of self introspection of self reflection and evolve herself into more liberated individual that what her gender of culture has sanctioned. The self quest of her is triggered of by crisis in her life. She strive heroically and overcome her cultural conditioning and barriers created by society in matter of tradition and manners. She finally emerge as free, autonomous individuals, no longer content to be led by desirous of taking a lead. She does not fall into Western Feminist slot, she is strengthened Indian woman, work out her own individual path towards liberation and in the process discover new facet to her self which has been latent in her. In this discovery of self and consequent self fulfillment, Jaya pave the way for a better understanding of herself as well as others. This kind of self realization helps her to find the reason for the unhappy married life. She understands the consequences of suppressed anger. Her silence is nothing but suppressed anger. Silence or lack of communication is the cause of marital incompatibility. She decided to break will have silence to restore people and happiness. She decided "to plug that hole in the heart ... I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to case that long, silence between us" (p. 192). She decides to be assertive and to be of her own self. Her silent suffering is socio-psychic in nature. Jaya quest or identity, moves from despair to hope, from self-negation to self-assertion. Her triangle throughout is to attain wholeness, completeness and an authentic selfhood."

Jaya in her quest reaches at a situation of Compromise. She agreed to change herself and hoped for a change in Mohan who had written a telegram that announced his arrival. The Compromise on the part of woman, as well as man makes Shashi Deshpande a liberal writer who does not commit to a writing that chooses ultimate freedom for women and assigns domestic chores to men. No hopes are offered: if Mohan is reinstated, life will start flowing again for Jaya; if not, then she shows no sign of recovery from the shock of realization. There is no vision offered: Jaya can be happy only as a devoted but complacent wife. She bids good bye to her silence, anger and resentment. She realizes her self-worth and decides to give up the prefixed norms of the society. She wants to liberate herself by respecting her feelings and desires. Her optimistic view of life that changes are possible, exposed the transformation she has undergone. That Long Silence is the story of Jaya's solitary crusade against the deafening silence that has entrapped the likes of her for generations. The tradition bound docile woman in Jaya is irreconcilable with the modernist individuality seeking Jaya. The loyal, loving Jaya – the devoted wife of Mohan – is irreconcilable with the epicurean Jaya relishing a momentary embrace with Kamath. So, the novelist is able to impart a complex identity to Jaya, focusing at the same time on the egoistic and the altruistic aspects of womanhood.

Work Cited

Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*. Noida: Penguin Books India, 1989. Print