

Echoes of Women's Silence in *That Long Silence*

Ms. Pooja Halyal

Assistant Professor,

Department of Studies in English,

Rani Channamma University,

Belagavi, Karnataka

India

Abstract

Shashi Deshpande is one of the living dynamic women writers in Indian English Literature. She is known for authentic portrayal of the typical Indian women's world with great sensitivity and has pictured the contemporary middle-class women with rare competence. Having started her career as a journalist, her creative endeavours include seven short story collections, ten novels and two short crime novels, four books for children. Her work has received awards, including the Sahitya Akademi award and the Nanjangud Thirumalamba award.

*In her Sahitya Akademi award winning novel *That Long Silence*, she has successfully voiced the innermost thoughts and perceptions which are consciously hidden intricately in their psyche by women. In fact Deshpande in this novel has creviced the walls of literary tradition that has since years estimated women's writing very low, and has successfully produced the multiple echoes of 'Women's Silence' to shape them into a rubric of 'dream writing' by women. This paper is an analysis of the difficulties that the women writers undergo to express the stereotypically prohibited, but true reflections of their selves.*

Introduction

It is Helene Cixous' adulatory persuasion of women in "The Laugh of Medusa" 'to write and to write with their bodies, their selves', that seems to be responded so well in *That Long Silence* by Deshpande. For it is Cixous who writes of women "She must write her self, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and

transformations in her history,” which seems to resolve Elaine Showalter’s analytical question of lack of women’s voices in the literary history as charted by Patriarchy. As it is a general understanding that the few stray voices however worthy they are, are either belittled or censored through varied layers of social sanctions that fetter women’s writing, which accounts for their non-inclusion in the canons of literary tradition.

Problems of Voicing the Unvoiced

It is precisely these problems of expression, as a writer that find a clinical analysis in the novel *That Long Silence*, where the varied silences that throttle the women’s voices, their formations and formulations, the reasons for their appearances, causes and consequences find an apt expression. Again Deshpande through her very act of writing this novel giving voice to the silences seems to be hinting at a possible remedy of breaking free from its fetters and shackles through ‘writing’ and there by disentangling themselves from the image of muted objects, that women so willingly have entered into down the ages. Even Rajeswari Sunder Rajan argues that Deshpande’s protagonist breaks her silence at one level through the act of writing itself, at another level through renegotiating interpersonal relations within the family”

It is Jaya, the protagonist of the novel, the middle class ideal wife married to Mohan, whose search for an identity of herself, as being distinct from all the multiple roles through which she is associated with others in the novel that impinges on the vital significance of ‘Writing’ as an empowering process for a woman. It is the negation of her persona as a writer that actually unhinges Jaya from her relationship with Mohan, her husband, and drives her to seek solace from Mr. Kamat. Kamat, a lonely widower lives above Jaya’s apartment. Jaya’s writings receive comments, criticism and encouragement from Kamat. The most striking quality of Mr. Kamat is that he sees her as an equal. He is altogether different from Mohan. While Mohan discourages Jaya from writing, Mr. Kamat introduces her to her lost 'self'. Jaya sheds her restraints in Kamat's presence who gives her reassurance and comfort in a fatherly way. He advises Jaya to be honest to self and realize her own faults. He tells her:

“Spare me your complexes. And you're a fool if you think I was joking. I'm warning you- beware of this "women are the victims" theory of yours....Take yourself seriously, woman. Don't sulk behind a false name. And work- work if you want others to take you seriously.” (p. 148)

Eternal Feminine VS Creativity

In fact it is he who makes her realize that she is ‘Jaya’ and it is futile on her part to act as Suhasini. ‘Jaya’ was the name given to her by her father meaning victory, who had

encouraged her to develop an individuality of her own, treating her in a special way. But unfortunately due to his early death, Jaya had to get married to Mohan for whom she was Suhasini, the pleasant one, and thus was forced to fall prey to the stereotypical image of an ideal wife. So, it is in the company of Kamat that Jaya enjoys her being, her real self, which gives her the liberty not only to discuss her opinions and ideas about her stories but also unload her burden of her grief over her father's death which she could not share with Mohan. She admires Mr. Kamat for treating her as his equal and only in his presence; she could be her own self. Her comments-

“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)

are significant in showing how she felt whole in his presence. And it is this honesty with oneself and being true to ones innermost feelings and desires which are the requisites to be a good creative writer.

It is not that Mohan does not encourage her to write, but he expects her writing to be impersonal. When one of her stories has won the prize which is about a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body, Mohan gets hurt assuming that the story is about their personal married 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 can I face people after this?” (Pp.143-44)

Jaya doesn't want to jeopardize her marriage and thereby she changes her style of writing. She forgoes honest expression and starts practicing writing about superficial subjects, filtering them of all her strong feelings and heartfelt convictions. As a result, shorn of all her original thoughts and opinions, the very force of her personality, all her stories get rejected and she stops writing completely. Even Kamat points out that her stories lack anger. He 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, a personal vision. I'll tell you what's really wrong with your story. It's too restrained. Spew put your anger in your writing, woman spew it out. Why are you holding it in?” (p.147)

Since Mohan thinks, for a woman, to be angry is to be unwomanly; Jaya sets her mind not to be angry even in writing. She confines her thoughts and defines her role according to the expectation of her husband. Naturally she has lost her 'true self'. She says:

"...no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman?

A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated" (p.147)

This lost true self, could have found ventilation in her writing, but her expected role of an ideal wife taints her persona and integrity as a writer which causes her ultimate silence. This is the problem not only with Jaya but also of all women writers. They tune their minds and pattern their ways of life according to the needs and expectations of men and try to fit in the set moulds of womanhood which curtails their freedom of expression. Virginia Woolf in her speech "Professions for Women" delivered before a branch of the National Society for Women's Service on January 21, 1931, highlighted these specific obstacles faced by women writers. In her words 'killing the angel in the house' is the first step towards gaining liberty to express the original self. This Angel in the House (borrowed from Coventry Patmore's poem celebrating domestic bliss) is the Victorian phantom of women that are selfless, sacrificial whose sole purpose in life was to soothe, to flatter, and to comfort the male half of the world's population. "Killing the Angel in the House," wrote Virginia Woolf "was part of the occupation of a woman writer."

So, Jaya also had to first kill Suhasini to emerge victorious which would lead her on the path of her much needed and cherished persona as a writer, which would have kept her sane, satisfied and in harmony with herself. But, unable to break free from socially ascribed position of a wife under the care of her 'sheltering tree' she succumbs to a state of living a life of a breathing corpse. She realizes this loss of her 'self'. She says:

'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).

However, this loss had left her hollow, insubstantial so much that when Mohan needs her moral support during his crisis of threats of losing his job on charges of corruption, she cannot give him the much needed respite unhinged as she is from within. He expects his wife to share his anxiety, doubts and unhappiness. She in turn thinks of Kusum in order to resolve her own inner conflicts. Kusum is a relative and is a deserted wife, who loses her sanity, whom Jaya had supported amidst objections from her family during Kusum's bouts of insanity, but who ultimately commits suicide. Jaya now compares herself to Kusum, and feels

that kusum was luckier in her madness to have found release from her roles and could be true to herself, being oblivious of the expectations of others on her in her insane condition. These streams of thought of Jaya, are comparable to the protagonist of Charlotte Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper', where the narrator is a symbol of female imprisonment within the domestic sphere. When John, her husband curbs her creativity and writing, the narrator unconsciously loses her sanity in order to reunite with her real self which she feels is trapped in the pattern of the yellow wallpaper.

In Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper', the narrator who is also desirous of being a writer thrives in her use of her imagination, and her creativity is an inherent part of her nature. John, who is a doctor by profession, does not recognize his wife's fundamental creativity and believes that he can force out her imaginative fancies and replace them with his own solid rationality. In essence, a large part of the "rest cure" that he administers to her focuses on John's attempt to remove the narrator's creativity; by forcing her to give up her writing, he hopes that he will calm her anxious nature and help her to assume her role as an ideal wife and mother. He is of the belief that the writer in her clashes with her role of being an ideal wife and a responsible mother. Hence he wishes to curb the urge of writing inherent in her by prescribing the 'rest cure' of mental and physical inaction, leading to forced passivity.

However, the narrator is not able to suppress her creativity, despite her best efforts to follow John's instructions. Because she is not able to write openly and feels the repression of her imagination, she inadvertently exercises her mind via the yellow wallpaper. Although the narrator attempts to incorporate John's rationality into the chaotic pattern of the wallpaper, she fails; the wallpaper cannot be quantified in John's way. Her repressed imagination takes control, and she loses all sense of reality, becoming lost in delusions and the idea that she herself was the woman trapped in the wallpaper. Her loss of even the opportunity of free expression through writing ultimately makes her develop strong feelings of being trapped and she loses her mental balance in her efforts to achieve her freedom from the shackles of her entrapment.

Charlotte Gilman believes in creativity without restraints and argues that the narrator's repressed imagination is the fundamental cause of her psychotic breakdown. She also suggests that the narrator's attempt to deny a fundamental part of her nature was doomed from the beginning. John should have been able to accept the true nature of his wife, rather than trying to force her to adhere to the prescriptions of his own personality.

The same tendency of the repressed writer in Jaya also can be perceived in the novel. If at all Mohan had allowed her to continue her writing, probably Jaya would have carved a niche for herself in the literary world, which could have aided her self-actualization, promising writer that she was with her story having won her a prize. But, the repression of Mohan forcing her to fit in the groove that was predetermined, encouraging her to write columns called 'Seeta', the name too being significant of the regressive image of the sacrificial wife on Jaya, was a kind of suggestion to her to use her tongue in a guarded way. With this conditioned restriction on her expression Jaya could no longer keep herself alive in her domestic prison. She just lived an empty life devoid of happiness. Jaya confessed, "Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony." It is here that a semblance can be struck between the helplessness of Jaya and that of the narrator of Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper". Jaya found a similarity between her marriage and "a pair of bullocks yoked together....."(p.7). It is because she believed that she was like one of the bullocks that move in the same direction and with same speed as the other one, to avoid pain and discomfort.

But, unlike the narrator of Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper', Jaya does not end up in deranged insanity but very soon overcomes her turmoil. She comes to terms with herself by writing about herself and family and thus breaks the 'Long Silence.' She realizes that women are not victimized thoroughly by men; they are victims of their own perceptions and self-imposed restrictions. Thus, Shashi Deshpande does not end this novel in split relationships, but sums up that 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 (p.169).

Conclusion

The whole novel reverberates with the varied silences of women of all castes and stations of life, many of who have willingly entered into holes for security, instead of risking the responsibility of choices and crossing the barriers to communicate. But it comes full circle when Jaya decides to write objectively about her life, prepared for a self-revelation and thus finally achieves harmony with her true self. For she now knows that "to achieve anything, you've got to be hard and ruthless" and that "there's just no other way of being a saint. Or a painter. A writer." (p. 1)

References:

1. Cixous Helene, Keith Cohen, Paula Cohen. 'The Laugh of Medusa', "*Signs*", Vol. 1, No. 4 (summer, 1976), pp. 875-893. The University of Chicago Press.
2. Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1989.
3. Rajan, Rajeshwari Sunder. 2004. "The Heroine's Progress: Feminism and the Family in the Fiction of Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan and Majula Padmanabhan." *Desert in Bloom*. Ed. Meenakshi Bharat. Delhi: Pencraft International, pp. 80-96.

Web-bliography

1. <http://s.spachman.tripod.com/Woolf/professions.htm>.(viewed on 28/6/2014)
2. <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/literatureofprescription/exhibitionAssets/digitalDocs/The-Yellow-Wall-Paper.pdf> (viewed on 28/6/2014)
3. <http://literarycriticismjohn.blogspot.in/2012/02/000171-elaine-showalter-s-towards.html> (viewed on 28/6/2014)