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A Study of Women on the Margins in *That Long Silence*

Abstract: Shashi Deshpande's narratives are chiefly centered to the lives of women in the social and domestic circumstances. Shashi Deshpande's denial of being a feminist writer does not primarily coincide with the thematic content of her novels, which are packed with female characters, who are struggling their way out in the highly traditional setup of Indian society. However, Shashi Deshpande's dislike for the word feminism suggests that she does not write being deliberately guided by any ideology rather she presents the truth of female existence as it is. The present paper revolves around a number of women whom Shashi Deshpande has introduced in her novel That Long Silence. Coming from different class, caste and culture- all of them put light on some or the other challenges that women have to face in this world. The nature of their struggle may be different, but at the core of it, every woman is helpless.

That Long Silence achieved a cult status in the Indian- English fiction for several reasons; among them the most important reason is that it is among the earliest novels in Indian- English literature which is altogether focused upon the lives of women. Shashi Deshpande's focus is always upon the challenges and hardships that women face in their lives in general, that's why she has been acclaimed as one among the earliest feminist writers in India. *That Long Silence*, which won her the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award is one among her many novels which carries her favorite theme into a story. The narrative revolves around Jaya, who gives a first person account of her experiences in life.

Jaya, a well-educated, English- speaking girl is conditioned into becoming an "ideal housewife" out of the necessity to prove herself as perfect home maker. Jaya, who is slightly unlike other girls, who are trained into household duties since an early age, is a favorite of her

father (hence her un- traditional upbringing). Her father aspired for her to study well so that she could win a fellowship to study abroad. Jaya's psychology was shaped by her father who was not like the traditional fathers, who want their daughters to become efficient in home making, and get married as soon as they reach their marriageable age. Jaya perhaps also inherited her creativity from her father. Jaya, however, could not develop into the woman, as desired by her father because his untimely death largely changed the way their lives were before. Here starts the journey of Jaya, the individual who is left alone in the world to deal with her own insecurities, fears and hardships. It was Jaya's father who truly understood Jaya as an individual. She was not even close to her mother, who was a traditional sort. In most of Deshpande's fiction, we find women who do not share a very cordial bond with their mothers. Jaya is also deprived of any emotional relationship in her life. Her marriage to Mohan proves much more unsatisfying because he held his traditional notions very strictly. For him the roles of husband and wife were pre- defined, and they needed to fulfill their responsibilities ritually. Mohan even interfered with her creative outputs and tried to control her way of writing. He was offended when he found Jaya writing the story of an unsatisfied wife. The reason behind his displeasure was that he thought, that people would take the story for real, and assume that Jaya and Mohan are also not happy together. Since then Jaya stopped writing freely, she carefully and deliberately shaped her thoughts to produce such characters who do not resemble "...Mohan's mother, or aunt, or my mother or aunt" (149, Deshpande). Jaya comes from a middle class background, is sufficiently learned and is able to earn a living for herself but she is always kept at margins by her husband who wants her to dutifully play the role of a wife only.

The novel also has a number of women characters who come from different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds, but all of them suffer in the world in one or another way. The first such woman is Kusum whom Jaya frequently mentions in the novel. Mentally weak and deserted by her husband, Kusum is a universal symbol of the utter failure of women. She provides a contrast to the seemingly well- managed life of Jaya; and comparing Kusum with her own life, Jaya finds a sense of satisfaction. Kusum was the orphaned niece of Vanitamami. She was not very smart earlier either, but her mental health collapsed gradually after her marriage. Her husband, even her children did not want her because she did not fit into the category of perfectness. A woman's role is limited to taking care of her family, but nobody wants to bear the burden of her if she is not able to perform her duties. Kusum's deplorable life and death shows how miserable the life of a woman can get if she is not sane

and ideal. Although Jaya is sympathetic towards Kusum, and Jaya is the one who comes forward to take Kusum's responsibility, when she becomes a total invalid, but Jaya also has a hidden sense of fear with Kusum because she makes her realize the actual condition of women. She hates to be compared or put together with Kusum in any way, for being associated with the destiny of Kusum makes Jaya afraid. Another female figure whom Jaya frequently mentions is, Vanitamami, who is herself is a very subdued person in her in-laws family. Jaya's mother could not thoroughly control her life because her father stood beside her, but after the death of her father when Jaya moved to her maternal grandparents' house in Ambegaon, she was taught the ways of womanly behavior by her mamis, especially Vanitamami who constantly reminded her the reality of women's lives. The oft-quoted sentence of the novel, "A husband is like a sheltering tree" keeps echoing in the lives of Jaya as well other female characters. Husbands may or may not be a sheltering tree, but they are largely responsible for the happiness or woes of women. Their destiny, directly or indirectly depends on husbands. Like the third woman character Mukta is living a life of misery and dejection because her husband Arun had died. Especially, the lives of widows is oriented towards self-denial because a woman whose husband had died, had no right to expect any pleasure in life;

"If it wasn't 'her saturday', it was her 'monday', or 'her thursday'. Mukta had more days of fasts than days on which she could eat a normal meal" (67, *ibid*).

A widowed and a deserted woman- both are the most pathetic creatures in the Indian society. Jaya's mother herself did not hold any individual identity of herself after her husband's death. Mukta and Neelima are the examples of women who are deprived of the security of male-shelter. Mukta spends her life in household chores and religious rituals. Neelima, on the other hands constantly suffers humiliation in the hands of her grand-mother, who was keen on having a grandson who could carry the family's name. Now that her son was no more, a not-so-good looking, and not-so-disciplined granddaughter can only add to their burdens.

Jeeja and the likes of her come from a different section of the society where they have to struggle for every morsel that they eat. In such circumstances, there is no particular division between bread-earners and house-keepers, because all the members of the families, including children do some work or other to support their families. But, in such circumstances as well, the women have no peace, because the husbands are either drunkards

or abusers. Jeeja's husband is a drunkard, and similar is her half-son Rajaram. Both Jeeja and her daughter-in-law worked in the houses to earn their living, while the men stayed at home or wandered about, but they demanded money to buy their liquor from their wives. If the wives did not give the money, they were beaten mercilessly. Both Jeeja and her daughter-in-law had the similar fate. They worked day and night, kept the home running, bore children, tended them- at the same time were beaten for every mistake which offended their husbands. The fate of women from the lower section of the society is written as soon as they were born. Jaya feels bad for Manda, who is an active and enthusiastic girl, but she had no hope for the future. She would work in other's houses, bear children after children, and will be abused by a drunkard husband. Mohan, who also came from a similar family, was very sensitive about class. His father was an abuser. He took Mohan's mother for a maid, whose sole duty is to look after his needs. He used to beat his mother, if the food was not fresh or not according to his choice. She used to keep awake late in the night, until her husband had come and eaten his food. Mohan took his mother to be a perfect example of wifery, who suffered her husband's tantrums mutely. She even went to cook food in small festivities in other's house to earn money. Mohan was distressed to see his mother suffer so, but his feelings towards his mother was more of embarrassment, than of sympathy. He did not go to eat food anywhere. It is because of his experiences of childhood that he decided he would marry a "convent-educated girl", coming from the same section of the society who humiliated them. Mohan's attitude towards women was also shaped by them who lived around him. Although, he was more sophisticated than them, yet the basic ideals in which he believed were the same.

Even Jaya and the women like her who belong to the middle-class, who are sufficiently rich, educated and emancipated are not granted the individuality that they need to get, because a woman is identified with several roles which she plays in her life and not only as a person that she actually is. This burden of role-playing crushes a woman from inside. She is hardly satisfied with the way she lives her life because it is more controlled by others than her. A married woman's identity is always overshadowed under that of her husband. Jaya also recalls how once she was not treated well in a hospital, but when the staff came to know about her husband, they quickly apologized to her for inconvenience. Jaya lived as under the shadow of her husband, who presided over every affair in her life. If the life of Jaya was not so much controlled by herself, then it is useless to expect any hope in the life of those women who are themselves at the farthest margins of the society. Widows, deserted women and poor women- all of them have a predictable future. There are innumerable challenges and

hardships that they have to face. If the husband is present, then he is the (oppressive) master, if he is not present, then the void caused by his absence is never filled. A woman has to live the emptied, incomplete life. For the likes of Jeeja and Nayana, the presence of a husband does not provide any economic or social security, but still, there is the security of being a wife, the security of being wrapped under the safe limits of household. When Rajaram was wounded, and was struggling for his life, Jeeja begged Jaya to ask the doctor to take care of him, because he provided Nayana with the security of a wife's name;

"And that girl, let her have her *kumkum* on her forehead. What is a woman without that? Her husband may be a drunkard, but as long as he is alive, no one will dare cast an eye on her" (160, *ibid*).

Quite similarly, once Mohan leaves Jaya, she feels lost. She feels the threat to her identity- a woman's identity which is made up with that of her husband. If Mohan's name no longer remains associated with her, she would lose the respect, the position that she once got. Jaya feels afraid because she had seen the emptiness of her mother and grandmother's lives after their husband's death. She had seen Kusum dying pathetically; she had seen the desolate life of Mukta. The lives of women, irrespective of their class, caste or economic status, are always over-shadowed; their individuality marginalised and their presence neglected.

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