

## **Feminist Perspective in Shashi Deshpande's “*That Long Silence*”**

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Man has always tried to determine and tamper the image of woman and especially her identity is manipulated and orchestrated. Whenever a woman is spoken of, it is always in the relation to man; she is presented as a wife, mother, daughter and even as a lover but never as a woman a human being- a separate entity. Her entire life is idealized and her fundamental rights and especially her behaviour is engineered by the adherents of patriarchal society. Commenting on the Man-woman relationship in a marital bond Simone de Beauvoir wrote in her epochmaking book entitled *The Second Sex (1949)*: "It has been said that marriage diminishes man, which is often true, but almost always it annihilates women". Feminist movement advocates the equal rights and equal opportunities for women. The true spirit of feminism is into look at women and men as human beings. There should not be gender bias or discrimination in familial and social life. To secure gender justice and gender equity is the key aspects of feminist movement. In India, women writers have

come forward to voice their feminist approach to life and the patriarchal family set up. They believe that the very notion of gender is not only biotic and biologic episode but it has a social construction. Keywords: That Long Silence, Shashi Deshpande, Indian Fiction in English, feminist movement.

*That Long Silence* was published in 1988 which is a women centric novel. Naturally , Kusum , Jaya , Mukta, Vanitamami, Jaya's mother, and grand-mothers, Jeeja , Nayana , Manda , Nilima, etc . occupy the centre-stage . None of these women has any defect of character and every one of them is the victim of male malevolence . Deshpande 's novel *That Long Silence* which was recognized with Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990 , has woven a story to present the truth that women is assigned a secondary role, and relegated to secondary position . Deshpande 's novel *That Long Silence* captures the themes and motifs running through all her short stories. Jaya's life falls apart when her husband is suspended from work after allegations of dereliction in professional duty and malfeasance against him. Her ordinary existence is disorganized and split ; the future of the family is in jeopardy . Jaya is an unsuccessful writer, haunted by memories. Polarity and divergence with her husband, dichotomy and frustrations in their seventeen -year marriage , disappointment in her two teenage children , and the claustrophobia of her childhood all begin to surface . She says: " surely there comes a moment in every human life when he or she says like the Sibyl - I wish to die ." In her small, suburban Bombay flat, Jaya fights with these and other truths, among them her failure at writing and her fear of anger. Deshpande portrays a woman trying to erase a 'long silence' begun in childhood.

The protagonist of the novel Jaya is personified as a typical Indian housewife following her husband without any queries as his shadow . Mohan , an engineer by profession gets involved in a case of financial embezzlement . An enquiry is ordered and Mohan immediately decides to leave his Church Gate flat and shift to a small shabby flat at Dadar . It is there in the small Dadar flat that Jaya starts discovering herself. She reflects upon her life and finds out that the life she had been living so far did not belong to her but to someone else:

“I’m wrong, I thought; it isn't frightening meeting the ghost of your past self, it's awkward, like having a stranger thrusting herself on you, claiming a relationship you're unwilling to allow. And just as I got rid of that houseproud woman who had been me, it came to me that the woman had had a name as well. Suhasini ! ”.

Like all other women, Jaya had perhaps no right to take her own decisions. She had to wait for one or the other person to chart out her course of life. She was exhorted to "wait till you get married. Wait until you have kids ". She was in a way, to wait and bear and do nothing on her own. Her Vanitamami had advised her not to revolt even if the husband had few mistresses. Perhaps she was also similarly advised. It was too much to expect of a wife, but reality of life had injured them to it. And since they had the feelings of insecurity deeply embedded in them, Vanitamami gave her the advice that the husband was a like a sheltering tree which should be watered and manured in all circumstances. These pieces of advice are uttered directly, without the circumstantial requirement, because they were the adages that women had drawn from centuries of experiences. Jaya's Ajji (grandmother) had advised Jaya in her turn to keep quite before her husband to make him comfortable- "I am sorry for your husband, Jaya, whoever he is. Look at you- for everything a question, for everything a retort. What husband can be comfortable with that? "She naturally meant that Jaya should not argue, put her views, mainly when they were contrary to her husband's or unpleasant to him. Poor Jaya followed this advice of Ajji's in letter and spirit , yet she was not happy . She recalled, " I had neither any questions nor any retorts for Mohan now, and yet there was no comfort . So many subjects were barred that the silence seemed heavy with uneasiness."

Jaya, a name that was given by her father since her birth, was changed to Suhasini after marriage. It is apt to quote Sunitha Sinha's words: "Jaya silently recollects how her husband gave her new name Suhasini on her wedding day. Though she remains silent, she does not use the name Suhasini, she remains Jaya, the name given to her by father meaning victory". That Long Silence delicately presents this facet of feminine life and intensely enlightens how the existence of a woman is confined within domesticity and how all forms of intimidation and coercion perpetuated on her are convincingly rationalized generating a closed mind syndrome. The figures of Mohan's mother and sister can be quoted as examples. In Jaya's narrative, the silent wait of Mohan's mother takes on diabolic features,"the women crouching in front of the dying fire, sitting blank and motionless , the huddled bundles of sleeping children on the floor , the utter silence, the loud knock at the door ". Mohan's mother had to wait for her husband late into night, cooking the rice again and keeping it hot as 'he' wanted it fresh, hot and from an untouchable vessel, declining to eat what he called, "your

children's disgusting leavings". The long vigil of wife and patient wait becomes futile when he gets angry at not having fresh chutney to eat.

He picks up the heavy brass plate and throws it at the wall. Silently, she picks up the plate, cleans the well and floor-soiled food and sends her son next door to borrow some chilies. Uncomplainingly she prepares fresh chutney, light the fire, cooks the meal and starts to wait. This long silence of Jaya is an expression of the silent- modern housewife. In Indian patriarchal society, there is no selfidentity of woman. As a reader what hurts more than the cruelty of a husband, the insensitivity of a son , which displays the continued discrimination against woman. Her son Mohan, who has been a witness to this incident, never condemns his father but eulogizes his mother, the virtuous woman, instead "...she was tough women in those days were tough". Jaya, in order to conform to the ideals of a wife and a mother , suppresses her emotional needs which make her lonely and vulnerable " I had to admit the truth to myself that I often found family life un-endurable . Worse than anything else had been the boredom of unchanging pattern , the unending monotony" .Her devotion to her family does not make her happy as it fails to provide any intellectual or emotional fulfillment and creativity is merely an outlet for it , not a passion. Jaya's relationship with Kamat , which has not been defined in the novel , is also an escapade to find empathy and sharing . Marriage and home do not give any autonomy to her a woman keenly aware of her imperfect freedom , she opts for silence. Mohan easily takes up the role of a protector , provider and custodian , without trying to understand the real nature of her silence .

The plight of the middle-class women and the base male psyche that has not undergone any fundamental change is projected through the character of Jaya . It is appropriate to quote Rashmi Gaur's observation: "The novel records the fact that the changing social dynamics had brought about a change in the socio-economic-educational-rights of the women , but they still have to create a niche for them". Jaya is basically modern but rooted in tradition , whereas Mohan is a traditionalist embedded in customs. The difference between their attitudes is so great that they fail to understand each other. To Mohan, a woman sitting before the fire , waiting for her husband to come home and eat hot food is real 'strength' of woman , But Jaya interprets it as nothing more than despair. The difference in their attitude is the main cause to understand each other.

Subsequently, *That Long Silence*, traces Jaya's journey through a plethora of self-doubts, fears, guilt, smothered anger and silence towards articulation and affirmation. Suman Ahuja, while reviewing the novel in *The Times of India*, observes that Jaya "caught in an emotional eddy, endeavors to become to terms with her protean roles, while trying albeit in vain....an unfulfilled wife a disappointed mother and a failed writer". Jaya rejects the patriarchal notion of a unitary identity of self when she observes:

"But what was that 'myself'? Trying to find oneself.... able to exist without the other".

E.H. Chaudry comments on this context: "This kind of self realization helps her to find the reason for the unhappy married life. She understands the consequences of hidden anger. Her silence is nothing but buried anger". Jaya ultimately bids good bye to her silence, anger and resentment. She realizes herself worth and decides to give up the pre-fixed norms of the society. Jaya's determination to exercise her rights is a welcome more as she wants to liberate herself by respecting her feelings and desires. Dinesh Kamini finds Jaya moving out of the "Cloistered self as she seeks to escape from the struggles of the everyday life and is forced to find out inner resources that will allow her to return and engage more fully in her life and marriage". What Jaya ultimately achieved by her writing, by her getting all the ghosts that bothered her out of her system on to the paper? In Jaya's own words,

"I am not afraid anymore. The panic has gone. I'm Mohan's wife, I had thought, and cut off the bits of me ...the child hands in packet, has been with me through the years. She is with me still".

Such statement bring out the feminist perspective of the novelist.

Deshpande has symbolized in Jaya not a woman who rails or protests openly in the beginning and later on harmonizes and reconciles to the situation, but a kind of woman who wants to rebel, but ultimately does not because she is ductile. Jaya's inner anxiety and commotion are so bitter that she is unable to speak them out and remains silent in order not to be frustrated and disappointed after

the censure and animadversion of her actions by society. She is unable to unfold the truth as her image becomes like that of a bird that have wings and knows that it can fly , but somehow does not. Jaya is aware of her abilities and she knows that she can explore them openly but somehow she does not do that and become submissive to her husband. Jaya always remains silent which indicates that the traditional roles of women still have primacy over all the newly-acquired professional roles.

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