

Articulation of the Feminine Voice: A Study of *That Long Silence*

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Abstract

That Long Silence, which won Shashi Deshpande the Sahitya Akademi Award for 1990, tells the story of an Indian housewife, who maintains silence throughout her life. The novel ends with her resolve to speak, to break her long silence. The novel is a protest against the limitation of Women's lives. The issues and problems of contemporary middle class woman have always been the subject matter of Shashi Deshpande's writings. This paper seeks to study the feminist perspective in Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence*. Although many women writers tried their hand at expressing this long silence that had turned woman into non-entities, they could only provide psychological depths to their characters. They either created unreal sentimental romances or finally succumbed to the temptation of mouthing feminist ideology. But Shashi Deshpande's success lies in her representation of real life experience. She realistically depicts the inner conflicts of Jaya and her quest for the self or identity. She has woven the tragic tales of Jaya's relations and her acquaintances into the texture of the novel, and so the novel inevitably takes on a feminist character. The novel is about gross gender discrimination and inequality prevalent in society.

Keywords: feminist, gender discrimination, non- entities, patriarchal.

Introduction

Women writers of Indian English fiction have significantly contributed to enrich contemporary Indian English fiction. Eminent Feminist critics and writers like Kate Miller, Simone de Beauvoir, Toril Moi, Taslima Nasrin, Anita Desai, Virginia Woolf, Elaine Showalter and Shashi Deshpande etc. have made a remarkable contribution to the literature of feminism. Shashi Deshpande is also one of the remarkable figures in Indian English Literature,

who used a realistic approach to unravel various issues related to socio-economic condition of women in India.

In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir presents the definition of woman's identity.

She believes that it is formulation by European tradition.

Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. . . . For him she is sex—absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other. (qtd. in Hesse-Biber 3)

Woman is seen only as a sexual entity and this limits the position of woman. Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* explores conflict between tradition and modernity in relation to women in the middle class society. In her novels she doesn't present men as wholly bad and women as wholly good. She is realistic in the sense that her stories are very close to life. She is not writing about Jaya only but also about Mohan, as Jaya says, "I am writing of us" (1). In the novel, Shashi Deshpande does not put the blame of their marital crisis squarely on Mohan's shoulders but also on Jaya's. The novelist suggests that the women should accept their own responsibility for their victimization, instead of putting the blame on others.

Initially, after her marriage, she is apparently a satisfied house wife married to a responsible man of social status. For some time all went well and Jaya adjusted herself in new environment according to the wishes of her husband. Mohan was a man of orthodox view and he gave her not much freedom. In the novel, there lies the smell of frustration in married life of the protagonist, who failed to be closer to her husband mentally and emotionally. Despite her marriage to Mohan, she suffered from isolation and subsequently becoming a mother of two children. Her husband could not understand her emotional self.

The metaphor of silence under which the novel is organized helps to impose a quietude and discipline: the inner dynamics of a self, cut off from human communication. That long silence is not an intrusion into the world of silence but a silent communication with the oppressed self- straining for articulation, for a voice. Silence manifests in Jaya's discontent which is more personal and deeply sexual. Her romantic longings of adolescence are transformed into rigid rules by tradition. Jaya and Mohan hardly spoke to each other of love and sex. Love- making for them was a silent and inarticulate affair (Sharma 96).

In other words, Jaya is self- alienated. Her creative urge and artistic zeal frees her from her cramped and dubbed domestic and societal roles. It releases her from emotional turmoil. At

length she resolves to break that long silence by putting down on paper all that she had suppressed in her seventeen years' silence—that long silence which had reduced her self to fragments.

I am not afraid any more. The panic has gone. I am Mohan's wife, I had thought, and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife. Now I know that kind of fragmentation is not possible. (Deshpande 191)

Such confessional statements like these manifestly show that the novel is a feminist critique disguised in the form of novel. Through the image of a woman crawling into a hole, Deshpande describes the woeful plight of Jaya, unprotected and unshelled. Jaya says: "Distance from real life, scared of writing, scared of failing, Oh God, I had thought I cannot take any more. Even a worm has hole it can crawl into. I had mine—as Mohan's wife, as Rahul's and Rati's mother" (Deshpande 148).

It is obvious that husband and wife drifting far apart due to a loveless marriage life have been crushed as their marriage is based on compromise rather than on affection and understanding in which Mohan assumes the image of "a sheltering tree" (Deshpande 32), while Jaya mostly plunges into the tragic silence due to lack of communication and companionship. The novel traces how Jaya gradually emerges as a confident individual fully in control of herself and refuses to be led by noose. The protagonist of the novel rejects the image of traditional women like Sita, Savitri and Draupadi and instead prefers the image of a pair of the bullock to describe a married couple. Jaya says:

No, what have I to do with these mythical women? I can't fool myself. The truth is simpler. Two bullocks yoked together...it is more comfortable for them to move in same direction. To go in different directions would be painful; and what animal would voluntarily choose pain? (Deshpande 11-12)

Hence she decides to 'plug that hole' by speaking and listening and erasing the silence between her and Mohan. It is this erasing of the silence that symbolizes the assertion of her feminine voice, a voice with hope and promise, a voice that articulates her thoughts. The novel does not depict Jaya's life as a totally dismal and hopeless struggle. It suggests hope and change for the better.

It is often debated whether or not *That Long Silence* is a feminist novel. Shashi Deshpande is against the labeling of her novels as feminist. She says:

Any woman who writes fiction shows the world as it looks to her protagonist; if the protagonist is a woman, she shows the world as it looks to a woman—to apply the tag of feminist is one way, I have realized, of dismissing the serious concerns of the novel by labeling them, by calling the work propagandist. (qtd. in Sharma 45-46)

The protagonist has raised her voice against the straitjacketed role models of wife and mother, and rebels against the suppression of the age- old patriarchal setup. Thus the novel is a feminist critique as TorilMoi says, “It seeks to expose, not perpetuate patriarchal practices” (qtd. in Sharma 46). Although she may not be a formal feminist but she certainly is a potential feminist writer.

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