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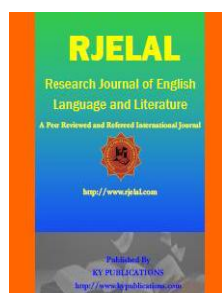
MARGINALISED FEMALE VOICE IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THAT LONG SILENCE*

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ABSTRACT

Women in Indian society belong to the category of the unprivileged, the suppressed, the downtrodden and the marginalised. She has been suffering for long being socially, politically as well as financially marginalised. In simple terms a woman in Indian society is deprived of opportunities and freedom to go with her own preferences and choices and thus marginalised at every front. Woman suffers some or other sort of marginalisation whether she is educated or illiterate, dependant or independent, traditional or modern, rural or urban. Despite of our advance in the 21st century, women in our society is still subjugated and placed at a secondary position to men. She has to follow the path of men whether her father, her husband or her son forgetting her personal identity. Women's struggle for identity and emancipation has long been treated as one of the major thematic concerns in Indian English writings. Indian English writers of fiction have written variously highlighting the women issues. ShashiDeshpande, an Indian feminist fiction writer has dealt the issue of women being a marginalised figure in a phallocentric world. The present paper is an attempt to analyse ShashiDeshpande's manifestation of the female marginalisation in her novel *That Long Silence*.

Keywords: marginalisation, women, marriage, silence, phallocentric, identity etc.

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Indian society is a society with so much of disparity at social level. There are classes, classes of various types. A certain sect of society is considered privileged and another unprivileged or marginalised. Here we are concerned with the marginalised category. The marginalised are the people of deprived category; deprived of equality, rights and opportunities. The base for marginalisation may be social, financial or political. Indian class system is the root cause of such marginalisation. People belonging to the lower class are subjected to all sorts of marginalisation.

One depressing fact is that Indian women are nowhere free from the marginalisation irrespective of class, caste, status, age, or generation. They suffer from the age old patriarchal system still prevalent in our society whether it is uneducated and unprivileged lower class or the elite class. A woman has to compromise everywhere and forced to remain at the secondary place to man. This stark reality of Indian society has widely portrayed in the Indian English Literature.

ShashiDeshpande is one among the master women novelists who have unfolded the dark reality of the suppressed women's psyche in her novels such as

The Dark Holds No Terror, The Binding Vine, and That Long Silence etc. The present paper focuses on her novel *That Long Silence* where in Deshpande has masterly delineated women character from every class representing the never changing and never ending agony of a woman's life.

In this novel, Deshpande talks of four major categories of women- the lower class uneducated women, the middle class educated modern women, the middle class traditional women and the mythical women. The protagonist Jaya is an educated middle class woman, who is a writer and wants to write freely without any apprehension of the judgment of people around. After marriage she feels herself so restricted that she starts losing her identity as an independent writer. She keeps on reflecting on the lives of various women in and around her life: her in laws, her own family members, her housemaids, and even the legendary mythical women characters. She broods over the pathetic life of all those women who have lost their own identity in order to follow an imposed stereotypical phallocentric identity of women. She compares their life with her own prosaic married life. Deshpande through Jaya's observations and introspection explores various facets of female subjugation and marginalisation. After a long process of self-realisation Jaya approaches to a conclusion that the life of women is everywhere the same as they are all ruled by a similar silence. Jaya observes the same silence in her own life. What lies behind that long silence is a volcano of suppressed desire for the manifestation of the self. Jaya, unlike other protagonists of Deshpande who move out of the marital knot in order to establish themselves, expresses her own silence while remaining in the institution of marriage. At the end of the novel Jaya comes out with a greater energy to express herself in her writings. She writes what she feels like despite the baseless objections from her husband. Though she finds a middle path and takes up a pseudonym "Sita" in order to avoid the readers' deliberate associations with the writers' personal life. She dares and finds out freedom in her own way and sets herself apart from the other stereotypical traditional women who blindly follow the established archetypes like Seeta, Savitri,

Gandhari etc. Jaya finds it inappropriate for women to follow the archetypes in the modern context. The text advocates the possibility as well as the necessity to break the long laid silence as that's the only way to break the marginalised boundaries.

Karyeshu Mantri, Karaneshu Daasi,
Rupeeha Lakshmi, Kshamayaa Dharitri,
Bhojyeshu Mata, Shayaneshu Rambha,
Shat Karma Yukta, Kula Dharma Patni.

(Like a slave while serving; a minister while counselling; Goddess Lakshmi in her looks; the earth in forbearance; a mother while feeding; as wife like Rambha, the celestial prostitute; these six are the true characteristics of an ideal wife.) (Usha 129)

The above Sanskrit quatrain sufficiently articulate the expected social roles assigned to a traditional Indian wife. There is so much of idealisation of women down the ages found in the scriptures as well as the ancient and the modern books. On one hand she has been designated as goddess, incarnation of power, idol of sacrifice and forbearance, mother earth; on the other hand a temptress, seductress, wretched creature, uncouth beast, subject to beatings, weak, vulnerable, obstacle, sexual object, a procreating device etc. Men have variously attempted to determine the stereotypical gender roles of women and women are trained to fit in these roles. Women have been portrayed unjustifiably as a silent figure heavily attributed with male ideology. In spite of constant male attempts to define and articulate women's silence men have failed to gauge the depth of women's psyche.

Since women dared to outpour their deep delved inner consciousness in the form of women writings, the predefined social stereotypical ideologies got rebuffed and the silence of women is explored. Contemporary Indian English women writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya, Kamala Das, Nayantara Sehgal, Chitra Banerjee, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy etc. through their realistic writings, have initiated a revolutionary task of upsetting the male ideology by putting women's consciousness at its place. Their female protagonists have set the model of the psychologically emancipated women in

contrast to the traditionally conditioned Indian women.

ShashiDeshpande, one among such revolutionary writers, has attempted to redefine the roles of women in Indian society. Her female protagonists emerge from the margins and succeed in breaking their long laid silence to the order and dominance of the male. Deshpande's women are basically traditional but in the course of the novel they emerge out as independent and confident going through the process of self- realisation. They tend to deny the imposed patriarchal autonomy and re-establish their marginalised identity projecting their silence into words.

That Long Silence, by ShashiDeshpande justly unravels the suppressed women identity. The protagonist Jaya becomes the emblem of modern Indian women dangling between tradition and modernity. Deshpande in this novel writes about the women's incessant struggle with the patriarchy which is primarily a passive rejection resulting into a silent protest. Deshpande has used the motif of silence masterly interpreting it at two parallel levels- the lower class women of least means and the financially independent middle class women. Both the categories are essentially women as their struggles are the same; they face the same challenges of not being understood by the male governed society. They all are marginalised and silenced. Jaya, the protagonist has presented the silence of middle class women and also exhibited the possibility of breaking the silence.

That Long Silence is the story of a middle class educated married girl Jaya, who goes through the process of self-realization and discovers her independence and will. She is a writer, wants to write but feels unable to present her real self. She feels restricted in her marital life. The only thing left between her husband and herself is silence. She broods over this silence and compares herself to the other women in her life-her relatives and her housemaids. There are various women characters in the novel including Jaya who are facing same kind of situation at home with their husbands. Most of them blindly succumb to the male supremacy. They have considered males supreme and themselves as inferior beings. Jaya finds no difference between

those women around her and herself. She, being educated could more clearly evaluate her relation with her husband. She questions the role of the traditional women saying:

Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails...No, what have I to do with these mythical women? I can't fool myself. (Deshpande 11)

Thus Jaya realises that she should not follow such rotten examples where there is no place for women's expression. She scrutinizes her relation with Mohan and finds both of them as:

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

She is following her husband's destiny as if she is bound to him like a bullock with a single yoke. She stops writing just for the sake of her husband as he started finding similarity between their married life and Jaya's stories. Mohan even changes her name after marriage calling her Suhasini. Their married life seems to her monotonous and a mere daily routine. Her life consists of Mohan's needs. She, being a married woman can't even have a male friend. She deliberately distances herself from Kamat. She could not even show any sympathy to Kamat's dead body due to social fear. Thus Jaya represents the marginalised condition of the class of educated women.

Another suppressed female voice in the novel is of Mohan's mother, a traditional Indian house wife. Deshpande has given a realistic portrayal of the typical house wife while narrating an incident from Mohan's mother's life. She receives a servant like treatment at home. It seems her only duty is to serve her husband and children to her best. She never has food before her husband. She cooks twice as her husband wants his rice fresh and hot. She gets harsh treatment from the husband if the chutney is missing from the plate. She helplessly and silently wipes out the walls smeared with food thrown by her husband. She expresses her anger but in a silent way. Jaya observes:

I saw despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender. (Deshpande 36)

Vimla, Mohan's sister, who remains constantly ill after her marriage, hides the truth of her illness from her in-laws. Vimla knew, even if she had told her in-laws about her illness, it would have been of no avail. Her mother-in-law's response to her illness confirms this:

God knows what's wrong with her. She's been lying there on her bed for over a month now. Yes, take her away if you want to. I never heard of women going to hospitals and doctors for such a thing. As if other women don't have heavy periods! What a fuss! But these women who've never had children are like that. (Deshpande 39)

Vimla ultimately leaves her in-laws' house and remains in a lunatic condition till her early tragic death. There is no sympathy for a woman who cannot bear a child in a typical patriarchal system. So Vimla proves of no use to her in-laws so consequently abandoned.

Vanitamami, Jaya's maternal aunt becomes a mouthpiece of Indian handbook of traditions prescribed specially for women. At the time of Jaya's marriage Vanitamami feeds her with various suggestions for a successful married life. "Remember, Jaya ... a husband is like a sheltering tree Without the tree, you're dangerously unprotected and vulnerable" (Deshpande 32). Thus Woman herself plays an important role in strengthening the male ideology. Following Vanitamami's suggestion Jaya keeps on changing herself as per the comforts of Mohan. In this practice she loses her identity entirely. Jaya who is confident, independent and creative gets transformed into a submissive, homely and weak Suhasini. Marriage brings this catastrophic change in her personality in the due course which clearly reflects in her reply to a magazine editor asking for her biodata, she replies: "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 one live" (Deshpande 2). Such irrelevant answer can only

come out of Suhasini not Jaya. So it is evident that an educated woman like Jaya is also untouched by the ill effects of Indian traditional marriages.

The lower class women are even more coarsely treated and subjugated in various ways. Deshpande has incorporated many women characters: Jeeja, Nayana, Tara, Manda representing the heights of marginalisation of women at the lower strata of society. For them, the agony starts from the moment a girl child takes birth. Nayana, one of Jaya's maid who is going to deliver soon but she is afraid of begetting a girl child as she could foresee the terrible life of a girl in their society. She expresses this fear in her words:

Why give birth to a girl, behnji, who'll only suffer because of men all her life? Look at me! My mother loved me very much, she wanted so much for me ... a house with electricity and water, shining brass vessels, a silver waist chain, silver anklets ... and what have I got? No, no, behnji, better to have a son. (Deshpande 28)

The lives of such women remains the same throughout their lives, even marriage doesn't bring any positive change in their life. They start working menial jobs at a tender age as they are supposed to earn. Education is considered waste of time and money. They continue working in the same way after marriage but the life becomes even worse after marriage. They are beaten up by their drunkard husbands. Tara serves a good example for such condition of lower class women. Her husband is a drunkard and thrives only on the earning of Tara. If she denies giving him money for alcohol she gets harsh beatings. Marriage becomes a burden for Tara. She even curses her husband saying: "So many drunkards die ... but this one won't. He'll torture us all to death instead." (Deshpande 53) On this Jeeja interrupts Tara saying that husband is a symbol of social prestige as "he keeps the kumkum" (Deshpande 53) on her forehead, and "what is a woman without that?" (p 53) Jeeja here echoes Vanitamami when she says "Husband is a sheltering tree"

Deshpande incorporates a third category of women that is mythical women. Sita, Savitri, Gandhari etc serve best examples of women who willingly chose

to follow the paths of their husbands. They are the archetypes to be followed by all traditional Indian women. Those women became famous for their sacrifice but no one knows if at all they have had any of their own desires or dreams. They associated their life totally with the choices of their husbands. Though rotten those examples are still alive and imposed on women.

Women's condition remains the same everywhere irrespective of class, generation and age. All women meet at the same point; their ultimate silence brings them together. They all carry a suppressed anger which turns into a neurosis.

A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There's ... no room for despair, either. There is only order and routine. (pp. 147-148)

She has to suppress her anger because Indian traditional family system doesn't allow them to express it openly and even if they express they are not understood and blamed of not being a good wife, a good daughter-in-law, a good mother etc. After, all this melodrama the only thing remains is silence.

Deshpande through her female protagonists offers possible ways for women to rise from the marginalised state. They may either move out of the marital knot and move ahead to achieve their wishes or they may learn to retort and demand their rights being in the marriage. Jaya takes the second path and she decides to be with Mohan but at the same time starts expressing herself boldly and ultimately turns out victorious.

Though it is evident that years of suppression and marginalisation have conditioned the consciousness of Indian women but the only hope lies in the women's self-conscious attempts towards the breaking of silence before the silence becomes eternal.

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