



## THE FEMININE VOICE: JAYA IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THAT LONG SILENCE*

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### ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* is about the modern young woman- educated and aware- nevertheless unable to break free from the stranglehold of tradition. But towards end of the novel the protagonist of this novel erase the silence and have a balanced fulfilled life. This paper examines the imbalances between the sexes. Thus it reveals a conscious-raising voice, struggling to assert her femininity.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Jaya, Self identity, *That Long Silence*

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Shashi Deshpande is realistic and an optimistic portrayal of the Indian middle-class educated women. Deshpande successfully presents these women as they are engaged in the complex and difficult social and psychological problem defining authentic self.

The tragic predicament of Deshpande's protagonists is the outcome of male domination in a patriarchal culture. Their silent suffering is socio-psyche in nature. In her quest for identity, Deshpande's protagonist moves from despair to hope, from self to self-assertion. Her struggle throughout is to attain wholeness, completeness and authentic selfhood.

In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande delineates the delicate swings of mood, the see-saw moments of joy and despair, the fragments of feelings perceived and suppressed, the life of senses as well as the heart -wringing anguish of the narrator protagonist Jaya, a housewife and a failed

writer. The novel depicts the life of Jaya at the level of the silent and the unconscious. A sensitive and realistic dramatization of the married life of Jaya and her husband Mohan, it portrays an inquisitive critical appraisal which the institution of marriage has been subjected in recent years. It centers round the inner perception of the protagonist, a woman who is subtly drawn from inside, a woman who "finds her normal routine so disrupted that for the first time she can look at her life and attempt to decide who she really is."

The question, "who am I?" haunts her so obsessively that she fails to find herself. She is "an utter stranger, a person so alien that even the faintest understanding of the motives of her actions seemed impossible." Hence her agonized cries: "I can't hope, I can't manage. I can't go on." In such a stifling and suffocating domestic ambience and patriarchal set-up, she finds her female identity effaced. Her dilemma is expressed in her vacillating

state of mind "I could and couldn't do, all the things that were womanly and unwomanly." Jaya is Suhasinini and also "Seeta", the pseudonym she assumes to write columns about the plight of middle-class housewife. Both "Suhasini" and "Seeta" are, as Jaya says, "the many selves waiting to be discovered... each self-attached like a Siamese twin to a self of another person, neither able to exist without the other." (69) Hence is life is "to be made possible" (193), she is to live neither as "Suhasini" or "Jaya", nor as "Seeta" or "anti-Kusum." She is to live but not in fragments.

Seething discontent within and without make her bounce upon the springboard of life. She loses all hold on it and keeps on oscillating in opinions and choices, yet to decide "who she really is. "Deshpande reveals the consciousness of Jaya through an exposition of her mind in the process of thinking, feeling and reaching to the stimuli of the moment and situation. In doing so, she goes on to assert the feminine psyche of the protagonist all agog to break away from the stranglehold of a quagmire social fabric rooted in patriarchy which repels as it attracts. In her tiny old flat in Dadar, Bombay, Jaya lives like an introvert, often given to brooding and reminiscing, with a lot of self – reflection in order to discover her true self:

And I was Jaya. But I had been Suhasini as well. I can her now, the Suhasini who was distinct from Jaya, a soft smiling, placid, motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped.(16)

Memories plunge in, often linked by the ambivalent association of ideas. Each incident, a mini –story, a fiction in itself, imparts an unexplored vision to the narrative. The dejections and disappointments of unrequited selfhood, the illusions and pinigs of love and the yearnings for companionship make up the stream of Jaya's consciousness. Recalling the ions of her split self- entangled in her memory, she creates a world – of harmony, a composite self: "Ours has been, a delicately balanced relationship, so much so that we have even snipped off bits of ourselves to keep the scales on an even keel."(7). Jaya is not a totally silent and mute sufferer. She is an actor participant as well as an observer in the novel. She

steps out of the narrative –action as a witness, as it were, a critic to perceive the tenor of the story filtered through a female consciousness.

Sensual memories are the coldest. They stir up nothing in you.. These emotions and responses seemed to belong to two other people, not to the two of us lying here together... whatever my feeling has been then, I had never spoken of them to him. In fact, we had never spoken of sex at all (95)

Jaya is in a modern predicament and the flood of consciousness that ensues out of it is a silent stream of thoughts and feelings. She known pretty well that in order to stay in a relationship one has to learn a lot of tricks and "Silence is one of them.... You never find a woman criticizing her husband, even playfully, in case it might damage the relationship". Jaya succumbs and surrenders to Mohan without revolting. Silently she bends to his will. She never says 'Yes' when her husband asks her whether he has hurt her. She endures everything, tolerates all kinds of masculine oppression silently: "in the emotion that governed my behavior to him, there was still the habit of being a wife, of sustaining and supporting him," Hence, it is Jaya who makes "the first conciliatory move." A dominating husband and a suffering wife – that is her tie with Mohan. She does not immediately react to the situation but the reader is insinuated through the flashback technique used by the author especially at critical junctures in the psychic life of Jaya. Lying solitary in her room, her mind shuttles between the past and the present and thus covers the whole span of her life.

At times Deshpande executes the stream – of –consciousness technique to project the psychic reverberations of her characters in order to make the story more real and authentic. Her heroines like Jaya are rebels, but only passive ones whose incarcerated lamentations are but cries in the wilderness, "mute and desperate calls to restructure the groove of society." Rebellion and suffering in Jaya has a proclivity for being transmuted into an artistic expression. In her there is an inner need for creativity and fulfillment, but this creative expression in her is inhibited due to lack of privacy, of sheer physical space to reflect and work in.

Jaya being renamed as Suhasini after her marriage is not a case of the loss of identity since Jaya and Suhasini are the two facets of the same coin and these two collateral names of the Deshpande protagonist are symbolic in their socio-familial import. Jaya, her pre-marital name, means 'victory' and Suhasini, the post-marital name given to her by her husband, means "a soft smiling, placid motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped."

Jaya is a woman who adjusts and accommodates unlike the modern women who find themselves "forced into the back-ground by the claims of culture" and hence they adopt "an inimical attitude towards it." She is not the structurally patterned woman of the traditional Indian society where woman was chiefly confined to the hearth and man to the world, where woman was the follower and man the leader, where woman was the sufferer and man the ordainer. She does not want to be a "Sita following her husband into exile" or a "Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband" or a "Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails." She believes that there is pain in hostility, and rebellion is anguish and agony. Hence, she adopts a subaltern and subservient attitude.

No, what I have 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 the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful; and what animal would volunrarily choose pain? (11-12)

In this way Jaya attempts to demythify / demystify her actions through the animal imagery of "two bullocks yoked together." But she is never safe when yoked. So the founders to break out of the yoke:

Stay at home, look after you babies, keep out the rest of the world, you are safe. That poor idiotic woman Suhasini believed in this. I know better, now I know safety is always unattainable. You are never safe (17)

Past disappointments 'flashback' across her mind 'fading out' the consciousness of her present plight in themilieu. The memories of the past enlighten the present and the recurring images, the Sparrow story

and the Mythlend a universal touch to her tragic predicament. The nursely rhymes and the trivial scenes through unrelated to the sequence of the narrative, yet have a thematic import. They portray the abandoned and the lonely Jaya's drift of thought and her evanescent mood captured through the broken and fragmentary stream of Consciousness:

"A husband is like a sheltering tree,".....  
"Take your pain between your teeth, bite on it, don't let it escape." (32).

Jaya's self-questioning attitude comes as a split in the narrative. She broods over the metaphor of the "sheltering tree":

A sheltering tree. Without the tree, you are dangerously unprotected... equally logically and vulnerable. This followed logically. And so you have to keep the tree alive and flourishing, even if you have to water it with deceit and lies. This too followed, equally logically. (32)

There is hardly any communication between Jaya and Mohan, neither verbal nor emotional. Mohan wanted a well-educated and cultured wife, not a reciprocating and loving one. So he resolved to marry Jaya when he saw her speaking fluently.

You know Jaya, the first day I met you at your Ramukaku's house, you were talking to your brother, Dinkar, and somehow you sounded so much like that girl. I think it was at that moment that I decided I would marry you (90)

An intellectually idealized and cultural husband like Mohan finds Jaya a square peg in round hole. There develops disheartening silence between the husband and the wife. Mohan's queries remain unanswered by Jaya for she is unable to find a word of response: "I racked my brains trying to think of an answer." (31)

Jaya's inner turmoils are so tense and acute that words fail her desire for articulation. She is unable to speak her trouble out the opposition of the milieu in the true spirit of ideal Hindu womanhood where obedience and loyalty has degenerated to the state of dogged subservience. Hence her life becomes chaotic. Temperamental incompatibility between Jaya and Mohan accounts for their incommunication and quizzical silence.

Could a modern woman nestled in tradition like Jaya understand a traditionalist like Mohan who is rooted out and out in the customs and whose repressive use of silence pressurises Jaya into conformity with his expectations? The discord in their temperamental outlook is so great that they fail time and again to understand each other. Deshpande presents here not a woman who has a desire to revolt but the one who ultimately reconciles to her hapless lot. Having failed to discover the truth, she remains silent and reticent revealing her most personal and private thoughts in her writings. Mohan wonders as to how women could be so rebellious and esoteric, so angry and recalcitrant. To him it is unwomanly to be angry for it is against the ideals of feminism (if by feminism, we mean humanism and anti-fascisms):

A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There is no room for despair, either. There is only order and routine, today. I have to change the sheets tomorrow, scrub the bathrooms the day after, clean the fridge. (147-48)

Marriage subjugates and enslaves women and it leads her to aimless days, indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently toward death without questioning its purpose. Women pay for their happiness at the cost of their freedom and de Beauvoir emphasized that such a sacrifice on the part of a woman is too high for anyone because the kind of self-contentment, serenity and security that marriage offers woman drains her soul of its capacity for greatness: "She shuts behind her the doors of her new home, when she was a girl, the whole countryside was her homeland; the forests were hers. Now she is confined to a restricted space."

The role of a wife restricts, rather circumscribes, women's self-development. The role of a mother does it even more and "sometimes women play their roles not so much because they want to, as because they have to in order to survive economically and/ or psychologically?" It is against this encoded and pre-ordained role of a woman that Jaya revolts. For her, "in this life itself, there are so many cross-roads, so many choices" (192) but a married woman has a few or practically no choice

left to her save what her husband wills and desires. But Jaya's is a life of instincts and urges. Unlike other married women slavishly tagged to tradition, she has her own say. She unfurls and unburdens herself to activate the creative impulses smothered within her artistic self. "The act of unburdening herself through self-expression" observes KaminiDinesh, "becomes for her a creative process. It is not merely a reliving of particular moments of the past but a coming to terms with her".

In reminiscing about the past Jaya succeeds in blotting out that long silence and making future life possible. With her traditionally muted voice, she wobbles between the past and the present through her stream of thoughts which reveals "ten different faces emerging from ten different mirrors." (1) In keeping with the needs of the quality of consciousness, the flux of the stream of Jaya's thoughts is not tied down to a rigid clock progression. Through close-ups and flashbacks, Deshpande has laid bare the psyche of Jaya which is reluctantly responsive and passively secluded. Through the stream of consciousness technique, Deshpande pictures Jaya's rejection of the patriarchal notion of a unitary self or identity. Jaya observes, "But what was that 'myself'? Trying to find one-self what a cliché that has become. As if such a thing is possible.

Silence manifests in Jaya's discontent which is more personal and deeply sexual. Her romantic longings of adolescence are transformed into rigid rules and rituals by tradition. Jaya and Mohan hardly spoke to each other of love and sex. Love-making for them was a silent and inarticulate affair:

God, how terrible it was to know a man so well. I could time it almost to the second, from the first devious wooing to the moment he turned a sway from me, offering me his hunched back. (85)

In the process of self-revelation through writing, Jaya comes to recognize herself as a failed writer, her stories have been rejected for lack of genuine feelings which she had laid aside. She had also kept away the clamouring voices of women who wanted to find expression there in; for fear that they may ruffle her domestic life. She comes to accept herself as a failed writer. She feels her identity

effaced when she sees repeated images of herself as a person with variegated interlinked selves, all alike and without any uniqueness of their own. She says, "I was so exactly like the other: I was almost invisible." In other words, she is self – alienated. Jaya's 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 resolved to break that long silence by putting down on paper that entire she has 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 a 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. The child, hands in pocket, has been with me through the years. She is with me stii 19l

Toward the end of the novel Jaya consciously acknowledge her writing as a kind of fiction and quotes Defoe's description of fiction as a kind of "lying," which may make "a great hope in the heart." Hence, she decides to "plug that hole" as said earlier by speaking and listening and 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 doesn't depict Jaya's life as a totally dismal and hopeless struggle. It suggests "hope" and "change" for the better:

We don't change overnight. It's possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope. Without that life would be impossible (193)

Through the protagonist's conscious-raising voice, struggling to assert her feminist, Shashi Deshpande gets to the root of existence and gives vent to a kind of female subjectivity which refuses to reconcile and identify herself with patriarchal and male-dominated society. Through her female protagonists, she seems to convey the message that marital relationship, human potential and individual happiness.

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