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**BREAKING THE SILENCE: A FEMINISTIC STUDY OF SELF ACTUALIZATION IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THAT LONG SILENCE***

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**ABSTRACT**

Women have long been living under subjugation in the patriarchal social system. They have always chosen to accept their fate deliberated for them by the male-dominated society and have long been living in silence. This silence that characterizes the identity of a female character breeds in her the eternal anguish and loss of individuality. Women, in order to seek personal identity or self-actualisation, need to break their silence and come out with personal expressions. The present paper is a critique of Shashi Deshpande's 'That Long Silence' with the perspective of exploring the voice of female's self actualization. The study aims at exploring the defined gender roles in male dominated societies, the perpetual oppression of the female and the pursuit for self-actualisation which is echoed through the internal turmoil of Jaya, the protagonist, underneath the social orthodoxy and callous attitude towards women.

**Keywords:** Self-actualisation, patriarchy, gender discrimination, silence

**1. Introduction**

Playing the roles of ideal daughters, wives, daughters-in-law, mothers and myriad other relations, women have always silenced their voices with respect to gender discrimination. They have always given up their personal viewpoints and preferences under family coercion and the tacit pressure of the societal structure. However, many women have lately been making efforts to expose the superficiality of the myths pertaining to female freedom in apparently sophisticated modern societies.

Shashi Deshpande illustrates the predicament of the Indian middle class ethos and male authoritarianism in the family on a more repulsive, more evident note. *That Long Silence*, a novel within novel depicts marriage as an institution that enslaves women to a lifetime of male dominance. It also presents the struggle of a middle-class woman for her self-actualisation through all possible means. She slogs through her roles as a

wife, a daughter-in-law, a mother and her profession of a writer, and eventually decides to break her silence and acquire a powerful place for herself. Jaya's intense introspection, juxtaposing her marriage and her own self under ruthless scrutiny results into a biographical narrative that encompasses a host of many other women, all sufferers of disparity between male authority and female subjection within marriage.

**2. Discussion**

Jaya grew up in a society wherein the general perception of male superiority was percolated very deep into the persona of a girl right from her childhood. She was presented with examples of the elderly women in the house and the social circle, and was made to realise the importance of a man in her life through the reiteration of statements like:

"A husband is like a sheltering tree. Without the tree, you're dangerously unprotected and vulnerable."<sup>i</sup>

Jaya breaks her long continued silence over this disparity, and bursts out into a sarcastic laughter at her husband's fake superiority. The novel is a vivid depiction of the female consciousness, her ambitions and her dreams juxtaposed to her plight, fears and dilemmas. Jaya discloses the general repressing, incapacitating and silencing life circumstances of a common housewife, who passes from ignorance to knowledge, through great torment and suffering when she says:

"I had learnt it at last no questions, no retorts, only silence"<sup>ii</sup>

Jaya was not intrinsically a complacent woman. She was very inquisitive and bold in childhood. The critical and rebellious spirit has been portrayed in Jaya's moral fibre through the anecdotes of her childhood when she ignored the recommendations of her father regarding the classical music of Polushkar and Fiayaz and enjoyed the buoyant melodious songs of Rafi and Lata that she was fond of.

The slow and bit-by-bit discovery of Jaya's complex intrinsic persona has been Shashi Deshpande's focus in the novel. The reader is immersed into Jaya's conscious quest of self which seems to be very convoluted and confused. Like any other Indian Middle-class educated woman, Jaya's character is a composite whole of contrasting shades of behaviour. She is neither contented in her role of an ideal Indian woman who is a model of patience, endurance and devotion in her husband's family, nor does she feel absolute fulfilment when she emerges out as a self aware, rebellious, defiant and disobedient person in her momentary affair with Kamat. The novel is a depiction of the conflict of womanhood swinging between the modernist, individuality seeking, independent Jaya and her second aspect of personality in the tradition bound, loyal, devoted and docile Suhasini (the name given to her by her in-laws). It is the depiction of the struggle of the female protagonist to establish equilibrium between her diverse facets.

The most agonizing fact for Jaya is the dichotomy of her husband Mohan's expectations from her, and the superficiality of their relationship which was based, not on love and mutual respect, but on social conditioning and silent complacence

like 'a pair of bullocks yoked together'. Mohan feels insecure in front of the mature and seasoned Jaya who is capable of carving a respectable career for herself in journalism, and therefore, he takes control over what she would write and what she would not. His masculine ego is hurt when she publishes a story which, according to Mohan, has an autobiographical note. On the one hand, he does not admit that he is like the male protagonist of the story, but on the other hand, he fears that he will be despised in public as others would mistake the story to be autobiographical. He retorts,

"They will all know, all those people who read this and know us, they will know that these two persons are us.... How could you write these things?"<sup>iii</sup>

Jaya's prospects of a promising career in writing, which was proven through her award winning story was shirked by Mohan's callous masculine attitude and she is made to kowtow to the social norms and to turn to writing only 'womanly' articles in womanly magazines. This forced resignation, compromise and submission to the patriarchal model of a 'happy married life' always carries an undercurrent of an incessant hunt for identity and self-actualization.

Despite the fact that the social system is becoming more congenial for women empowerment, and women are emerging from the age long 'objectification' and are acquiring their identity as free and equal citizens like men, there are men like Mohan who have not been able to free their minds of the so called possessor-of-woman attitude. Mohan has a paradoxical outlook to Jaya's abilities. On the one hand he cannot tolerate to see her as a modern, well-established, self-dependent woman, and on the other hand he wouldn't hesitate in asking her to act as a modern wife and befriend the CE's wife, so that he could be saved from the allegations of fraudulent act at office. This intensifies Jaya's indifference and disrespect for him that eventually results into the breaking of her long silence and her expression of sarcasm through a disdainful laughter at Mohan's comment.

Jaya's long silence is a result of gradual subordination inflicted upon her via several layers of imposed identities. Firstly, when she was bound into

the nuptial ties with Mohan without her consent, secondly, like every other woman, when her surname was changed and she had to carry her husband's surname, and thirdly when her name was also changed from Jaya to Suhasini at the sweet will of her in-laws. The name 'Jaya' means 'victorious' and 'Suhasini' means 'ever smiling'. This change of name speaks of the implicit subjugation of the confident and ambitious Jaya into a compliant and malleable Suhasini. Moreover, Jaya's individuality got a final blow when she was implicitly coerced into renouncing her identity as a powerful and promising writer and turning to 'womanly' or 'weak' writer for women's magazines. This long-drawn process of gradual silencing of Jaya's feelings had resulted into the bottled-up frustration and rebellion. And she retorts,

"Surely there comes a moment in every human's life when he or she says, like the Sibyl - I wish to die."<sup>iv</sup>

Jaya had never been her real self in the entire course of her married life, except for the short duration of her relationship with Kamat. She was attracted to him because of his free and genuine persona that had no tint of the Mohan-like male ego and was liberated from all social dogmas and obligations. He had no inhibitions in cooking and doing other household chores that were supposed to be done by women in the patriarchal system. Jaya never felt 'silenced' with him as she used to feel with Mohan. Kamat became her friend, philosopher and guide and motivated her to revive her powerful writing. With him Jaya enjoyed the freedom of being her original self as she did in presence of her father. The greatest solace she found with him was that she could express freely in his company. Mohan's presence always suffocated her; she never meant what she spoke, and she never spoke what she meant. After every sexual intercourse, he would try to act a gentleman and would ask "*Did I hurt you?*", and she would say "*No*." This small formal dialogue was never intended at showing genuine concern or expressing genuine love. When Jaya said "*No*" she never meant it. Though she was not hurt physically, there were myriad other ways in which she was hurt: she was hurt as this physical relation was not a

result of an emotional intimacy; she was hurt as she never wanted it yet could never say no to it.

Jaya could never love Mohan because she could never respect him. Love grows only when it is fostered with mutual respect and understanding. Mohan's possessive, mean and fake behaviour created his image of a very weak persona in Jaya's eyes. Furthermore, his fraudulent act at office, his hiding away in Jaya's house at Dadar, and his efforts to use her to safeguard his position made him even more Dwarfish in front of her. Mohan could never respect Jaya as for him women were always secondary in men's lives. He treated her as a mere possession and crushed her twice: he crushed the woman in her and then the writer in her. He always tried to use her the way she was beneficial for his own familial, social and professional positions.

Though Jaya had apparently convinced herself into being satisfied with her droning household role, sacrificing all her ambitions for the so called 'happy married life', the turn of events in her life with Mohan's job at risk, and their detached short stay at Dadar flat help her in the final self actualization. The stressful trying circumstances bring out all the dormant courage in Jaya and she finally gives vent to all her feelings on paper, thus breaking her silence into the novel 'That Long Silence' and declaring her autonomy. Her short emotional and physical interaction with Kamat brings her out of long emotional stagnation and helps her feel a revived interest in life. With him, she could feel respected and important. It was he, who helped her believe in the value of her opinions. However, despite this renewed interest in life and faith in her abilities, Jaya faces a conflict between her loyalty to her matrimonial bond and her love for Kamat.

In the character of Jaya Shashi Deshpande has presented a vivid portrayal of the dilemma and internal conflict of the modern educated Indian women who are aware of their rights, and are conscious of the injustice being inflicted upon them but do not have enough courage to break the social bonds and voice their rebellion. They seem to have silenced themselves voluntarily. Jaya was conscious of her objectification; she knew that she was being used by insensitive Mohan at every walk yet she

would not revolt against it as she did not want her image of a loving and caring wife, mother and daughter-in-law to be broken. She found her true love in Kamat yet she never wanted this relationship to come into light and left him alone when he was dying. This fear and dilemma is not a matter of individual conduct but is implanted in her gradually on different social institutions. Women in general are made to feel dependent and insecure, and are persuaded to follow the pre-determined social norms through subtle but strong insinuations. They are required to live under male surveillance outside as well as in homes.

The study establishes that women need to voice their feelings freely and powerfully in order to be heard and in order to get an equal position in the society. Instead of uncritically resigning to the roles allocated to them by the male-oriented culture they need to break their long restrained silence and free their psyche of all apprehensions in order to prove that they too, like men, exist as an autonomous individual with an identity of their own. Jaya undergoes emotional and psychological torture that stems from male chauvinism and social discrimination. Although she plays the role allotted to her to the best possible extent yet emotional and psychological composure and contentment have disappeared from her life. She tries to hunt for self-fulfilment and delight through submission to the established norms of male-dominated society but the urge for self-actualisation remains insatiate. She ultimately commands a voice of her own by writing the novel. At the end of the story we find that Jaya questions herself and tries to find the answers, she concludes:

"What have I achieved by this writing? The thought occurs to me again as I look at the neat pile of papers. Well, I've achieved this. I'm not afraid any more. The panic has gone."<sup>v</sup>

Jaya eventually realizes that she herself has been reason behind her torment. She never tried to question the socially established view of a happy marriage which is rooted in absolute compliance of the women with male-dominated vision of a happy nuptial bond. This consciousness of her is visible in

her ruminations during her solitary moments at the Dadar flat:

"While studying Sanskrit drama, I'd learnt with a sense of outrage that its rigid rules did not permit women characters to speak Sanskrit. They had to use prakrit-language that had sounded to my ears like a baby's lisp. The anger I'd felt then comes back to me when I realize what I've been doing all these years. I have been speaking prakrit myself."<sup>vi</sup>

The metamorphosis in Jaya's persona was very subtle. It wasn't of a kind of a revolution. It was rather in the form of very silent insinuations of denial of subjugation. For instance, when they reached the Dadar flat, Jaya went in front to open the door rather than observing the generally expected behaviour of staying back and handing over the keys to Mohan; thus establishing that she thenceforth had emancipated herself from the mental subordination to the husband.

"It was not he who relinquished his authority, it was I who no longer conceded any authority to him."<sup>vii</sup>

Finally the study upholds that emancipation of women from male subjugation and gender bigotry can be realized only if women confront their assigned roles and appreciate their individuality. There is no other path heading to liberation of women from the social apparatus of patriarchy except for female self-actualisation. However, Jaya finally keeps hope on changes. She decides to give another chance to Mohan:

"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. And if there is anything I know now it is this: life has always to be made possible."<sup>viii</sup>

### **3. Conclusion**

To conclude, Jaya presents the quintessence of a modern woman who swings between her traditional and modern roles. She wants to break all social shackles and actualise her individuality, but, at the same time, she cannot altogether break all relations. She also realizes that the subjugation was not inflicted upon her by her

husband, but it was a result of her own silence and unquestioned submission. She therefore decides to break her long borne silence and to voice her feelings strongly. The realization helps her choose not to run away from the existing situation which was suffocating, but to accept the life as it is and to live as a rather intrepid and sanguine woman of transformation by taking hold of her existence.

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<sup>ii</sup> Ibid p. 143

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid p. 12

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid p. 13

<sup>v</sup> Ibid p. 191

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid p. 192-93

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid p. 9

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid p. 193

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