



' Seeking The Self ' in Shashi Deshpande's ' That Long Silence '

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In the context of contemporary Indian writing in English, Shashi Deshpande is one of the most understated yet confident voices exploring the individual and universal predicaments through the female psyche. In her 'Quest for the human self within the women'. Deshpande lays bare their trials and tribulations under the impact of the conflicting influence of tradition and modernity. Through myth and modernity, Shashi Deshpande has emerged as an icon for the younger writers. Her work reflects the whole gamut of Indian cultural issues, the thickly populated world of her novels, the working out of relationship within families and marriages, the fine insight into human character as well as her boldness in the treatment of sex and class barriers which have been the major concern of her fiction.

Her work provides a pointer to the catatonic status of woman in the tradition bound, male dominated middle class society of contemporary India, and concentrates on the struggle of women to overcome the problems. Her feminine perspective does not entirely oppose the patriarchy. Men and women analyze their failures and problems in order to work their way out of the state of crisis.

Shashi Deshpande's novels explore the patriarchal social set up of India and her protagonist located within this social reality, reach out to define the 'self' in an attempt to free themselves. Shashi Deshpande's sure footed literary voice explores predicaments through the female psyche. Her novels reveal the inability of the woman to speak and the positive movement is always the movement towards the breaking of 'That Long Silence'. That Long Silence reemphasizes Deshpande's passion for these issues as she weaves a simple ingenious tale of the contradictions of male ambivalence and cruelty, female stoicism and shame and human desire and desertion. Talking about 'That Long Silence' a book about the silencing of one half of humanity. A lifetime of introspection went into the novel, the closest to me personally; the thinking and ideas in this are close to my own.

The narrator of this novel is a writer for whom the stripping of accumulated layers of self-deceptive constructions yields the present fiction. Jaya, the narrator-writer, commences the novel with an acknowledgement of the ruthless process entailed in the self-revelations of the autobiography mode she employs. In 'That Long Silence' Shashi Deshpande reveals the picture of an ordinary middle class woman.

The protagonist, Jaya lives with her husband Mohan and her two children Rahul and Rati. The author describes the travails of being a middle class woman educated yet confined to restrictions posed by the orthodox society. The novel centers on the inner perception of 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 novel is shrewdly presented by Shashi Deshpande as Jaya's own series of memories, a first person account of both her past and present life, written only for herself, and thus as a direct and truthful statement on one's woman; introspective analysis, her concrete existences. Shashi Deshpande reveals the consciousness of Jaya, the protagonist through an exposition of her mind in the process of thinking, feeling and reacting to the stimuli of the moment and situation. Playing the role of an ideal wife Jaya follows her husband into exile. They shift into their old small flat in Dadar. In the silence of this flat and in the absence of her usual domestic routine, Jaya broods over her situation and fondly recalls her past. The move out of Dadar flat destabilizes the fictions upon which Jaya had based her life till then, and wrote herself in the roles of mother and wife.

The Dadar flat becomes the inspiration for further intrusions upon Jaya and mock her precarious self-constructions. Though, Jaya is a writer, she has not achieved true self-expression. As Jaya goes over the past, she realizes in how many different ways Mohan has pushed her and appropriated her space and her relationship, and also in how many different ways he has limited her. Even on most crucial domestic issues, she was silent.

Veena Sheshadri aptly comments:

"One ends up by wondering whether Jaya has imposed that long silence on herself not out of a sense of duty or to emulate the ideal Hindu woman of the ages gone by, but in order to camouflage the streaks of ugliness within her".

Jaya silently recollects how her husband gave her a new name 'Sahasini' on her wedding day. Though she remains silent she does not use the name Sahasini she remains Jaya, the name given to her by her father meaning victory. Sahasini meaning-, "a soft smiling placid motherly woman", is not accepted by Jaya. However even when hurt at being accused she stays dumb and also wonders -"Oh God, why could not I speak? Why could not I say something? I could say nothing". Her husband described woman being treated very cruelly by their husbands and he calls it strength.

Jaya comments, "He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fires, but I saw despair..... I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender" (P. 36). When she scrutinizes her life closely, she realizes that to achieve this state of fulfillment as wife, she had deliberately suppressed many traits of her personality. However, Jaya does not suppress her writing career and her relationship with Kamat, her neighbor at one time.

In the early years, Jaya's writing was a matter of pride for her husband Mohan. But a particular story about, "a couple, a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body" (144) makes Mohan intolerant. Jaya's imaginative writ-

ing is condemned by her husband who asks-, 'How could you have done it'. How can you reveal our lives to the world in this way?' Jaya loses her identity as a writer; she compromises with writing silly things for a woman's magazine which does not satisfy her intellectual hunger. She had neglected her real self but now at the end, she decides to come out of the nest because life has become intolerable for her. She suffers from alienation and mutters in anguish, "I was Jay. But I had been Suhasini as well, the Suhasini who was distinct from Jaya, a softy smiling placid motherly woman. A woman who coped." (p. 16)

The protagonist Jaya had to suppress her emotions as Mohan warns her. "My mother never raised her voice against my father, however badly he behaved to her". Another striking trait of Jaya's personality which comes into conflict with her role as wife and mother is her association with Kamt, a widower, who live in an apartment above Jaya's flat at Dadar. An advertiser by profession, Kamat analyses Jaya's problems objectively. Her relationship with Kamt, which is never very precisely defined in the novel. This relationship imparts an inner fulfillment to Jaya which her relationship with Mohan had failed to provide.(p.94) She feels physically attracted to Kamat but she felt that by "the equally over-whelming certainty of my mind that I could not do so". Even when Kamt dies, she does not pay homage to him, remains silent as it might have resulted in threatening her marriage.

Jaya surrenders to Mohan without revolting silently. She wills to his will. She never "Yes" when her husband asks her whether he has hurt her. She endures everything, tolerated all kinds of masculine oppression silently in the emotion that governed her behavior to him, there was still the habit of being a wife of sustaining and supporting him.

Jaya in desperate mood says, "There is no communication between me and Mohan-". Nothing between us..... Nothing between me and Mohan. We like together but there had been emptiness between us. Even since she gets married she has done nothing but wait." Further she says, "Waiting for Mohan

to come home, waiting for children to be born, for them to start school, waiting for them to come home, waiting for the milk, the servant, the lunch carrier man". The sexual life of Jaya too gives her no satisfaction. Unable to endure, 'A silent wordless lovemaking', she says, 'I could stay apart from him without a twinge, and I could sleep with him too, without desire'. Mohan's indifference after sex often fills her with a sense of loneliness and of illusion.

Towards the end of the novel, Jaya emerges as bold and mature woman. She has decided not to look for clues in Mohan's face and then, "give him the answer I know he wants". At length she decides to break that silence by putting down on paper that entire she had suppressed in her seventeen years silence that long erases the silence and asserts herself. "I will have to speak, to listen; I will have to erase the silence between us". She breaks the silence, writes her story and concludes. The Long Silence which had reduced her to fragments is broken at last. She realizes that fragmentation of "SELF" is not possible. "I am not afraid.....any more. The panic has gone.

The novel is beautifully summed up thus, "The novel which is more a woman's novel than any other novel of Deshpande's and which is full of minute details of everyday life, the hopes and dreams and the insignificant happenings, end on a positive note. The crisis has forced a whole lot of rethinking. And there is a new beginning. Jaya has recovered her lost self and along with that her capacity to dream. She has decided to get rid of the silence which women have lived with for ages, 'That Long Silence'. So the title of this novel 'That Long Silence' remains a muted and essentially sympathetic treatment of the problem of marital relationship, credible balance between the sexes'. For a writer, the most significant thing is to find a voice and the writer Deshpande through her fiction breaks the silence of women and redeems them from their linguistic exile. All her women characters, Indu, Saru, Jaya, Urmila and Sumi reorganize themselves in new kinship patterns with every change, and within these changing patterns, they revolt against the tradition and in their quest for liberation.

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