

WOMAN AT THE CROSS ROADS: A STUDY OF SHASHI DESHPANDE'S THAT LONG SILENCE

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Abstract

Indian fiction in English has a formidable line of women novelists from Kamala Markandaya to Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande is one of the brightest stars in this august galaxy of Indian women writers who in her various works has depicted the contemporary middle class women's outer and inner world with remarkable acute insight. The present study is an attempt to show how the multi-layered 'silence' is used by her protagonist as a strategy to survive, understand and realize her identity and self-respect, as also to establish and assert her status, role and contribution in the domestic and social domains. That Long Silence is a modern novel, which won her the Sahitya Academy award in 1990, revolves around its central protagonist Jaya, who is in search for her self identity in a tradition bound society. The present paper is an honest attempt to show how patriarchy hampers woman's assertion and tries to oppress her in each and every possible way; and how a woman projects herself as a subject and refuses to live her life in a servile manner. The paper beautifully traces the journey of Jaya, the protagonist from suppression to self-realization.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Silence, Suppression, Self-realization



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Introduction

Right from the Ancient time, India has been a male-dominated culture. Indian women were surrounded by so many prejudices, conventions and traditions. She was considered as an 'inanimate object'. She was always supposed to be placid, gentle, patient, submissive. But, with the change of time and advent of western education and culture the Indian woman has come out as a 'new individual'. Now, the women have started to come out of their image. **Deshpande bares the subtle processes of oppression and gender differentiation operative within the insitution of the family and the male-centered Indian society at large. Deshpande's feminism does not uproot the woman from her background but tries to expose the different ideological elements that shape her. These include social and psychological factors such as, woman's subordinate position in the family**

and her restricted sexuality. The author seeks to expose the ideology by which a woman is trained to play her subservient role in society. In her conversation with Gita Viswanath, Shashi Deshpande opines, "**we are shaped by our childhood and our parents**".(1) The male domination in woman's life is a natural phenomenon in a patriarchal society and the consequent relegation of woman to a secondary position seemed to have prompted Indian women writers to take up the cause of women. They stressed the need for women to break free from the shackles of their traditional position and see their own need for self-fulfilment as more important than the duty of sacrificing themselves for their husbands and children. The new woman voices a note of resentment as they feel stifled under the oppressive restrictions. She has her own changed notions of life. It is true that women's education, her rights of citizenship and other legal rights and above all her gainful employment and economic independence have tremendously influenced her outlook and conjugal relationship and attitude towards marriage.

Jaya understands that a holistic yet resilient approach towards life is necessary, "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 to know now it is this: life has always to be made possible."(TLS,193) 2 Her decision to cease to be a passive partner and overcome the turbulence in her relationship with Mohan leads her to an uninhibited self-identification.

The novel clearly spells out the faith that a woman's desire to succeed like an individual does not negate her desire for love, marriage and domesticity. A balanced and purposeful life is not a utopian fancy for a woman if she liberates herself from the stereotyped conditioning of the society and is not dependent on the male presence to authenticate her thoughts and deeds at every step. **That Long Silence aesthetically communicates the essence of the creed of feminism along with contemporary realities.**

But today, women are no longer passive characters who easily conform to the conventions of a society. Now they rebel, they reconcile showing that if a woman can be 'Sita', she can be 'Durga' as well. Even our History

shows that Savitri, Damyanti, Shakuntala, Draupadi, were not passive, submissive and servile. They all had resisted the patriarchal norms in their own ways.

The real meaning of freedom in the context of Indian women is the freedom from age-old male-domination and male-ordained social and cultural traditions. Patriarchy had compelled woman to live in 'servitude'. She had been denied access to education, equal rights and the 'freedom to act and choose'. Over the past few decades a surprisingly change has come over and women have started to contribute significantly to life and literature. They have started questioning of age-old conventions and exploring their identity and their fellow beings respectively. Deshpande consistently explores the nature of the female world and reconstructs the suppressed records of female experience. She constructs contexts, representing different facets of the trapped female psyche, and attempts to transcend its boundaries. These narratives function as modes of women's experience underlining its resistance and simultaneously subverting it, which opens up a space where the, "marginal comes into being and retains its difference".³

Shashi Deshpande characters are modern, educated, career oriented middle-class married women, who are sensitive to the changing times and circumstances. Though her women protagonists are crushed under patriarchal norms but they never think about flouting the sacred institution of marriage. Instead, they make clever strategic use of their 'multi-layered silences' in order to achieve their individuality. 'Silences' is a mysteriously fascinating word which implies different layers and meanings of absence of speech in relation to different categories of people and in different circumstances. 'Silence' of the oppressed and the marginalized is completely different from the silence of the privileged and the powerful and so is the difference in the silences of different categories and segments of society. The different nuances of long and oppressive silence, when peeled off in relation to lives and situations of women, reveal an altogether different world- a world of tyranny, a world of suppression and repression, a feeling of loss, pain, rebellion, confrontation, redefining and re-visioning the equations and relations of power and much more including the myriad attempts at affirmation and realization of self.

Her novels are about women trying to understand themselves, their history, their roles and their place in this

society, and above all their relationship with others... In all my novels.. I have rejected stereotypes and requisitioned the myths which have so shaped the image of women, even the self image of women, in this country. Beauvoir's statement, "**one is not born a woman, one becomes one**"⁴ has a special relevance to India where conventions, religious and social taboos dictate and inhibit woman's individuality.

What is remarkable about the whole aspect of using silence as a strategy is that her central woman protagonists might appear to be compromising with their lot in the form of seeking security within the domains of the family or bending to the dictates of their husbands or fathers in the family, or silently bearing up with all the trials and tribulations of life, but seen in the larger and correct perspective, there is no compromise as such and their silence speaks so loud and clear through their thought processes that at the end of the day, they are completely different human beings. *That Long Silence* (1989) is a modern novel, revolving around its central protagonist Jaya, who is in search for her 'self' in a tradition bound society. She is a convent educated and fluent English speaking woman and having great literary sensibility. The name Jaya which suggests 'Victory' is nowhere applicable in her life. She has to lead a traditional role of an 'obedient and ideal wife'. She has been raised with listening to stories about Sita, Savitri, Damyanti and Draupadi, depicting the sharing of their husband's trials and tribulations in difficult times. Like these legendary women she also follows her husband Mohan dutifully.

Since her childhood, she has always been reprimanded for being an 'inquisitive child'. But she was always supported by her father . Throughout the novel, she feels herself "trapped" and craved for the quest of self and identity. After her marriage she tried hard to fit herself in the role of an ideal wife. She transformed herself from an aggressive, inquisitive being to a meek, docile, nervous, submissive and passive woman. In spite of being a wife and a mother of two children, she suffered from isolation. Mohan failed to understand her emotional self. The novel traces the journey of Jaya from being a passive character to become a confident human being. She rejects the traditional images of Sita, Savitri and Draupadi and instead, describes married couple as 'a pair of bullock yoked together'. The novel revolves around the silence of Jaya and her suppressed feeling. She always suppressed her literary talent and gives priority to her role as a

good wife. Mohan's attitude towards her writing skills, completely shows the relegation of woman to a secondary position. She is always made to believe that the aim of her life is to make her husband happy. "Remember, Jaya, the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you." (TLS,138) She was given a new name 'Suhasini' after her marriage. After her marriage, she has to shed her real 'self' and like an ideal house wife 'waiting for him' has become an important part of her daily activities. She says:

Ever since I got married, I had done nothing but wait, 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 tiffin carrier. (TLS,30)

She has no right to complaint about anything. Her romantic ideas of love shattered after her marriage with Mohan. As Simon de Beauvoir says, "One is not born but rather becomes a woman" is apt for Jaya's condition. She always prefers to be a silent one rather than contradicting with Mohan's interest. She never told him about her liking for ads whenever they went for a movie fearing of being labeled as 'a woman of poor taste'. It would not be wrong saying that she, herself marginalized her position by refusing to enter into the circle which society had drawn around Mohan. She becomes 'Voiceless' because she never tries to voice it beyond her imagination. She says:

I never asked him how he did it...I was an ideal wife...(Like Gandhari) I bonded my eyes tightly. I didn't want to know anything. It was enough for me that we moved to Bombay, that we could send Rahul and Rati to good schools...have things we needed... (TLS,61-62)

After her first quarrel with Mohan, she comes to know that anger makes a woman 'Unwomanly'. 'My mother never raised her voice against my father however badly he behaved to her, he had said to me once'. (TLS,83) An ideal woman is always expected to be attractive in order to please their husbands. Since their childhood it is incorporated in their minds that they have to look beautiful to seek their husbands attention. But, in spite of doing all this, she fails to get love from Mohan for whom the sex is only a mechanical process having no room for emotional bonding. It is always considered shameful on a woman's part to be 'sexually aroused.' She has no identity of herself apart from being someone's

mother or someone's daughter and someone's wife. She is always made to feel subdued whenever she tries to assert her individuality. It is considered as a crime if she ever tries to think about herself.

The protagonist Jaya realizes that in order to attain self-hood, a woman must transcend silence, negation and self-alienation.

Jaya understands that a holistic yet resilient approach towards life is necessary, "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 to know now it is this: life has always to be made possible."(TLS, 193) She decides to express her real feelings, her anger; her resentment through her writings. She realized her own contribution towards her oppression and understood that her silence is responsible for her failure. As she admits that:

It's not just that life is cruel, but that in the very process of our birth we submit to life's cruelty. I had learnt it at last no questions, no retorts, only silence. (TLS,143)

Jaya performs the role of an ideal wife and a good mother whole heartedly but her loyalty as well as her identity receives a great blow when Mohan is found indulged in some wrong practices in his office, due to which he had to leave his job. Jaya broke down when Mohan tries to absolve himself from this crime by saying that it was due to her and children that he slipped from the right track to give them more comforts. Jaya feels tormented that she always subdued her real self, her identity and her real character in order to appease her husband. She always remained under the sense of 'fear' of losing her house, her husband and her children. Mohan stifles both the woman and creative genius in her.

Vrinda Nabar points out: "Whereby the woman/mother eventually sees her imprisonment as empowering her by conferring on her the attributes of mother and wife. She sees these largely in relation to the men in the domestic power hierarchy. She thus becomes a symbol of what men later expect their women to be. She is imprinted on the children's consciousness as sublime sufferer, selfless slave, tireless worker for her family's comfort and happiness."⁵

It is clarified that any fragmentation of the self in the form of being a dependent wife and an independent woman is just 'not possible' and that 'life has

always to be made possible' (TLS,193), reconcile her to the necessity of bringing about a change in life.

Conclusion:

So, the paper has focused on the how patriarchal system indoctrinate women to change themselves according to social norms. This society never give them a chance to groom and assert themselves in their marriages, treat them as a commodity' and an object for satisfying their sexual urges. But it is shown that how a woman can find herself and assert her individuality by shedding her all fears. This is what the protagonist also does in the novel and projects herself as a subject and refuses to live her life in a servile manner. She decides to take harness of her life in her own hands and able to complete her journey towards self realization. self-reliable and self-dependent. That Long Silence portrays a suffering and deprivations of feminine life by representing such characters as stereotyped representatives of traditional womanhood. Their emotional and intellectual liberation does not negate the possibility of nurturing and enjoying various relationships which the society and the biological nature have imposed upon them. These women are on a new road to carve a niche of their own. In this novel, Deshpande uses silence as a strategic tool to resist patriarchy. The characters in the novel don't waste their energy in questioning or blaming others; rather they use their will power for attaining their self identity.

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