

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THAT LONG SILENCE*

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## ABSTRACT

There have been numerous Indian writers dealing with the feminine conditions in India. Shashi Deshpande is one such writer who takes interest in the challenging conditions faced by the females. Though she is not a 'propagandist' feminist, still most of her works have female protagonists at the centre of the novel. This paper makes a study of her Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel, *That Long Silence* (1988), and its protagonist's (Jaya) search for an identity for herself. The study reveals that though Jaya is having all material comforts of life, even then she craves for a fulfilment. During a period of crisis, she realises that this fulfilment would be achieved only if she 'lets out' her inner self, and stops simulating the role of an 'ideal' wife and mother. To speak for oneself, and assert one's views is the first step to assert one's identity. This is what Jaya realises at the end of the novel. The present paper shows her journey from being an escapist, in the beginning, to one who is ready to take a stand for herself and face the upcoming situations.

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Shashi Deshpande is an award winning Indian novelist. She is the second daughter of famous Kannada dramatist and writer Shriranga. She is also a winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *That Long Silence* (1988). Most of her works have centred around women, and their encounter with self as well as their quest for identity in this male-dominated world. Her women characters try to subvert the traditional model of a man-centred world where the women are always marginalized and pushed towards the periphery.

Deshpande's women characters are not the uneducated and under-privileged women. Rather,

her protagonists are women of good education and cultured upbringing. It seems natural that an uneducated and naive person can be easily exploited and suppressed. But the story becomes different when a well educated and professional woman is succumbed to oppression by her male counterparts. Because in this situation both are standing on the same plane and are equals. Still the female characters yields to the domination of the males – be it her father, brother, husband, or a colleague. This very unreasonable and illogical oppression becomes the dominant theme of Shashi Deshpande's novels. Deshpande portrays a very

realistic picture of the middle class educated women, who though apparently independent, are still facing the confusion, convictions, and problems of adjustment; thereby feeling frustrated and bearing that long silence which has been their lot for many centuries. Most of Deshpande's heroines are educated women who struggle and break out of the family mould to choose their own way of living life. All her novels deal with the women's psyche and feminine consciousness. As a writer, Shashi Deshpande seems interested in highlighting the secondary position occupied by women and their degradation which is inevitable in an oppressive male-dominated society. She peeps into the state and conditions of the present day women who is intelligent and ambitious, aware of her capabilities but is thwarted under the weight of male chauvinism. Her protagonists, myriad and specific at the same time, provide an insight into the feminist perspective – women who are ready to take up the challenges bravely after introspecting their state of misery, and finally coming out finer, stronger and balanced personalities who are ready to face the world once again with renewed energy and confidence.

*That Long Silence* (1988) is the story of Jaya Kulkarni, an apparently satisfied housewife. Having married a responsible man, Mohan, and blessed with two children, Rahul and Rati, and a comfortable home and material comforts, she seems to have nothing more to ask for in life. Placing Jaya in such a comfortable situation the writer wants to show that still there can be crises in the life of a woman. For seventeen long years, Jaya successfully manages to suppress her feelings, thinking that it is more important to be a good wife than a good writer. She perhaps would have remained subservient to her husband Mohan for the rest of her life if she hadn't received the sudden blow to the carefully constructed edifice of her family. Her husband is charged of being involved in a shady deal and is compelled to take leave from office till the enquiry is conducted. However, he is relieved that the children are away on a tour with the family friends. He expects that his wife Jaya would unhesitatingly accompany him during his period of crisis. Jaya, playing the role of an unquestioning wife, fulfils her husband's expectations.

The real crisis in her life doesn't occur due to her husband's temporary suspension from his job, rather it occurs because of her idleness throughout the day. Till now she was playing the role of a mother and a wife who was busy with the daily household chores, and trying to satisfy and fulfil every minor duties expected from a housewife as well as a mother. But now her husband was suspended and her children were away on a tour. She, thus, realised that as Mohan was deprived of his routine, so was she:

There was nothing he needed, so there was nothing for me to do, nothing I had to do. My own career as a wife was in jeopardy. (Deshpande 24-25)

It was this 'idleness', this 'purposelessness' in her life that actually created the crisis and started disturbing her. This purposelessness compelled her to think in a recapitulative mood, that what kind of life has she been living till now. She has passed seventeen long years long years in mere drudgery, in washing clothes, ironing them, cleaning the table, the windows, shining the glass pane, spending a lot of time thinking what to cook, which school her children should go – repeating these chores meaninglessly, everyday, like Sisyphus, who kept on rolling the stone up the mountain, and when it fell down kept on repeating the task throughout his life.

She comprehended the situation and saw the reality, that the hustle bustle of her life till now was a mere illusion. Actually, it was the hustle bustle of Mohan's life in which she was only a participant. She compares her situation with the example of sitting in a stationary train. The noise, commotion, movement makes you feel that your train is moving with full speed. But the sudden silence outside makes you realise that it was the other train that was moving. Thus, Jaya realises that her own life hasn't moved any further. It was Mohan's life that was gathering speed. She was just being a part of illusion:

Your own movement has been only an illusion. You are right where you were all along. (Deshpande 24)

But Jaya felt restless because she took

seventeen years to come out of this illusion. And facing this reality has brought along with the feeling of 'nothingness'. Jaya was not 'Jaya'; she was just a 'wife' and a 'mother'. She could not etch up an individuality of hers. Rather, she became a stereotype – someone like "Mehra's wife, and Gupta's wife, and Yadav's wife, and Raman's wife" (Deshpande 96).

A close scrutiny of her life, as gleaned from the retrospective account of her marriage, reveals that to achieve this stage of fulfilment as wife, Jaya had systematically suppressed many traits of her personality that could not fit her role as a wife and mother. Among many others, the two most striking things that she had to suppress, in order to be a stereotype 'wife', were her writing career, and her relationship with Kamat, her neighbour at one time in the Dadar flat. Jaya, the protagonist of the novel, was a writer by profession. Once Jaya wrote a story about a husband-wife's relationship where the husband could not approach to his wife except through her body. Jaya got a prize for this story, but Mohan felt insulted by the story. The reason was that, he felt that people would relate this man and woman to be Mohan and Jaya and thus their marital relationship would have to face public humiliation. Mohan behaved in such a way that Jaya had to stop writing –

And looking at his stricken face, I had been convinced I had done him wrong. And I had stopped writing after that. (Deshpande 144)

Moreover Jaya never made any attempt to explain her point of view – what she thought or felt. She never tried to make Mohan understand the difference between a fictional story and the reality. Mohan was a common man who hadn't the taste the aesthetic beauty of a piece of work, but Jaya is being a writer could have helped Mohan. But, as usual, instead of speaking and explaining her opinions, Jaya preferred silence. Jaya was more interested in her career as a 'wife' than as a 'writer'

. . . I had been scared – scared of hurting Mohan, scared of jeopardising the only career I had, my marriage. (Deshpande 144)

And thus she retreated from being a realist writer and opted for the light, humorous pieces on the travails of middle class housewives in a column entitled 'Seeta'. These stories received positive responses from all sides – Mohan liked it, the editors loved and so had the readers. And through these stories Jaya got the means through which she could withdraw herself from facing the reality; from writing about such women who might resemble in some or other way Mohan's mother or aunt, or her mother or her aunt.

However, her neighbour Kamat always tried to show Jaya the mirror, to make her see and identify the 'real' Jaya. Kamat is an important character in the novel, because he is the one who made conscious efforts in helping Jaya to carve out an identity for herself. He is an influence as well as an inspiration for Jaya. He criticised Jaya for underestimating herself. Kamat told Jaya time and again to take herself seriously and to express herself fully in her creative works. But Jaya wasn't ready for the change. Kamat mocked at Jaya's fake popularity as a writer of the 'Seeta' column. However, Jaya kept on writing other stuff also side by side, but under a false name, so that no close ones feel insulted or humiliated. But all these writings were continuously rejected by the editors and publishers. Jaya got angry and asked Kamat the reason of such a rejection. Kamat instantly sees her anger replied:

. . . Why didn't you use that anger in your story? There's none of it here. There isn't even a personal view, a personal vision. I'll tell you what's really wrong with your story. It's too restrained. Spew it out. Why are you holding it in? (Deshpande 147)

But Jaya unable to respond logically mumbles out the words which had been unconsciously fed into her. She blurted out:

A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There's no room for anger in my life . . . . There's only order and routine – today I have to change the sheets; tomorrow, scrub the bathrooms; the day after clean the fridge. . . (Deshpande 147 – 148)

This situation of crisis and complication,

however, starts resolving when Jaya goes through a period of self introspection. This period starts when she comes to Dadar flat. Detached from her children and her usual way of life in her luxurious apartment in Church Gate, Jaya asks herself, whether the kind of life she has been living till now, should at all be accepted? She starts reviewing her life and tries to find out the loopholes in her marriage. Jaya realises that she had been an introvert in her marital relationship. She escaped from situations of confrontations as long as she could. She got many opportunities to speak up and take a stand. But she didn't. She intentionally took the 'silence' upon her. Because that was an easier way out. This was her greatest drawback. She had become an escapist. Till now she was blaming Mohan for her present situation. But after a retrospection of past life, she realised that it was not Mohan, who made her suppress her feelings and desires; rather she herself was the accused.

And so I had crawled back into my hole. I had felt safe there. Comfortable. Unassailable. And so I had stopped writing. It hadn't been Mohan's fault at all. . . . Mohan had not forced me to do that kind of writing. I'd gone into it myself. With my eyes wide open. (Deshpande 148)

Mohan was no antagonist to Jaya. He always asked her opinions, but it was she who always replied with an affirmative. She might have at least tried to speak what she felt. Then there would have been chances of a different situation. Whenever Mohan showed interest in Jaya's opinion and said, "What do you say Jaya?" she tried to read his face and give him an answer that he wanted :

'What do you say, Jaya?'

Until today this has been a rhetorical question. I have looked at his face for clues and then given him the answer I know he wants. (Deshpande 192)

Until now she was happy in living this life of drudgery, boredom, purposelessness and nothingness – this life of suppression of one's real self. Because if a person gives his/her opinion, he/she is bound to take responsibility for that opinion. But Jaya, leading the life of an escapist, took pleasure in retreating from responsibilities.

But I said nothing. It was so much simpler to say nothing. So much less complicated. (Deshpande 99)

Anyways, after a self-analysis and examining of her own thoughts and feelings, she realises her mistakes. Jaya finally understands that to assert one's identity, one has to speak.

But it is no longer possible for me. If I have to plug that 'hole in the heart', I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us. (Deshpande 192)

Moreover, she would have to cast off her superfluous identities, so that the 'real' Jaya, the individualist, may come forward and carve out a fresh and new identity for herself. Through etching out the 'real' Jaya, Shashi Deshpande very aptly puts forth her idea of the 'new woman' – a woman with a refreshed identity. The novelist, through Jaya, tries to illuminate the idea of a woman who is capable of taking her decisions, her responsibilities, and liberating herself from 'that long silence'. She is the 'new woman' who has been given the knowledge, and now the choice is hers. She must do as she desires.

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