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## QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S "THAT LONG SILENCE"

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of my research article is to study Jaya's quest for identity in Shashi Deshpande's novel, *That Long Silence*. The novelist focuses on the theme of gender-differentiation and domination of the male categories, along with the silence and surrender to which a woman is subjected in our society. The author reveals an intriguing image of an ordinary middle class educated woman namely Jaya, a housewife, who is recurrently perceived to be in search of her own identity. In this novel Shashi Deshpande gives us an extraordinarily accomplished portrayal of a woman trying to erase a 'long silence' begun in childhood and rooted in herself and in the constraints of her life.

**Key words:** Quest for Identity, Alienation, Husband, Woman, Housewife, Children

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most accomplished contemporary Indian women writers in English. She was born in Dharwad, Karnataka in 1938. She is the second daughter of the famous dramatist 'Shriranga'. She received an English education at the protestant mission school in Karnataka. She was exposed to and influenced by British classical texts at a very young age. She studied Economics in Bombay (now Mumbai) and graduated in Law from Bangalore (now Bengaluru). Later, she did an MA in English Literature. After marriage, when she was in Bombay, she did a course in journalism and worked as a journalist for the magazine 'Onlooker'. She started publishing short stories in magazines like Femina and Eve's Weekly. Her first collection of stories Legacy was published in 1978. Till date Shashi Deshpande has published seven novels - *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *If I*

*Die Today* (1982), *Come Up And Be Dead* (1983), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Vine* (1992) and *A Matter of Time* (1996). "Her novels eclectically employ the post-modern technique of deconstructing patriarchic culture and customs, and revealing these to be man-made constructs" (Atrey, Mukta and Kirpal 15). Human relations form the warp and woof of Shashi Deshpande's novels; her greatness is revealed in the treatment of human relationships for a deeper probing of the human heart.

Deshpande began her literary career in 1970, but she shot into prominence when her novel, *That Long Silence* was published in 1988 by the British Feminist Publishing House, Virago. It won Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990. It is a matter of noteworthy that this novel was translated into French and Dutch languages. The novelist presents a sensitive portrayal of Indian Womanhood treading

the labyrinthine paths of human mind with a rare gift for sharp psychological insights into the subtleties of the human female, supported with rich evocative, unassuming and unpretentious style.

P.D.Nimsarkar rightly puts it: "Deshpande is concerned with people, the women and their relationship with others, like husbands, parents, children, and sons and daughters. She has faithfully tried to construct womanhood in the contemporary context, society and the world" (P.D.Nimsarkar 114). She reflects in her writings a realistic picture of contemporary middle-class woman. They find themselves trapped in the roles assigned to them by society and attempt to assert their individuality. They confront their husbands, and revolt against their family traditions in quest of freedom. They do try to redefine human relationship and behaviour. They choose to remain with their families but reject the roles prescribed to them by the society. They try to achieve self-identity and independence within the context of marriage. She concerns herself with the plight of the modern Indian woman trying to understand herself and to preserve her identity as wife, mother and, above all, as a human being. Her unequivocal feminist stand has got her a distinctive place in the contemporary Indian English fiction. G. S. Amur rightly observes: "Women's struggle in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and, most important of all, as human being, is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer" (G.S. Amur 10).

## II. Discussion

The very title of the novel, *That Long Silence*, given by Shashi Deshpande, suggests the failure to communicate and assert one's own self. In this novel, she uses first person narrative to unfold the mute tale of Jaya. She delicately delineates the swings of mood, the see-saw moments of joy and despair, the fragments of feelings perceived and suppressed, heart-wringing anguish of the narrator protagonist, Jaya, a housewife and a failed writer. During the period of her quietude the protagonist undertakes a journey towards her own self. She endeavours to search for her own identity which seems to be lost somewhere during seventeen years of her marriage.

Jaya, in the beginning of the novel, confesses that she is going to reveal her real self. In order to do so, she alienates herself from her real self that is veiled under the taciturn attitude of Jaya. She moves back and forth in time to recall her submissive and docile self. Just like a staunch feminist she, as mentioned by 'Satbir Kaur':

seeks to discover the female author's quest for empowerment through self-expression by escaping the controlling authority of the male in the realm of social/sexual power" and examines the 'double colonization' of women under imperial and patriarchic condition. She also dares to "expose, question and challenge the age-old traditions and prejudices in male-dominated society" (Satbir Kaur 15- 20).

Shashi Deshpande occupies a coveted place in the annals of contemporary women novelists, who concern themselves with the problems of women and their quest for identity. Most of her women characters are able to transcend their identity crisis by analyzing their childhood and the process of upbringing. She explores conflict between the tradition and modernity in relation to women in the middle class society. Though Deshpande doesn't like to be labelled as a feminist writer she mostly focuses on the issues relating to the 'rainbow coalition of rights, desires, agendas, struggles, victories', speaking for all the women (Arshia Sattar 1993). Shashi Deshpande's remarkable achievement of the novel that it is an expression of the silence of modern Indian middle class house wife. Most of the writers turned women into non-entities and created unreal sentimental romances and finally succumbed to the temptation of feminist ideology.

The novel tells the story of an Indian housewife, Jaya, who maintains silence throughout her life. The novel centres round the inner perception of Jaya, 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" (TLS 3). The novel ends with her resolve to speak, to break her silence. The novel opens with Jaya and her husband Mohan shifting from their well-settled, comfortable house to their old house in Dadar,

Bombay. They shift into their old apartment in order to escape the scene as Mohan has been caught in business malpractice and an inquiry is in progress. Luckily for them, their children, Rati and Rahul, are away on a tour with their family friends, and if all ends well, they need not even know about the disgrace. For the first time she looks at her life and attempts to decide who she really is.

Jaya was born in liberal family. Though she is convent-educated and modern in outlook, she is influenced by the ideal mythological characters like 'Sita', 'Gandhari' and 'Maitrayee'. Her father named her Jaya, which means victory. The name, 'Jaya' symbolizes 'revolt'. He expected her to be courageous, but she can recall how her desires and feelings were suppressed by her own liberal father. During her childhood days she always felt free to voice her opinions piercingly as her grandmother continuously complained and scolded her for her inquisitive nature, and further cautioned her saying that "for everything question for everything a retort what husband can be comfortable with that (TLS 5). She is further cautioned that "a husband is like a sheltering tree" (TLS 137), and that "the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you" (TLS 138). The same spirit exhibited was expressed through tantrums during her adolescent years as well. Jaya herself is puzzled by the transformation: "I'm scared of cockroaches, lizards – almost the stereotype of a woman, nervous, incompetent needing male help and support. But what puzzles me in this: how did I get this way? I'm sure I wasn't always like this" (TLS 76). She loved film music, but her father wanted her to enjoy the classical music of Paluskar and Faiyaz Khan. To him, film music was poor and cheap. Jaya as a child did not revolt but kept quiet. It was the first blow to her identity. Deflated, she experienced a loss of self, and began to keep her feelings and emotions confined to her.

When she leaves her home after getting married, her father advises her to be always good to Mohan and she tries her best to follow his advice meticulously. Her first and only outburst with Mohan, soon after marriage, results in days of Mohan's silence. As a child, she used to get angry very soon. But after her marriage, she tolerated her anger with stoicism. She realized that to Mohan

anger made a woman 'unwomanly'. Since then, she adopts silence as a strategy for leading a smooth life. Despite her marriage to Mohan and subsequently becoming a mother of two children, she was still living in a world of ivory towers.

At the time of her marriage, her husband's people gave her the name 'Suhasini', which means 'a soft, and smiling, motherly woman'. The name Suhasini symbolizes 'submission'. The fact that Jaya was rechristened as 'Suhasini' by her husband on their wedding day flummoxes her, and subsequently she finds herself in search of her own identity. The pseudonym under which she operates as a writer further complicates the issue. Jaya rejects the name Suhasini and it is significant as a manifestation of her protest against such customs. But her sense of identity is never certain. She is torn between being Jaya herself and Suhasini, the good wife. She is also torn between a self as a writer and another self as a wife and mother. She suffers from alienation and tells like this: "I was Jaya. But I had been Suhasini as well – the Suhasini who was distinct from Jaya, a soft, smiling, placid motherly woman. A woman who coped" (TLS 16). Through the process of reliving the past in her mind, Jaya gets the guidance of her future. She feels suffocated and trapped in the traditional Sita's role and refuses to surrender her name, Jaya or Suhasini. But she cannot afford to insist on for long and willingly accepts her new identity of Mohan's wife, of Suhasini. To be an ideal wife and mother, she suppresses her own emotional needs. To love her husband and be happy is a duty she owes to herself and to society.

Having found herself in the conventional role of a woman as a wife and mother, Jaya has stifled her own existential self. Albeit she has a happy home with his well earning husband and two children Rati and Rahul and material comforts, she feels vexed with the monotony and fixed pattern of her life: "Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern and unending monotony" (TLS 4). Her husband could not understand her feelings as a result of which she was torn from within. She is not happy with her married life and she feels that she is alienated.

She describes her marriage as "a pair of bullocks yoked together -- A man and woman

married for seventeen years (TLS 18). Mohan dictates the terms and Jaya follows them silently. She has to suppress her emotions because her husband warns her: "My mother never raised her voice against my father however he badly behaved to her" (TLS 83). Jaya is deeply distressed to know that she is not supposed to raise her voice against her husband though he is at fault. She is asked to walk in the footsteps of her husband's mother which, in turn, makes Jaya feel that she does not have freedom of expression at her house. In her re-assessment of her matrimonial life, she discovers that she is not really happy. Happiness in their conjugal life is merely a hallucination. The fact is that she does not enjoy her individuality. Jaya's maid-servant, Jeeja, says, "Don't forget, he keeps the kumkum on your forehead. What is a woman without that?" (TLS 53). Jaya plays the role of a typical Indian wife at the loss of her real self. Mohan thinks the silence of her mother is her strength. But Jaya feels the silence is the result of despair. Both the perception of Mohan and Jaya are quite contradictory.

There grows a silence between the husband and wife. It creates a gap between them. When Mohan asks Jaya a question, she looks into his face and gives him the answer which he needs or pleases him. She desires to be called 'an ideal wife'. She decides to break her long seventeen years of silence and gives up being a passive and silent partner to Mohan. She also decides to assert herself as an individual. Though she chooses to remain in the family, change has been wrought in her situation. She has come out of the confusing slots allotted to her by the patriarchal society.

Feminists are primarily concerned with the recognition of woman as a being, an autonomous being. They want woman to realize herself through self-analysis. Such a quest for one's own identity forms the theme of Shashi Deshpande's novel, 'That Long Silence'. While relating the story of a couple, Jaya and Mohan, Shashi Deshpande unfolds the power relations in the patriarchal structure, the gender differentiation and the typical travails of a woman struggling to shed her inhibitions and the subordinated self.

Jaya is immensely talented in creative writing. She has given up writing just because Mohan does not like it. A desire of self-expression stimulates every creative writer, and if it is suppressed, it certainly creates asphyxiation and mental agony. Jaya's imaginative writing is castigated by her husband as 'self-revelation'. When she writes a story about a husband and a wife, a husband who could not reach out to wife except through her body. As the story receives the first prize, Jaya's husband gets it too personal and asks, "How could you have done it? How can you reveal us? How can reveal our lives to the world in this way?" (TLS 144). When she writes a true story, Mohan fears that people who read it would think that it is about them. So he wants her instead to write for the newspaper column 'Sita' about the daily routine of a middle-class housewife. Jaya has shaped her life according to the desire of Mohan and loses her own self and identity. She admits:

It hadn't been Mohan's fault at all. And it had been just a coincidence, though it had helped, that just then Mohan had propelled me into that other kind of writing. 'I encouraged you', he had said to me. He was right. But, I went on with my chest-beating out of penitence; Mohan had not forced me to do that kind of writing. I'd gone into it myself with my eyes wide open (TLS 148).

Pashupati Jha and Nagendra Kumar put it: "The most critical moment comes when Mohan tells her that she is his wife of success alone and not of failure. She begins to laugh without control at his allegation. It is too much for Mohan that someone should laugh derisively at his failure and he abruptly leaves home before Jaya could give her explanation." (Pashupati Jha and Nagendra Kumar 155).

Inspired by the feminist movements in the Occident, some Indian women, in their eagerness for freedom, seek to enjoy freedom from everything including from their culture. Shashi Deshpande's women protagonists find freedom not in the western sense but in conformity with the society they live in. It is not meek surrender or submission to circumstances. It is an understanding or sensible

compromise between conformity and non-conformity. Shashi Deshpande does not believe in the theory that 'women are victims'. She believes that the 'dependency syndrome' in women is responsible for their victimization. Her feminism is pro-woman but it is not anti-woman. Jaya looks for happiness and self-fulfillment within the family itself as she knows that the breaking off family bonds would result in her loneliness and unhappiness.

Jaya asks for her individuality to be valued equally along with that of a man. Jaya who is confident of her individuality and hopeful of a change in Mohan's attitude moves beyond the cultural stereotypes. S.P.Swain observes: "The tragic predicament of the Deshpande protagonists is the outcome of male-domination in a patriarchal culture. Their silent suffering is socio-psychic in nature. In her quest for identity, the Deshpande protagonist moves from despair to hope, from self-negation to self-assertion. Her struggle throughout is to attain wholeness, completeness and an authentic selfhood" (S.P.Swain 125).

Another important phase of the novel is that Jaya is able to exchange ideas freely with Kamat, an intelligent, middle-aged widower who was free of the usual male complexes. He helped her to analyze her individuality, and have faith in her capacity. With his help, Jaya is able to find answers to her pending questions which had caused remorse and grief to her. But when Jaya had found him lying dead on the floor of his flat on one of her visits to him, she became panicked and left the place in silence. This is because of friendship between a married woman and another man that is viewed with suspicion and disapproval. Her grandmother cautioned that "the happiness of your husband and home entirely depends on you" (TLS 138). Petrified by the social stigma and the fear of ruining her married life, Jaya flees from the dead Kamat's room and gives up sparing a thought for the dead man. She thinks that she is only Mohan's wife. But, at the same time, she cannot identify herself with her husband. The husband who should be "a sheltering tree" (TLS 137) is found wanting.

At the Dadar flat, she feels forsaken when Mohan angrily leaves the house. She fears the social stigma of a discarded wife. Out of her anguish, she

goes out of her house and in an unconscious state walks aimlessly in the streets of Bombay. However, she manages to come out of her emotional upheaval, for the two nights that she has to herself, and she puts down on paper to write as to how she was suppressed in her seventeen years of silence. As a result, realization dawns on her that she can be a complete woman but not merely by being a wife or a mother. She cannot ignore the other equally important self namely 'a writer'. She decides to give up her role model of Sita. She no longer wants to be a subservient and silent wife. She also decides to give up the 'Sita' column. She bids good bye to her silence, anger and resentment. She realizes the worth of her own self, and decides to give up the pre-fixed norms of the society. Rashmi Gaur observes: "The haunting riddle of the ultimate purpose of a woman's life within the family can be solved when she learns to assess her worth as an individual and shuns to be guided by pre-fixed norms about it." (Rashmi Gaur 179). She even rejects the image of two bullocks yoked together. She also realizes that she herself has become a contributing factor for her own victimization.

When Jaya hears the news that all ends up well in Mohan's office through telegram and Rahul also comes back, she is again in danger of becoming entrapped in the prison-house of marriage. But she decides to break her silence and refuses to be led by the nose. Now she will continue as a writer of her choice, and would not look up to Mohan for an answer he wants. Her life with Mohan appears to her like a meaningless exercise of living together - a fact she admits in a mood of frustration: "We lived together but there had been emptiness between us" (TLS 185).

Mohan's mother and his sister Vimala also are the victims of this institution of matrimony. Vimala suffers from an ovarian tumor for a long time but does not tell anybody about it, and eventually passes away. The same story happens with Mohan's mother. Mohan's mother is tired of producing child after child, but she can't prevent her husband from doing this. She has to fulfill all his whims and fancies even when she is carrying a baby in her abdomen. Finally, fatigued of all this, without telling her

husband, she tries to abort her baby, and in due process dies in that effort.

The only woman character, Geeta, Jaya's brother's wife, appears to be a little bit dissimilar in contrast with other female characters of the novel. She appears to dominate her husband, Dinkar. But quite interestingly, their marriage is a love marriage. Geeta's husband wants to give a flat to Jaya but he is rather apprehensive of what Geeta would say if he gave his flat to Jaya. If Dinkar can't speak candidly about his decision with his wife, can anyone say that his love marriage with Geeta is successful? And, of course, the answer can never be positive.

Towards the end of the novel Jaya emerges as a bold and mature woman who refuses to be merely a shadow of her husband. She strongly makes up her mind to break the silence that has been the why and wherefore behind all her troubles in her life. She says: "I will have to speak, to listen; I will have to ease that silence between us" (TLS 192). Silence is truly a devastating device. It implies shame, guilt, suffering and even death. Self-expression is fundamental human right. Jaya breaks the silence, writes her story and concludes: "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" (TLS 193).

Shashi Deshpande is incomparable for her portrayal of Indian middle-class women with their turmoil, frustrations and for the long silence, which has been their lot for many centuries. It is clearly observed in this novel that the novelist presents a sensitive portrayal of a woman where tradition is breaking down and new challenges are tormenting her with the awakening of her consciousness. Jaya in her quest reached at a situation of compromise. She agreed to change herself and hoped for a change in Mohan who had written a telegram that announced his arrival. The compromise on the part of woman, as well as man, makes Shashi Deshpande a liberal writer who does not commit to a writing that chooses ultimate freedom for women and assigns domestic chores to men. N.Sethuraman rightly puts it: "Deshpande never supported the radical view of 'Amazon Utopias', female realms where men have been relegated to secondary roles. The novelist moved a step ahead of the female dominated vision

and portrayed the female psyche" (N.Sethuraman 194). Jaya thus emerged out as a round character that developed in the due course of time. It is the same Jaya who longed for disaster in the beginning but awakened herself so much that during crises she decided to be hopeful and start her life afresh.

### III. Conclusion

*That Long Silence* traces the passage of a woman through a maze of doubts and fears towards her affirmation. Looking at the man-woman relationship objectively, the novelist does not blame entirely the men for the subjugation of women. She sees how both men and women find it difficult to outgrow the images and roles assigned to them by the society. This novel deals with female quest for identity aptly in which the female protagonist longs for self, identity and self-dependence because she suffers from silence and lack of communication with her husband. Jaya wants to liberate herself in order to respect her own feelings and desires. She is able to evaluate the expectations of her life, and realizes the emotional frustration and trauma she has undergone over the years by being silent and submissive. She evolves into a woman with her own identity, having gained tremendous fortitude and confidence. On one hand, the novel teaches women to fight the silence and express themselves, and, on the other, it gives a message to the male community to try to understand women in a better way. The novelist feels that men and women can lead a happy, peaceful and blissful life by mutual understanding.

The novel is aptly called *That Long Silence* and it depicts the plight of an educated Indian woman of our time. In a way the protagonist, Jaya, is like any modern woman who resents the husband's callousness and becomes the victim of circumstance. By implication her character represents the modern woman's ambivalent attitude towards marriage. Deshpande hints at the modern woman's refusal to comply with the wishes of the husband. Jaya is both individual and type, and the reader is free to take her in any manner he likes.

Deshpande's fictional achievement is not supposed to be seen in terms of her subscription or non-subscription to feminism, for a writer of some substance is committed to human situation and not

necessarily to any ideology. She, for herself, chooses the path of conciliation without succumbing either to absolute acquiescence or to the temptations of embracing the feminist mould, which she would have with slight manipulation of her creative endeavour. However, her insights and depth of perception ensure that her fictional creations rise above the staple ideological work, and go on to become serious reflections on the human condition with particular focus on the perils and predicament of her sex in their world. It is the quest of Jaya for an authentic selfhood and finds through her rebellion against the patriarchal core of society.

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