



SILENCE IN *THAT LONG SILENCE*

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ABSTRACT

That Long Silence written by Shashi Deshpande is the story of Jaya basically a modern woman rooted in tradition, and belongs to a middle class family that is traditional and too conservative to give equal status to man and woman. Jaya got married to Mohan, an engineer in a steel plant. Her family members had taught her to be passive and docile in relation to her husband. A woman has to follow her husband in order to have a well balanced conjugal life. She was told that the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you. During the early year of marriage, her life was contented. But their story reached its climax when there were some serious charges of business malpractice against Mohan and he had to go on leave as charges were to be investigated. When Jaya came to know it, she was at loss. She could never imagine that such an immoral act could be done by her husband. Jaya had to face many problems even the question from the neighbours and maidservant. So she remained silent and her silence was misinterpreted by Mohan who thought that Jaya was accusing him for the discomfort. But at the end Jaya decided to start a new life with her husband, making an end of her long silence.

Key Words : Silence, Passive, climax, Malpractice, investigation, immoral, accusation. Problems.

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Shashi Deshpande a talented and award winning novelist of India was born in Dharwad, Karnatak. Her father Sriranga was a Kannada dramatist and writer. She was educated in Bombay and Bangalore. She has degrees in Economics, Law and Journalism. She worked for a couple of months as a journalist for the magazine Onlooker. She occupies an unique position among the Indian woman novelists. She has written four children's books, a number of short stories and nine novels. *That Long Silence* was published in 1988, received the Sahitya Academy Award in 1991. This novel published by Virago Press, London, has been considered as the manifesto of Indian feminism by

critics. In an interview with Geetha Gangadharan, Shashi Deshpande on being asked her best book replied :'' *That Long Silence*. It is more meaningful and deals with a much higher issue – the long silence of women.'' (1) This novel has been proved a landmark in the literary career of Shashi Deshpande, as it brought her worldwide recognition.

That Long Silence begins with the sentence ''To achieve anything, to become anything, you've got to be hard and ruthless. Yes even if you want to be a saint, if you want to love the whole world'' (2). Shashi Deshpande is a very realistic writer and she accepts that if we have to attain anything, we have to be hard and ruthless. As she told her interviewer

Geetha Gangadharan : “ Unless you are ruthless, you really can’t achieve much in life. Take any achiever and you see that the ladder is usually made up of other people. It takes a very hard person to do that but there are people who have done that. The lack of women achievers is because of our incapacity to be ruthless. Women are more sensitive and do not give up on individual human needs and pulls easily. It is more important for us to be loved and liked as individuals with the family” (3).

That Long Silence is the story of Jaya basically a modern woman rooted in tradition, and belongs to a middle class family that is traditional and too conservative to give equal status to man and woman. Jaya was much influenced by her father as her father was a modernist. Her father was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and “ he had given up his studies in Gandhi’s name, burnt a few foreign clothes and worn a Gandhi cap for a few years.” (4). Jaya’s father had married against the wish of his family and lived in a separate house. He had sent his children in a convent school in spite of the disapproval of his family. “No good will come of sending your children to a Padre school. They will forget all our customs, they might even become Christians, you know how these Padres are,” she had prophesied darkly. “ Let them learn good English,” Appa had replied. It is going to be more useful to them than being good Brahmins.” (5). Her father gave her the name Jaya which means victory. He had very high opinion about his daughter and thought that Jaya was not like others and that she must shine in life, as her father says : “ You are not like the others……. Pulling me ruthlessly out of the safe circle in which the other girls had stood, girls who had performed pujas and came to school with turmeric dyed threads round their wrists and necks, girls who, it had seemed asked for nothing more than the destiny of being wives and mothers. While I Appa had said, and I had agreed, would get Chatfield Prize or the Ellis Prize, go to Oxford after my graduation……. you’re going to be different from the others Jaya.” (6).

It was unfortunate for Jaya that her father expired at an early age when she was doing her graduation. Her father’s death was a great loss for her. Her father was the source of inspiration for her

as she was friendly with him. But she had never developed friendly relationship with her mother. Her mother was typical traditional Indian woman. So Jaya after her father’s death preferred to stay in hostel rather to come home and stay with her mother who hardly felt the loss of her husband. After the death of her father, her responsibility came upon her elder brother. He wanted to marry her off to complete the unfinished job of his father. And it was coincidence that Jaya was selected by Mohan as his bride who could satisfy his special liking for a convent educated girl. As Mohan expressed his views to Jaya : “ You know Jaya the first day I met you at your Ramukaka’s house, you were talking to your brother Dinkar, and somehow you sounded so much like that girl, I think it was that moment that I decided I would marry you.” (7).

Everyone in the family encouraged her and praised Mohan. They had good opinion about Mohan as he was an engineer in a steel plant. As his brother says: “He’ll be good to you, keep you in order……. He seems a very decent chap, soft spoken and quite may be, but determined you know. He will make his way, he is very independent. And he has a good job as a junior engineer in the new steel plant at Lohanagar. What more do you want? ” (8). Jaya could not reject this proposal as she believed that to reject such a groom would be a sheer madness. And she got married Mohan. At the time of marriage her husband had given her a new name “ Suhasini” and surprisingly she got changed after marriage. When she leaves her home after getting married she is advised by her family members to be always good to Mohan and she tries at all times her best. After coming to Mohan’s home Jaya, finds a woman’s work is sharply differentiated from man’s work, as she says : “ It was when I first visited home that I had discovered how sharply defined a woman’s role was. They had been a revelation to me, the women in his family, so definite about their roles, so well trained in their duties so skilful in the right areas, so indifferent to everything else. I had never seen so clear, so precise a pattern before, and I had been entranced by it.” (9). A man was never expected to do woman’s work, like sewing, mending or cooking even for his own sake. At her in – laws home Jaya tried to be a perfect

house wife.

Jaya belongs to a traditional family. Her family members had taught her to be passive and docile in relation to her husband. A woman has to follow her husband in order to have a well balanced conjugal life. As Ramu Kaka says to his niece, "Remember Jaya, the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you" (10). And Vanitamami said to Jaya solemnly, Remember Jaya, a husband is like a sheltering tree" (11).

During the early year of marriage, Jaya's life was contented. She was very happy with her husband. She was so much attached to Mohan that she was not ready to be separated from him even for a moment. As Jaya says: "The thought of living without him had twisted my ideas. His death had seemed to me the final catastrophe. The very idea of his dying had made me feel so bereft that tears had flowed effortlessly down my cheeks. If he had been a little late coming home, I had been sure he was dead. By the time he returned, I had in my imagination, shaped my life to a desolate widowhood." (12)

Jaya's husband Mohan, an engineer by profession, is a typical man of the materialistic world, concerned only with money, status and material comforts. He was doing well and prospering. But once he was caught in malpractice along with his boss. Here their life takes a turn. Mohan has to leave his office and Churchgate bungalow till the enquiry is completed. Mohan was completely broken and disappointed. When Jaya came to know it, she was at loss. She could never imagine that such an immoral act could be done by her husband. Jaya had to face many problems even the question from the neighbours and maidservant. So she remained silent and her silence misinterpreted by Mohan who thought that Jaya was accusing him for the discomfort. Mohan angrily said that it was for you and the children to have all those things I never had. Jaya now unsatisfied with her married life is gradually surrounded by a vacuum in their relation, or the charm of life has gone and the hard reality of life becomes visible. She thinks and recollects her childhood, and tries to analyze herself. She recalls her past days, her up – bringing, the environment in which she was brought up and

the preaching that were thrust upon her when she was growing up. As Adele King says : " Jaya 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." (13) Jaya always tried her best to keep a balance between husband and wife. She tried her best to keep a balance between husband and wife. She tried to make herself attractive simply to make her husband happy. Jaya really wanted to be an ideal wife. The early period of her married life was balanced. As Jaya says: Ours has been a delicately balanced relationship, so much so that we have even snipped off bits of ourselves to keep the scales on an even keel." (14)

It was a great shock to Jaya. It shook her very existence and forced her to make a self analysis. She realised now that she had been wrong for remaining silent about Mohan's activities. Her self – analysis revealed her own shortcomings and she prepared herself for facing the reality. In the process of self – analysis she compared herself with the great mythical figure Sita, who always obeyed her husband without asking any question, and had been accepted as the model wife in the Indian society. She suffered but never protested. Jaya also followed her husband without any question. She analysed her past activities and reached the conclusion that: " Self revelation is cruel process. The real picture the real you never emerge. Looking for it is as bewildering as trying to know how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces." (15). The role of Sita demanded sacrifice and Jaya also sacrificed her individuality and moulded herself as per Mohan's desire simply to make her married life happy. She cut her long hair, did not go for a job and aborted against her will an urge for reality. She tried to give Mohan a list of occasions when she was subdued. As she says: " The job I wanted to take, the baby I wanted to adopt, the anti price campaign I'd wanted to take part in..... But even as I listed these to myself it came to me that perhaps it had nothing to do with Mohan the fact that I had not done these things that I had left them alone. Perhaps I had not really cared enough about these things myself. Instead I said and my voice sounded sullen even to me. I've done everything you wanted me to." (16)

Jaya also took up the role of Gandhari, who had bandaged her eyes so that she might be denied eyesight like her husband Dhritarashtra since the day of her marriage. Gandhari's feigned blindness also kept her unaware of the bad acts committed by sons and supported by her husband. Jaya also posed to be blind for just to be an ideal wife. She did not bother about the ways adopted by Mohan for getting a better quarter and then a transfer to Bombay, as she says: "Mohan had managed to get the job. I never asked him how he did it. If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife. I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged 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, that I could have the things we needed." (17) There was another role, that of Draupadi, when her husbands were in trouble, she followed them in exile. Almost the same way Jaya followed her husband.

Jaya's approach reveals a typical Indian attitude. In the Indian context once a girl gets married to a man, he takes complete control over her. She knows that it is expected to merge her will in the will of her husband. Jaya also tried her best to do what exactly she was expected to do by her husband and also by the society. She is compelled by the circumstances to follow the principle that: "Two bullocks yoked together. it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful and what animal would voluntarily choose pain." (18). It does not show a natural and harmonious relationship between Mohan and Jaya because one is unable to express his or her real feelings to the other. Jaya had embraced the Indian tradition and had recognised that if anything she had to do, it was to bring a change in her husband's mind, but it was impossible. So it was a forced relationship, not a natural one. Again physical relationship between Mohan and Jaya was the case of dominating husband and suffering wife. Even if husband hurts the wife, she remains silent. Robert Morgan, in this context rightly remarks: "The women have over the centuries developed an ethic that is appropriate to the world view that is emerging out of the new

physics, they see in terms of relationship and in terms of environment of human values for centuries. Their primary value is a reverence for life. This ethic must become the governing world ethic."

(19)

Mohan's accusation that Jaya was responsible for his malpractice, shattered the illusion that Jaya had maintained for so long. When Mohan was facing the biggest crisis of his professional life he accused Jaya of being cold and indifferent towards him. Mohan tried to justify his taking black money, but it was of no use. She did not console Mohan rather she was compelled to share Mohan's sin. Jaya was unable to explain all this to her husband and so she remained silent. Mohan could not understand Jaya's sensibility. There grows a silence between Jaya and Mohan. It creates a gap between them. Mohan asked her but she remained silent. Shashi Deshpande has presented a woman who cannot revolt openly in the beginning and later on reconciles to the situation. But she, at the same time, is a woman who wants to revolt, but ultimately does not. Her image is like that bird that has wings and knows that it can fly, but somehow, does not. In the same way, Jaya knows her abilities and she knows that she can expose them openly, but somehow she does not. She always remains silent which indicates that the traditional roles of women still have primacy over all the newly-acquired professional roles. At the end the problems of Jaya are removed and she decides that she will start a new life with her husband, making an end of her long silence. Finally, Shashi Deshpande shows that the problems have to be solved through mutual discussion and not through silence. People should be hopeful to change if they want to make life possible. Her optimistic attitude can be seen in the words that we do not change overnight. It is possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible. Santwana Haldar also remarks about that long silence that: "That Long Silence, almost entirely a woman's novel, nevertheless, a book about the silencing of one-half of humanity. A Life time introspection went into this novel, the one closest to my personality, the thinking and ideas

in this are closest to my own." (20).

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