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## A VALEDICTION TO FORBIDDING SILENCE IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THAT LONG SILENCE*

PANKAJ SOLANKI

Assistant Professor of English, Govt. College for Women Hisar, Haryana.

[pankajsatyasolanki@gmail.com](mailto:pankajsatyasolanki@gmail.com)

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PANKAJ SOLANKI

### ABSTRACT

History of human beings is a story of continuous evolution. In this process of human being's transformation from nomadic herders to the settled civilizations, they developed means of entertainment, expression of their feelings and customs through paintings, folk songs and literature. With the settlement of society came the concept of private property and family. With the division of labour male and female were assigned with some particular roles which became rigid with the passage of time. Several images have been imposed upon women and they have been worshipped as silent angels in the roles of mothers, daughters, sisters and wives.

As far as Indian Societal set up is concerned it is a patriarchal one that persists here. Women since ages have been denied of their speech. It has been the male who speaks for himself as well as for her. It has been the male who makes his ideologies and articulates it to be followed by all. Women devoid of education and opportunities have suffered in silence for long. However, with the advancement of feminist critical theories, women got aware of their rights and desired to speak and articulate their own emotions and experiences.

Object of this paper is to presents a feminist study of Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*. It deals with the issues related to women in patriarchal society and mental trauma suffered by them. The novel describes the consciousness of this silence and is an effort in itself to bid farewell to that long silence.

Key Words: Ideology, patriarchy, feminism, trauma, liberation.

Shashi Deshpande is one the most prominent Indian writers writing in English today. Her exclusive concern with the plight of ordinary people, women in particular, caught in the web and flow of routine, tedium, stereotypical customs and conventions opens up the new possibilities for fiction. Her forte, however, is not the material landscape but the inscape—a capturing of inner turmoil, conflicts and dilemmas of psyche. She has

emerged as a strong champion of women's issues in India. She has written nine novels, six collections of short stories and four children's books.

Here the focus of study is upon her novel *That Long Silence*. Published in 1988, it is one of the most praised and perfectly executed of her works. It won her the highest literary recognition in India—a Sahitya Akademi Award. It marks an important milestone in the journey of feminist literary

movement in India. The novel presents a number of female characters who suffer from the centuries old protocol in a long silence. It is through Jaya, the protagonist that Shashi Deshpande puts light on the causes and effects of this silence and tries to break the protocol.

“If I were a man and cared to know the world I lived in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy—the weight of that long silence of one-half the world.”

With this quote of Elizabeth Robins, Shashi Deshpande starts her novel *That Long Silence*. The novel is a story of Jaya—her social and cultural consciousness and her individuality, aspirations and fears. She is married to Mohan and has two children Rahul and Rati. Jaya has a contemplative nature. She is aware of her surroundings and her position in the family. She looks at her monotonous life as an illusion of happiness. She broods over her situation saying that “I had to admit the truth to myself—that I had often found family life unendurable. Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony” (4).

Jaya is a modern, educated woman who had been rebellious and of a questioning nature as an adolescent. She faces an acute dilemma when, as a married woman, she is expected by her orthodoxy inclined husband to play the role of a dutiful wife. Jaya also recalls the ritual ceremonies after her marriage which required her to show herself as a passive, inferior being in comparison to her husband, who being a man had to be given due respect. She recounts:

The one who finds the coin first rules the other at home,’ the women of Mohan’s family had told us, laughing, before initiating us into one more of those insane post-wedding ceremonial games. As we had begun, a mound of rice in a plate between us, I had deliberately dawdled, my fingers secretly moving, while his had scabbled frantically through the grains, groping for the coin. (7)

This act is not natural in Jaya. She is conditioned to behave in such manner. Simone de Beauvoir in her

*Second Sex* declares that “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” Jaya too is a constructed woman. In her adolescent her Ajji conditions her by saying, “Look at you—for everything a question, for everything a retort. What husband can be comfortable with that?” This kind of conditioning caused a mental dilemma in Jaya. She is aware of women’s situation. She says, “. . . for women the waiting game starts early in childhood. Wait until you get married. Wait until your husband comes. Wait until you go to your in-laws’ home. Wait until you have kids. Yes, ever since I got married, I had done nothing but wait. (30)

In her article ‘Telling Our Own Stories’ Shashi Deshpande laments that:

Our epics and puranas are still with us and among us . . . over the years they have been reinvented, reshaped and regionalized. Myths continue to be a reference point for people in their daily lives and we have so internalized them that they are part of our psyche, part of our personal, religious and Indian identity. (86)

Vanita mami also tries to teach Jaya that “Remember, Jaya, a husband is like a sheltering tree” (32).

The illusion of happiness soon comes to an end when Mohan is suspended from service on a charge of bribery and now out of his own sense of insecurity, he expects his wife’s vocal and active support. He says that “it was for you and the children that I did this. I wanted you to have a good life; I wanted the children to have all those things I never had” (9). But Jaya—a morally conscious and sensitive woman—can neither condemn him nor support him openly. Her silence is mistaken as defiance by her husband who suspects that she has been spreading words of his complicity in wrong doing among her relatives. He accuses Jaya saying that “As long as I had my job and position, it was all right; as long as I could give you all the comforts, it was all right” (121).

It is here for the first time that Jaya breaks the silence. She cried out at Suresh and says “No, that’s not true, that’s a terrible thing to say, it’s

stupid" (121). When he says that he knows her, she replies again, "no, you don't know me at all" (122). She becomes so disturbed by the absurdity of the situation that she bursts out in a hysterical laughter. Mohan is taken aback at this reaction. He therefore, in a mood of extreme provocation, leaves home threatening never to return. Jaya's mental agony becomes most excruciating and intolerable when she comes to know of the sudden disappearance of her son Rahul. All these traumatic events prove hazardous for Jaya. She feels a great mental trauma.

Being of a highly sensitive and contemplative nature, Jaya is often lost in thinking of the past. She is aware of the gender inequalities. She recalls the austere life her grandmother, Ajji, used to live after her widowhood. She has internalized the conventional and orthodox role assigned to her in Hindu Society. She even advises her grand-daughter Jaya also to give up her questioning attitude or else she would invite problems in her future life.

She thinks of Kusum, the niece of Vanita mami who had been deserted by her husband. She was living a miserable half crazy existence. Everybody ridiculed her because she was the most inattentive, even ignoring her clothes. Even her children did not like to be with her. She suffered throughout her life in silence and died unlamented.

Jaya also thinks of the family of Nairs who committed suicide because of economic difficulties. The whole Nair family entered into a suicide pact, tied themselves with a rope and drowned themselves. The daughter in the family instinctively attempted to save herself but she could not. Jaya often thinks of the different members of the family how they could all come to such a fatal agreement when one cannot face poverty and deprivation, but what role did the women in the Nair family have in the whole process of decision making. About husband-wife relationship Jaya is of the view that they are "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?" (12).

She also recalls the plight of Mohan's mother who was ill treated in a most brutal manner

by Mohan's father. Often while cooking she would have painful seizures when her limbs would get locked and she would not be in a position even to move them. Later it was learnt that she was seeking the help of a midwife for terminating an unwanted pregnancy and the medication administered to her led to her death in great agony and pain. Throughout her life she bore her fate in total silence without uttering a word of pain.

The fate of Mohan's sister Vimla is no different from her mother. She died of a most painful tumour in her ovaries. She was aware of her condition but she refrained from seeking a cure and went on bearing the pain stoically because she was without an issue and feared lest her ovaries be removed, for that would have rendered her incapable of bearing a child.

Jaya reflects the fate of all women characters she encounters in her life. Most of them restricted themselves into a sexiest protocol set up by the patriarchy. They lived their lives miserably in silence and die tragically in silence. However, Jaya is aware of that protocol and it is said that awareness is the first step towards transformation.

It is Jaya who finally breaks out the paralyzing silence syndrome, graphically represented in the novel. She has to go through the process of soul searching before she can assert herself. She is helped immensely by the emotional support she gets from her neighbour Mukta. Jaya takes Mukta in confidence and shares her agony with her. The act of confiding in Mukta releases the pent up feelings in her heart and she can breathe easy. She is capable of taking control of the situation now.

Moreover, she is now in condition to help others. She helps her sweeper Jija whose son is in hospital and needs immediate medication. Jaya talks to the doctor who is attending Jija's son. With her help everything gets arranged to Jija's satisfaction. It is in this spirit that she assures her son Rahul when he returns. She tells him that all would be well and Mohan would return soon.

Towards the close of the novel, Jaya seems to have evolved a new and mature self. She has

developed a sober outlook and seems to have delved deep into her own being and made certain discoveries about herself. In this new mood she seems capable of defining her new role in relation to the world. This new Jaya has after much introspection and thought resolved to “plug that hole in the heart”. She tells herself, “I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us” (192).

This journey of Jaya’s awareness and realization of her self forms the shape of this novel. Jaya’s writing this novel itself becomes a symbol of breaking the silence. “What have I achieved by this writing?” she asks herself. She realizes that “Well, I’ve achieved this. I’m not afraid anymore. The panic has gone” (191). Thus Jaya has become Shashi Deshpande’s mouth piece in giving voice to the sufferings, struggle, fears and aspirations of women. In this way she would be offering to other female a way to snap out of the mould which stifles and suffocate them.

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