

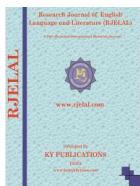


THAT LONG SILENCE: ECHO OF WOMAN'S STRUGGLE

NITESH

Language Lab Instructor

Govt. College Jind



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Abstract

A lot of studies have been made in order to examine the difficulties and hardship faced by a woman. The same notion lies in Indian English literature. Many Indian English novelists give an artistic record of a woman's emotional distortion, fear, isolation, her quest for identity and how she tries to survive in this patriarchal society. This portrayal depicts her as a fighter, survivor and victim. The paper is an attempt to show how Shashi Deshpande has revitalized contemporary India by assigning conventional roles to female characters and how they respond to the traditional Indian mentality in her famous novel *That Long Silence*. How her female characters like Jaya, Kusum, Vanitamami, Nayana, Mukta, Ajji accept and some rebel against the traditional approach to life, its rituals, ceremonies and patriarchal norms.

Keywords: Patriarchal society, submission and self-identity.

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande's novels depict the struggles of educated middle class Indian Woman. She portrays the life which a woman leads in a male dominated society in her novels. Deshpande's *That Long Silence* unfolds the story of the Indian housewife who maintained silence throughout her life whether it is Jaya, Kusum, Vanita, Vimla, Mohan's mother or any other female character of the novel. Shashi gives a minute analysis of the unwholesome situation in which a woman has to work to adjust herself. She gives almost every type of problems to her female characters so that she can explore a woman's psyche, her conflict, her continuous struggle to survive and search for her own identity.

Through the character Jaya the novel *That Long Silence* is concerned with disharmony with the cultural, social and sexual roles of a woman. Jaya belongs to a middle class family that is not ready to

give equal status to man and woman. Jaya's desires are suppressed by her own liberal father. Jaya loves film music but her father wants her to enjoy the classical music of Paluskar and Faiyaz Khan. It was first blow to her identity. After marriage, she was given a new name 'Suhasini'. She tries to be a perfect wife. She sacrifices her own identity, desires, taste and feelings for the sake of her family:

"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. Waiting for Mohan to come home, waiting for the children to be born, for them to start school, waiting for them to come home, waiting for the milk, the servant, the lunch-carrier man."

The patriarchal society makes her believe that she is born to serve only. Jaya being an educated and intellectual lady compares her submission to the

Gandhari, Seeta and Draupadi. She submits because she has no other way to follow:

“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?”

Jaya could not enjoy even the freedom of expression and writing. When her realistic story of man- woman relationship wins a prize, Mohan becomes angry. He thinks that Jaya has disclosed their personal relationship. Jaya, in order to please Mohan, stops writing realistic stories and tries her hand at imaginary stories under the pseudo name *Seeta* which signifies her submission. She alters and lost her self during the process of pleasing Mohan. She has changed her name, personality and profession according to Mohan’s desire as Jaya has been taught that husband is everything for a woman.

Kusum who was Vanitamami’s niece suffers a lot for being a woman who is not able to give birth to a male child. Just because of it she loses her mental balance. When Jaya wants to help ill Kusum, Mohan tries hard to stop her from helping Kusum. Jaya’s family members usually advise to ‘ignore her’ silly behavior. The gender biasness can be clearly seen when Kusum is compared with her corrupt brother, Dilip. Everybody praises him. Vanitamami told Jaya, “He’s leader of the unions and the factory owners give him money to keep him pleased. He has a lot of ‘Black money’ now.” But on the other hand Kusum was treated as if she is not a human. She is blamed for having three daughters only. When she is failed to give birth a male child, her husband deserted her. Later she committed suicide. Ai told Jaya:

“Kusum had gone to her in laws for a few days.... She threw herself into a well and died. Your aunt keeps moaning and crying, but it was a good thing in a way. She was of no use to anyone after she went crazy, nobody needed her.”

The other victim of male dominion attitude is Jaya’s mother in-law. Mohan’s sister, Vimla told Jaya how

her father tortured her mother and how she preferred to keep silence in which Mohan saw strength: “she was tough. Women in those days were tough.” But silence was the only weapon for her to survive. ‘silence and surrender’. His father hurts her mother even on trivial issues. She suffers a lot with silence:

“Though she always waited for him, their father, however late he was (and he never gave her any indication of when he would be back)... she cooked rice for him again, for he would not, he made it clear to her, eat what he called ‘your children’s disgusting leaving’....She has just finished this second cooking and was waiting...he sat down...and then he paused. ‘why is there no fresh chutney today?’... the next moment he picked up his heavy brass plate and threw it.”

She had to cook thrice that day. He is no doubt a cruel, emotionless, rude, devil like person. Vimla tells Jaya that almost all her childhood she remembers her mother as being pregnant. She had six children and four or five babies were lost. She died because of her abortion.

The other character is Jeeja who is a realist and good worker. Jaya envies her single mindedness. She knew what her purpose in life was. It was to go on living. Jaya had never heard her complaining. Jaya is surprised to see that there is no anger behind her silence:

“with whom shall I be angry?... My parents didn’t intend marrying me a drunkard. God didn’t give us any children- that was his misfortune as well as mine. How could I blame him for marrying again when I couldn’t give him any children? How could I blame that woman for marrying him? With whom shall I be angry?”

Jeeja takes responsibilities of his husband’s two children. The son Rajaram, had stepped into his father’s shoes and started drinking. He beats his wife Tara. Like herself she wants Tara to be brave and strong and help her to survive in this patriarchal society. She helps her in her ‘batatawada’ business.

It can be said that Jeeja is a strong lady who knows how to cope up with the society.

Through the character Ajji, Shashi Deshpande depicts the miserable life of a widow. Ajji was a shaven widow and she had denuded herself of all those things that make up a woman's life. She has no possessions apart from the two saris she wore. She sat on the bare ground and slept on a straw mat at night. Mukta had more days of fasts than days on which she could eat a normal meal. The purpose of all hindu women's fast –the avoidance of widowhood. Mukta is a stereotype woman who is nervous, introvert and need a male for help and support. Jeeja believes in the same idea. When Tara cursed and reviled her husband and moaned her fate: 'so many drunkards die. She cried, 'but this one won't.' Jeeja sternly shut her up 'stop that! Don't forget, he keeps the kumkum on your forehead. What is a woman without that?' All the women in this Indian society are being taught that husband is everything for them. 'Husband is like a sheltering tree.'

Nayna who is sweeper has two girls who lived and two boys who died soon after their birth. She usually cursed her husband, her brothers and her father. She called them wasters, good for nothing, drunkards. Still she wants a male child. When Jaya asked her, 'why do you want a boy so much?' she replies,

"why give birth to a girl, behnji, who'll only suffer because of men all her life? Look at me! My mother loved me very much, she wanted so much for me..... and what I got? No, no, behnji better to have a son."

Vimala, Mohan's sister is also a victim of this male dominion society. She is also childless like Vanitamami and jeeja. She performed many fasts in order to become a mother. She herself left her ovarian tumor untreated even though it caused her severe pain. She did not want to have the ovaries operated upon because that would have made her incapable of conceiving.

Woman is always taught that she is secondary and her only motive is to devote herself towards her husband, her children and her family.

Jaya is forced to believe she is born to serve because she is a woman. All female characters like Jeeja, Tara, Jaya, Vimala, Vanita, Kusum and Nayana suffered the pain of being second sex. They all struggle for their identity. The novel reveals the truth of Simone de Beauvoir's statement: 'One is not born a woman, one becomes a woman.'

Shashi Deshpande strongly asserts that the basic reason of female sufferings is the silence which is culturally, mentally, circumstantially imposed on her. All such instances create a very heart breaking situation in which women find themselves compelled to live in. Patriarchal society is the real culprit of woman's sufferings.

Jaya asserted that she would start a new life, making an end of her long silence. She was like *Seeta* who never questioned her husband, but now she has decided to take the role of *Maitreyee*, who wants to question everything and even challenges her husband. She refuses to follow her same image of a pair of bullocks yoked together. Kusum's death, Jeeja's Single mindedness, Kamat's encouragement helps Jaya to reshape her woman awareness. The psychological state of women in various circumstances is convincingly presented in this novel.

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