

**THE VOICE OF THE EMERGING CLASS OF WOMEN IN THAT LONG SILENCE BY SHASHI DESHPANDE****MS.S.SANTHI**ASSISTANT PROFESSOR  
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GOBICHETTIPALAYAM, TAMILNADU**ABSTRACT**

Indo-English literature in the recent years has proved its existence and has gained its position in the world literature. The most dominant literary form of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is undoubtedly novel writing, which engulfs experience and ideas of a particular time in a realistic way. The novel is a unique form of art that captures human life in an imaginative conception in prose. The 1930s was a golden period for Indian literature scene. The three stewards of Indo-English literature Raja Rao, R.K.Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand wrote novels in English.. These three writers brought new vitality in the creative writing in English. Indo-English fiction is called as the twice born fiction due to its amalgamation of two traditions, Indian and British. In the early works Indian women is depicted as an ideal housewife, sacrificing mother and patient lover. Either she is glorified or pitied for her status in our traditional backdrop. Not only woman writers' even male writers have written about woman. The conflict between tradition and modernity is thoroughly depicted by a host of novelists. There is also a powerful portrayal of female oppression in some of the novels. The contribution of a host of women writers embarked upon articulating their gender concerns in the country marks a significant development. The novels of Shashi Deshpande enjoy immense popularity among the women readers whose works offer unique and penetrating insights in to the psyche of her women characters. She has successfully built a rich literary platform of universal female experiences. Comparatively, Shashi Deshpande is a new name on the scene of Indian English writing. Her works have drawn global critical attention and

applause of her detailed, sensitive and penetrating representation of the Indian middle-class woman in her domestic sphere. The novelist has examined and depicted a variety of common domestic crises which trigger calamitous situations that degrade a woman.

**Key words:** amalgamation, tradition backdrop, oppression, articulating, literary platform, domestic crises.

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### INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande's novels present a sensitive and delicate portrayal of Indian womanhood with a focus on the predicament of woman and her concern in the life of her protagonists. Her success lies in her representation of real life experience. In her *That long silence* she realistically depicts the inner conflicts of Jaya and her quest for the self or identity. Her themes deal with the struggle of women in contemporary tradition-bound, male-dominated middle-class urban society in India. Her protagonists try hard to overcome their self-imposed inhibitions and handicaps to establish their respectable status. The novel is about a married couple, Jaya and Mohan, who get separated and about Jaya, who observes silence all through her married life only to break it in the end when she takes to writing about herself, her own plight, and her husband Mohan. But the novel ends on a note of optimism as her son, Rahul, returns and

Mohan promises to return. Jaya also learns the truth that “Life is always to be made possible” (193).

Shashi Deshpande’s stories begin after marriage. Marriage is the institution which affects women most in many cultures. Married lives of many of her heroines involve constant struggle to find freedom from their shackled lives. *That long silence* describes Jaya’s disappointment in her married life and her suffering in isolation. Deshpande describes Jaya’s married life in the image of “A pair of bullocks yoked together” (7), suggesting that the husband and wife perform their duties mechanically.

Vimala Rama Rao comments about the protagonists that

“Jaya is one of the rare narrative voices in Indian English fiction who possesses and displays a literary sensibility commensurate with her fictional role as a writer telling her own story, one whose college education and reading habits are in evidence in her speaking voice. This indeed is an achievement”.(6)

Jaya is a well-educated and cultural woman. She leads a quiet life. But later hardships of life fiercely jolt her out of her complacency into a gloomy state. Her silence is symptomatic of alienation and apprehension rooted in every woman’s soul in different forms. But silence is often misunderstood by men as woman’s contentment. Jaya faces the dilemma of a woman-writer who is also a housewife. As a writer, she has to present her views and ideas to the readers but remains silent probing into her past, struggling with her present, and trying to establish a rapport with her future.

Shashi Deshpande’s novels are exploration of the hidden truths as related to married women. In exploring the depths of human mind she seems to come across many dark and hidden recesses. Jaya who evolved as a silent endurer is subjected to revolution in her attitude. When Jaya begins her married life, she struggles hard to put herself into the traditional mould. After marriage Jaya looks totally different. Even her name is changed to Suhasini. The high spirited and courageous Jaya is reduced to a housewife and mother, the apotheosis of whose housewifely pleasures stems from a bathroom scrubbed of all stains. She passes through a plethora of self-doubts, fears, guilt, smothered anger, and silence towards articulation and affirmation.

Suman Ahuja observes that Jaya,

“...caught in an emotional eddy, endeavors to come to terms with her protean roles, while trying, albeit in vain, to rediscover her true self, which is not but an ephemera...An unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and a failed writer.”(7)

*That long silence* is a “muted and essentially sympathetic treatment of the problems of marital relationships maintaining a credible balance between sexes. Jaya made herself a puppet in the hands of her husband and society. After marriage Jaya is named ‘Suhasini’-“A soft, smiling, motherly placid woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped with every solution to safeguard her family and whose sole intention in her life is to be good and serve her family by all means.”(16). Though no one called her by the new name, she is officially known as Suhasini and she has accepted the role of Suhasini that is the role of a married lady. Kamat’s immediate reaction when he heard of this new name to her was laughing at her but Jaya had seriously taken her role and rejected her other self that had always been true to herself.

Generally a woman’s identity is defined by others in terms of her relationship with men; that is a daughter, as a wife, as a mother etc. The question ‘what a woman does’ is never asked, but ‘whom she belongs to ‘ is always considered important as though she is a commodity which is for a sale. She does not have an identity of her own and she is always expected to dance to the tune of a man, whether he is her father, brother or husband.

Woman is always bound by restrictions imposed by the society. The story of the crow and sparrow becomes an ironical symbol of Jaya’s life where in the weak and the sensitive can be treated with cruel carelessness by the more successful ones. Jaya was submissive and passive; in fact it was deep rooted in her from childhood. Her inquisitive nature and further cautioned her saying that no husband will be comfortable with her retorting nature. When Jaya was betrothed Vanitamani advised her that “a husband is like a sheltering tree and that the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you” (138).

Jaya wanted to confront security, she accepted Mohan as sheltering tree that is why she did not bother to know if he was following shortcut ways for earning money. Rather she kept

herself aloof from reality and took shelter in her make-believe world. She was afraid to lose her so called secure life, which she blindly accepted her husband and his deeds. Ever since her marriage she had been content to follow the footsteps of the mythological role of Sita, Which authorities tend to sacrifice at one instance and she tries to compare herself with Gandhari:

“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 don’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- decent clothes, a fridge, a gas connection, traveling 1 class”.(144).

Jaya longs to be called an ideal wife. The fear to conform to the stereotyped model of the ideal woman that is Suhasini makes her restless and she is afraid to acknowledge her desires. In the process of becoming ‘Suhasini’ she sacrificed her individuality.

As Bijay kumar says, “In a way, the protagonist, Jaya is any modern woman who resents her husband’s callousness and becomes the victim of circumstances. By implication the character of Jaya represents modern woman’s ambivalent attitude to married life”. (6)

On the occasion of Revathi’s birthday, Jaya as well as her daughter Rati feel that Mohan loves his niece Revathi more than his daughter. But she does not say anything to Mohan as he only dismisses it as her ‘writer’s imagination” and nothing more. She always wishes to proceed as per her husband’s wish, surrender her decisions to her husband by just being silent. His desires and approval seemed to be all and end all of her life. She was ready to change herself according to his choice. Ultimately Jaya gets so completely transformed in to the stereotype of a woman: nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support. She desperately clings to her husband as if her life depends on it. She feels rootless and a sense of waste in her existence without him. Her words clearly state her value is found through him rather than through herself.

Subhash Chandra rightly says, “Ostensibly she relates it as the story of a particular couple but the power relations in the patriarchal structures, the gender differentiation with all its ramifications, the typical travails of the woman struggling to define herself, take on the dimension of the condition and place of the Indian woman in society”(8).

Jaya too sacrifices her creative writing for her insensitive husband. In the early years of her marriage, she was on the threshold of acquiring some merit. One of her short stories bags the first prize and is published in a magazine, which is about “a couple, a man who cannot reach out to his wife expect through her body”. Mohan thinks that the story portrays their own personal life, and he is very apprehensive of the idea that people may assume that he is the kind of person portrayed in the story. His words were enough to nip her creative writing in the bud.

Kamat plays an important role in Jaya’s life. His words provide her insight in to the truth about herself and make her accept responsibility for her deeds. He warns her against self-pity, “I am warning you –beware of this ‘women are the victims’- theory of yours. It will drag you down in to a soft, squishy bag of self-pity. Take yourself seriously, woman. Don’t sulk behind a false name,” (148).

Kamat’s concern towards her gave full scope to express the hidden feelings of her heart. Jaya feels quite comfortable with him. In her introspection she tries to come to grips with a series of truths about her and begins to erase the long silence which had begun in her childhood. She tries to define her identity and selfhood. Jaya who is set free from her routines is puzzled change in her thoughts and she is at the edge of split personality.

Jaya’s father was a source of inspiration; it is after his death that Jaya’s life gets shattered. Jaya’s crisis led her to deep self-analysis. In the solitude of the Dadar flat where she was free from her daily routine was able to think about her. She found that ‘the ghost most fearful to confront is the ghost of one’s own self’. (13). She feels she was neither a good wife nor a good mother she was not able to balance her life. She was disappointed from all sides of her life even she was unsuccessful as a writer. She wants to raise voice against the age-old patriarchal set-up.

Toril Moi says, “It seeks to expose, not perpetuate patriarchal practices.”(19).

She rejects ‘Suhasini’ when she has to equate Suhasini to the sparrow in the story of the crow and the sparrow, she says,” I have a feeling that even if little boys can forget this story, little girls never will. They will store this story in their subconscious, their unconscious or whatever and eventually they will become that damnably, insufferably priggish sparrow looking

after their homes, their babies ...and to hell with the rest of the world. Stay at home look after your babies, keep out the rest of the world and you're safe. The poor idiotic woman Suhasini believed in this. I know better now. I know that safety is always unattainable. You're never safe."(17).

This realization of Jaya is the milestone in her journey for self-recognition. Detached from her family Jaya was able to question her inner self and find answers. She experiences utter mental agony and confusion. At last Jaya realizes that she has to make a choice of her own to assert her individuality. Now Jaya is out of panic. Rajeshwari says, "She chooses to operate within the self-imposed limits of the family, resolving to change her life by renegotiating the power-relations and improving the interpersonal relationships within in it rather than through the instrumentality of her writing". (22)

## Conclusion

*That long silence*, is about the suffering of an educated woman, focuses the predicament of a modern Indian woman caused by the insensitivity and rigidity of her husband and making her a victim of circumstances. The novel also dramatizes transformation of Jaya, the "every woman" of our time, through self-recognition and self-analysis. She faces adverse situations boldly and realizes that the wheel has turned a full circle and the shadow that lurked between husband and wife for about seventeen years has disappeared. The novel seems to advocate that a woman should be assertive and maintain her individuality and take her own decisions about her life and future.

Shashi Deshpande seems to be more for a woman's social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, cultural, and economic liberation which would negate the possibility of nourishing and enjoying relationships which society and biological nature have imposed upon her. She can be a woman with multifaceted roles of daughter, mother, wife, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, and friend by overcoming her inhibitions. The intricacies of a woman's life within the family and outside can only be solved by herself when she learns to evaluate her worth and becomes conscious of herself as an individual.

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