

## From a Fragmented Self to a Untied Whole: Jaya in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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### Abstract

This paper depicts the transformation of the protagonist from a fragmented self to a united whole in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*. Jaya, the protagonist faces a lot of sufferings in the novel, which is Shashi Deshpande's usual approach to bring out the mental trauma of her protagonists. The story unfolds with Jaya and her husband Mohan moving back into their old flat in Bombay from their luxurious house. In that small flat, Jaya gets ample of time for contemplating of her past and being an introvert, she becomes a poor victim of depression. The memories of her past start haunting her and this creates differences with her husband and increases frustration in their seventeen years old relationship. The process of self-contemplation comes to an end with the decision of writing her autobiography.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Voice, Self-contemplation, Mental trauma, Realisation, Assertiveness.

Shashi Deshpande won Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990 for *That Long Silence* which portrays the story of an Indian housewife who maintains silence throughout her life. The novel ends with her resolve to speak, to break her long silence. The novel depicts the life of Jaya, the protagonist, 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. The question "Who am I?" (Deshpande, 24) haunts her so obsessively that she fails to find herself. She is "an utter stranger a person so alien that even the faintest understanding of the motives of her actions seemed impossible" (Deshpande, 69). Hence her agonized cries "I can't hope, I can't manage. I can't go on." (Deshpande, 71) In such a stifling and suffocating domestic ambience and patriarchal set-up, she finds her female identity effaced. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes in her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Between patriarchy and imperialism subject- constitution and object formation the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'Third-World Woman' caught between tradition and modernization. (137)

Jaya writes columns about the dilemma of the middle class housewives in the pen name of 'Suhasini' and 'Sita'. Both 'Suhasini' and 'Sita' as she says are "the many selves waiting to be

discovered each self attached like a Siamese twin to a self of another person, neither able to exist without the other” (Deshpande, 69). Deshpande reveals the consciousness of Jaya through an exposition of her mind in the process of thinking, feeling and reacting to the moments and situations.

And I was Jaya. But I had been Suhasini as well. I can see her now, the Suhasini who was distinct from Jaya, a soft smiling, placid motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped. (16)

‘Gender’ refers to socially constructed roles and it is not merely determined biologically like ‘sex’. As Simone de Beauvoir states, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”. In our patriarchal society a woman has some certain roles to play as she is seen as a subservient wife, obedient daughter or the adoring mother. In *The Long Silence* Jaya, the protagonist is not born a woman but rather tries to become a woman. Our society and its certain traditions and practices specially associated with the institution of marriage encourage her to become an ideal woman. She says that she even “snipped off bits of herself to keep herself an ideal daughter, ideal wife, ideal mother, in short an ideal Indian female” (Deshpande, 7).

Shashi Deshpande depicts the journey of a submissive woman towards an assertive woman through the life of Jaya. In her childhood, she is brought up in a very loving and affectionate environment. Her father named her ‘Jaya’ with a belief that she would get victory in all the endeavours of her life. She has given modern education to develop her own thinking and to be able to take her own decisions. But simultaneously her parents have taught about the ideal images of traditional Hindu women like Sita and Savitri etc. She has been taught that an ideal wife always follows her husband blindly. In the patriarchal society a woman is defined in terms of her relationship with men. She does not have an independent identity of her own. She is the daughter, the sister and the wife of someone. Jaya gets confused and caught in this duality. As a modern woman, she is independent but as an ideal traditional woman she is bound to certain social taboos. She is attracted towards the new roles of a modern woman but she is not allowed to give up her deep rooted traditional values. This mental trauma has been excellently portrayed by Shashi Deshpande in *That Long Silence*.

Modern education teaches about equality of men and women in the society. It gives women a desire to be independent and assertive. But the patriarchal society tries to restrict their ways and wants to make them submissive and docile. These social restrictions make them alienated and dissatisfied. The marital relationship too plays an important role in female oppression. In *That Long Silence* Jaya says “it was not Mohan but marriage that had made me circumspect” (Deshpande, 187). Our society conditions men and women to follow patriarchal norms. Women also have full faith in patriarchal conventions and assume these conventions necessary for their marital bliss and social reputation. Shashi Deshpande tries to deconstruct these assumptions through her novels. Jaya is not absolutely a silent and voiceless victim but she steps

out of the narrative action as a witness as it were a critic to perceive the tenor of the story filtered a female consciousness.

Sensual memories are the coldest. They stir up nothing in you... These emotions and responses seemed to belong to two other people, not to the two of us lying here together... whatever my feeling has been then, I had never spoken of them to him. (Deshpande, 95)

Jaya is a modern predicament and the flood of consciousness that ensues out of it, is a silent stream of thoughts and feelings. Jaya succumbs and surrenders to Mohan without revolting. Silently she follows his will. She never says 'yes' when her husband asks her whether he has hurt her. She endures everything, tolerates all kinds of patriarchal oppression. Simone de Beauvoir expresses her own views on man-woman relationship—"man represents both the positive and neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general, whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity" (1974; 534). A woman is never regarded as an autonomous being since she is always been assigned a subordinate and relative position.

Man can think of himself without a woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees...she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex...absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her, she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. (1974: 534)

Jaya being renamed as Suhasini after marriage is not a case of the loss of identity as Jaya and Suhasini are the two facets of the same coin and these two collateral names of the protagonist are symbolical in their socio-familial import. Jaya, her premarital name means 'Victory' and Suhasini, the post marital name given to her by her husband means a soft smiling placid motherly woman. Jaya is a woman who adjusts and accommodates unlike the modern women who find themselves forced into the background by the claims of culture and hence they adopt an inimical attitude towards it.

Jaya's drift of thought and her evanescent mood is captured through the broken and fragmentary stream of consciousness. Her self-questioning attitude comes as a split in the narrative. She broods over the metaphor of the 'sheltering tree'. "A husband is like a sheltering tree. A sheltering tree, without the tree, you are dangerously unprotected...equally logically and vulnerable. This followed logically." (Deshpande, 32)

Jaya wants to flee from the cribbed confines of an imprisoned domestic life in order to find a new identity for herself, a new mooring for her fugitive self. There is hardly any communication between Jaya and Mohan, neither verbal nor emotional. There develops disheartening silence between them. Jaya is unable to speak her trouble out as she is a woman who faces the suffering of her life and the opposition of the milieu in the true spirit of ideal

Hindu womanhood where obedience and loyalty has degenerated to the state of dogged subservience. “Nothing between us...nothing between me and Mohan. We live together but there had been only emptiness between us.” (Deshpande, 185)

Shashi Deshpande presents here not a woman who has a desire to revolt but the one who ultimately reconciles to her ill fated lot. Having failed to discover the truth, she remains silent and reserved and reveals her most personal and private thoughts in her writings. Mohan wonders as to how could women be so rebellious and esoteric, so angry and recalcitrant. To him, it is unwomanly to be angry and is against the ideals. “The ideal of womanhood fore-grounded in the images of Sita or Savitri is one of chastity, purity, gentle tenderness and a singular faithfulness which cannot be destroyed or even disturbed by her husband’s absence, rejections, slights or thoughtlessness” (Kakar 55). Jaya, in *That Long Silence* was an ideal wife, or in other words, she was successful in her attempts to be an ideal wife and would have been through out until and unless the crisis in her life revealed the “illusion of happiness” floating over the “visual” of her family life (Deshpande, 4). Jaya was the meek and submissive wife of a “proudly matter-of-fact” husband (Deshpande, 5). She was trying to change herself from Jaya to Suhasini, cutting, not only her hair, but even “bits of me that had refused to be Mohan’s wife” to satisfy Mohan’s concept of an ideal wife (Deshpande, 191). She was following not her dreams, but her husband’s ideas about the life he wanted to lead with her eyes bandaged like Gandhari. She too like any other ideal wife believed that “a husband is like a sheltering tree” and tried to keep it alive and flourishing, watering it even with deceit and lies (Deshpande, 31). But she was not able to keep her illusion of having a sheltering tree, a protecting hand in her husband for too long. That myth was destined to be shattered. The sheltering tree of her life “died of too much water, of white ants in the manure that destroyed its roots” (Deshpande, 32).

In male dominated society a woman is considered as a weaker creature. She always needs protection of a male to survive in this world. Without male protection she is unable to face the sufferings of her life. Shashi Deshpande examines this image in *That Long Silence*. Jaya says that she is “Scared of cockroaches, lizards, nervous about electrical gadgets, hopeless at technical matters, lazy about accounting... almost the stereotype of woman: nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support” (Deshpande, 76). But this statement of Jaya is contrary to her nature because she herself admits that she was not always like this but it is due to her transition from Jaya to Suhasini. She tries to show herself weak and timid as these are the qualities of women stereotype. She is even refused to show her anger. Jaya in *That Long Silence* states:

A woman can never be angry, she can only be neurotic, hysterical frustrated. There is no room for despair, either. There is only order and routine. Today, I have to change sheets... tomorrow, scrub the bathrooms...the day after, clean the fridge....(Deshpande, 147-48)

Marriage subjugates and enslaves women and it leads her to “aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently towards death without questioning its purpose” (Beauvoir

1974: 500). Women pay for their happiness at the cost of their freedom and Beauvoir emphasizes that such a sacrifice on the part of a woman is too high for anyone because the kind of self-contentment, serenity and security that marriage offers, woman drains her soul of its capacity for greatness. “She shuts behind the doors of her new home. When she was a girl, the whole countryside was her homeland, the forests were hers. Now she is confined to a restricted space...”(Beauvoir 1974: 502).

Distance from real life scared of writing, scared of failing...oh God, I had thought, I cannot take any more. Even a worm has hole it can crawl into. I had mine as Mohan’s wife, as Rahul’s and Rati’s mother. (Deshpande, 148)

In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande attempts to interrogate the mental agony of Jaya, the protagonist. She is surrounded by self doubts, fear, guilt and anger but remains silent. While facing all the sufferings and challenges of life, she is continuously moving forward to establish an independent identity. Jaya achieves self-realisation and decides to speak, to break her long silence. *That Long Silence* shows her journey from the fragmented self to a unified whole. In one of her interviews with S. Prasanna Sree, Shashi Deshpande says:

I don’t write from myths. I write from real life...I don’t see women as Sita, Savitri and Draupadi. These are all myths. Let us leave them there. (Prasad 94)

*That Long Silence* is an excellent example of the above mentioned words of Shashi Deshpande. She takes subject matter from the real world and through the characters like Jaya, Kusum, Jeeja, Vanitamani and many others, she examines the male constructed concepts and symbols, the myths of wifhood, Pativrata concept, images of ideal motherhood, the myth of women as victims. A married woman has a few or practically no choice left to her except what her husband wills and desires. Unlike other married woman slavishly tagged to tradition, Jaya has her own say. She unfurls and unburdens herself to activate the creative impulses smothered within her artistic self. Jaya’s creative urge and artistic zeal frees her from her cramped and dubbed domestic and societal roles. At length she resolves to break that silence by putting down on paper all that she has suppressed in her seventeen years silence that has reduced her to fragments.

I am not afraid...any more. The panic has gone. I am Mohan’s wife. I had thought, and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan’s wife. Now I know that kind of fragmentation is not possible. The child hands in pocket, has been with me through the years. She is with me still. (Deshpande, 191)

In our society, the outlook of men and women to see the same thing is totally different. As in *That Long Silence*, Mohan’s mother endures her husband’s cruelty silently and Mohan and Jaya have different analysis of their mother’s behaviour. Mohan considers her mother strong and

“tough. Women in those days were tough.”(36) But Jaya believes that this silent suffering represents despair:

I saw a despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender. I’m a woman and I can understand her better; he’s a man and he can’t. (Deshpande, 36-37)

Towards the end of the novel Jaya consciously acknowledges her writing as a kind of fiction and quotes Defoe’s description of fiction as a kind of lying which may make ‘a great hope in the heart’. She decides to erase the silence between her and Mohan. This erasing of the silence symbolizes the assertion of her feminine voice, a voice with hope and promise, a voice that articulate her thoughts. The novel does not depict Jaya’s life as a dismal and hopeless struggle but it suggests hope and change for betterment. “We don’t change overnight. It’s possible that we may not change even over long period of time. But we can always hope without that life would be impossible” (Deshpande, 193). The novel *That Long Silence* is full of minute details of everyday life, the hopes and dreams and the insignificant happenings, ends on a positive note. The crisis in Jaya’s life has forced a whole lot of rethinking. And there is hope for a new beginning. Jaya has reconstructed her identity and along with that her capacity to dream. She has decided to get rid of the silence, which women have lived with for ages.

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