

**Search for Identity: A Feminist Reading of Shashi Deshpande's
*That Long Silence*****Dr. Manjeet Kumar Rai**Assistant Professor- English
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Uttarakhand**Abstract**

Feminism means granting the same rights to women as those enjoyed by men. Feminism does not particularly talk of equality and rights of women but it is more about compassion, respect and understanding from the male counterparts. Throughout the world women have been deprived of their social and economic rights. Twentieth century has witnessed a growing awareness among women regarding their desires, sexuality, self-definition, existence and destiny. Women's efforts to seek their independence and self-identity started a revolution all over the world which was termed by analysts and critics as 'Feminism'. The contemporary writers are still striving to provide liberation to the female world from the debilitating socio-cultural constraints and oppressive myths of their respective countries. In post-Independence India, where education of women had already commenced, the New Woman also had begun to emerge. Education had inculcated a sense of individuality amongst women and had aroused an interest in their human rights. It was then that the feminist trend in Indian literature had appeared on the horizon and women came into conflict with the double standards of social law through ages and the conventional moral code.

Shashi Deshpande has emerged as a major authentic voice in Indian English Fiction. Her novels abound in female quest for identity. They are usually narrated by female protagonists who strive to find out their own selves throughout the novels. No doubt, they are haunted by the memories of past and feel a kind of worthlessness, but towards the end they realize their selves. Though they appear to be successful outwardly, they seem to lack direction and feel a sense of futility. Deshpande's novels fit into such a scenario and help females realize their potential in a positive manner. The quest for female identity has its roots in the patriarchal set up, where man is given every kind of freedom. He has the right to choose his aim. His emotions are taken care of. Blunders committed by him are ignored and are perceived as his pastime, whereas women cannot afford a little digression from the set rules. They have to conform to social norms of the so called "great tradition" which has 'silenced' them in one way or the other.

Published in 1988 and winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award, Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is a portrayal of man-woman relationship on a small canvas and, simultaneously, it is a deep probing into the search of a woman for her identity in Indian social and cultural milieu. The female protagonist, Jaya like any other educated middle class woman, conforms to the rules and constraints of the society. She is unable to find out whether she lives for herself or for her family. Her silence is symbolic of most of the women of the world who are unable to express themselves as individual. The paper intends to analyze *That Long Silence* in terms of Jaya's individual search for identity. The present paper studies the novel in the light of a recently developed phenomenon known as 'Feminism.'

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Published in 1988 and winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award, Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is a portrayal of man-woman relationship on a small canvas and, simultaneously, it is a deep probing into the search of a woman for her identity in Indian social and cultural milieu. '*That Long Silence*' is a bold attempt as well as an assertion of a contemporary Indian writer to break the long silence that has surrounded woman, their experience and their world. For a long time, woman has existed as a gap, as an absence in literature, whether Western or Indian. This is not only true of the fiction created by men, but also by woman, who have mostly confined themselves to writing love stories or dealing with the experience of woman in a superficial manner, creating the same kind of stereotypes of woman which they find so reprehensible in the writings of men. Women writers have also often fallen a prey to that prescriptive feminist ideology of creating strong woman characters. This doctrine becomes as repressive as the one created by male hegemony and represses the truth about the majority of their sisters and their lives.

The female protagonist, Jaya like any other educated middle class woman, conforms to the rules and constraints of the society. She is unable to find out whether she lives for herself or for her family. She is taken for granted by everyone in the family. She is a typical wife with love and affection for children, respect and sense of duty for husband and her in-laws. Her silence is symbolic of most of the women of the world who are unable to express themselves as individual. She tries her hands at writing and succeeds, but she is not appreciated by her husband. Her children, too, are unable to appreciate her achievement. She feels a kind of stagnation when she recalls that her life had been nothing but a worthless pursuit. Her effort to break the long silence through her writing is interpreted as her individuation.

"If I were a man and cared to know the world I believe in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy – the weight of that long silence of one half of the world" (Deshpande). This statement by Elizabeth Robins forms the epigraph of Shashi Deshpande's novel. This silence refers to the reticence of a female character. During her silence, Jaya, the protagonist, undertakes a journey towards her own self. She endeavors to search for her own identity, which seems to be lost somewhere during seventeen years of her marriage. In this connection Chandramani observes:

"Novels of Deshpande abound in female quest for identity. Her novels are usually narrated by female protagonists who strive to find out their own selves throughout the novels Deshpande got success in her representation of real life experience through *That Long Silence*. She realistically depicts the inner conflict through Jaya, who suffers from the begging to the end craving for the quest of the self and identity" (Chandramani 98).

Against this backdrop, Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* promises to be a refreshing departure from most of the fiction written by woman. Of course, one cannot claim that she is doing anything extraordinary. We readily recognize the middle class ethos and people that we come across in the novel. The novelist's contribution lies in the heightened sensitivity and the fresh insights that she brings to bear on the well-known types and situations. The action of the novel is triggered off by a crisis in a middle class family. Mohan, the narrator's husband, in this pursuit of prestige and security, had indulged in certain malpractices, as a result of which he now faces an inquiry and may perhaps lose his job. Mohan is advised by Agarwal, his partner in the crime, to stay away from the office and his Churchgate flat till the storm blows over. Luckily from Mohan, the children are away on a tour with their family friends, and it all ends well, they need not even know about this disgrace. Mohan, therefore, decides that he and his wife Jaya would go and stay at the flat in Dadar. This flat had belonged to Jaya's maternal uncle. Jaya and Mohan had stayed there before shiftings to bigger flat in Churchgate. Jaya acquiesces to her husband's decision and accompanies him, albeit in silent resentment, to their present exile at Dadar Flat. It is there, in the intolerable period of waiting and rising hysteria, that the process of self examination and self criticism begins for Jaya. She is flooded by the memories of the past – her earlier life, her marriage with Mohan, the frustrations and disappointments in her seventeen years old marriage existence, her personal failures, all these begin to haunt and torment her. By her journey into the past, Jaya gets the guidance for her future. By the end of the novel, the crisis has been averted and everything outwardly appears to be a passive, silent partner to Mohan. The novel ends with her resolve to speak, to break her long silence.

That Long Silence traces Jaya's passage 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, endeavours to come to terms with her protean roles, while trying, albeit in vain, to rediscover her true self, which is but an ephemera – an unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and a failed writer" (Ahuja 02). Jaya, in fact, rejects the patriarchal notion of a unitary self or identity.

Even a casual reading of the novel makes one conscious that Shashi Deshpande is not only writing about her female protagonist, Jaya, who is trying to erase a long silence and grapple with the problems of self-revelation and self-assessment, but through Jaya, also about other women, those unhappy victims who never broke their silence.

"Self-revelation is a cruel process. The real picture, the real 'you' never emerges. Looking for it is as bewildering as trying to know how you really look" (Deshpande 01). A critic Anupama Chowdhury also observes: "In all her novels . . . this . . . novelist explores what happens in the psyche of the heroines as they go through the complex process of self-realization" (Chowdhury 53).

That Long Silence is also a scathing critique of our social institutions like marriage on family, the way they stifle the growth and free expression of the individual. These institutions put the individuals into the slots like wife, husband, brother, brother, sister, daughter, son, etc. and obstruct the free communication between human beings.

Kamat was Jaya's upstairs neighbor as well as best friend who showed a lot of understanding and sympathy for her. Jaya was also free, comfortable and uninhibited with him. But in our society, this kind of friendship between a married woman and another man is always looked upon with suspicion and disapproval. That is the reason when Jaya had found Kamat lying dead on the floor of his flat on one of her visits to him, she was panicked and

left the place in silence. This incident underlines how marriage often drives people into impossible and awkward situations.

In her anxiety to fulfill her roles of a wife and a mother, Jaya had not done proper justice to her own talents. Years back, Jaya had made a good beginning as a writer by producing a story which had won the first prize and was published in a magazine. But Mohan's response to the story was most disheartening. He assumed that the story was about their personal life: "How can you reveal us, how can you reveal our lives to the world in this way (Deshpande 144)?"

He was apprehensive and hurt at the thought that the people of his acquaintance would think he was the kind of person as was the man portrayed in the story. No doubt, this incident had left a deep impression on Jaya's psyche and affected her career as a writer. She, therefore, can easily make her husband as a scapegoat for her failure, but in her self-critical mood at the Dadar flat, she refuses to have this easy way out. She reminds herself that even after her confrontation with Mohan she had continued to write – write under an assumed name (as women writers have often done under patriarchy) but her stories had been rejected. Something had been missing from them, something had been censored out of them. According to Kamat, it was Jaya's anger, her strong passions: "Why didn't you use that anger in your story? There is none of it here . . . what is really wrong with your story (Deshpande 147)."

Jaya had tried to remind what actually she had learned from her husband in her memorable argument with him that a woman cannot be angry, that anger makes a woman 'unwomanly'. She had also given the familiar excuse that women give, when they fail at anything, that they have no time for serious work, because of their household duties. Kamat had reproved of this tendency in her: "I am warning you - because of this 'women are the victim' theory of yours. It will drag you down into a soft squishy bog of self-pity. Take yourself seriously, Woman. Don't skulk behind a false name. And work – work if you want other to take you seriously (Deshpande 148)." Kamat was a hard critic and he would leave no escape route for Jaya. The real reason for her failure, he pointed out was her fear. She was afraid of writing, of failing.

Jaya was in no mood to take such hard criticism. She had crawled back into her hole. She had resumed her career as a wife, as a mother. In the meantime, Mohan had suggested that she should write, light humorous pieces in the newspapers, what they called "middles". Jaya had then started her weekly column "seeta" which had gone the approval of the readers, the editor and above all her husband. Jaya observes:

"And for me, she had been the means through which I had shut the door, firmly, on all those other women who had invade my being, screaming for attention: women I had known I could not write about, because they might - it was just possible - resemble Mohan's mother or aunt, or my mother or aunt" (Deshpande 149).

Thus the novelist makes it clear that not only patriarchy has kept silent on the subject of women, but under patriarchy, women have also recoiled from telling the truth about their sex.

Shashi Deshpande has also portrayed, in the present novel, the irony of a woman writer who is also a young house-wife. Being a writer she is supposed to present her views and ideas before the society but still she remains silent probing into her past, struggling with her present and trying to establish a rapport with her future. She is an intellectual who finds herself out of place in the society meant only for men.

In the small old flat at Dadar, Jaya gets out of touch with her daily affair and becomes an introvert. She sits deep in contemplation, thinking of her childhood and tries to

analyze herself. As Adele King observes: “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 . . .” (King 97).

Generally a woman’s identity is defined by others, in terms of her relationship with men i.e. as a daughter, as a wife, as a mother etc. The question “What a woman does” is never asked but “Who she belongs to” is always considered important. She does not have any identity of her own. Her name keeps on changing according to the wishes of others. In the novel the writer has presented this phenomenon through the character of Jaya, who is known by two names: JAYA and SUHASINI. Jaya which means victory, is the name given by her father when she was born, and Suhasini, the name given after her marriage which means a “soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman.” Both the names symbolize the traits of her personality. The former symbolizes revolt and the latter submission. The dreams of her childhood, to change the ascribed situation of woman resulting in achieving her goals, are shattered by the environment, the surroundings, and above all by the society which imposes all sorts of restrictions on women. She is absolutely helpless and is unable to do anything to improve her situation. Ultimately she tries to adapt herself to the main current. She longs to be called an ideal wife. She revolts in silence. She comments on a situation when her husband talks about women being treated very cruelly by their husbands and he calls it “strength”.

“He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire, but I saw 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” (Deshpande 36).

Coming to the physical relationship between husband and wife, it is again the case of a dominating husband and a suffering wife. Even if the husband hurts the wife, she remains silent. Jaya, too has been cast in the same mould. She cannot say “yes” when her husband asks her whether he has hurt her. She has to tolerate everything:

“In any case, whatever my feelings had been then, I had never spoken of them to him. In fact, we had never spoken of sex at all. It had been as if the experience was erased each time after it happened; it never existed in words. The only words between us had been his question, ‘Did I hurt?’ and my answer, ‘No.’ Each time, after it was over, the same question; and my reply too, invariably the same – ‘No.’ (Deshpande 95).

A bit further:

“The contact, the coming together, had been not only momentary, but wholly illusory as well. We had never come together, only our bodies had done that. I had begun to cry then, despairingly, silently, scared that I would wake up Mohan, trying desperately to calm myself” (Deshpande 98).

All this certainly doesn’t show a natural and harmonious relationship between the two, when we see that one is unable to express his or her real feelings to the other. Their physical relationship always ends up with Mohan’s question whether he has hurt her. It obviously shows a forced relationship and not a natural or even a comfortable one. Jaya does not immediately react to the situation but the reader is informed through the flashback technique used by the other. Lying alone in a small house, her mind travels through the past and the present and thus covers the whole span of her life. At times the author uses the technique of stream consciousness to project the minds of the characters, and thus making the story authentic and realistic.

Jaya was taught that “a husband is like a sheltering tree” (Deshpande 137). But Mohan always interprets things in relation to the effect it may have on the society. He unobtrusively likes to conform to the social norms even if they are strong. The success of Jaya’s novel

depicting the relationship between man and woman is weighed in relation to what society would think in future. So he wants to make Jaya also think like him and induces her not to deliberate on such themes that would endanger their marriage. Jaya, a representative of the typical Indian woman, in the present context, wants to mould herself as her husband wills. But all this male - chauvinistic ideas are not her own, but have been thrust upon her by the society in general and her father in particular. Her father made her think that she was different from others and hence, she could not cope with her hostel-mates and kept herself aloof from other girls.

When Kamat asks her why she has not expressed the anger of woman in her writings, her reply is “because no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman” (Deshpande 147).

When she leaves her home after getting married, her father advises her to be always good to Mohan and she, at all times tries her best to follow his advice. It also throws light on her being closer to her father than to her mother than to her mother. Even when her mother scolds her or questions her going out and returning home late, she complains against her mother to her father.

Social conformity has always been more obligatory for a young woman than for a man. Generally, a woman’s identity tends to be defined about moulding her tastes in order to suit those of the rest even if her superior intellect is not satisfied. In the very beginning of the novel, she sees that she tries to reason out her father with her father as to why she would not listen to the songs broadcast on the radio, but ultimately she keeps silent, suppressing her desire. Here the novelist has presented the theme of lack of communication. As she herself declares: “The theme of lack of communication may be over familiar in western fiction, but in . . . India it is not much analysed” (Deshpande).

In the novel under study, Shashi Deshpande presents the meanings of silence. As she herself puts it:

“You learn a lot of tricks to get by a relationship. Silence is one of them. You never find a woman criticizing her husband, even play – fully, in case it might damage the relationship” (Deshpande).

To make the story authentic and appealing, Deshpande has used the method of first person narrative to ensure its credibility by making the protagonist read her inner mind and thus representing the psyche of the modern middle-class learned woman. As Dr. Deepa Rani observes: “Shashi Deshpande’s women characters belong to middle class society, are brought up in a traditional environment and struggling to liberate themselves and trying to seek their self identity and independence under the influence of modernity” (Rani 12).

Jaya is basically a modern woman rooted in tradition, whereas her husband Mohan, is a traditionalist rooted in customs. The difference between their outlook is so great that they fail, time and again, to understand each other. To Mohan, a woman sitting before the fire, waiting for her husband to come home and eat hot food is the real “strength” of a woman, but Jaya interprets it as nothing more than despair. The difference in their attitude is the main cause of their failure to understand each other.

It was due to differences in attitude, their marital life grows shaky and gloomy. It becomes more a compromise than love based on social fear rather than on mutual need of each other. The cause may be rooted in the choice of a partner. Tamanna Kapoor is of the view that:

“Jaya in her quest reached at a situation of Compromise. She agreed to change herself and hoped for a change in Mohan . . . The compromise on the part of woman, as well as man makes Shashi Deshpande a liberal writer who does not commit to a writing

that chooses ultimate freedom for women and assigns domestic chores to men” (Kapoor 624).

Shashi Deshpande in her novel *That Long Silence*, at one level, presents the condition of the woman in Indian society – her role model – and how the different types of woman act out their roles with their silence. The title emphasizes the silence that the protagonist Jaya wishes to break and to search her own self, her wife role and her real individual self. At another level, she examines the role of Sita and Gandhari and Maitreyee, at still another level, it is the modern convent – educated English speaking woman who gropes into the darkness of life – the dis-satisfaction with her role model in marriage and her agony her own acceptance, though unconsciously, of the two standards for man and woman in society – the two language formula of the Sanskrit drama, Sanskrit for the man and Prakrit for the woman. Anjali Hans offers a valuable observation which leads us toward a fine conclusion: “In this whole scenario the fiction of Shashi Deshpande comes as a fresh air, which not only propagates feminist ideas but also advises women to understand their naked selves. Deshpande’s novels suggest that women should take cognizance of their weaknesses, overcome them and implement their potentials in order to assert their individuality. As a novelist she mirrors the new socio-cultural context of the process of change. Her novels reflect the social realities of Indian life - they also reevaluate and reinterpret women’s status, helping them to reinvent their identity and community positions, norms and values. The themes dealt by Deshpande in her novels possess universality. They do not refer to a particular woman or a particular section of women in the society but are representative of Indian womanhood” (Hans 1766).

Thus the author highlights how our culture has often kept silence on the subject of women. The novel is Jaya’s protest against the kind of treatment that is given to women in our culture and her attempt to search for her own identity as well as to give another version of history from women’s point of view.

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