

BOOK REVIEW ON SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THAT LONG SILENCE*

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Title: *That Long Silence*

Author: Shashi Deshpande

Publication: Virago Press Ltd. UK and Penguin Books India

Publication Year: 1988

Issues like women, patriarchal roles, and marriage institutions had been of utmost importance in India. While searching quality Indian Literature on Sahitya Award winning parameter, That Long Silence written by Shashi Deshpande is very attractive. The title seems to pull readers towards itself. It seemed as if it was shouting for someone to get out of the clutches that the person had been in from ages and also the cover attracts so much, where a woman can be seen in the dark as if hiding from someone and also wanting to get her desires fulfilled.

Early years of Shashi Deshpande's marriage were largely given over the care of her two young sons, but later, she took a course in journalism and for a period of time worked on a magazine. She is a novelist and has also written children's books. Her novels primarily present a social world of many complex relationships. She is regarded as a feminist writer and frequently writes about women belonging to the Indian middle class, who are brought up in a traditional, environment and are struggling to liberate themselves and seek their self-identity and independence. She also brings forth the issue of violence against women, whether physical, mental or emotional, which is a concern that crosses all borders and all classes of women.

Feminism and its crusade against a male dominated society are of special importance in the Indian context and thus also find a special place in her novels.

That Long Silence published in 1988 in UK by Virago Press Ltd. and later published in India by Penguin Random House, Penguin Books India in 1989 is a book that won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990 and the Padma Shri Award in 2009. Shashi Deshpande herself holds the copyright of the book. The book has around 200 pages with easily readable font size. It has off white pages with a normal texture and having a smell quite similar to that of a newspaper. The print of the book is quite appreciable. It does not have any kind of misprinting or faded words at all.

The book contains a brief introduction of the author given by Penguin Books. Then the Author's Note provides a crisp introduction to the characters and the names used for them in the book. Book also has an Epigraph which is taken from Elizabeth Robin's Speech to the WWSL in 1907 before the starting of the text. This Epigraph becomes the basis of the novel. At the end, the book also contains a Glossary that provides the translation of the Kannada words used in the book and the idea behind them.

The genre of the book is fiction which is a classical innovative piece of Indian literature dealing with marital conflicts. The title of the book is suggestive of a 'long silence' which the protagonist Jaya had been experiencing for the last seventeen years of her married life. It reveals the psyche of the protagonist's mind. The silence, which is by its own nature, very calm and peaceful, appears to be just opposite of it in the novel. Jaya has always lived a life of silence but later this silence becomes a tool of protest and revolt against the laws which have been rooted inside her for years. "I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and Surrender." (36) By penning down what she feels, she sheds away this silence without literally

breaking it. Even the cover of the book is quite revealing. The woman standing in the dark at the back of an old building, looking at light outside the room is suggestive of a woman bound by the laws of society. At the same time, she is unwilling to abide by them. Her gesture shows her helplessness in the present situation but there seems to be hope for a better future.

Modern Indian Women of today's time are enjoying liberty and the freedom of their rights but even today, at some places the silence still continues. That Long Silence is not just an imaginary piece of art. It is very much rooted in the soul of every Indian woman irrespective of marriage and education. It has always been there, silently eating up some women's hearts or coming out in other ways. It's the story of an urban middle class lady whose identity is trapped between a mother and a wife. She has always lived in silence and ultimately realizes that this silence was something that has never been imposed on her. It was she who chose it for her own self. It seems as if it is not just a story. In fact, these are the monologues uttered in the mind of Jaya at a point of time in her life where the status quo can change, although it does not change in the end. In a period of a few days, she recapitulates everything. She thinks and talks about everything starting from her hiding under the mask of a wife or a writer and her relationships with everyone around her to the things which have happened, not happened, could have happened, could not have happened, should have happened and should not have happened.

Issues like quest for identity, efforts to lead an independent life, realization and recognition from Jaya's side along with Mohan's want for a woman to be submissive and a home maker leads to the silence creating emptiness in Jaya's life and withdrawal of happiness from the marital bond of Jaya and Mohan. These issues are in the background of the novel whereas the foreground issue of the novel is Feminism: "I was born. My father died when I was fifteen. I got married to Mohan. I have two children, and I did not let a third live" (2). A woman has always

been attached to a male member of the house, whether it is a father before her marriage or the husband and son after her marriage. Vivid imageries are visible in the novel. Through Jaya, a number of images can be explained that shows how a woman is defined in a patriarchal setup. We can see the image of marriage which acts as an institution, image of a middle class woman who is sandwiched between tradition and modernity, also the image of a woman emerging out of the cocoon. Jaya had always been expected to be under the shelter of her husband: "A sheltering tree. Without the tree, you're dangerously unprotected and vulnerable... so, you have to keep the tree alive and flourishing even if you have to water it with deceit and lies" (32). Jaya explains her loveless marriage through the image of bullocks: "A pair of bullocks yoked together... A man and a woman married for seventeen years... But the reality was only this. We are two persons. A man. A woman." (5) Mohan is the symbol of a typical husband who holds the ideals of patriarchy very strongly. Jaya symbolizes the silence that is deep inside every woman's heart and mind. Jaya's name is even symbolic of victory which is also ironically presented: "I named you Jaya," he said, "Jaya for victory" (15). Even her second name given to her by her husband on their wedding day is symbolic: "Suhasini" which meant her to be always "Soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman." (16) Jaya's silence symbolized 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." (36). Silence acts as a string that holds patriarchy as an institution which can only run on the basis that one always have the surplus power to exploit the other but the silence of those who are exploited acts as a fuel to run these patriarchal institutions. Major themes of the novel are liberation of female, alienation, self-discovery, revolt, and the story of a subaltern gender. And the minor themes are self-belief, self-confidence, reconciliation, marital disharmony, and the image of a new woman.

Talking about the writing style, we do not find it to be very complex or using a lot of literary devices or techniques as Deshpande is a homemade writer. She never went abroad to study great styles. In the novel, she has used the technique of pondering upon the past in such a way that everything is interlinked. One thing happens like the other thing. Things are not ridiculed by the writer, rather they are just focused upon for the readers to understand it by their own thinking. Novel is written in the first person and at times third person narrative. Many sentences are left incomplete for readers to complete them by their own understanding of the pressure and tension undergoing in the mind of the speaker. Usage of Kannada words and stories like Seeta, Draupadi, Gandhari in connection to Jaya, roots the book in to the lives of the people and the readers can make a direct connection to the story. Narrative is so much connected to the real aspects of life that sometimes it feels as the readers are going through someone's personal diary. Every character is weaved around the protagonist Jaya like a hairdresser who picks up random hair from here and there to place them beautifully and make a perfect hairstyle. Every character is unique and shows a different aspect of life. At times the narrative becomes a bit confusing also. Thoughts in the story jumps on different places at different periods. Though the book has a very dense narrative with extensive vocabulary, it fails to establish a proper plot summary as such. Novel is written with a realistic viewpoint which clearly shows the idea stated by Judith Butler that feminism shows the difference between a male and a female.

Keeping all this in mind, I think the book is a good read not only for a student of literature but also for the common masses as the writer has very well achieved her aim. She very realistically portrays the plight of a woman who has always defined herself with respect to her husband and children. Looking at Jaya with Freudian psychology, Electra complex can easily be traced in her character. She is completely shattered after her father's death and had never been

attached to her mother. In fact she feels her mother to be somehow responsible for the problems in her life as she never taught Jaya the ways to be in a family after marriage. She herself also, is very sensitive towards Rahul but cares very less about Rati.

Jaya's struggle for identity is not only a story but an effort for people to realize that victimization should not always be of an individual irrespective of the individual to be a woman or a man, but a married couple should realize their responsibilities in a marriage and shoulder them equally. Deshpande has not taken sides at any place. She has portrayed the things as they are. Things are not the consequences of anyone's doing, rather the mutual failure of a couple as husband and wife in their marriage. Since the story is set in a period before and after independence, at times, a few events do not relate to the present state of existence. If the reader is an independent woman who has lived with her own identity since her birth, she may not relate to it. But if the reader is a housewife, whose career as an author, or any other profession rests at home with her husband and children only, who is dependent on the marriage for her identity, she may very well relate a lot to most of the things in the book. The book can be recommend to specially those couples who are facing an imbalance in their marriage so that they may amend their ways and have a better married life.