

## A STUDY ON SHASHI DESPANDE'S *THAT LONG SILENCE*

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### ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande, a well known feminist writer depicts the different facets of women in Indian society. She creates characters who feel a sense of isolation in the suffocating darkness of their life where communication is beyond their reach. In her novel *That Long Silence*, she delineates the dilemma of a woman-writer, Jaya, who is also a housewife. Being a writer, she is expected to present her view 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. This paper is an attempt to trace the journey of Jaya who breaks the cocoon and moves from patriarchal suppression towards self-realization.

Jaya remains a submissive wife submitting herself to the whims and fancies of her husband. She remains silence to maintain her marital relationship and marital life. She makes no choice of her own and allows herself to be directed by her husband. Deshpande's statement, "two bullocks yoked together"(11) suggests that marriage is inevitable and the wife has no other alternative except following her husband. Jaya suppresses herself silently to cope with the social and cultural outlook. Mohan, Jaya's husband, is a self-centered person. He fails to look upon Jaya as an essential company. A crisis arises where Mohan has been blamed for his involvement in a financial malpractice. He expects Jaya to go into hiding with him but she denies complying with. Her attitude aggravates Mohan and he leaves home without saying anything to her.

Jaya is left all alone in Dadar flat where she gets space to review herself. She is dreaded by the past disappointments and she decides to articulate her long silence, her doubts, fears and her inner thoughts which she has suppressed for seventeen years to save her marriage. Jaya starts penning down her experience of marital life which is a sort of catharsis for her. She has decided not to be passive and silent. A gradual change in the outlook, attitude and demeanor sprouts out strengthening her morally and spiritually. Women in Indian society have ingrained these patriarchal social norms to such an extent that they turn themselves into an effigy of submissiveness and dependency. But Jaya strikes a great contrast to these women by her consciousness to assert her self identity. She decides to break the ice between Mohan and herself, and completes her journey towards self-assertion.

**KEYWORDS:** Suppression, Gender Discrimination, Self-Assertion

### INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande, a well known feminist writer depicts the different facets of women in Indian society. She creates characters who feel a sense of isolation in the suffocating darkness of their life where communication is beyond their reach. In her novel *That Long Silence*, she delineates the dilemma of a woman-writer who is also a housewife. Being a writer, she is expected to present her view 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. This paper is an attempt to trace the journey of Jaya who breaks the cocoon and moves from patriarchal suppression towards self-realization.

In Indian society, women are expected to undergo different stages as docile daughters, chaste and obedient wives and sacrificing mothers. The only domain ascribed to female is to fit in this good daughter, good wife and good mother criteria. Marriage has become an indispensable one in the Indian society. Jaya, the protagonist is a passive victim of eternal suffering within the oppressive walls of patriarchal system. As victim she has to pawn her real identity in order to keep herself fit in the male - centered domestic and social arena.

Jaya remains a submissive wife submitting herself to the whims and fancies of her husband. She remains silence to maintain her marital relationship and marital life. She makes no choice of her own and allows herself to be directed by her husband. Deshpande's statement, "two bullocks yoked together"(11) suggests that marriage is inevitable and the wife has no other alternative except following her husband. Jaya suppresses herself silently to cope with the social and cultural outlook. "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 didn't want to know anything" (61). She is left with no identity of her own. She says, "Just emptiness and silence" (144). It shows her intense frustration in her married life and her inability to raise her voice against the traditional concept of an ideal marriage.

Jaya, though a highly educated girl, is preoccupied with the advice of her mother and other female members of her family to maintain silence and to carry out all the orders of her husband without opposing him. They made a deep impact on her impressionable mind by entrusting upon her their own experiences of life and underscoring that she has no own knowledge of real life yet. Though a modern and convent educated girl equipped with the skill of writing, she follows their instructions due to her traditional upbringing. As an outcome of the teaching she receives from her mother and other female members of the family, she remains voiceless after marriage. She never resists her husband in order to save her marriage.

When Jaya tries to figure out why she had married Mohan, she sees the truth that it was because 'he had decided to marry' her, she 'had only to acquiesce'. Jaya's traditional upbringing makes her submissive after marriage. She never argues or opposes her husband in order to save her marriage. As she has observed the lives of widowed and deserted women, she is afraid to live a deserted life. She is counseled just before her marriage: "Remember Jaya, a husband is like a sheltering tree. Keep the tree alive and flourishing, even if you have to water it with deceit and lies" (32). She further says: "If your husband has a mistress or two, ignore it. Take up a hobby instead, cats, may be, or your sister's children" (32). She does not believe in these patriarchal notions but still follows the same path out of helplessness. At the time of her marriage, her husband changes her name from Jaya to Suhasini. She doesn't protest just to keep him happy. Even she cut her hair as per her husband's choice, dressed according to her husband's choice.

Jaya suffers of gender discrimination right from her childhood. As a neglected child of the family, she always feels difference in her mother's attitude towards her and her brothers. Her longing for her mother's love never gets fulfilled. She sadly recalls, "When I had passionately wanted her love, she had ignored me and concentrated on her sons. ... 'Smarming that had been Dada's (her elder brother) word for her behaviour, and the smarming had never been for me. When I got married, she had been unperturbed, there had been not even a pretence of tears when I left home" (106) and "I longed for a soft, motherly breast to cry on. And then I had to smile, I had never gone to her for comfort" (139). After a long struggle Jaya pursues her higher education, in spite of gender discrimination.

Jaya's marital life does not follow the path she visualizes. A quarrel between the two leads Mohan to silence. She feels guilty as Mohan is the "Sheltering tree", "God for her" as she was taught by the ladies of her family before marriage.

She indeed wraps herself in a cover of silence. For seventeen years of her marriage she successfully manages to suppress her feelings as she thought it's important for a happy and successful married life. There is a lack of communication and lack of merger of the self. She even gives up her career as a writer to make her husband happy.

Mohan, Jaya's husband, is a self-centered person. He fails to look upon Jaya as an essential company. A crisis arises where Mohan has been blamed for his involvement in a financial malpractice. He expects Jaya to go into hiding with him but she denies complying with. Her attitude aggravates Mohan and he leaves home without saying anything to her. She realizes that Mohan has lost interest in her. She cannot imagine a life without Mohan or his support:

The thought of living without him and twisted my insides, his death had seemed to me the final catastrophe. The very idea of his dying had made me feel so bereft that tears had flowed effortlessly down my cheeks. If he had been a little late coming home, I had been sure he was dead. By the time, he returned, I had, in my imagination shaped my life to a desolate widowhood. (96-97)

Jaya is left all alone in Dadar flat where she gets space to review herself. Her realization that her own children are distanced from her besides her husband's accusation of having let him down are sufficient to shake her dreams of glory for her revolutionary ideas. She is dreaded by the past disappointments and she decides to articulate her long silence, her doubts, fears and her inner thoughts which she has suppressed for seventeen years to save her marriage. She has never confronted her husband but even then she was blamed by her husband in times of crisis in their life. She spends seventeen years of her life according to her husband's choice and will. Her husband wants her to be an ideal housewife whose sole duty is to please her husband, to cook food of his choice, to bring up children and to maintain the house.

The long silence of Jaya is an expression of the silence of the modern Indian housewife. In Indian Patriarchal society, there is no self-identity for a woman. It is easy for an uneducated woman to accept this dominance silently without arguing like Jaya's help maid whose husband is a drunkard and who frequently beats her. Her maid does not protest even when her husband remarries because she thinks that she has failed to give him a child, so he has every right to remarry. But the situation for highly educated women is very tough. She has her own point of view on a particular situation. It is not easy for her to follow someone silently without even telling her own attitude.

Jaya starts penning down her experience of marital life which is a sort of catharsis for her. She has decided not to be passive and silent. She says, "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"(191). A gradual change in the outlook, attitude and demeanor sprouts out strengthening her morally and spiritually.

The protagonists of Shashi Deshpande rebel but they choose the middle path because they believe in the institutions of marriage and family. Thus, women in Indian society have ingrained these patriarchal social norms to such an extent that they turn themselves into an effigy of submissiveness and dependency. But Jaya strikes a great contrast to these women by her consciousness to assert her self identity. An identity that is free from the conservative anticipation and discriminations and that can uphold one's pride in a world full of irrationality. She decides to carve a niche of her own. She will no longer live in a terrified state. She decides to break the ice between Mohan and herself, and completes her journey towards self-assertion.

*That long silence* presents "Jaya caught in this dilemma: firstly, trying to be a fit wife to her husband and secondly, struggling to express the kind of emotions women experience, but seldom express in a male-dominated

chauvinistic society” (Bharvani 150). She ponders on her far from successful writing career and her past memories. In the process of doing this she probes inward, thus emerging from her long moments of silence.

A woman has got to go beyond the socially determined role of wife and “mother”. She has to find out who she is? The Indian woman seeks to be emancipated; her aim is to be a whole human being, regardless of difference in sex. The women are responsible for their lot, for they have contributed to their own victimization. Women have not offered any resistance; they have to fight for their cause. (Dhawan 22)

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