

From A Voiceless To A Voiced Identity: A Study Of The Journey Of Jaya In *That Long Silence* By Shashi Deshpande.

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ABSTRACT

That Long Silence by Shashi Deshpande, is a psychological study of struggles of Jaya, an educated, married woman, as she navigates societal expectations and her own desires for self-expression and independence. Women are supposed to bear the stamp of their family and a silence is imposed on them by the society literally as well as figuratively. This restriction on speech mars the independence, identity and confidence of the women converting them into voiceless beings who are to be silent spectators of the working of the family. They are like doormats who are supposed to cater to the needs of the family passively without offering any suggestion for the betterment of the family. *That Long Silence* is a feminist novel which critiques the patriarchal structures of Indian society and the silence imposed on women within it. This paper attempts to study the silence imposed on women and the result of this silence on the lives and identities of women.

Key words: Feminist, patriarchal, independence, identity, voice, voiceless

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande is one of the eminent novelists of contemporary Indian literature in English. Born in 1936, in Dharwad, she is the younger daughter of the Sanskrit scholar, novelist, actor and dramatist R. V. Jagirdar. Her father was a renowned personality whose work has become a part of the national Indian heritage. Deshpande grew up in a literary inclined family that belonged to the upper middle class, had the opportunity to study at a convent school, got a degree in law and then married to a Doctor. Writing did not come to Deshpande as a conscious decision. She had a happy married life with two children but no work of her own, no career. She got restless with being just a housewife and mother. She felt isolated and lonely with husband and children away all day. It was then that her husband encouraged her to write about her experience in England. In 1972 she wrote her first short story, "The Legacy". Her father advised publication of the story otherwise the stories would get lost. Thus began a career that would make her a name in India and beyond.

The web of her main text is woven around Indian women's lives in modern Indian society. Their day-to-day living deeply impregnated by religious, social, and political traditions, and gender relations determined by patriarchal dominance and a voice of freedom dominates her work. Well-educated women of the middle and upper middle classes, who fight for their own space, for their place in the family and in their social and their cultural setting, forms the backdrop to her stories. Deshpande's novels are family novels. The intricacies in family life, the patriarchal enfolding, the male power structure leaving the women a mute spectator in the family despite her education and degrees is the ground work of the novels. Women, in Deshpande's texts, are not simply victims of circumstance, of family, or society. They leave behind limitations and stand out for themselves as self-assured, self-empowered, articulate personalities. The mute voiceless beings are provided voice by Deshpande. Her first published novel, *The Dark Holds no Terrors* (1986) deals with the painful topic of marital rape. She lives and writes in India, and she explicitly addresses Indian readers, not the international market place.

Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* (1988) is her most autobiographical one, makes silencing, by the family and by society its main topic. It is a loud shriek of despair. The novel had come out in English, in Britain, but was translated into Hindi, Marathi and Kannada. The main figure, of the novel, Jaya, much like Deshpande, is a writer who is subdued by the power structure of male dominated society. But she manages to break the silence and to speak out, becoming a voiced entity in the end. *That Long Silence* is a feminist novel which critiques the

patriarchal structure of Indian society and the silence imposed on women within it. The novel explores the psychological struggle of Jaya, an educated, married woman and her painful navigation through societal expectations and her own desires for self-expression and independence. The title itself refers to the silence imposed on women, both literally and figuratively and the novel examines the result of this silence on the lives and identities of women. Deshpande herself asserts:

"I have no doubt at all that it is the women's movement which has made it possible for an increasing number of women to have more space to breathe. I know that as a writer I am privileged to be living at a time when the women's movement has made it possible for my voice to be heard, for the things I write about to be taken seriously, looked upon as issues that concern all of our society, and not just dismissed as "women's stuff". (Writing p.83)

Methodology

This paper attempts to study *That Long Silence* through the lens of Feminism using Qualitative analysis. The dialogues and incidents used in the novel offer a backdrop to study the male dominance and female submissiveness and the silence imposed on women in the family.

Analysis and Discussion

'Silence' in the novel refers to acceptance of suppression and male power, leaving your aspirations and career without a word and the ultimate loss of identity. Silence is both a weapon used by women to cope with familial oppression and a burden, a sense of depression that stifles and strangulates their self-expression and individuality. Jaya's silence, initially a means of survival in the family and creating a peaceful atmosphere, eventually becomes a source of frustration and isolation for her. Mohan feels that being silent is the strength of woman:

"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." (That Long Silence pg. 36)

Silence refers to the lack of communication. Deshpande herself declares: "The themes of lack of communication may be over-familiar in western fiction, but in extrovert India it is not much analyzed" (*Writing*). In order to have a well-balanced conjugal life, it is imperative that husband and wife be at par with each other. They should communicate their feelings with one another. They should know each other well physically as well as emotionally. They should supplement and not supplant each other. In this novel, it is not only Jaya's silence that Deshpande is highlighting but the silence of each and every character in the novel from different strata of society: Jaya's mentally disturbed cousin Kusum who is ill treated by her in-laws, her maid who is constantly beaten by her husband and her widowed neighbor ill treated by her mother-in-law. It also deals with Mohan's silence, which is the silence of a man who either has no one to speak to or speaks but can find no one to listen to him. So the novel deals with the issue of silence faced by all the people but highlights marital silence faced by Jaya and her efforts to obliterate the silence that is suffocating her.

The novel opens with Jaya and her husband Mohan moving back from their cozy and palatial house into the old Dadar flat in Mumbai. Her husband is involved in a financial malpractice and an inquiry is marked against him. Mohan is consoled to find that the children, Rahul and Rati, are away on a long tour with their family friends. It is here in the small Dadar flat that she becomes an introvert and goes into deep contemplation about her own identity. For seventeen long years of her marriage, she successfully manages to suppress her feelings as a writer because for a successful family life one has to be a good wife than being a good writer.

Silencing the Voice:

Jaya's father, when she leaves her home after getting married, advises her to be always good to Mohan and she, at all times, tries her best to follow his advice. After her marriage to Mohan, she writes a short story which bags acclaim and gets published in a magazine. The story is about a man who cannot reach out to his wife except through her body. She was on the threshold of making a mark as a creative writer when Mohan expresses his displeasure at her story as he suspects that he has been portrayed in the story in the guise of that man. Her career as a successful writer is jeopardized right in the early years of her marriage. Her voice is suppressed but the writer in her goads her and she begins to write under a pseudonym. This does not help as her stories are rejected one after the other. Her neighbor, Kamat, in whom Jaya finds a friend and sympathizer, tells her that her stories lack strong emotions as she has suppressed her anger and frustration. But she cannot express her anger and feelings lest it should damage her relationship with Mohan. The loyal wife defeats the writer. Later she changes her genre and starts writing light humorous pieces on the travails of a middle-class housewife in a column entitled "Seta." She not only gets encouraging response from the readers but also a nod of approval from Mohan.

Jaya accepts the role of the second sex bestowed upon her after marriage when she does not protest the change of her name from Jaya to Suhasini at the time of her marriage just to keep Mohan happy. Name, which is the

source of identity of a person, is all of a sudden changed signifying the total alteration of a married female's identity. She is a satisfied housewife married to an apparently caring man, with no dearth of material comfort. Jaya, in order to maintain her marriage as a happy one, slowly transforms herself to this ideal of womanhood where she learns to suppress her anger. Jaya even transforms her appearance to suit Mohan's idea of a modern woman- cuts her hair and wears dark glasses. She ultimately gets so completely absorbed into the family-fold that from a fiercely independent woman, she is transformed into the stereotype of a woman. Jaya desperately clings to her husband as if her life depends on him. Is this all that a woman requires? She represents the urban, middle-class woman who is educated and has had exposure to liberal Western ideas but her upbringing demands the suppression of the self so that the marriage can survive. She accepts the figurative destruction of her identity voicelessly.

The Craving for Identity

In the Dadar flat, Jaya reminisces over her seventeen-year-old marriage, its frustrations and disappointments, her fears and guilt. Now her strangulated anger and silence begin to haunt her and consequently through a period of intense introspection she kills Suhasini, the silent, submissive partner of Mohan. She renews her creative activity as a writer and shortly emerges as a new being. Her association with Kamat, a widower living above her flat, lends yet another dimension to Jaya's personality. She is drawn towards him, as he, unlike Mohan's bossy behavior, treats her as his equal, showers his attention on her and offers her constructive criticism on her writings. She receives her mail at his address to avoid confrontation with her husband who disapproves of her writings. Her ease in his company makes her womanly inhibitions wither and she opens up her problems to him and their relation leads to physical attraction. He warns her against wallowing in self pity and asks her to pursue her literary career by giving expression to her real inner self. Shashi Deshpande has beautifully woven the tragic tales of Jaya's marital relations and her acquaintances into the texture of the novel. Deshpande wrote about her own experiences in her book *Writing*

"There was ... the feeling that after becoming a wife and mother, my intellectual self, which had been so important a part of me until then, was being suppressed, that it was being discounted, not valued. And this dormant self was becoming restive, it wanted a release. Maybe it was out of the conflict between this 'female self' and the intellectual self that self-expression began." (pg 5)

Jaya too is in search of an individual identity, An identity where she is not just a daughter, a wife or a mother but she is Jaya, an individual person and a good writer.

Finding the Voice

Jaya makes a powerful statement on the totally unfair system prevailing in society of the subjugation of women. She realizes that it is fear on the part of woman that has allowed the subjugation to continue. Women need not succumb and assume the roles cast upon them. Women have allowed victimization instead of bargaining for partnership. Jaya understands that she also has contributed to her victimization and that she had to fight her own battle and work out her own solution. Accordingly, she feels the necessity to break the silence, articulate her predicament, and establish her identity. She decides that from now onwards she will live without sacrificing her identity or individuality. She will make adjustment, but it will not be a servile one. Her giving up writing for the newspaper column 'Seta' symbolizes her traditional role-model of a devoted wife, now she will write what she wants to write and will not look up to Mohan for an answer. She develops a new feminist frankness. The advancement from maintaining absolute silence to the breaking of the silence speaks of a transition that Jaya has accomplished. This makes her voyage of self discovery complete. Jaya can no longer be a passive, submissive and silent partner to Mohan. The novel ends with her determination to speak, to break her long silence.

Conclusion

The novel is a significant contribution to feminist literature, offering a powerful portrayal of the psychological and social realities of Indian women in a patriarchal society. It explores the themes of female oppression, the struggle for liberation, and the importance of self-assertion. The novel's ending suggests a move towards breaking the long silence, with Jaya beginning to assert her independence and seeking a more fulfilling life. This breaking of silence is not just about speaking up, but also about claiming one's own identity and desires. For Indian women marriage and motherhood are considered mandatory for fulfillment and happiness. Jaya is caught in this dilemma, firstly trying to be a suitable wife to her husband and secondly, struggling to express the emotions of women's experience, seldom expressing them in a male-dominated, chauvinistic society. Deshpande herself admits this kind of dilemma when she says that women have this kind of emotions but they never come out. Jaya knows that her relationship with Mohan is spoiled by incompatibility and lack of communication. If her suffering is in silence, her revolt is also in silence. She suppresses her feelings lest

they should spoil her relationship with her husband. But later Jaya observes that meaningful co-existence can come only through understanding, respect and compassion, not through domination or subjugation.

Jaya, the protagonist of *That Long Silence* raises her voice against the role of wife and mother assigned to a female. She also rebels against the suppression of women's identity by the age-old patriarchal set-up. Her silence is her armor when faced with despair, but there comes a time when she sheds this silence and asserts her identity. Deshpande has presented not a woman who revolts openly in the beginning and later on reconciles to the situation, but a kind of Indian woman who, in her heart -of -heart wants to revolt, but ultimately does not. Her inner turmoil is very bitter but she is unable to speak them out but remains silent and this silence becomes the poison eating her up silently making her frustrated and disappointed. The novel ends on a note of compromise which is quite representative of the basic Indian attitude. In quest for the wholeness of identity, Deshpande does not advocate separation from the spouse but a tactful assertion of one's identity within marriage. It stresses on breaking that long oppressing silence and communicating one's feelings and desires as a means of cordial family relations.

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