

Silence and Survival: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence

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It may be that we are puppets. Puppets controlled by the string of society. But at least we are puppets with perception, with awareness. And perhaps our awareness is the first step to our liberation.

- Stanley Milgram

Shashi Deshpande's novel that long silence (1988) won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1989. The little of the novel was derived from the Elizabeth Robins's speech to WWSL in 1907: "If I were a man and cared to know the world I lived in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy the weight of that long silence of one-half the world." The novel expresses the dilemma of a married women who comes to terms with herself and her life sets the read a shade uneasy and "will change lives" of many. The compact structural pattern of the novel elevates it from a simple Indian woman's tale of woe and misery to that of a sensitive person confronted with certain unavoidable existential problems. The opening sentence of the novel itself provides a clue how protagonist Jaya raise her voice against societal double faced behaviour. She makes it clear at the outset that:

I'm writing of us of Mohan and me. And I know this-you can never be the heroine of your own story. 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. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces. (Deshpande 1)

Shashi Deshpande's that long silence elaborates how Indian women of the middle class in tradition-bound, male-dominated society live their life and also what treatment they get from their male counterparts. The novel really tries to break the ice and exhorts the Indian women for emancipation and self-realization. it is not the story of a particular family, it may be a story of any family- Punjabi, Tamil, Bengali or any of

the families of Indian peninsula. the novelist evinces how the silence imposed on women is partly of their own making and party levied by the society and tradition. Jaya journeys across a plethora of self-doubts, fear, guilt, smothered anger and imposed silence towards her self-emancipation. To Deshpande, the freedom for women does not merely mean the disobedience of old-established tradition and conventions, it really means to make her aware of herself as an individual having 'a room of their own'. Self-affirmation and self-completeness is real freedom that leads to self-ownership.

Jaya, a convent educated girl, who was made to feel special by her father in her childhood. She got married to a man he had dreamt that her daughter would go to oxford for higher studies. But her father died before her dreams could be transformed into reality.

Who is traditionalist and who has his roots firmly laid in old-age customs and conventions. Mohan marries Jaya because he wants a girl who can speak "good English" (90) "an educated and a cultured wife" (90). For Mohan, love or liking is not the touch stone to marry Jaya, it is only his fascination for an English speaking wife that persuade him to marry her. The marriage between Jaya and Mohan is a necessity on Jaya's part also as she intends to lessen the burden on her parental family. Thus, their marriage has already lost the basic essential quality as the basis of marriage is not love but 'necessity' and 'fascination'. Moreover, he makes no demands for dowry. Under these circumstances, she thinks:

If there had been no reason why I should have married Mohan, there had been not reason not to marry him either. (93)

After a long period of their marriage, Jaya's relations with her husband have not been very cordial. Mohan makes every effort to dominate and to impose his superiority over Jaya. Jaya's going to a new environment after marriage and her non-compatibility with her husband creates our atmosphere of agong, angusish and conflict. Toner, married life becomes unbearable and monotonous. She stats. "Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony" (4).

Subsequently, Jaya accepts a life of passivity for herself. She has arranged her life according to the needs of Mohan. She reduces her wants and desires and whatever she practises or whatever she follows is directed by only one consideration- what her husband will think of it. Shashi Deshpande uses a beautiful image to describe Jaya's married life, "A pair of bullocks yoked together [...]. A man and a woman married for seventeen years. A couple with two children [...]. But the reality was only-this. We were two persons. A man. A woman" (8) This description shows the frustration and mental trauma in the married life of Jaya. In her traditional role of a wife. Jaya upholds the maxim that "a husband like a sheltering tree" (137). In an unequivocal kesans, she states that Mohan is "my profession, my career, my mens of livelihood" (75). Adjustment and compromise are, no doubt, the basis of good relationship but every compromise shatters her individuality into pieces. Jaya's psychic was is between the role she has been playing to please Mohan and the actual person she wants to be. she is conscious that she is "not free, I could feel the burden of his usanting, the burden of his clinging" (29). This is the point of challenge for Jaya who seems to be smothered between her actual personality and imposed veil.

Silence on the matters of mutual concern gives rise to an unprecedented crisis, which proves to be the important factor to spoil peaceful domesticity. On Jaya's silent mode on domestic issues, Veena Sheshadri comments, "One ends up by wondering whether Jaya has imposed the long silence on herself not out of a sense of duty or to emulate the ideal Hindu woman of the ages gone by, but in order to camouflage the streaks of ugliness within her" (Sheshari 94).

In the beginning of her marital life, Jaya bore male dominance silently. However, when she realizes the agony of silence, Jaya uses her writing skills to break the silence imposed on her by social norms. In spite of Mohan's disapproval, she keeps on writing serious stories under an assumed name 'Sita'. Jaya attempts to carve out a niche for herself in the realm of writing.

"She is a successful columnist and an aspiring writer of fiction who is liberal in outlook, sensitive to the core, alive to hurts" (Daruwalla 32). Jaya becomes totally despaired and unprotected and feels an endless struggle within herself in order to search her own identity and the meaning of life. Jaya was fed up with her life because theirs was a kind of relationship which existed only to fulfil the obligations of society. Her deep sense of anguish regarding relationship with Mohan, comes out vividly when she say that "I was conscious of having being chained to [Mohan's] dreams" (90) and further that "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" (98). Again she accepts that "We lived-together but there had been only emptiness between us" (185).

Here, one thing is apt that women in our Indian society have to adapt to the testing demands of the mole. It is the mole who (de) constructs the female. She needs a man who can construct and position her in the domestic sphere and society. In this context, chanda, Ho and Mathai comment: "This concept of womanhood is an eminently patriarchal construct and emphasizes suffering, duty and silence. And Jaya's universe is replete with women who subscribe to this notion of womanhood: her neighbour, her domestic servants, Mohan's mother, his sister" (1997:61). Deshpande puts all her characters in testing situation, where, their desired liberation is possible only through silence, Jaya's 'first quarrel' with Mohan was an eye-opener when Mohan got furious because Jaya has called his mother a 'cook' (though not a lie). She thinks, "It was I who had left that alone after the day when my first disastrous foray into verbalising emotions had almost ripped our marriage apart" (116). Jaya's violent conduct shattered Mohan, being a traditional male he thinks that females should be submissive, and "to him anger made a woman unwomanly" (83). This male chauvinistic idea about woman's anger is not his iron, but his been thrust upon her by the society in general and her husband in particular.

Jaya has been renamed Suhasini after her marriage, a starting point to split herself as one name stands for victory and other symbolises submission. She thinks:

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 women. A woman who nurtured her family. A Woman who coped. (15-16)

Jaya is sincere, cooperative, responsible and educated but still she suffers. Not only Jaya, Kusum, Vimla, Vanitamami, Mukta, Azzi, Appa and Aai are sailing

the same boat. Incident after Incident follows to shelter the 'self' of Jaya into pieces. In her self-annihilating pursuit to carry on her balanced married life, Jaya not only 'silences' her genuine emotions but also accepts the role of a docile and submissive wife. She follows the suggestions appearing in women-magazine for housewives how to become perfect and ideal treating them 'Bible' (96). In order to satisfy her husband, she forgets to do justice to her own being.

Adele King remarks:

"Shashi Deshpande's middle class Indian woman narrator is basically like the female voice described by Claudine Herrmann and other French critics; she does not place herself in the centre of a universe of her own making, but rather is always painfully aware of the demands and needs of others."

At the mental level, Jaya and her husband work at different wave length. Mohan admits her about illegal dealings and shady business malpractices along with his unscrupulous chief. Jaya is forced to take stock of her life when Mohan in his pursuit of prestige and security, had indulged in certain malpractices, as a result of which he faces an inquiry. Up to this point, Jaya has turned a blind eye towards her husband's illegal means of earning and corrupt practices. At a later point, Jaya muses, "If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind her husband could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly. I did not want to know anything" (61).

After this indents the couple sunk into utter silence in a mood of frustration and depression, without speaking to each other and without sharing their ideas. Silence is a part of woman discourse. Even if woman want to speak out, they were always silenced. They suffer from a depleted sense of self-esteem. Moreover, the fear of losing their sense of security and the fear of uncertainty make women like Jaya get addicted to abuse. The innate fear of abandonment in Jaya does not allow her to do what she wants to. initially, she was encouraged to write some "Light, humorous pieces about the travails of a middle class housewife. Nothing serious...." (148-49). She writes what her husband and others want to read not what

she wants to write. And when she did what she wanted to she was scorned at by Mohan. Jaya was deeply distressed to know that the writer in her could not come to light because of Mohan, she opines, "To Mohan, I had been no writer, only an exhibitionist" (144). He imagines that she is airing their family problems in her writings. Jaya has deliberately annihilated the creative aspect of her personality.

At many of times silence acts as a strong weapon of protest but for Jaya has been silenced herself but at last, this silence became a defence mechanism. Jaya journeys a full circle from searching her identity in loneliness to her relationship with Mohan and her children and has acquired wisdom in the trials and tribulations of life. This change in Jaya's outlook is brought about by an objective consideration of obtaining realities offered by Mohan's absence. The worlds from the Bhagavad Gita (the final words of Lord Krishna to Arjuna)-

Yathechhasi tatha kuru (Do as you desire)- appeal to her after she gains knowledge about her own self (192). Jaya resolves that she is a writer and therefore, will live as a writer. She realizes her potentiality to provide something to society by becoming the angry young writer who attempts to obliterate "that Long Silence" which has incarcerated women for centuries.

References:

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