

## WOMAN'S EMANCIPATION IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *LONG SILENCE*

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### ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande presents a sensitive portrayal of Indian Womanhood trampling the convoluted paths of human mind with a rare gift for sharp psychological insights into the subtleties of the human female, supported with rich evocative, unassuming and pretentious style. Her themes are based on lives and problems of women only. Her works give attention to the status of the women in the traditional bound and male-dominated middle class society of the contemporary India. Her novel *That Long Silence* depicts the protagonist, Jaya on being victimized to traumatic experience. Her identity, personality and voice is totally crushed up. Shashi Deshpande writes her female protagonist in search for 'self' or to rediscover her identity. The only goal of Jaya is liberation from her womanhood. Jaya opposes Sita, Savitri and Draupadi as role models because they have lost all relevance. She only babbles reply to all her husband Mohan questions. She decides to be silent. It is only towards the fag end of the novel, she decides to break her long silence. Shashi Deshpande uses the stream of consciousness technique in a most artistic and gratifying manner. A women is always defined and differentiated with reference to man and not the man with reference to her, is true of the Indian women in spite of legislation and many other safe guards provided. The novelist being aware of the constraints present in the Indian society. At the end it moves from the nervous climax to the very reality of realities, it is an exploration of selfhood as a mere form of expression.

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"Shashi Deshpande characters are portrayed of truth felt.

Her novels have bare hard truths more hard-hitting and more sensitive"

Shashi Deshpande presents a sensitive portrayal of Indian womanhood trampling the convoluted paths of human mind with a rare gift for sharp psychological insights into the subtleties of the human female, supported with rich evocative, unassuming and pretentious style. She delicately delineates the swings of mood, the swing moments of joy and despair. Her themes are based on lives and problems of women. Her novels are the schools of psyche of that person whose capacity for rational thought vanishes on being victimized to traumatic experience. She is quite different from other women novelist of Indian English, for she

dares to make bold and bare statements. She does not colour superficially or any extra sentimentalities. She concentrates on the tortures and sufferings of middle-class Indian, Women who are educated, sensitive and are conscious of their legal, social and conjugal rights. Shashi Deshpande confesses that “only a woman could read my books - they are written from the inside, as it were.” (*Interviews with Shashi Deshpande: A woman's world.....All the way!- Literature Alive* (9).

Deshpande novels are autobiographical in nature depicting experiences of the educated middle class Indian women's quandary and they tend to be gender specific. Her work concentrates on the status of the women in the traditional bound, male-dominated middle class society of the contemporary India. She carefully analyses the situations and circumstances in which a sensitive woman lives confiscated between the powerful currents of tradition and patriarchy, of terror and suppression. These women are inescapably subjected to continuous physical torture and sexual assaults in the society. Her identity, personality is totally crushed, her voice is hushed up and her very instinct of self-assertion gets capitulated. Deshpande writes her female protagonist in search for 'self' or to rediscover her identity. Self-discovery is by all means an adult act. With the crisis developing in the novel culminates in reaching 'resolution' further this 'resolution means achievement of freedom to think and decide for oneself. In her novel, *That Long Silence* the only goal of the protagonist, Jaya is the liberation from her womanhood. Her womanly self is stifling and struggling for freedom. In all her novels, Deshpande raises her strong voice of protest against the male-dominated Indian society and against man-made rules and conventions. There is a numeral instances bringing home to the reader the cruelty of men perpetrated on women.

The novel is a first person narrative, one story is unfolded by Jaya – symbolizing victory, but in actual life situation, she has to lead on a traditional, passive, obedient wife's role. Right from her childhood days, she has been told stories about Sita, Savitri and Draupadi, depicting the sharing of their husband's travails and their silent sufferings. Jaya refuses these role models because they have lost all relevance in modern period Sita, Savitri and Draupadi; the legendary women followed their husbands willingly, but Jaya followed her husband Mohan because of compulsion as the novelist expresses: “there is a frank brutal realization of this evil necessity in her conjugal life” (*That Long Silence* 27). Jaya is a sufferer right from her childhood days. Her aunt Vanitamami has continuously admonishes her for her prying nature and says that, “husband is like a sheltering tree” (137). She is further cautioned and conditioned towards the comforts of her future life partner that “the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you” 138). The winning of a husband, his longevity and the propagation of his lineage through a male child are the goals of the women.

Traditionally, a woman has an identity only as “a wife or as a daughter or as a mother” but the real identity never comes out. The attitudinal difference between Jaya and her husband Mohan brings in a matching silence. She only babbles replies to all his questions and decides to be silent. Her silence is often understood as her symbol of contentment and toughness. At the end of the novel, she decides to break her long silence. But through the stream of consciousness technique, the novelist makes it quite clear that even in the educated upper middle classes, the inherent value of intelligent and capable women is affected by her social and married status, for the society treats her as an object. Being a woman, Jaya is forced to accept the social and familial responsibilities. Mohan's and misfortunes, his accusation turns out to be Jaya's traumatic experience. A sense of insecurity is the natural feeling when Mohan's job is all at risk and it gets doubled when her son Rahul's disappearance from their family friends – Rupa and Ashoka – who had taken their children on a holiday tour comes as a bolt from the blue. This truth has a striking effect on her. Earlier she has been expecting something woeful to befall on her and mentally she welcomes it. Mohan has renamed, Jaya at the time of marriage as “Suhasini”, meaning ‘a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman’. (15, 16) Ever since she is named as Suhasini she feels that her identity is in dilemma and feels disoriented. She discerns the unlimited despair in the heart of the ‘wounded women’ and went on working for the man who wounded her and continuously struggles with her weapons ‘silence and surrender’.

Jaya is quite a different personality when compared with Mohan's mother and sister, who within their duties of duties, responsibilities and freedom excelled without a murmur. But, Jaya tries to set up herself in those defined roles, the innate assertive traces inculcated in her by her father surfaces several times in her married life. Jaya, too tries, her level best to imbibe the tradition of silence of her mother-in-law and sister-in-

law, by enacting role of a devoted wife and dutiful mother, but the role playing is not as natural as it should have been, the cracks are soon visible. Once, she cannot control her anger, retorts back at Mohan, paying back his anger in the same measure- "Then, getting the feel of it, I had met his anger with my own, deliberately using it as a weapon, raging, furious- I had flung accusations, wildly at him" (81). By nature Jaya has inherited tenderness, she relents for she cannot see Mohan shattered, yet her entire pent up anger surfaces when Mohan's professional life faces crisis, and the blame is showered on Jaya and children. She now realize that the seventeen long years of her married life had failed to make them one emotional, intellectual, only their physical bodies had occasionally met, not their souls, "We were two persons, A man, A woman" . (8)

Shashi Deshpande protagonists belong to different cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds. She opposes the patriarchal establishments which unnerve and cripple the innate creativity, individuality of Women. In exploring and transcending the boundaries of the female gender, Deshpande create initial revolters, but finally they compromise. Jaya is such a character whose experience the gravitational pull of patriarchy and tradition. Her initiative in breaking *The Long Silence* is a welcome step towards restoring normalcy and happiness in the family. The early Indian tradition was that, men spoke a superior language and women were made to speak an inferior language. She is continually oscillating between submission and assertion, the former is more dominant note in her character, is certainly not a prescriptive feminist character. Repeated accusations and allegations of Mohan force her to react sharply; Mohan keeps on finding faults with Jaya - for not caring his profession, his professional prospects, not looking properly the wife of chief engineer. He calls her completely selfish. In actual, Jaya has abundant resources to become a good writer.

Jaya is one of the rare narrative voices in Indian English fiction who poses and displays a literary sensibility commensurate with her fictional role as a writer telling her own story, one whose college education and reading habits are in evidence in her speaking voice. This indeed is an achievement. (*A Well-Articulated Silence Review of That Long Silence* 76-77)

But, with his male ego he divulges that it was he, who had always encouraged her to write the column by the name 'Seeta'. It was he, who had first telephoned the editor of the "Woman's world", So that her silly scribbling pieces could be accepted. And that she is always silent during the current crisis of his professional life. Jaya, in turn, out bursts and tells him that, she gave up creative writing because of the family, husband and two children. But when the quarrel continues longer than expected, for the time, she realizes the bitter truth of frustration against each other—had been cooking between them since long. Right from the day of their marriage to till now, he had never accepted her as Jaya (the victorious) and he had renamed her as 'Suhasini'. But, when Jaya's interior battle blurts out and says that, "Suhasini was dead; yes, that was it, she was the one Mohan was mourning... No, the fact was that I'd finally done it—I'd killed her"(121). Jaya has been living with this kind of split personality for the last 17 years of her married life. As her conflict reaches climacteric proportions she utters an even more frank admission of - "a feeling of total disorientation", experiences totally detached "from everything even from her own body" (177).

Deshpande highlights the household conflict between wife and husband operating at the emotional, intellectual and sexual levels. The novelist being fully aware of the patriarchal set-up of Indian society does not plead for any kind of confrontation or militancy between Man and women, between husband and wife. As it is often said and practiced that "Silence, tolerance, sufferance is golden" and though the novel is in the feminist framework, the novelist does not cross the limits of Indian, socio—cultural reality. *That Long Silence* is not an intrusion into the world of silence but a silent communion with the oppressed self-straining for articulation, for a voice (*New Perspectives on Indian English Writings* 127). The concept of new women is a mere attitudinal transformation stifling and oppressive system of sex roles giving her way to undistorted gender equality. She rolls up as a new woman who is in search for the means to overcome oppression, develop her powers and abilities for her personal fulfillment and self-actualization.

In conclusion, it is observed that, the exigencies of life presented themselves in the form of traumatic events to Jaya, presents the predicament of human state. The novel authentically states that, the patriarchal set up is responsible for women condition in the Indian society. The novel is an exploration of selfhood as a mere form of expression.

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