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ARTICULATION OF THE FEMININE VOICE: 'JAYA' IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S
'THAT LONG SILENCE'

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ABSTRACT

Sashi Deshpande in her book 'That Long Silence' articulates a thematic and technical maturity on Feminine Sensibility. It achieves greater creditability that Jaya, the protagonist is a very well read person and a writer who corresponds with her fictional role. Often in spite of the writer's best effort, the narrator fails to find a voice of her own and ends up mouthing the creator. Articulate women characters are unseen in tradition bound India as they are made to lead a subservient life from their childhood. The author has managed to overcome this difficulty by endowing her protagonist with abundant creative talent. Greatly conscious of the stifling social milieu, the narrator/writer unfolds her story. The question "who I am?" (24) haunts Jaya so obsessively that she fails to find herself. In such a stifling and suffocating domestic ambience and patriarchal set-up, she finds her female identity effaced.

The conflict in her mind within and without makes her a wrecked boat in the sea of life. She loses all hold on it and keeps on oscillating in opinions and choices, yet to decide "who she really is". Deshpande reveals the consciousness of Jaya through an exposition of her mind in the process of thinking, feeling and reacting to the stimuli of the moment and situation. In doing so, she goes on to assert the feminine psyche of the protagonist, all ago to break away from the strange hold of a social fabric rooted in patriarchy which repels as it attracts Jaya is the representative of the urban middle class woman exposed to liberal western ideas. But she is unable to free herself entirely from the clutches of male chauvinist ideas. These ideas are a part and parcel of her culture thrust upon her by those around her. When it comes to the question of a choice between her husband and family and asserting herself as an independent individual she chooses the former without hesitation. Individual tragedies of several women known to Jaya are woven into the tapestry of the novel. It is this which makes That Long Silence stand out as a feminist writer in spite of the author's reluctance to be branded a feminist writer. That Long Silence is not just another novel filled with hysterical ranting by a prejudiced writer but almost the diary of a same housewife. The novel doesn't depict Jaya's life as a totally dismal and hopeless struggle. It suggests "hope" and "change" for a better life.

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"I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist wherever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat." *Rebecca West*, 1913. Sashi Deshpande in her book 'That Long Silence' not only forthrightly articulates a thematic and technical maturity but also effectively communicates an intentionally apprehended Feminine Sensibility. It achieves greater creditability from the fact that Jaya, the protagonist is a very well read person and a writer who corresponds with her fictional role. Often in spite of the writer's best effort, the narrator fails to find a voice of her own and ends up mouthing the creator. Articulate women characters are unseen in tradition bound India as they are made to lead a subservient life from their childhood. The author has managed to overcome this difficulty by endowing her protagonist with abundant creative talent. In the words of Vimala Rama Rao, "*Jaya is one of the narrative voices in the Indian English fiction who possesses 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 the evidence in her speaking voice. This indeed is an achievement.*" Greatly conscious of the stifling social milieu, the narrator/writer unfolds her story. "*Ostensibly, she relates it as the story of a particular couple, but the power relations in the patriarchal structures, the gender differentiation with all its ramifications and the typical travails of the woman struggling to define herself take on the dimension of the condition and place of the Indian Woman in Society*".

The question "*who I am?*"(24) haunts her so obsessively that she fails to find herself. She is "*an utter stranger, a person so alien that even the faintest understanding of the motives of her actions seemed impossible*" (69) Hence her agonized cries – "*I can't hope, I can't manage. I can't go on*"(70). In such a stifling and suffocating domestic ambience and patriarchal set-up, she finds her female identity effaced. Her feminine dilemma is expressed in her vacillating state of mind: "*I could and couldn't do, are the things that were womanly and unwomanly*"...(83). Jaya is Suhasini and also 'Seeta' the pseudonym she assumes to write columns about plight of the middle class 'Seeta' are as Jaya says, "*the many selves waiting to be discovered....each self-attached like a siamese twin to a self of another person, neither able to exist without the other*"(69). Hence if life is "*to be made possible*" (193), she is to live neither as 'Suhasini' or 'Jaya', not as 'Seeta' or 'antikusum'. She is to live but not in smithereen.

The conflict in her mind within and without makes her a wrecked boat in the sea of life. She loses all hold on it and keep on oscillating in opinions and choices, yet to decide "*who she really is*"(King: Ibid). Deshpande reveals the consciousness of Jaya through an exposition of her mind in the process of thinking, feeling and reacting to the stimuli of the moment and situation. In doing so, she goes on to assert the feminine psyche of the protagonist, all ago to break away from the strange hold of a social fabric rooted in patriarchy which repels as it attracts. In her tiny old flat in Dadar, Bombay, Jaya lives like an introvert, often gives brooding and reminiscing with lot of self-reflection in order to discover her true self.

"And I was Jaya. But I had been Suhasini as well as I can see her now, the Suhasini who was distinct from Jaya, a soft smiling, placid, motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped" (16).

Memories plunge in often linked by the ambivalent association of ideas. Each incident, a mini – story, a fiction in itself, imparts an unexplored vision to the narrative. The frustration and disappointments in her life with regard to her self-respect, the illusions and craving of love and the longing for companionship make up the stream of Jaya's consciousness. Recalling the ions of her split self-entangled in her memory, she creates a world of fantasy, understanding, authentic selfhood and a composite itself : "*ours has been a delicately balanced relationship, so much so that we have been snipped off bits of ourselves to keep the scales on an even keel*"(07). Jaya is not totally a silent and mute sufferer. She is an actor participant as well as an observer in the novel. She steps out of the narrative action as a witness as it were a critic to perceive the tenor of the story filtered through a female consciousness.

Jaya is the representative of the urban middle class woman exposed to liberal western ideas. But she is unable to free herself entirely from the clutches of male chauvinist ideas. These ideas are a part and parcel of her culture thrust upon her by those around her. Her aunt VanitaMami, for instance counsels her just before her wedding. Vanitamami's long suffering role of a martyred wife prompts Jaya at one time before her marriage to think that, may be, she too had been similarly counseled as a bride. Vanita Mani s advice, however, Jaya

proves that she is different from her. When it comes to the question of a choice between her husband and family and asserting herself as an independent individual she chooses the former without hesitation.

Jeeja, Jaya's maid servant is a typical example of the oppressed woman. She is battered about her good for nothing drunken husband. Without a murmur of protest, she supports him and even provides him liquor with her hard earned money. She bears no grudge against him even when he takes up another woman. She justifies it by saying, "God didn't give us any children. That was his misfortune as well as mine. How could I blame him for marrying again when I couldn't give him any children?"⁵². After the death of her husband and his mistress, she willingly brings up their son, Rajaram, who is a chip of the block. He drinks and beats up his wife. Tara, Jeeja, however, does not allow Tara to even abuse or curse her husband. There is also the character of Jaya's grandmother, Ajji, who, once widowed takes to an empty room, never to emerge again, and that of Mukta and VanitaMami. Mukta is Jaya's immediate neighbor at her Dadar flat. She is widowed at a young age and lives with her parents and a rebellious daughter. Nilima, she is the sort who will go out of the way to help people. She is deeply pious and Jaya cannot help but wonder at the utter helplessness of such self-torture. Herself modification seemed to be the most positive thing about her. And yet her piety surely it was that which prompted those fasts-seemed meaningless. Since she had already forfeited the purpose of it, the purpose of all Hindu women's fast-the avoidance of widowhood.

Individual tragedies of several women known to Jaya are woven into the tapestry of the novel supposedly of her and Mohan. It is this which makes That Long Silence stand out as a feminist writer in spite of the author's reluctance to be branded a feminist writer. Several reviews of the novel bear to this view which emphasizes the fact that the central theme in That Long Silence is to highlight the grossly unequal status of woman in our society. For instances TapanBasu says that this novel is the story of Jaya, "who has spent a lifetime in surrender of her will to social mores and customs that had regulated women to a second class status" .³

At the end of the novel, Jaya very honestly questions herself: "But why am I making myself the heroine of this story? why do I presume that the understanding is mine alone" (193). It is statements like this which prove that That Long Silence is not just another novel filled with hysterical ranting by a prejudiced writer but almost the diary of a same housewife.

After a long silence, Jaya finally comes to the phase of self-realization or the female phase. She stops blaming others for her failures. She examines her past life and comes to know the truth about her failures as a writer. She decides to plug that hole as said earlier by speaking and listening and erasing the silence between her and Mohan. It is this erasing of the silence that symbolizes the assertion of the feminine voice, a voice with hope and promise, a voice that articulates her thoughts.

The novel doesn't depict Jaya's life as a totally dismal and hopeless struggle. It suggests "hope" and "change" for a better life.

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