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POSTMODERN FEMINISM IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S 'THAT LONG SILENCE'

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ABSTRACT

Latest form of feminism that came into existence after 1960s has become an evolving socio-political movement. It is a theoretical project, which aims at understanding the power structures in the society, male domination, social practices and social institutions, which are instrumental in assigning a marginalized position to women. Feminist theory also devises the strategies to transform the social structures, which can help in the emancipation. Shashi Deshpande is one of the most prominent and accomplished Indian women novelists of postmodern period. As her novels cannot conceal her class identity, they cannot help but betray her gender identity. The existing paper is an attempt to study the novel *That Long Silence* in the light of postmodern theory of feminism.

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The term feminism involves plethora of interpretations and perspectives. However, the plurality of perspectives is used for the single purpose of contesting and challenging different cultural, philosophical and social systems that propagate and perpetuate binary and hierarchical understanding of man-woman relationship. Among the variety of perspectives and ideologies deployed to challenge this discriminatory understanding in recent years are the ideas impacted by postmodernism. There have been feminist thinkers like Simone De Beauvoir who understand man woman relationship in terms of fundamental antagonism:

The category of the Other is as Primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality-of the Self and the Other.....Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought (De Beauvoir: 1972, 16-17)

It implies that human beings define themselves against each other demanding recognition from the other. It makes their relationship reciprocal. But such reciprocity does not exist in man woman relationship. Man has always dictated terms and norms of behaviour to woman as the other. In feminist struggle for rights women are to assume subject position against women's claim for equality. The postmodern ideas intervene the thoughts related to feminist struggle against patriarchy through the questions related to authority and power as they function in social and gender difference. Postmodern ideas become a potent tool to support feminist struggle as this system of thoughts considers:

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most prominent and accomplished women novelists of postmodern period. As her novels cannot conceal her class identity, they cannot help but betray her gender identity. Deshpande herself admits in one of her recent interviews as it is published in The Times of India under the title "Demystifying Womanhood : Novelist Shashi Deshpande talks to Veena Mathews" as, " As writing is born out of personal experience, the fact that I am a woman is bound to surface. Besides, only a woman could write my books- they are written from the inside, as it were" (p.8). She is modern in her fictional techniques. In her novels, Shashi Deshpande explores togetherness and separation, presence and absence, in fact everything that is related to the psychodynamics of relationships. Shashi Deshpande's protagonists are in search of an authentic and distinct life

A look at her novels will reveal her treatment of major women characters and will show how the themes in them are related to women's problems. Shashi Deshpande has exposed the gross gender discrimination and its fall-out in a male dominated society in her first novel "*Roots and Shadows*". In the novel, she depicts the agony and suffocation experienced by the protagonist Indu in a male-dominated and tradition bound society. She refuses to play the straitjacketed role of a wife imposed upon by society. Her quest for identity is tellingly expressed in the novel. "*The Dark Holds No Terrors*", her second novel, is about the traumatic experience the protagonist Saru undergoes as her husband refuses to play a second-fiddle role. Saru undergoes great humiliation and neglect as a child and, after marriage, as a wife. Deshpande discusses the blatant gender discrimination shown by parents towards their daughters and their desire to have a male child. After her marriage, as she gains a greater social status than her husband Manohar, all begins to fall apart. Her husband's sense of inferiority complex and the humiliation he feels as a result of society's reaction to Saru's superior position develops sadism in him. Her husband Mann vents his frustration on Saru in the form of sexual sadism, which has been vividly portrayed by Deshpande. "*That Long Silence*", the third novel, is about Jaya who, despite having played the role of a wife and mother to perfection, finds herself lonely and estranged. Jaya realizes that she has been unjust to herself and her career as a writer, as she is afraid of inviting any displeasure from her husband. Her fear even discourages her from acknowledging her friendship with another man. These three novels belong to her early phase and portray a mild form of feminism.

Shashi Deshpande wants to break binary opposition and thinks that equal treatment should be given to all including marginalized. A close analysis of her novels leaves no doubt about her genuine concern for women. Her protagonists are acutely aware of their smothered and fettered existence in an orthodox male-dominated society. Caught between tradition and modernity, her protagonists search for identity within marriage. Deshpande's novels contain much that is feminist. The realistic delineation of women as wife, mother and daughter, their search for identity and sexuality as well, leaves the readers in no doubt where her real sympathies lie.

It is not difficult to agree with the view that in Shashi Deshpande's novels, we observe a change corresponding to the change in the contemporary society. We notice that the plot in her novels begins with an unconventional marriage and later on deals with the problems of adjustment and conflicts in the minds of the female protagonists and ultimately portrays their endeavour to submit to the traditional roles.

Shashi Deshpande maintains a unique position among the contemporary, up-coming Indian writers in English. Many writers appear not to have paid much attention to the recent phenomenon of the educated earning wife and her adjustment or maladjustment in the family. Shashi Deshpande has minutely dealt with the phenomenon, arriving at the conclusion that women, after attaining all types of rights, are now struggling to adjust rather than to get free from the traditional world. She deals with the middle-class woman who represents the majority and covers a wide area in the modern society. She takes up women characters very carefully. The female protagonists in her novels are:

- (1) Young girls who can be led astray. For example, *in Come Up and Be Dead*;
- (2) Married women who suffer silently. For example, *That Long Silence*; and
- (3) Working women who, most of the time, are out of the family and come in direct contact with society. For example, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*."

Woman in Shashi Deshpande's novels is initially an unconventional one. She willy-nilly submits herself to the tradition, perhaps realizing the wisdom of the traditional ways at this stirring moment of the transitional phase of society. Ultimately, she is an appendage to man or family. Though economically independent, she is emotionally dependent on her husband.

In Shashi Deshpande's novels, the protagonist's growth towards an honest acknowledgement of responsibility for her own repressed state is shown in her earlier novels as well as her later novels.

The protagonists' quest for identity gets largely accentuated due to their frustrating experiences in the Indian patriarchal society. In her novels, the host of male characters — husbands, lovers, fathers and other relations — display different aspects of patriarchy and oppression. While the majority of the husbands are patriarchal in their approach, the older men, particularly the fathers, are broad-minded. Surprisingly, the male friends are "feminist" in their approach and sympathise with the protagonists' lot. Deshpande's male characters only serve to enable the protagonists to define their identities more fully.

With Shashi Deshpande, we move into a much more middle-class ethos and the forms of male repression within the family that takes on an uglier, more obvious form. In novel after novel, marriage is shown to be an institution enslaving women to a lifetime of male dominations. Shashi Deshpande's exploration of female subjugation in patriarchal family structures takes on a larger dimension than the inner psychological world. In her novels she creates, in fact, a mosaic of marriage, women come and go, aunts, cousins, mothers, mothers-in-law, friends, acquaintances, each providing a different slant on marriage, a dozen sub-texts to the main text of a protagonist whose marriage is collapsing. Shashi Deshpande is a writer who can focus intensely and elaborately on a network of male repression and is concerned with making statements regarding the politics of male power and its effect on women.

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is an expression of the silence of the modern Indian housewife. Many women writers tried their hand at expressing this long silence that had turned women into non-entities. Shashi Deshpande's success lies in her representation of real life experience. She realistically depicts the inner conflicts of Jaya the main woman character of the novel and her quest for the self or identity.

The novel opens with Jaya and her husband Mohan moving back into the old Dadar flat in Mumbai from their cosy and palatial house. Her husband is involved in a financial malpractice and an inquiry against him is set up. Mohan is consoled to find that the children, Rahul and Rati, are away on a long tour with their family friends, and expects Jaya to go into hiding with him, which she refuses to comply with.

It is here in the small Dadar flat that she becomes an introvert and goes into deep contemplation of her past and her childhood. Had there been no such crisis in their life, she would never have given a thought to her individuality. Adele King opines: "Jaya finds her normal routine so disrupted that for the first time she can look at her life and attempt to decide who she really is" (p.43).

For seventeen long year of her marriage she successfully manages to suppress her feelings as she thought it more important to be a good wife than being a good writer. She suppresses her writing career and her association with her one-time neighbour, Kamat. Her career as a successful writer is jeopardized right in the early years of her marriage. A short story of hers bags the first prize and gets published in a magazine. When on the threshold of getting recognition as a creative writer of some merit, Mohan expresses his displeasure at that particular story written by her. The story is about a man who cannot reach out to his wife except through her body. Mohan suspects that the man portrayed in the story is he himself She thinks, "Looking at his stricken face, I had been convinced I had done him wrong. And I had stopped writing after that" (p.144).

But the writer in her goads her and she begins to write under a pseudonym, which does not help, and her stories are rejected one after another. Her neighbour Kamat 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 relation with Mohan. She had learnt to control her anger as Mohan considered this anger in a woman as "unwomanly." She tells Kamat: "Because no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman?"

"Later she writes light humorous pieces on the travails of a middle-class housewife in a column entitled "Seeta." She not only gets encouraging response from the readers but also a nod of approval from Mohan."

The questioning of an established identity for woman here becomes more significant than providing an identity, though changed and different, in fixed terms. Jaya's association with Kamat, a widower living above her flat, lends yet another dimension to Jaya's personality. She is drawn towards him as he treats her as his equal, 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. He showers his attention on her as he is lonely. 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.

In her zeal to play out the role of a loyal wife and a caring mother, she smothers her real self. She does not protest the change of her name from Jaya to Suhasini at her marriage just to keep Mohan happy. Her dress and her appearance are proof of her submission to Mohan's liking, replicating an absorbed family-woman.

Postmodernism asserts and then deliberately weakens such principles as value, order, meaning, control and identity that have been the basic premises of modernism. In *That Long Silence*, Mohan's mother had been the traditional long-suffering Indian wife, uncomplainingly bearing the burden of her husband's harshly imposed authority over his household. The father had been an unrelenting autocrat, demanding that fresh food should be served to him whatever time he decided to return home. The sights and sounds of beaten womanhood reverberate through the novel sometimes creating an impression of unrelieved gloom. Mohan's mother is true representative of modernism and it can be said that this character represents modernist agenda of rationalism, logic and patriarchal society.

That Long Silence traces the passage of a woman through a maze of doubts and fears towards her affirmation. Viewing the man-woman relationship objectively, the novelist does not throw the blame entirely on men for the subjugation of women. She observes that both men and women find it difficult to outgrow the images and roles allotted to them by society. All the expression of concern for women is a raid upon this silence in *Dun Long Silence*. But Shashi Deshpande does it not by speaking against their silence on a public platform or through a handbill or a manifesto. Instead she maintains an aesthetic distance. She weaves the things into a metaphoric structure. It shows how the protagonist Jaya, after long, decides to break silence and give vent to her suppressed feelings. This may also be read as the expression of the entire womankind which has been forced to keep its lips sealed for centuries by the system of the society, especially middle-class. So, Jaya begins to write a fortnightly column "Seeta." To the Indians, Sita is the best example of undeserved suffering all through her life with brief interludes. Perhaps Jaya might have thought: "Is woman born to suffer and that too without complaint?" Hence she decides, "I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us."

Thus, Shashi Deshpande presents Jaya as a role model for all the women suffering from this or that kind of injustice. They have to articulate their grievance. Jaya, a modern woman rooted in tradition, experiences an impulsive desire to be emancipated and, at the same time an almost instinctive urge to be traditional and conservative. As a result, she tries simultaneously to be a suitable wife and to retain her identity as an individual. However, in order to fulfill her roles as wife and mother, as Mohan wants her to, she gradually transforms herself to be a stereotyped house-wife always trying to please her husband. But slowly she begins to realize that her very compromise shatters her individuality. She realizes that women have allowed themselves to be victimized instead of working for a partnership. She too has contributed to her victimization and that she has to fight her own battle and work out her own strategy. Accordingly, she decides that she will live afterwards without sacrificing her identity or individuality. She, no doubt, makes some adjustment of her own volition, taking care to see that she does not lapse into servility. Her decision to have her own way gives a new confidence to her and this confidence brings her emancipation.

Deshpande's feminist ideology stems from her belief in 'self-striven' approach towards women's empowerment or what S.L.Sharma terms as 'empowerment without antagonism' in her article of that title. She refuses to indulge in 'adversarial-orientation' or intemperate expressions towards men. She attributes profession to her protagonists as a 'strategic interest' which enables them to enter the prevailing and androcentric system and to dismantle their politics. Deshpande's treatment of issues like Indian woman's autonomy, identity, space and desire may lead to an Indian model of feminism which will be workable, honest and more viable for indigenous condition. Instead of providing tales of female victimization she seems to be concerned with the idea of 'how women can live afresh?'

Being influenced by western feminist writers, the post independence Indian women writers, have engaged themselves in devising verbal strategies for rejecting 'male cold' literary conventions historically accepted as 'standards'. Shashi Deshpande is one of the prominent contemporary women writers in Indian writing in English. She has created ripples in the society of male domination by taking women as women seriously in her novels. She takes us inside the consciousness of her women characters to present their plight, fears, dilemmas, contradictions and ambitions.

All the fictional details in the novel reveal Shashi Deshpande's feminist stance impacted by postmodern thought that contests universalization of 'woman' and 'man'. She rather seems to assert that knowledge about 'self' is constituted within history and culture. Her feminist perceptions offer a critique of binarism in male female relations and assert difference and incommensurability. Instead of opposition and antagonism she prefers an understanding asserting faith in multiple forms of reality and human experience. The feminist views that emerge from different aspects of women's protest registered through different women characters in the novel. It points out that self assertion should not always mean negation of the other.

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