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A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON THE NOVEL *THAT LONG SILENCE* OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

Dr. SUSHMA MISHRA

Assistant Professor of English

Pt.Shymacharan Shukla College, (Shankar Nagar)Dharsiwa,

Dist-Raipur (C.G.)

E-Mail ID:- mishrasushma2301@gmail.com

The feminist movement, which started in the West in the 1960s went a long way in arresting the injustice meted out to women. There had been an abundance of feminist writing which preceded and followed this movement, but there is much still left to be done to wipe out the age-old prejudices and misconceptions regarding women.

The term 'feminism' was first used by the nineteenth century French dramatist, Alexander Dumas, to refer to the then-emerging movement for women's rights which was mostly limited to politics. It gradually spreads across the world, securing complete rights for women-political social, economic and educational. A few Indian writers in English have attempted to challenge the age-old myths surrounding the man-woman relationship. Some have succeeded in their attempt, if not finding an ideal solution, but, at least in creating an awareness of the existing inequalities in society.

A reading of Shashi Deshpande's novels reveals a deep understanding of the female psyche particularly that of the educated, urban middle-class women. Deshpande is undoubtedly an outstanding Indian English novelist who published four volumes of short stories, four children's books and six novels to her credit.

A close study of Deshpande's novels reveals an author who is intelligent, articulate and relatively free from prejudices regarding gender, but at the same time highly sensitive to the issues involving women. Deshpande feels that women have a tremendous inner strength, but so much of that strength is used up in merely enduring. Her idea of feminism is translating what is used up in endurance into something positive: a real strength.

Shashi Deshpande's novel, *That Long Silence*, portrays the conflict in the mind of the narrator between the writer and the housewife. Jaya, the protagonist, is a very well read person, possessing a literary sensitivity which corresponds with her fictional role. For seventeen long years, Jaya manages to suppress her feelings, thinking that is more important to be a good wife than a good writer. She perhaps would have remained in the shadow of her husband, Mohan, for the rest of her life if had not been for the jolt received to the carefully constructed edifice of her family. A crisis is sparked off by her husband's involvement in a shady deal. There are charges of corruption against him and it is expected that an enquiry will be conducted. He feels consoled to some extent that the children Rahul and Rati are away on a long tour with their family friends. He takes it for granted that his wife will go along with him into hiding. Jaya follows her husband into exile as unhesitatingly as her mythological counterpart Sita displaying her 'Sati-dharma'.

In the silence of their Dadar flat where they have shifted temporarily and in the absence of usual domestic routine. Jaya goes into and intense introspection of her life. After seventeen years of playing out her many-faceted role of a loyal wife and tireless mother, the silence becomes deafening. Jaya's loneliness is further accentuated as she ponders over the intrinsic isolation of the human condition. Jaya is a 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. The other most important aspect of Jaya's personality which clashes with her image of wife and mother is her association with Kamat, who is a widower and lives in an apartment above Jaya's flat at Dadar. He is a lonely man and showers his attention on Jaya's. He is totally unlike most other men Jaya has known in the sense that he has no reservations about doing things like cooking which are usually considered to be a woman's domain. He is an advertiser by profession and is apparently well read. He is able to offer constructive criticism to Jaya with regard to her writing. He understands her fears and even volunteers to receive her mail at his address, so that she could avoid a confrontation with her husband who disapproves of her writing.

Though her creative writing and her close association with Kamat are two glaring examples of Jaya's inability to seek her own identity, there are several other factors which hinder her development as a complete individual in her own right. In her anxiety to perform her role as a perfect wife and a loving and caring mother, her identity is relegated to the background. To please her husband, she transforms her appearance to suit his idea of a modern woman.

In the small, drab flat at Dadar, Jaya's carefully built façade cracks and she breaks her self-imposed silence. She proceeds to unmask layer by layer the superficial aspects of her married life to reveal the hard core of reality. As Indira Bhatt observes, "Shashi Deshpande unmasks both Jaya and Mohan when they face the crisis in their lives. They have run into stormy weather and their secure sheltered life washes away like a water colour in a rainy storm" (Bhatt 156).

Each of them reacts to the crisis in a different manner. Mohan becomes restless and unsettled, away from his routine work. He feels insecure and confused. He expects his wife to empathize with him because he feels he has got involved in this mess only because of her and the children. What is more, he wishes to use his wife "as a buffer, an opiate to soften the impact of the forces he has set into motion against himself. In fact, he is seeking emotional gratification for his insecurity created by his own deeds. He wants to hold hard to Jaya in whom he seeks an anchor in this tempest" (Bhatt 157).

But Jaya herself faces a traumatic situation. Ever since her marriage she had been content to follow the footsteps of the mythological role model of Sita. Looking up to her husband as a 'sheltering tree' she had been lulled into a false sense of security. This sense of security is shattered with the sudden prospect of Mohan facing an enquiry. Added to this is the weight of her husband's insecurity, fear and feeling of inadequacy that she has to put up with. The novel that is finally written by Jaya contains not only her story and that of her husband and children but numerous other characters, mostly Kusum, her mad cousin, Mohan's mother and many other victims like them—"Victims of patriarchy and also of their own silence" (Sarla 168). Jaya tries to define herself negatively through the insanity of her cousin, Kusum, a deserted wife.

A close study of *That Long Silence* reveals that it abounds in incidents which highlight the gross inequalities between man and woman. There are no antagonists or villains in Deshpande's novels. She does not take sides with her characters, presenting them as close to reality as possible, portraying both their strengths and weaknesses. One cannot say that *That Long Silence* is a feminist or a psychological novel. It has been written by a strong personality, fine craftswoman and novelist with an unerring eye for character.

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