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PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN *THAT LONG SILENCE*

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande portrays the pragmatic, sensible and realistic picture of Indian womanhood by treading the intricate and sinuous path of human mind into the subtleties of female self with an extraordinary gift for keen psychological insights supported with pretentious, evocative and unassuming style. She delicately delineates the see saw moments of sorrow and joy, hope and despair, trials and tribulations, feeling of being suppressed and objectified, heart-wringing anguish as an educated housewife and a backside writer. Deshpande's unequivocal and clear cut feminist stand has placed her among the distinctive contemporary Indian English writers.

**Keywords:** womanhood, female self, objectified, anguish, feminist.

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is a landmark in the Indian English literature published in 1988. It won her the Sahitya Academy Award in 1990 and Padma Shri in 2009. The very title of the novel is extracted from the speech delivered to World Body by Elizabeth Robbins "If I were a man, who 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 of the world" (*A Speech to WWSL*). To dive into the plot, the novel unfolds the predicament of Indian women and revolves around Jaya who is sandwiched between her husband, Mohan and her two children, Rahul and Rati. The novel highlights how patriarchy considers woman as a passive pawn and tread over them as they are treated as sexual objects to be exploited and subjugated. The artificial and mechanical love is very much crystal clear in the novel as she is forced to say "surely there comes a moment in every human's life when he or she says, "like the Sibyl – I wish to die" (*That Long Silence* 95). Jaya is forced to remain silent and adopt socio-psychic nature throughout the novel. But it is only at the epilogue of the novel that she breaks 'that long long silence' as a revolt and breathes free and thus ends with a rejuvenation of faith. Her bold decision leads her to contended life in the right direction.

It is one of her unique and distinctive works which bespeaks of the pathetic conditions of Indian women in general and Jaya in particular. It is a demonstration of a middle class woman in an adamant social milieu i.e., an orthodox family. The novel resonates the deep and extreme sufferings of a female protagonist, Jaya who silently bears the authoritative impositions of patriarchal hegemony as she is adorned with literary sensibility and yet is nurtured in silence. The sufferings which she undergoes and the sacrifices which she makes are hardly noticed by the phallogocentric society till the moment she speaks for herself.

The sad and grim tale of Jaya reveals her life to be tragic farce having malleable role of wife, mother, daughter- in- law etc. Jaya herself feels claustrophobic, bored and trapped in the allegorical bubble of existence

as she has fallen on hard times for being silent for seventeen years. After revealing her feelings as a creative writer she jots down that her life is not bed of roses but full of thorns. It is a wasteland that has left her in utter desolation as she wonders throughout her life whether she lives for her own sake or social sake. She feels as if she is trapped in purposeless cosmos searching herself amid the anarchic and chaotic macrocosm as she says "it is not just that life is cruel, but that in the very process of our birth we submit to life's cruelty..." (TLS 129).

It is hierarchal thinking that creates prejudice and false consciousness about her identity as in the womb of mother she is not embellished with tags of 'female, she, other, woman' rather it is the society that engenders the acumen of gender issues. Nature too doesn't differentiate between the two except for the single purpose of procreation. Jaya Kulkarni engages in psychological, emotional and physical torture that buds out from social discrimination and male chauvinism. She blooms and blossoms in a society wherein males are considered par-excellence to women. The very consciousness of male leadership is percolated deeply into the image of a girl child right from her infancy. She is conferred with exemplar of the aged and experienced women and the social circle and is imposed to believe that male being important in her life through the iteration of assertion like, "a husband is like a sheltering tree. Without the tree, you are dangerously unprotected and vulnerable" (TLS 32). Furthermore, the blatant paradox with Jaya's life is that it is not only her husband who sidelines her but it is her own mother who too discriminates with her as she yearns for love from her mother but she always prefers her brothers over her, suggesting the very gender inequality prevalent in Indian male driven society since ages not only on part of men but on part of women also as their frame of mind gets shaped by the very culture and orthodox tradition they reside in.

Deshpande has depicted the helplessness as well as irony of Jaya who being a writer has to keep mum instead of communicating her ideas to the society. She has portrayed the conundrum of a woman-writer who is also a homemaker. Jaya's deplorable condition is presented in the simulacrum of a small worm crawling into the hole indicating her withdrawal, keeping inner talent of creative writing to herself and suffering the monotony of life caused by household activities.

caught in an emotional eddy, endeavours to come to terms with her protean roles, while trying, albeit in vain, to rediscover her true self, which is not but an ephemera...and unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and a failed writer. (Review in Times of India 2)

She remains silent, probes into her past, struggles with her present and tries to establish concord with her future. She is sandwiched between modernity and tradition as she is basically a modern woman deep rooted in her tradition whereas Mohan, her husband is a conventionalist firmly grounded in customs. To Mohan, the real strength of a woman lies in her usual predicament of sticking to hearth, waiting for her spouse to come home and dine hot food while for Jaya it is sheer nonsense as a woman too has got an independent will to breathe freely and to live her own individual life. The discrepancy in their mental outlook is the critical factor and fundamental reason of their failed relationship with each other. For Mohan, even a natural feeling to woman like anger makes her unwomanly as Jaya utters:

A woman can never be angry, she can only be neurotic, hysterical and frustrated. There is no room for anger in my life, no room for despair either. There is only order and routine today. I have to change the sheets tomorrow, scrub the bathrooms the day after, clean the fridge... (TLS 147-148).

Jaya despite being a well educated woman is domesticated and confined to the four walls of her home. She feels suffocated with her marital life which is altogether mechanical, impersonal, cold and loveless and craves to run away from traditional role of a woman that restricts her to the maintenance of household chores and satiating her husband's sexual desires. The holy matrimonial life of Jaya and her husband, Mohan is described as,

a pair of bullocks yoked together...a man and a woman married for seventeen years. A couple with two children. A family somewhere like the one caught and preserved for posterity by advertising visuals. I so loved this but the reality was only this. We were two persons. A man. A woman. (TLS 8)

suggesting their relationship as compromise rather than love /based and spiritless than spiritual. Her pathetic condition seems to echo:

Man for the field and woman for the  
hearth: Man for the sword and for the  
needle she: Man with the head and  
woman with the heart: Man to command  
and woman to obey. (*The Princess*)

The novel carefully expostulates the life of a sensitive woman who is entangled in rigid and restrictive tradition on one hand and the patriarchal suppression and the terror on the other. Jaya fails to appear the 'absolute she' as she is the victim of perpetual physical and mental torture and sexual assaults on part of her husband. After sharing bed with Jaya, Mohan would act like gentleman by saying, 'Did I hurt you' and she would soberly reply 'No' but she was hurt more psychologically than physically because she never wish for this act and yet could never deny him. Her tragic tale is woven in relationship with Mohan when she speaks about discrepancy between love and sex, "First there is love, then there is sex, that was I had always imagined it to be. But after having with Mohan, I had realized that it could so easily be the other way round" (*TLS* 137). Her identity is totally crushed, curbed and tamed as her husband changes her name from Jaya meaning 'victory' to Suhasini meaning 'placid, submissive and motherly woman'. The very changing of her names reveals the two different aspects of her life before and after marriage as her former name symbolizes revolt and the latter submission. She enunciates that, "no questions, no retorts: only silence. She expresses "the truth is that it was Mohan, who had a clear idea of what he wanted; the kind of life he to led, the kind of home he would live in, and I went along with him" (*TLS* 25). Even her voice is choked and her very self assertion is capitulated by the phallogocentric and hierarchal culture where women are victims of emotional, physical and domestic violence. In the post-colonial times even, woman's voice is unheard and unexpressed despite having the freedom of expression. Compared with men she is often known by the binary oppositions – He is head, she is heart, He is dominant, she recessive, He oppressor, she oppressed, he is colonizer, she colonized as Vikas Raval asserts,

women appear in the stories of men but only in roles defined by men. It is men who create polar image like virgin and whore, saint and witch, good mother and wicked step-mother. These binary conceptions fit conveniently into the scheme of a phallogocentric society. (*Critical Essays on Indian English Poetry and Drama Texts and Contexts*. 215).

Jaya is completely controlled by Mohan as she even subordinates her will to the likings of Mohan. She is constrained and coerced to put aside her favorites and desires towards the simpler things of life. For instance, before the commencement of movie she has an idiosyncrasy to watch commercials but Mohan undermines such things. Jaya has to pretend that she too doesn't like that kind of stuff. Thus she is forced to follow her husband's orthodox school of thought where female has to remain a mere puppet at the hands of her husband.

No wonder Jaya also seeks and cares to conform to the pattern. She learns to suppress her own wishes spent up feelings and act according to her husband's. She, for example strongly likes to see advertisements that precede a movie show, for they give her "the illusion of walls happiness" within the four walls of the home. Yet, since her husband does not like them, they start late. Over the years, she shapes herself "so resolutely to his desires" that in the end she is left with no identity of her own, just emptiness and silence. (*The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande* 19)

Mohan seems to pay deaf ear and blind eye to Jaya's sacrifices as women are deemed as second class citizens. Jaya realizes that it is only Mohan who can give opinions and criticism because he is man and head of family while as she is woman and is treated and acknowledged as unpaid source of labor or sheer 'appendages' of man as in a patriarchal or male driven society a woman is always seen in relation to man:

Throughout history, woman has always occupied a secondary role in relation to man, being relegated to the position of the "other" i.e., that which is adjectival upon the substantial subjectivity and existential activity of man. Whereas man has been enabled to transcend and control his environment, always furthering the domain of his physical and intellectual conquests, woman has remained imprisoned within "immanence" remaining a slave within the circle of duties imposed by her maternal and reproductive functions. (*A History of literary criticism: from Plato to the present* 682).

In a patriarchal society especially in India, a woman is always constructed in the context of culture and tradition. It is the tradition which determines the life of a particular society or community in general and woman in particular. The myths present images that women are anticipated to stick to, pure like Sita, beautiful like Laxmi, loyal like Draupadi, bountiful like Annaporna, dogged like Savitri, strong like Durga as they are considered to be eventual role models which women cannot dismiss at any case. Likewise from the very childhood Jaya has been told the tales of traditional and archetypal women viz Sita, Savitri and Draupadi who had been incarnation of silent sufferers and were amenable to their respective husbands. But Jaya been an epitome of knowledge finds it strenuous to accept the malpractices and dictums determined by the local traditional system. She no longer believes in the myths of feminity fashioned by the hierarchal system. She utters, "Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails... No, what have I to do with these mythical women? I can't fool myself. (TLS 11).

Jaya at last endeavors to hunt for salvation, self-introspection and redemption to the constructed norms of phalocratic society. She eventually enjoins to express herself by putting down her seventeen years long silence on paper to empty her bosom. She draws to a close, "what have I achieved by this writing? The thought occurs to me again as I look at the neat pile of papers. Well, I have achieved this. I am not afraid anymore. The panic has gone". (TLS 213)

The pillar to post narration of Jaya Kulkarni makes all the female characters to come to the fore front and utter their rallying cries of social injustice and their subjugation within a male driven society as it is not only she who suffers at the hands of patriarchy but other women characters as well who pass through a plethora of paroxysms of dismay, smothered anger, gender inequality, sexual assaults, guilt, self doubt etc.

To begin with, Aiji the widower is the eldest woman character in the novel. She is Jaya's grandmother and is described by the narrator as "a shaven widow" which in a male dominated society symbolizes public humiliation which a hindu widow has to bear throughout her life. Aiji's hair (the crown of a woman) is shaved off suggesting that the widowhood divests her off her glory, sublimity and even the feeble happiness from her. She lives in outright seclusion. Jaya reminisces that Aiji:

...had denuded herself for all those things that make up to woman's life. She had no possessions, absolutely none, apart from the two saris she wore. Her room was bare, except for the large bed on which my grandfather had slept...Aiji herself sat on the bare ground and slept on the straw mat at night. The bed was memorial to grandfather and the chairs meant for any male, who wearing trousers, could not sit comfortably on the ground. (TLS, 26)

Aiji's life demonstrates how in a patriarchal hegemonic society, a widow's life is blackjacked to abandon all pleasures and luxuries which never is the case with a man because the moment a man's wife dies, he is presented with multiple choices to choose another. In a male chauvinistic society,

...humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as autonomous being...she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other. (*The Second Sex* 16)

Mukta, Jaya's neighbor is also a widow. She also lives with an unending grief. She fights against the vigorous battle of widowhood, the battle of lonesomeness, seclusion and solitariness. The way Mukta lives her hard life irritates Jaya: "if it wasn't 'her Saturday', it was 'her Monday' or 'her Thursday'...those fasts? - seemed mean- hood" (TLS 6). Mukta being well read and educated finds it hard to set herself free from the worthless norms and conventions, orthodox school of thought and confinement of solitariness because of the nightmare and phobia of society. Nilima, her daughter says to her, "my Saturday! Oh God, Ma, what does it matter what day of weak it is? All your fasts are so stupid" (TLS 68). Deshpande through Nilima boldly dissertates about the issue of menstruation. Niliima is fed up with the monthly cycles that despite being integral part of the female reproductive system are considered to be an impediment and a hurdle, by the phallocentric society, in leading a free life by a woman. She laments, "why can't I stop having it? Isn't any drug I can take to stop it?". (TLS 63)

Jeeja, Jaya's female domestic servant due to her lack of ability to give birth to child makes her husband to remarry. She doesn't complaint against her husband's remarrying act but the irony is that she blames herself only and believes that she has wronged her husband by not delivering a child. She expresses her grief and sorrow as, "God didn't give us any children – that was his misfortune as well as mine. How could blame him for marrying again when I couldn't give him any children? How could blame that woman for marrying him? With whom shall I be angry?" (TLS 52)

Nayna, a sweeper on the other hand gives birth to four children. Still her husband frightens her, "he says he will throw me out if I have another daughter" (TLS 28) because only the girls survived and the two boys died soon after their birth. Like Jeeja, who was the silent sufferer, Nayna too won't be able to stop her husband from marrying another woman but unlike Jeeja, she won't let her husband to throw her out of his house as she strongly retributes to him, "Take yourself another woman if you want, roll in the gutters, I can't prevent you just try to throw me out of this house..." (TLS 28-29). When Jaya questions her, "why do you want a boy so much?", she answers, "why give birth to a girl, behnji, who will only suffer because of men all her life? Look at me! My mother loved me very much, she wanted so much for me... a house with electercity and water, shining brass vessels, a silver waist chain, silver anklets...and what have I got? No, no, behnji, better to have a son" (TLS 30). The plight of the women in such orthodox society can be seen from the very stand of Nayna who despite being a woman herself doesn't want to give birth to a girl child as she knows how she would suffer in such a gender biased society.

Mohan's Mother has to endeavor a lot of sufferings because of male dominion attitude and her husband's egoistic nature. Mohan's father inflicts much pain on her and she has to suffer silently. This cruel attitude was adopted by Mohan on Jaya and the females knew only two words – Silence and Surrender. Once Mohan recounts his childhood incident about his father's brutality over her mother:

I was ill: I remember I had a fever when he came home that night. I was sleeping on my usual bed... the man looked down at the boy and said, what are you doing? Do you want to finish off that mat? Does his lordship think that we can buy a new one everyday?...he came closer and kicked at the hand, hard, so that the boy cried out loudly in anger and pain. The mother rushed out...sat down beside the boy and asked him, how is your headache? Is it better. (TLS 37).

Vimla, sister of Mohan is very compassionate, courteous and cordial lady. She suffers from menstrual problems but hides it to everyone. Once Jaya and Mohan go to pay a routine visit to her, where her mother-in-law tells them,

God knows what is wrong with her. She has been lying on her bed for over a month now. Yes, take her away if you want to. I never heard of a woman going to hospitals and doctors for such thing. As if other women do not have heavy periods! What a fuss! But these women who have never had children are like that. (TLS 39).

She sinks into a trauma, her silence intact and dies a week later. Deshpande depicts the helplessness of women in a typical hindu family where they are even denied the proper medical treatment and they die a traumatic death.

Tara, Jeeja's daughter in law is married to Rajaram who is drunkard and beats her wife every now and then. She curses her fate, her husband for marrying him and sobs loudly, "so many drunkards die. She cried, but this one won't. He will torture us all to death instead" (TLS 53). If Tara won't lend money to him for drinking, she used get severe beatings for it. Jaya after getting to know Tara's condition thinks and comes to conclusion that it is better to put an end to one's life once and for all rather than prolonging these pains and pangs for years and years together.

In That Long Silence, Deshapnde's characters visualize the ill-treatment, dismay, misery, agony and unending sufferings inflicted on them by the male chauvinism and patriarchal hegemony. She undoubtedly is the writer who looks deeply into the problems faced by women. She sketches women feelings right from the pangs of infancy to the desolation and greatest void resulting from the unfulfilled yearnings of a woman.

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