
Quest for Identity in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract: *In a time of yore, the voice of women used to go unheard in the patriarchal world. Though the world is still patriarchal and male ordained, the women have gained legal sanction as well as social liberty to voice their problems and to protest against injustices done to them. It was sometimes in the 60's that the movement for women's liberty started. The women came to the forefront and tried very enthusiastically to overthrow all the taboos ordained by a male-dominated society. But, unfortunately, their enthusiasm could not continue for long. Issues like individual freedom and equality with men are no longer any news. The question now is how far women have succeeded in getting the rights for which they fought. Shashi Deshpande, being the author of 70's and 80's, understands women well, and tries to project a realistic picture of the middle-class educated woman who is financially independent. This paper explores the protagonist's quest for identity in the Indian society and how she performs different roles with her silence. Key*

Key Words: Struggle, Conflict, Individuality, Identity

Introduction: The title emphasizes the silence that the protagonist Jaya wishes to break in order to search her own self, her wife-role and her real individual self. At another level, she explores the exertions of the modern convent-educated English speaking woman who happens to grope in the darkness of life having been dissatisfied with her role-model in marriage and her agony over her own acceptance, though unconsciously, of the two standards for man and woman in society.

In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande has portrayed the irony of a woman writer who also happens to be a young housewife. Being writer she is supposed to present her views and ideas before the society but still, she remains silent probing into her past, struggling with her present and trying to establish a rapport with her future. She is an intellectual who finds herself out of place in the society meant only for men. The novel opens with Jaya and her husband Mohan shifting from their well-settled, comfortable house to other old house in Dadar, Bombay, where they had stayed immediately after getting married when their financial condition was not so good. They shift into an old

apartment in order to escape the ugly scene as Mohan has been caught in some business malpractice and an inquiry is in progress. Here, in a small old flat, Jaya gets out of touch with her daily schedule and becomes an introvert. She sits deep in contemplation, thinking of her childhood and tries to analyze herself.

Not satisfied with her married life, Jaya recalls her past days, her upbringing, the environment in which she was brought up and the preachings that were thrust upon her when she was growing up, e.g. she was taught that a husband is like a sheltering tree. Though Jaya has been educated and influenced by the modern thought of the west and other advanced countries, and is herself a writer, she still wants to compare herself with the image of Sita, Draupadi, and other ideal mythological characters. She had always tried her best to keep a balance between husband and wife: “ours has been a delicately balanced relationship, so much so that we have even snipped off bits of ourselves to keep the scales on an even keel” (Deshpande 7).

On the occasion of the Raveti’s birthday, Jaya as well as her daughter, Rati, feel that Mohan loves his niece Raveti more than his own daughter. But she does not say anything to Mohan as he only dismisses it as her “writer’s

imagination” and nothing more. She always wishes to proceed as per her husband’s wish. Generally, a woman’s identity is defined by others, in terms of her relationship with men, i.e., as a daughter, as a wife, as a mother, etc. The question “what a woman does” is never asked, but “who she belongs to” is always considered important. She does not have an identity of her own. Her name keeps on changing according to the wishes of others. In *ThatLongSilence*, the writer has presented this phenomenon through the character of Jaya, who is known by two names: Jaya and Suhasini-Jaya, which means victory, is the name given by her father when she was born, and Suhasini, the name given after her marriage which means a “soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman” (Deshpande16). Both the names symbolize the traits of her personality. The former symbolizes revolt and later submission. The dreams of her childhood, to change the ascribed situation of a woman resulting in achieving her goals, are shattered by the environment, the surroundings, and above all by the society which imposes all sorts of restrictions on a woman. She is absolutely helpless and is unable to do anything to improve her situation. Ultimately, she tries to adapt herself to the main current. She longs to be called an ideal wife. She revolts in silence. She comments on a situation when her husband talks

about a woman being treated very cruelly by their husbands and he calls it “strength”: “He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire, but I saw despair. I saw despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and Surrender” (Deshpande36).

Coming to the physical relationship between husband and wife, it is again the case of dominating husband and a suffering wife. Even if the husband hurts the wife, she remains silent. Jaya, too, has been cast in the same mould. She cannot say “yes” when her husband asks her whether he has hurt her. She has to tolerate everything: “The emotion that governed my behavior to him, there was still the habit of being a wife, of sustaining and supporting him” (Deshpande98). All this certainly does not show a natural and harmonious relationship between the two when one is unable to express his or her real feelings to other. Their physical relationship always ends up with Mohan’s question whether he has hurt her. It obviously shows a forced relationship and not a natural one. Jaya does not immediately react to the situation but the reader is informed through the flashback technique used by the author. Lying alone in a small house, her mind travels through the past and the present and thus covers the whole span of her life. At

times the author uses the technique of stream-of-consciousness to project the minds of the characters and thus making the story authentic and realistic.

In the Indian context once a girl gets married to a man, whether it be a love—marriage or an arranged one, the husband takes complete control over her whether he follows the right path or the wrong one, she has to blindly follow in his footsteps. When Mohan is caught in an act of malpractice and is supposed to be unavailable for certain period, he assumes Jaya would accompany him. Though she is unwilling to follow the examples of Sita and Savitri, paradoxically, she is compelled by the situations and circumstances to follow the principle that “both are yoked together, so better to go to the same direction as to go to different direction will be painful” (Deshpande10).

Jaya’s husband, Mohan, always interprets things in relation to the effect it may have on the society. He unobtrusively likes to conform to the social norms even if they are wrong. The success of Jaya’s novel depicting the relationship between man and woman is weighed in relation to what society would think in future. So, he wants to make Jaya also think like him and induces her not to deliberate on such themes that would endanger their marriage.

Jaya, a representative of the typical Indian woman in the present context, wants to mould herself as he wills. But all these male-chauvinistic ideas are not her own but have been thrust upon her by the society in general and her father in particular. He father made her think that she was different from others and hence, she could not cope with her hostel mates and kept herself aloof from other girls.

In her childhood, she had been brought up in a loving and affectionate manner without any responsibility. But after her marriage, she changes automatically, her anger withers away: “She was a child who used to get angry very soon. But after her marriage, she tolerated her anger. She realized that to Mohan anger made a woman ‘unwomanly’ (Deshpande83). When Kammat asks her why she has not expressed the anger of woman in her writings, her reply is: “Because no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman?”(Deshpande147). When she leaves her home after getting married, her father advises her to be always good to Mohan and she, at all times, tries her best to follow his advice. It also throws light on her being closer to her father than to her mother. Even when her mother scolds her or questions her going out and

returning home late, she complains about her mother to her father.

Social conformity has always been more obligatory for a woman than for a man. Generally, a woman’s identity tends to be defined by others. Due to her sensitive nature, Jaya is very particular about moulding her tastes in order to suit those of the rest even if her superior intellect is not satisfied. In the very beginning of the novel, we see that she tries to reason out with her father as to why she should not listen to the songs broadcast on the radio, but ultimately she keeps silent, suppressing her desire. Here, Deshpande has presented the theme of lack of communication. Jaya is basically a modern woman rooted in tradition, whereas her husband, Mohan, is a traditionalist rooted in customs. The difference between their outlooks is so great that they fail, time and again, to understand each other. To Mohan, a woman sitting before the fire, waiting for her husband to come home and eat hot food is the real “strength” of a woman, but Jaya interprets it as nothing more than despair. The difference in their attitude is the main cause of their failure to understand each other.

In her stream of thoughts, Jaya too looks at her marital relations where there is left the little possibility of conversation between

them. This unhappiness is reflected not only in her conjugal life but also in social life. Her books, her stories lack anger and emotion. Her writings are rejected by the publishers. And when, finally, Mohan angrily walks out of the house, she feels that she has failed in her duty as a wife. She recalls the tradition of act and retribution and compares herself with Kusum, Mohan's mother "An act and retribution- they followed each other naturally and inevitably" (Deshpande128). When Mohan leaves the house without informing her, she feels that she is being neglected by her husband in the same manner as she had done with Mohan's mother. Silence creates a gap between Jaya and Mohan. Mohan keeps on asking questions, but she does not find a word to answer them, "I racked my brains trying to think of an answer" (Deshpande31). But her silence on such issues, like her own writings, puts on into doubt. As Veena Sheshadri writes, "one ends up by wondering whether Jaya has imposed the long silence on herself not out of a sense of duty or to emulate the ideal Hindu woman of the ages gone by, but in order to camouflage the streaks of ugliness within her" (95). Her negative approach coupled with her habit of discerning and analyzing every situation causes havoc in her personal life. She does not like to submit to the male-chauvinistic ideals, for her prudence does not allow her to submit before

ignorance. Thus, there ensues a struggle between ignorance and prudence.

Further, her covert superiority complex makes her think not only of herself but also of other women who come in her contact which causes a type of irritability in her marital conduct. Thus, all the troubles emerge from their unequal cognitive status. In order to have a well-balanced conjugal life, it is imperative that husband and wife be at par with each other. They should supplement and not supplant each other. Further, they should know each other well physically as well as emotionally. It is this harsh reality that Deshpande tries to project through the female protagonist who, at the end, chooses to break her long silence of the past. The intuition of this talented contemporary Indian writer seems to break the long silence that has surrounded women, their experience and their world.

That Long Silence, then, traces Jaya's passage through a plethora of self-doubts, fears, guilt, smothered anger and silence towards articulation and affirmation. Jaya, in fact, rejects the patriarchal notion of a unitary self or identity when she observes:

But what was that 'myself? Trying to find oneself-what a cliché that has

become. As if such a thing is possible. As if there is such a thing as oneself, intact and whole, waiting to be discovered. On the contrary, there are so many, each self, attached like a Siamese twin to a self of another person, neither able to exist without the other. (Deshpande69)

Even a casual reading of the novel makes one conscious that Shashi Deshpande is not only writing about her female protagonist, Jaya, who is trying to ease a long silence and grapple with the problems of self-revelation and self-assessment but through her, also about other women, those unhappy victims who never broke their silence. The author, in the first place, points out how our culture has often kept silent on the subject of women. For instance, at one point in the novel, Jaya discovers that she does not figure in the family tree. When Jaya asks her uncle why her name is not included in the family tree, she is given to understand that she now belongs to her husband's family and not to her father's. But this is only half the truth. Neither her mother, her Kakis, i.e. her uncle's wives, nor even her grandmother, ajji, the indomitable woman, "who single-handedly kept the family together" (Deshpande143) finds a place in the family tree. Jaya, to her dismay, finds that her name and

existence, along with those of other women in the family are completely blotted out of the family history. The novel, as it were, is Jaya's protest against the kind of treatment that is given to women in our culture and her attempt to give another version of history from woman's point of view.

The feminist upsurge of Jaya's ego becomes evident when we consider the husband-wife relationships of the old Hindu women and the modern women. Jaya's mother never raised a voice against her father. Mohan thinks Jaya is not sufficiently trained to play the role of a good wife and that a woman in anger is "ugly and unwomanly" (Deshpande83). Shashi Deshpande through Jaya-Mohan relationship has shed some light on modern love, sex, marital relationship, and has hinted at the domestic warfare of married couples. The novelist focuses on some modernist elements in the novel. The first is the pre-marital love of Jaya and Mohan before they are under the yoke of marriage. Mohan was enamoured of Jaya's modernity and her modern education. With a new feminist frankness Jaya talks of the interdependence of love and sex: "First there's love, then there's sex-that was how I had always imagined it to be. But after living with Mohan I had realised that it could so easily be the other way round" (Deshpande95).

Woman's realization between of her aloneness in the "act of sex" (Deshpande97) and the possibility of love without abodily union (as in the case of the relationship between Jaya and Kamat) are discussed clearly and add an unorthodox frankness to an esoteric experience.

Tolerance and suffering, "Silence and Surrender" are seen as marks of goodness, but tyrannical mother-in-laws are considered as "Ghouls" (Deshpande45). The Greek thought that "a woman is her womb" (Deshpande107) fills Jaya with remorse and guilt after the abortion. At the face of it, Jaya's predicament seems existential in so far as she often finds life absurd and meaningless. However, the feminist rebellion and defiance, epitomized in Jaya's conduct, are based on the balance of the rejection of bad and the acceptance of good in the time honoured values and traditions.

Jaya's feminist awareness has a note of deterministic pessimism: "I felt a thickening in my throat as if I was to burst into tears. It's not that life is cruel, but that in the process of our birth we submit to life's cruelty" (Deshpande102). This cosmic awareness leads her to momentary gloom and to her adoption of aggressive tactics as a psychological defense, and this partly explains her mysterious giggle at Mohan and desertion of the dying Kamat. A

modernist trait of Jaya's temper is her agnostic treatment of religion as a symbol of tyranny and violence: "So many chariots of Jagannath promising us Moksha. But there was no Moksha anymore" (Deshpande113). Nevertheless, the novelist gives an optimistic message through these words of Jaya: "...we have to go on trying." One has to believe in one's self; As K.R.S. Iyengar concludes:

Jaya will begin life anew, for life provides many choices. She feels a compulsive sense of embracing life's obligations as life "has always to be made possible" (114). This is the wisdom Jaya has learnt in the tribulations of her life. Perhaps, almost always she will have an opportunity in life to act according to her will. (760)

Conclusion: Woman occupies a central place in Deshpande's novels. The novelist presents a subtle analysis of conflicting phases and underlying reasons suggesting to some extent a way out. It becomes more interesting to analyze the image of a woman in the novels when it is portrayed by a woman. The woman, today, plays diverse roles both indoors and out of doors. She participates in all the hitherto male-dominated spheres. Still, there is something that provokes conflict in her mind and makes her restless.



Deshpande truly explores Jaya's quest for identity.

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