
Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*: A Reading In The Light of Indian Feminist Theory

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"If others see something feminist in my writing, I must say that it is not consciously done, it is because the world for women is like that and I am mirroring the world." (Shashi Deshpande)

The feminist thought and the feminist movements in the west have had some influence on the women's movement in developing countries like India. Yet feminism as it exists today in India has gone beyond its western counterpart. Although feminism as an organized movement made its appearance in India late in the 1970's, it existed in spirit long before even the western feministic movement had begun. In the Indian context, several feminists have realized that the subject of women's emancipation in India should not be reduced to the contradictions between man and women. The woman, in order to liberate herself and advance, needs to empower herself to confront different institutional structures and cultural practices related to patriarchal domination and control.

Throughout the twentieth century there has been a study of male control over

every aspect of a women's existence. Sarah Grimke observes:

"Man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means of Selfish gratification, to minister to his sexual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort; but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill."

Feminism strives to undo this tilted and distorted image of woman whose cries for freedom and equality have gone, still go, unheard in a patriarchal social structure.

Virginia Woofs' *A Room of One's Own* which is considered to be the Bible of feminism talks about two important conditions for woman. First the room of one's own and second an income of one's own. Woolf talks about economic independence and individual identity of a woman. Toril Moi observes, "Feminism represents one of the most important social,

economic and aesthetic revolutions of modern times.” Semon De Beauvoir asks the question in her book *The Second Sex*, “What is woman? How is she constructed differently from men? Answer: She is constructed differently by men.” Beauviore celebrates the difference between man and woman.

In India, feminism, as a new way of life, as a new perspective came into existence in India with the feminine psyche trying to redefine woman’s role in the society. In India, women novelists depicted, woman who were traditional in outlook and resigned themselves to life. They wrote mainly to voice their concern for and sympathize with the suffering of Indian woman, rather than to censure the society. The majority of novels written by Indian women writers depict the psychological sufferings of the frustrated homemakers. This subject matters often considered superficial compared to the depiction of the replaced and oppressed lives of women. Indian women writers have started questioning the prominent old patriarchal domination.

Shashi Deshpande has made bold attempt at giving a voice to the disappointments and frustrations of women despite her vehement

denial of being a feminist. Shashi Deshpande says:

...I am a feminist, I’m a very staunch feminist in my personal life...cruelty and oppression should not be there between the two genders, this is my idea of feminism. I am a feminist very much and I strongly react against any kind of cruelty or oppression, denial of opportunities to women because they are women...the important thing is we have the right to live ourselves (Sree 22).

Shashi Deshpande’s novels encapsulate her artistic vision of feminity. She has dealt graphically with problems that confront a middle class, educated woman in the patriarchal Hindu society. But hers is not the radical and militant kind of feminism which sees the male as the matrix of all menace. She concerns herself with women's issues in the Indian context. In an interview she tells Lakshmi Holmstorm:

It is difficult to apply Kate Millet or Simone de Beauvoir or whoever to the reality of our lives in India. And then there are such terrible misconceptions about feminism by people here. They often think it is about burning bras and walking out

on your husband, children or about not being married, not having children etc. I always try to make the point now about what feminism is not, and to say that we have to discover what it is in our own lives, our experiences (26).

In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande delineates the delicate swings of mood, the see-saw moments of joy and despair, the fragments of feelings perceived and suppressed the life of senses as well as the heart-wringing anguish of the narrator protagonist Jaya, a housewife and a failed writer. The novel depicts the life of Jaya at the level of the silent and unconscious. A sensitive and realistic dramatization of the married life of Jaya and her husband Mohan, it portrays an inquisitive critical appraisal to which the institution of marriage has been subjected to in recent years. It centers round the inner perception of the protagonist, a woman who is subtly drawn from inside, a woman who “finds her normal life and attempt to decide who she really is” (King 97).

The question, “who am I?” (*That Long Silence* 24) haunts Jaya 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” (*That Long Silence* 69). Hence her agonised cries “I can’t hope, I can’t manage, I can’t go on” (*That Long Silence* 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, all the things that were womanly and unwomanly... (*That Long Silence* 83). Jaya is Suhasini and also ‘Seeta’, the pseudonym she assumes to write columns about the plight of the middle-class housewife.

Jaya being renamed as Suhasini after her marriage is not a case of the loss of identity since Jaya and Suhasini are the two facets of the same coin and these two names of Shashi Deshpande’s protagonists are symbolical in their socio-familial import. Jaya her premarital name means ‘victory’ and Suhasini, the post-marital name given to her by her husband means “a soft smiling, placid motherly who coped” (*That Long Silence* 15). Jaya is a woman who adjusts and accommodates unlike the modern women who find themselves “forced into the background by the claims of culture” and hence they adopt ‘an inimical attitude

towards it” (Freud 73). Jaya’s aunt said to her: “A husband is like a sheltering tree,” ... “Take your pain between your teeth, bite on it, don’t let it escape...” (*That Long Silence* 32) Jaya’s self- questioning attitude comes as a spilt in the narrative. She broods over the metaphor of the

“Sheltering tree” A sheltering tree. Without the tree, you are dangerously unprotected ... equally logically and vulnerable. This followed logically. And so you have to keep tree alive and flourishing, even if you have to water it with deceit and lies. This too followed, equally logically (*That Long Silence* 32).

Struggling with the threats to her freedom and her integrity, Jaya desperately needs to protect herself from dissipating and sinking in the crumbling world around her.

Jaya is a modern predicament and the flood of consciousness that ensues out of it is a silent stream of thoughts and feelings. She knows pretty well that in order to get by in a relationship one has to learn a lot of tricks and “Silence is one of them. ... You never find a woman criticising her husband, even playfully, in case it might damage the relationship” (Cunningham 6). Jaya

surrenders to Mohan without revolting. Shashi Deshpande’s women

“try to redefine human relationships. Without rejecting outright the cultural and social background, they realize the need to live in the family but reject the roles prescribed to them by society” (Sree 123).

Silently she kills his will. She never says ‘yes’ when her husband asks her whether he has hurt her. She endures everything, tolerates all kinds of masculine oppression silently: “... in the emotion that governed my behaviour to him, there was still the habit of being a wife, of sustaining and supporting him” (*That Long Silence* 48). Hence, it is Jaya who makes, “the first conciliating move...” (*That Long Silence* 82). A dominating husband and a suffering wife – that is her tie with Mohan. She does not immediately react to the situation but the reader is insinuated through the flashback technique used by the author especially at critical junctures in the psychic life of Jaya. She considers herself a patient suffering from the disease of loneliness. She, now, realizes that she has to make choice on her own. She, so far, has been scared of breaking through the thin veneer of a happy family. She has suppressed the desperate

woman in her. Psychologically speaking, when repression of anger continues for a long time, ego-self crisis reaches its climactic point (i.e., ego's identification, with self is at its climax) and there is a danger of extinction. Encounter with death is the possibility. It may sometimes lead one to suicide. This stage may also result in the re-orientation of the total personality. A new consciousness may emerge. In psychological terms, a fresh relationship between ego and self may be established. Thus in helplessness, she surrenders to life and situation in order to settle herself peacefully in her world. She finds no other option better than this at the end it is because of having no such power to struggle with male dominating society.

Shashi Deshpande's feminism is certainly not cynical or nihilistic. She avoids indiscriminate use of the western feminist jargons and analyses the universal significance of the woman's problem, thereby transcending the feminist perspective. She believes that feminism is "... very much an individual working out of her problem." (Mala 156). She is quite down earth in her feminist approach to the woman's problem. To a question from an

interview whether she would like to call herself now a feminist, she reacts thus:

Yes, I would, I am a feminist in the sense that, I think we need to have a world, which we should recognize as a place for all of us human beings. There is no superior and inferior; we are two halves of one species. I fully agree with Simone De Beauvoir that the fact that we are human is much more important than our being men and women. I think that's my idea of feminism (Gangadharan 254).

For though she is aware of the seriousness of the Indian woman's dilemma and the generation old struggles behind it, she also believes that a positive change in women's social status cannot materialize without bringing about a change in the woman's mindset first. The woman's increasing involvement rather than detachment in her predicament as expressed in her novels reveals the positive, humanistic side of Shashi Deshpande's feminism. Hence Shashi Deshpande rightly considers her role an Indian feminist as one of a "humanist feminist" (Mala 143).

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