

**“YOU ARE YOUR OWN REFUGE”: SHASHI DESHPANDE’S
THAT LONG SILENCE**

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Shashi Deshpande has given a clarion call to the women through her novels to awaken them to their worth in the society. Educated middle-class women are focused in her novels which form the bulk of our society. She cannot be called a true feminist as per the definition put forth by her foreign counterpart because she stresses feminine freedom without open revolt and exclusion of male from their life. Abiding by the norms of our culture and society, Shashi Deshpande does not deny the necessity of the existence of man in a woman's life in our but at the same time; she defies total subjugation of woman before man absolving herself of her responsibilities towards herself as a human being. In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande discusses the mute supplication of Jaya not only to her husband Mohan but her continuous obeisance to her father then to her elder brother and finally the most to her husband. Jaya's life is a living example of a middle-class educated woman of today's society who comprises at all the stages of her life in order to secure her position in the family.

Keywords: *Abide, Subjugation, Middle-Class, Obeisance, Secure*

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The protagonist Jaya is a lower middle class woman who grows up in a poor suburban apartment block on the edges of metropolitan Bombay. But as she and her marital family prosper they move into an apartment in the more posh Churchgate area in the heart of the city. The story of Jaya's self-discovery however, unfolds back in the suburban apartment. Under suspicion of malpractice, Mohan has to take leave from his job. He and His wife Jaya return to their flat in Dadar, a poorer Bombay suburb. An outwardly happily married couple with two teenage children and a beautiful home Jaya and Mohan are separated by a wide chasm of silence. The return to

the apartment which was their first marital home is a hiatus from the posh Churchgate home. Here Jaya confronts the fears that have led to her imprisonment if not erasure.

Jaya's personal drama takes place in the less affluent, suburban apartment in Dabar on the fringes of Bombay city. The contrast between the wealth of the central Bombay Churchgate home and the dirt and poverty of the Dabar apartment are noted at the very beginning and also mark the differences between what Mohan and Jaya are striving to escape. Both Mohan and Jaya's childhood had been problematic so this not quite the Bachelardian return



to childhood the analogy therefore is curious. This insistent trope of staging a return to a known earlier home, especially for women protagonists in many of the novels is not uncommon. The 'return home' seems essential for the protagonists to come to terms with their pasts so that they can reshape the future.

In Shashi Deshpande's novels womanly silence is often seen negatively as a silencing of women by patriarchy. In *That Long Silence*, particularly, Jaya's silence and her writing are linked. In the biography she has to submit to a newspaper she pares herself down to the barebones of "I was born. My father died when I was fifteen. I got married to Mohan. I have two children and I did not let a third live." (Pg.69) In literary terms this would be the plot of her life. The sum total of the actions that happen. It does not at all reveal who she is. She notes that her diaries of the same period read like the neurotic ravings of a too sane housewife because they are utterly dull and prosaic. But these diaries cleverly camouflage her real feelings.

But of course, the truth was that were only the bare skeletal outlines of that life in these diaries. Its essential core had been left out. The agonized cries- 'I can't cope, I can't manage, I can't go on'-had been neatly smothered. As also the question that had confronted me everyday- 'Is this all?' (Pg.70)

The contents of the diary are heavily self-censored. Jaya does not, will not and cannot admit, even to herself, her real feelings. But the bland tone and style of her diary is a pertinent reminder of the critiques of Indian English writing mentioned earlier. Jaya is self-reflexive enough to note with shock the narrowness of her vision. The diaries reveal a person who is so self-obsessed by domesticity that she is oblivious of larger events in the country famine, drought, and scarcity of food (Pg.72). They parallel her Seeta newspaper column. The very pseudonym 'Seeta' is a subtle reminder of the Sita of the Ramayana but the different spelling also distances the two. The columns evoke the saccharine image of the dutiful Sita like the one popularized by Ramanand Sagar's television serial that was based on Tulsidas's version. The Sita of certain folk traditions, women's version and regional retellings like the Kamban

Ramayana is portrayed very differently and probably lies latent in the column and the Seeta column are stalwarts of conformity like Mohan, the newspaper editors and mainstream readers.

But for Jaya the Seeta column had been the means through which I had shut the door, firmly, on all those women who had invaded my being, screaming for attention; women I had known I could not write about, because they might-it was just possible-resemble Mohan's mother, or aunt, or my mother or aunt. Seeta was safer. I didn't have to come out of the safe hole I'd crawled into to write about Seeta. I could stay there, warm and snug. (Pg.149)

Shashi Deshpande, 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 that her uncle, Ramukaka, had prepared with great pains and of which he was so proud. 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 of the truth. Neither her mother nor her Kakis, i.e., her uncle's wives, not even her grandmother, Ajji, that indomitable woman, "who single handedly kept the family together" (Pg. 143) find 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 women's point of view.

Jaya recollects the fable of the foolish crow and the wise sparrow which she had often heard as a child. She does not repeat the story to her children because of the fear that they might store it in their subconscious and eventually turn out to be like "that damnably, insufferably, priggish sparrow looking after their homes, their babies.... and to hell with the world. Stay at home, look after your babies, keep out at the way in which the seemingly harmless bedtime stories influence children at a tender age to believe that a woman's job at all times is to protect her



family even if she has to resort to treachery or deceit.(Pg.71)

Jaya also recalls the pativratas-Sita, Savitri and Draupati- mythical symbols of ideal wifeness, ironically comparing herself to them. "Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging death to declaim her husband. Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails."(Pg.11) She feels that she has unconsciously cumulated their example by following her husband into hiding when he is faced with the threat of corruption charges.

Jaya's fortnightly "Seeta" story, which is about "girls who ultimately mated themselves with right men" is a fictionalization of her experience and reflection on the central theme of the novel – an ironical statement on the notion of man as the ultimate goal of woman. Mohan does not approve of the stories, for they do not bring money, with which he judges everything. Her prize-winning story about incompatible marital life evokes angry response from Mohan, that people might suspect it to be the representation of their life. While for him the fiction is life, for her life is a fiction, an illusion. Her diaries, which she ironically calls "the Diaries of a Sane Housewife", are the records of her submissiveness surrender and compromises, because it is accepted that a woman's sanity lies in following her husband. This is put within the larger narratives of Gandhari: "If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife; I was an ideal wife too" (Pg.61). This can be read along with the underlying myth of Ratnakar, whose claim that he has committed crimes for his family and they must have a share in his sin is rejected by his wife and parents. The myth of Maitreyee, who refuses her husband's offer of property and wants immortality, is a challenge to the male domination of sainthood, and scholarship and provides a framework to the struggle of Jaya.

Jaya begins to look at her own role in the making of her marriage a little more closely. She has been too unquestioning, too docile, concerned with the ends rather than the means. Can she totally absolve herself of the share in Mohan's moral lapse? A woman's whole life – her childhood and adulthood both – are totally geared towards a male centre in

which the central male, above father and above son, is the husband. Unending fasts are observed by the Hindu woman, a continuous self-mortification disguised as piety motivated by the sole desire of avoiding widowhood. It is not human goodness which is privileged, nor is it the functional aspect of a relationship, but the physical presence of the man and his right of ownership.

Amidst this surrounding awareness, suddenly her earlier insulation is punctured and the fortnightly 'Seeta' story, she is committed to write, never gets written. The strangeness of her diary pages stares her in the face. She falls back as her own resources unsullied by status and uncontrolled by sanity and finds that the world she had so carefully built had collapsed. She felt totally dislocated. Bit by bit, through fragmentary revelations of the past, the success' story is unraveled to reveal the conscious efforts both – Jaya and Mohan – have made at forgetting the past. Memory is selective and one learns to falsify emotions and hide one's true feelings not only from others but also from oneself. Mohan has worked hard at acquiring an education and a middle class status, forgetting that his mother was a cook and that an old man paid for his education as an act of charity. Jaya has suppressed her anger and modeled both her prosaic recordings in the dairy and the 'Seeta' stories on the culturally governed images of womanhood.

Jaya in *That Long Silence* attempts to break not only her own silence but that of women, especially women writers, down the ages. A desire for identity and self-expression spurs the creative writer but Jaya finds it being smothered by her husband's reactions. Jaya's imaginative writing is not appreciated by her husband Mohan who asks: "How could you, how could you have done it?.....How can you reveal us, how can you reveal our lives to the world in this way"? (Pg.32) Consequently, in an effort to fit into the pre-ordained mould of a good wife, Jaya finds herself content with writing the innocuous middle under the name Seeta. She begins to write what people want to read and not what she wants to write. Deshpande here subtly indicates the constraints under which women writers seek self-expression. Kamat rightly scoffs at that writing of



Jaya's as being written by a 'plump, good-humored, pea-brained but shrewd, devious, skimming over life' (Pg.23) type of woman. Even the pen name – Seeta that Jaya chooses is indicative of her desire for conformity – the traditional Indian woman who treads the expected path of a dutiful wife. In satisfying Mohan's ego and expectations, Jaya is forced to curb her creative genius. She gets smothered under the weight of her own silence.

None of Deshpande's protagonists are presented in the traditional *pativrata* mould. Closely related to their attitude to marriage is their capacity to analyze their relationship with their husband as well as their extra-marital relationships. Since these relationships do not seriously affect their marriage or stretch over a long period of time, they are dealt with in a very matter of fact fashion by the protagonists. Jaya considers love to be a myth.

The theme of the novel is that woman often suffers due to male chauvinism and her own defeatism. The title of the novel itself implies that women do not rise their voices against suppression. Deshpande wants the woman to be aware of the subordinate position they have placed themselves in for the sake of their husbands and children. In the novel Jaya recalls her married life with nostalgia. She is married to Mohan and lives with him at different places till he leaves her in his attempt to clear himself of the charges of business malpractice. She bears him two children and the third one is aborted. She recalls her relationship with innumerable relatives and friends with kindness and understanding. She tries to come to terms with herself and determines to break her long silence. The novel ends with the return of her son, Rahul; the promise of Mohan to return on Friday morning and with the revelation of truth that life has always to be made possible.

Mohan's desire to have an English speaking wife makes him marry Jaya, a convent educated girl, Jaya in turn, marries Mohan out of defiance as his mother disapproves of him. Mohan has a strong traditional background and he has grown up seeing his mother silently submit to every erratic demand of his father. In Mohan's mind the roles of submissive wife and domineering husband have deeply ingrained and with such deep rooted thoughts he enters into

matrimony with Jaya. Jaya, on the contrary, is the only daughter of an unconventional family adored by her father and brothers and has been brought up differently.

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 doesn't have an identity of her own. Her name keeps on changing according to the wishes of others."

In the novel Deshpande has presented this phenomenon through the character of Jaya, who is known by two names Jaya and Sushasini. Jaya is the name given to her by her father which means 'Victory' and Suhasini the post marital name given to her by her husband, means "a soft smiling, motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman coped". (Pg. 15-16) Both the names symbolize the traits of her personality. The former symbolize 'revolt' and the latter 'submission'.

Jaya has to endure an incompatible and traumatic marital life. She is one of those lucky girls whose upbringing is free from social conditioning. Jaya's carefree childhood has become a part of her existence, while her husband Mohan has a traditional male psyche with all its oppressive cruelty and insensitivity. Frictions occur soon. Mohan finds self-abnegation as strength in a woman as he has watched his mother suffering mutely and still carrying out her domestic affairs. In order to save her marital life from total collapse, Jaya submits before the hegemony of Mohan. Their relationship lacks companionship and Jaya is reduced to the status of a subordinate.

Jaya's married life was an unhappy one, with Mohan it is mostly a silent, wordless love making. She was romantic and Mohan's physical encounters failed to arouse any emotional link between them. "I could stay apart from him without a twinge." She says, "I could sleep with him too without desire." (Pg.97) Jaya puts her relationship with Mohan in these terms: "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." (Pg.7)



The crises in Mohan's career and the simple Dadar flat brings home to Jaya her distance from the image of wifedom and motherhood that had been created by centuries by centuries of tradition, myth and contemporary practice which she has tried to live up to. Mohan has been, as Jaya says, "My profession, my career my means of livelihood." She has been "Mohan's wife, Rahul's and Rati's mother not myself." (Pg.173) This fact occurs to her on reading her writings. Past and present coalesce and she can read two selves or see herself from a distance. Jaya tells us that they were yet to live as husband and wife even after seventeen years of their married life. Nothing can be more frustrating and depressing than this experience of futility.

Jaya blames the institution of marriage rather than her individual husband, "it was not Mohan, but marriage that had made me circumspect." (Pg. 187) She feels that systems, structures and institutions tie women and men down. Jaya feels that the system helps in wearing women down because injustice and inequality is systematic and encoded in the state of wifedom. Jaya learns the lessons of wifedom by example from the women in Mohan's family.

Terrified of his disapproval, I had found all the things I could and couldn't do, all the things that were womanly and unwomanly. It was when I first visited his home that I had discovered how sharply defined a woman's role was. They had been a revelation to me, the women in his family, so definite about their roles. So well trained in their duties, so skilful in the right areas, so indifferent to everything else. I had never seen so clear, so precise a pattern before, and I had been entranced by it. (Pg.83)

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.' 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 collateral names of the Deshpande protagonist 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 woman." A woman who lovingly nurtured her family, a woman who coped." (Pg. 15)

Jaya had never confessed her frenetic feelings to Mohan as it has seemed "like a disease, a disability" (Pg. 97) which he had to hide from everyone. Jaya pines for social communication but the society is impervious to her spiritual need. There is hardly any communication between Jaya and Mohan. Mohan wanted a well-educated and cultured wife, not a reciprocating and loving one. There develops disheartening silence between the husband and the wife. Mohan's queries remain unanswered by Jaya for she is unable to find a word of response. Could a modern woman, nestled in tradition like Jaya understand a traditionalist like Mohan who is rooted out and out in customs and whose repressive use of silence pressures Jaya into conformity with his expectations?

Mohan's running away from family is followed by the report of Rahul's running away from Rupa and Ashok, in whose custody he was left. This report, Jaya hears when she is in a delirious state that further drives her to the dizzy height of delirium. Even when she gets the information, later on, that Rahul is with Vasant, Mohan's brother, she, instead of feeling relieved, feels more bewildered as to why all this has happened, and what disaster might follow. At the end Rahul comes back with Vasant, the telegram arrives informing that Mohan has sorted out his problems in Delhi and is soon returning. But that does not give her the required sense of security. The novel concludes with Jaya's comments on writing objectively and acting independently but she finds this is not possible: "I'm Mohan's wife. Now I know that kind of a fragmentation is not possible." (Pg. 191). This statement has two implications. First, though Jaya wants to be independent, she ends up being Mohan's wife, which means some sharing. Second, to be objective she has to detach herself from her personal whims and fancies but finds she cannot entirely get over them and the truth gets distorted. In this context she quotes Daniel Defoe, who called fiction "a sort of lying... a sort of lying



that makes a great hole in the heart at which by degrees a habit of lying enters in." (Pg. 191). Reality is hard and bitter. Little bits of fiction are necessary to make life tolerable and enjoyable. Jaya is open to other viewpoints, alternatives and choices. She feels there can be other alternatives to the image of two bullocks yoked together she has so often used to express her sense of their marital life. Deshpande presents here not a woman who has a desire to revolt but the one who ultimately reconciles to her hapless lot. Having failed to rediscover the truth, she remains silent and reticent about revealing her most personal and private thoughts in her writings.

Jaya is really a person divested of all deceptions, falsities and artificialities that she has all along been living with. She considerably sobers herself on making certain discoveries about herself. The picture of the emotionally, physically and socially secure world of which her own people are seemingly permanent members has vanished from her imagination for ever and now she is a new woman.

Shashi Deshpande has effectively presented the plight of Indian women who grow suffer and die silently. Their silent sacrifice goes unnoticed in the society. Deshpande wants all the women to break that long silence to survive in this male dominated world. *That Long Silence* is a typical all Indian novel in English. Jaya gives us the new image of the Indian woman who strives to stand on her own legs. The traditional suffering of women in silence in the patriarchal society has to be broken with assertion, courage and determination to attain self-fulfillment and to lead a peaceful life in their march towards progress.

The important insight that Shashi Deshpande imparts to us through Jaya is that women should accept their own responsibility for what they are, see how much they have contributed to their own victimization, instead of putting the blame on everybody except themselves. It is only through self-analysis and self-understanding, through vigilance and courage; they can begin to change their lives. They will have to fight their own battles; nothing is going to do it for them.

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