

The Theme of Silence in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract

This article deals with one of Deshpande's most significant novels, *That Long Silence*. In studying the novel from a feminist point of view, an effort has been made to study Deshpande's psychological insights into the Indian woman's behaviour. This novel deserves much attention as it is generally considered to be amongst her best and has been singled out among her novels by the Sahitya Academy's prestigious award in the year 1990.

Keywords: Discrimination, predicament, dilemma, patriarchy, subjugation.

The novel *That Long Silence* derives its title from a speech made by Elizabeth Robins to the WWSL, 1907. A part of the speech forms the epigraph of the novel. It says:

If I were a man and 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. (1)

The phrase "that long silence" in the third line becomes the base of the novel. The phrase in the novel's title refers to the silence of the main character, Jaya Kulkarni, who maintained

silence throughout her life. Though the title has been picked up from the epigraph of a speech, where it has somewhat negative connotation, it is possible to interpret that word silence in a more positive light, particularly when seen in the light of what her other novels tend to say through negative sounding words in the title. The word silence can also mean that period of solitude and quiet when maturity dawns on Jaya.

The present novel is rooted in the ethos of an urban middle class household and mainly deals with Deshpande's domestic concerns. The author is concerned with human relationships as they follow a marriage. In her novels, most of the time, marriage collapses due to lack of understanding between man and woman. This leads to the suffering and the conflict between traditional limitations and modern aspirations. In the present novel, Deshpande critically analyses the institution of marriage in the modern context. She reflects upon the situations and circumstances in which a woman lives entangled between the powerful currents of tradition and patriarchy, of terror and suppression. Deshpande illustrates this concept through the character of Jaya, the female protagonist, who has internalized the image of deprived femininity that constantly hinders her growth towards betterment. Jaya represents those Indian women who want to break the barrier of a long silence created around them by male hegemony. Deshpande seems to question the established traditional norms and assertively points out the women's need for self-expression.

That Long Silence is the story of Jaya, an educated middle class girl whose name symbolizes victory. She finds herself restricted in her married life. Jaya's husband, Mohan, is an engineer who cares for money, status and material comforts. This novel portrays the conflict in the mind of Jaya who is a writer as well as a housewife. For seventeen years, Jaya manages to suppress her creative ability; her feelings. She thinks that it is more important to be an ideal wife than a good writer. Perhaps, she would have been in prolonged slumber and in the shadow of her husband if there wasn't the jolt for her family. Her husband is accused of

a shady deal, being corrupt and unethical. An enquiry is instituted against him. Mohan is quite assured that his wife will help her out in all the circumstances, no matter whether he is right or wrong. He takes a sigh of relief because their children, Rahul and Rati, are on vacation with their family friends. On the one hand, Deshpande has presented the inner world of Jaya's consciousness that reflects her problems and predicament; on the other hand, she has dealt with the agony of women in the traditional society of India.

Deshpande, through Jaya, seems to say that self-realization is a method of asserting an individuality that is often neglected and denied in a woman's life. Jaya says, "Self-revelation is a cruel process. The real picture, the real you never emerges. Looking for it is as bewildering as trying to know how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces" (1). At the time of crisis, Jaya and her husband get shifted to their Dadar flat temporarily. During this time, Jaya goes into an intense introspection of her life and gets lost in the images of those experiences which she witnessed during her married life. After seventeen years of playing out her many-faceted roles of a loyal wife and tireless mother, the silence becomes deafening. The haunting memories of her bitter experiences with Mohan bring disappointment in her life. Jaya appears to be a satisfied housewife who is married to an apparently caring man but internally she feels a void in her life. Her normal routine gets disturbed when they come to a new flat. At this point of change, Jaya look into herself and tries to find out her identity. She doesn't want to be like Mohan's mother and sister who always compromised. But still she has to submit to Mohan's likes and dislikes as she has been told not to disobey her husband. Now she feels as a stereotyped housewife who is "nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support" (76). Though, she seems to live a satisfied life, in reality, she has suppressed many aspects of her personality that were not fit for her role as an ideal wife and mother.

Jaya belongs to those women who are caught between tradition and modernity. Though, she is exposed to liberal western ideas but she finds Indian tradition and culture as the part of her life. She feels unable to come out of the clutches of a male dominated society. She has been trained since the beginning to be a perfect wife who never questions her husband. Her aunt,

Vanita Mami, tells her before her wedding, “Remember Jaya, a husband is like a sheltering tree.

Keep the tree alive and flourishing, even if you have to water it with deceit and lies”(32). Vanita

Mami’s long suffering role of a martyred wife prompts Jaya once before her marriage to think that possibly she too had been similarly counseled as a bride: “If your husband has a mistress or two, ignore it” (32). This is the tendency of old women in our society, who think that a husband is an epitome of God, whose will and interest should always be taken care of without opposition.

Jaya seems to be a little different from Saru and Indu of *The Dark Holds No Terror* and *Roots and Shadows* respectively. Jaya, unlike Saru and Indu, has designed her life according to her family members’ desires. She marries Mohan not out of choice but out of convenience. He is from the same caste, decent, good looking and has a good job. Jaya has no reason to reject him.

She says, “And, if there had been no reason why I should have married Mohan, there had been no reason to reject him either” (93). Initially, she used to romanticize love, but later circumstances make her look at married Jaya, as a typical Indian woman, suppresses her wishes and anger at every stage of life. She tries her best to conform to the role of an ideal wife. Jaya has a creative ability. In the beginning, she gets support of her husband. In fact, he encourages her to write good articles for various papers and magazines. On his advice, she

starts writing “light humorous pieces about the travails of a middle class housewife”(148-149). She doesn’t like the kind of writing she is doing. However, she keeps writing in order to make him happy. Jaya is an intense thinker who wants to write about real life experiences. She gets a prize for one of her stories. But the problem is that she has received a prize for a story that hurts Mohan’s sentiments. He, who earlier used to applaud her for her writings and used to be proud, is now insecure and intolerant for a particular story written by Jaya. The story that has created a rift between Jaya and Mohan is about “a couple, a man who cannot reach out to his wife except through her body”(144). Mohan thinks that the story tells about their personal life and he is very scared that the people of his acquaintance may assume that he is the kind of person portrayed in the story. His apprehension is enough to threaten Jaya’s career as a writer. Though she knows there is no truth in what her husband thinks, she does not argue with him. She says:

Looking at his stricken face, I had been convinced. I had done him wrong and I had stopped writing after that. Perhaps if Mohan had been angry, if he had shouted and raged at me, if he had forbidden me to write, perhaps would have fought him and gone on. But he had only shown me his heart, and I had not been able to counter that. I had relinquished them instead, all those stories that had been taking scared –scared of hurting Mohan, scared of jeopardizing the only career I had my marriage. (144)

These words of Jaya painfully depict the pathetic condition of a married woman who is devoid of choices. She feels as if she has no right to express her real self even in fiction. Having no option left, she begins to write under an assumed name but her stories are rejected by one publisher after another. She tries to analyze the reason behind the series of rejections. Then, her neighbour, Kamat, comes to her rescue and makes her realize that her writings lack the intensity of thought and expression. Jaya is forced to write articles on the subjects that she

hardly takes interest in. Her predicament resembles the predicament of many educated women who are compelled to curb their thinking due to social or family pressures. Jaya forces herself to write what she does not want to. She states:

Seeta had been the means through which I had shut the door firmly on all these 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. (149)

As a result, her writings lack the original or individual touch. She knows about the falsity of her expressions yet she feels helpless. Here Shashi Deshpande seems to observe that sometimes women do not get appreciation for their services even when they work tirelessly. Any creation that seems to defame the family is considered a crime. Simon De Beauvoir rightly observes:

A husband regards none of his wife's good qualities as particularly meritorious . . . He fails to realize that his wife is no character from some pious and conventional treatise, but a real individual of flesh and blood. (492)

Deshpande seems to convey the fact that women writers have curbed themselves from telling the truth, giving greater importance to their roles as wives than to themselves as individuals. History has been witness to this injustice as Simon De Beauvoir suggests: "The history of humanity is a history of systematic attempt to silence the female"(492).

At every step, Jaya has to prove to be an ideal wife and mother but Jaya is a human being, a human being who always looks for love, respect and freedom. When Jaya doesn't get enough respect and freedom, she gets inclined towards Kamat who is a widower as well as her neighbor. Her association with Kamat, clashes with her most important aspect of her personality as a wife and mother. Jaya gets attention from Kamat and she feels totally free in his company. She feels totally at ease in his company because he treats her as an equal. He

offers constructive criticism to Jaya's writings. In him, Jaya finds a companion, a most important aspect that she misses in her husband's personality. She is not able to believe that she can be so much of herself in any man's company. She utters, "It had been a revelation to me that two people, a man and woman, could talk this way, with this man I had not been a woman. I had been just myself,

Jaya"(153). Jaya's character is not ideal because Shashi Deshpande believes in realistic presentation rather than an idealistic one. Like any other human being, she gets attracted towards Kamat, a person who makes her behave as she wants to. Gradually, their relationship develops into physical attraction. But their relationship cannot be categorized. He sometimes behaves like a father, and sometimes, like a lover. Her relationship with Mohan is overpowered by silence and subjugation while with Kamat, she is totally free and equal. In her interview with Pallavi Thakur, Deshpande comments on Jaya's relationship with Kamat:

Jaya is very much aware that with Mohan, she is Mohan's wife but with Kamat she is many things. She is that kid Jaya, a rebellious kid, She is a writer; She is a frustrated person who cannot write what she wants to. She can be angry with Kamat. With Mohan, she cannot be angry because he does not like it. (116)

Through Jaya, Deshpande has depicted the predicament of a married woman who is supposed to behave according to culturally constructed norms. Deshpande seems to suggest that the Man-woman relationship, in an attempt to go by the norms of society, gives opportunity to deceit and treachery to come into relationship. Human beings, more often, prefer to wear a façade of an ideal person rather than being truthful to themselves as individuals. Appearances have to be maintained at any cost. It is, perhaps this façade which prompts Jaya to behave in a utterly callous way on the death of Kamat. On her visit to Kamat's room, she finds him lying dead on the floor of his flat. As an ideal human being, she

was supposed to be there and express her condolence but instead of paying her tribute to him, she runs away from the spot. She is unable to pay homage to her friend just because she doesn't want to involve herself in any kind of relationship that may spoil her married life with Mohan. At this point, Jaya behaves as a typical Indian wife who has been trained to think that marriage is of utmost importance. Had she been with Kamat at his death, it would have endangered her marriage with Mohan. Though she feels terrible guilt yet she remains passive. Deshpande, at this point, has revealed the conservative norms of the society that has always curbed women's freedom. There are so many rules which have been made for married women but not for men. A married woman is morally bound to her husband only. However, the reverse is not true most of the time. Friendly relationships with other men are not permissible and are looked down upon with contempt. Deshpande, on the other hand, seems to support healthy human relationships. In an interview with Laxmi Holstrom, she says:

But yes, I did bring in Kamat to serve a purpose: to show Jaya the kind of relationship that she could achieve with a man. She gets a kind of companionship with Kamat that she never gets from her husband. Yet that is marriage and this is not. But perhaps I do realize that this kind of relationship, the kind of companionship that is possible, although it is very rare. Often it is missing, because of the pre dominance of the sexual motif in India without marriage. (247)

Deshpande created a character named Kamat to make Jaya realize that what kind of person she is and what kind of attachment, compatibility and relationship she can have with a man who is more understanding than her husband. So, here, Kamat can be considered as an agent to reveal this typical women's situation. Because, even if she was comfortable with Kamat, she was not able to face society as she was married and it could be a threat to her married life. There are many other examples which prove that Jaya is trapped in this

patriarchal society and tries hard to come out of it. In her effort to become an ideal wife and mother, her true self is relegated to background. In India, marriage is a kind of necessity, a demand of culture. Jaya says,

“Marriages never end. They cannot. They are a state of being”(127). As a result, a marriage becomes a liability most of the time and it is woman who has to try hard to make it a perfectly balanced relationship. Jaya describes her marriage: “Ours has been a delicately balanced relationship, so much so that we have even shipped off bits of ourselves to keep the scales on an even keel” (7). Jaya loses her identity and learns to be silent after marriage.

Simon De Beauvoir rightly says:

Marriage has always been a very different thing for man and for woman. The two sexes are necessary to each other, but this necessity has never brought about a condition of reciprocity between them; women as we have seen, have never constituted a cast making exchanges and contracts with the male cast upon a footing of equality. (3)

Marriage and social setup in India contribute to the relegation of women to a large extent. This patriarchal structure proves to be an obstacle in assertion of women’s individuality.

Sometimes it happens that husbands take the wives’ consents for granted. They do not think it necessary to ask for their wishes. When Mohan gets entangled in problem, he decides to move to another flat and he takes this decision without asking Jaya and Jaya agrees reticently in order to avoid any kind of altercation between them. She recollects, “I remember now that he had assumed I would accompany him, had taken for granted my acquiescence in his plans.

So had

I”(11). The silence grows between them and both become too uncomfortable to communicate freely with each other. Deshpande has thrown light upon the marriage which becomes just a liability, a social demand that lacks companionship. Jaya, even though she is educated, finds

herself entangled in the complex web of marriage. The Indian women find themselves caught into two worlds. They find it difficult to define their place in the society. Betty Friedan states in *The Feminine Mystique*:

For a woman, as for a man, the need for self-fulfillment, autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization – is as important as the sexual need, with as serious consequences when it is thwarted. (282)

This is what Jaya tries to attain in this novel but every time she finds herself trapped. In order to save her married life from breaking, she submits herself before the hegemony of Mohan.

However, after a long silence, Jaya gathers courage to face her life and her husband. She has a self-realization. She becomes restless to construct her life again. She, now, finds that she had stopped writing because of her fear of failure, not because of Mohan. Jaya concludes:

I hadn't stopped writing because of Mohan; I could not possibly make Mohan scape goat of my failures, for I had written even after the confrontation with him – stories that had been rejected, stories that had come back to me, stories that I had hidden here in this house. (145)

She realizes that it is she who is responsible for her failure. Deshpande seems to give a message that women should take their own responsibility without blaming others. Women, to a great extent, are responsible for their suffering and victimization. Jaya realizes that she has to go ahead, overcoming all the hurdles. With this thought, she introspects the problems related with her marital life. Looking through her diaries, she realizes that all these seventeen years of married life, she had been Mohan's wife. Rahul's and Rati's mother only, not herself. She had been denying herself completely. She realizes that she has to remove the darkness from her soul and mind. Jaya, like Saru and Indu, chooses security through

reconciliation. Jaya too does not negate family and husband. She now thinks about leading an organized life with her husband. This is the specialty of Deshpande's heroines that they choose family and husband along with their career and identity. All her heroines choose a feasible solution that is possible in our society. Jaya decides to move forward in her life expecting a change in Mohan's attitude. She hopes to develop a better understanding with Mohan as a companion. She decides to reject the traditional silence of a wife. She emerges as a more confident woman who is ready to face all challenges in her life. She says:

I am not afraid anymore. The panic has gone. I am Mohan's wife, I had thought, and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife. Now I know that kind of fragmentation is not possible. (191)

Now she has a realization of her position and she rejects the image of two bullocks yoked together that signifies a loveless couple. She comes to know that life cannot be lived in isolation. We need family and relationships to be complete. Now she looks herself and Mohan as two individuals with two independent minds. She realizes that blaming others will not give any solution. The ultimate solution comes when a woman changes herself and asserts her individuality. Through Jaya, Deshpande gives a message that hope is the most important thing that gives impetus to our life. Hope must be there in our life. Jaya concludes:

It's possible that we may change even own long periods of time. But can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know now it is this: Life has always made to be possible. (193)

The novel reaffirms Deshpande's belief that a woman should assert their potential to achieve self-identity. It also shows that economic independence is an important measure to give confidence to a woman, helping her to previous understand her true potential. But Deshpande is also aware of the compromises that a woman has to make in order to make balance between personal and professional life.

Jaya's attempt to review her own predicament as well as of others, then her emergence as a strong woman, gives the novel its feminist stance. Though Deshpande highlights gross inequality that prevails in our society yet she denies being called a feminist. In her interview with Malini Nair, she says:

The women in my books are people who come to realize what it is to be a woman in the process of their own lives and the situations they face, not through books and theories. I think, feminism is entirely personalized perception. It is when you start questioning preconceived notions about your roles. I don't think there is anything 'inherent' in a woman apart from the fact that she can conceive. All other things are equally important for them as they are for men. (TOI, Nov, 1989)

It is to be noticed that there are no villains in her novels. She does not take side of Jaya, but presents her as close to the reality as possible. She portrays her strength as well as weakness.

In her interview with Nair, she explains, "Once you understand the mind of a person, you can't be harsh. I don't see in terms of black and white, all of us have several shades of grey in us".

To sum up, it can be said that Deshpande's *That Long Silence* provides a critique of Indian marriages which hinders the free communication and expression of women. It exposes how the prevalent patriarchal practices help in feminine marginalization, and how women's mind has been tones through centuries of biased conditioning.

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