

Sufferings and Suppressed Desires of Women in Shashi Deshpande's "That Long Silence"

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ABSTRACT: That Long Silence is Shashi Deshpande's fifth novel which has got Sahitya Academy award. Deshpande is a staunch feminist but not a feminist writer. She has unfolded the problems of women in the patriarchal society in a very positive way. She says that a woman has every right to live her life to develop her qualities, to take her decisions, to be independent, and to take charge of her destiny. The novel portrays the suffering and deprivation of a woman's pains, her cries, her anxiety; Nature has created her for the exploitation and use and for bearing every trouble; sorrows, blows and pains bestowed on her by man. The title of the novel itself emphasizes her real individual self. This paper attempts to unveil the protagonist's journey from subordination to autonomy, from dharma or duty to personal goals, from sexual purity to sexual emancipation and from silence to eloquence.

KEYWORDS: sufferings, suppressed, desires, women, Shashi Deshpande's, that long silence

I. INTRODUCTION

Unlike Desai's heroines, Shashi Deshpande's female protagonists cannot totally reject the network of relatedness within which she has to find her own space. In Shashi Deshpande, we move beyond the occasionally naively optimistic world of Nayantara Sahgal where values are upheld confidently and positively, where the filtering consciousness speaks with the authority of being incontestably right. Commenting on That Long Silence, Adele King finds the worth of the novel in refusal to adopt a simplistic reductive approach: The richness of the work lies in the refusal to propose any easy resolutions, in the creations of narrators who are not altogether reliable in the depiction of an atmosphere of doubt.¹

Jaya, the protagonist and the heroine of That Long Silence is an intelligent woman with good academic qualifications, a bright career and a considerable amount of success. But none of these attributes would provide her a respectable position in the eyes of Mohan. Gender conditioning makes women vulnerable and silent. Mohan, Jaya's husband is the victim of misappropriation of office funds that carries trouble for him. An enquiry is set up against him, and he has been advised to hide himself till the case is over. Jaya and Mohan start to live in a comfortable Dadar flat which has been given by Jaya's uncle. Away from the trap of family life, she suffers from isolation. She fails to be closer to her husband mentally. Her husband cannot understand her feelings. Her life with Mohan appears to her a meaningless exercise of living together; a fact she admits in a mood of utter frustration: We lived together but there had been only emptiness between us. Jaya capitalizes fully on this rare chance of introspection and searching self analysis to relocate her life on a different plane.²

It is as if the return to the roots triggers off the whole complex process. Sarla Palkar comments; Caught in an emotional eddy, Jaya endeavors to come to terms with her protean roles, while trying, albeit in vain, to rediscover her true self, which is but an ephemera - an unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and a failed writer.³

Jaya had had the privilege of an outstanding supportive father, who had inculcated in her a positive belief in herself, calling her Jaya - "Jaya for victory". During her childhood days she had felt free to voice her opinion vociferously; as her Aiji complained, she had "for everything question, for everything a retort". The same lively spirit had often exhibited itself through tantrums during her adolescent years. Jaya herself is puzzled by the transformation:

I'm scared of Cockroaches, lizards almost the stereotype of a woman, nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support. But what puzzles me in this: how did I get this way? I'm sure I wasn't always like this.⁴

**International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in Science, Engineering,
Technology & Management (IJMRSETM)**

(A Monthly, Peer Reviewed Online Journal)

Visit: www.ijmrsetm.com

Volume 7, Issue 3, March 2020

II. DISCUSSION

She suffers from alienation and mutters in anguish: I was Jaya. But I had been Suhasini as well-the Suhasini who was distinct from Jaya, a soft, smiling, placid motherly woman. A woman who coped (16). No doubt, love, compassion, tolerance, kindness and faithfulness are widely acknowledged traits of female nature but self-realization and self-expression are not to be viewed as contrary to these values. She re-appraises her own role-enactment, placing the sacred icons of marriage and family life under the light of a mercilessly honest examination. Through her protagonist, Deshpande is fulfilling an implicitly feminist's function, a "consciousness-raising" similar to one carried on by women's groups in America in the 1960s during the early years of the radical feminist movement. As Jaya flicks through her meticulously - kept diaries - which she ironically comments can be called "The Diaries of a Sane Housewife". Jaya is deeply hurt when she finds no place in the family tree because of her gender.⁵

Marriage turns out to be just another enclosure in which a woman has to confine herself. She has no freedom to assert herself. She had to suppress her emotions because her husband, Mohan warned her. My mother never raised her voice against my father however badly he behaved towards her. Jaya feels that she used to be like Fanny Price in Jane Austen's Mansfield Park-Fanny, who had to subdue all her wishes in favor of the Bertram family.

A sense of unfulfillment, of incompleteness, has lain dormant in Jaya for years, suppressed out of fear of denting the façade of a happy marriage. In a consideration of marriage as a form of Purdah, Rani Dharkar comments: The woman learns to adopt certain strategies in order to survive within marriage. These strategies conceal her true self much like purdah hides the line of the body.⁴

Jaya is gifted with a talent for creative writing; she has given up her writing just because Mohan does not like it. A desire of self expression spurs every creative writer and if it is smothered, it creates suffocations and anguish... Jaya's imaginative writing is condemned by her husband as "self-revelation" when she writes a story, a story about a husband and a better-half, a husband who could not reach out to his better-half except through her body. The story received the first prize. Jaya's husband gets it too personal and asks, How could you have done it? How can you reveal us? How can you reveal our lives to the world in this way?. Jaya loses her identity as a writer. She compromises with writing silly things for a woman's magazine which does not satisfy her intellectual hunger. Jaya has badly neglected her 'real' self. But now she decides to come out of the nest because life has become intolerable and suffocated to her.⁵

III. RESULTS

She realizes that she was being defeated; her voice was being hushed up by the ideal notions thrust upon her by the male-dominated society. Towards the end of the novel Jaya emerges as a bold and mature woman who refuses to be merely a shadow of her husband. She firmly resolves to break the silence that has been at the root of all troubles in her life; I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us.

Silence is a destructive device. It implies shame, guilt, suffering and even death. Self-expression is the basic human right. Jaya breaks the silence, writes her story and concludes: We can always hope without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know now it is this; life has always to be made possible.⁵

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Deshpande has dealt very minutely with the problems of middle class educated women. Her contribution to the world of literature is the presentation of the reality of middle-class women. She writes for women, presents their problems and lets the world know the problems that women of today are facing. She makes it clear that hers is not the strident and militant kind of feminism which sees the male as the cause of all troubles'. Rather her writing deals with the inner mind of women.⁶

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**International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in Science, Engineering,
Technology & Management (IJMRSETM)**

(A Monthly, Peer Reviewed Online Journal)

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Volume 7, Issue 3, March 2020

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