



Defining crude silence in that long silence by Shashi Deshpande

Anjali, “Research scholar of OPJS University Churu” Rajasthan

Email id- anjaliahlawat007@gmail.com

Suresh Kumar,” Assistant Professor of OPJS University Churu” Rajasthan

Abstract: This article was about Shashi Deshpande's book *That Long Silence*. Shashi Deshpande discusses women's rights in this article. The book highlights Deshpande's desire to end the frigid "silent" that has pervaded women's lives. The author of the novel illustrates how the quiet forced on women is caused by both social norms and their own actions. The story follows Jaya's lone battle with the oppressive silence that has imprisoned those similar to her for many years.

Keywords: society and tradition, self-emancipation, women attitude, prestige and security.

That Long Silence: The novel *That Long Silence* (1988) won the Sahitya Academy Award in 1990. The novel emphasizes the intention of Deshpande to break the icy "silence" that has surrounded women, their world. The novelist evinces how the silence imposed on women is partly of their own making, and partly levied by the society and tradition. The novel traces Jaya's solitary crusade against the deafening silence that has entrapped the likes of her for generations. Jaya journeys across a plethora of self-doubts, fear, guilt, smothered anger and silence towards her self-emancipation. Suman Ahuja, while reviewing the novel in *The Times of India*, observes that Jaya "caught in an emotional eddy, endeavours to come to terms with her protean roles, while trying [...] to rediscover her true self"

Jaya's journey towards her emancipation begins the moment when she gets married to a man who is traditionalist and has his roots firmly laid in custom. The differences in their outlook and attitude are so glaring that they fail to understand each other. To her husband, Mohan, a woman sitting before the hearth, awaiting her husband's return home and serving hot food is the real "work" of a woman. But to Jaya it is nothing but despair. The ideological difference creates a wide chasm between them.

Mohan is steeped in the norms he had learnt in his own family. Jaya has her first and the only outburst with Mohan soon after her marriage and Mohan's response is, "My mother never raised for voice against my father, however badly he behaved to her" (83). Nonetheless, she has to make the first reconciliatory move after days of Mohan's silence. And then she goes



silent, keeping her grouses to herself, withdrawn under the shell of silence. Soon their marital life grows shaky and shady, it rests on a thin thread of compromise between them rather than based on love. The cause may be rooted in their choice of a partner. For instance, from the very beginning, Mohan wanted a wife who was well educated and cultured (never a loving one). He made up his mind to get married to Jaya when he saw her speaking English fluently, sounding so much like a girl whom he had seen speaking English fluently. He tells Jaya, "You know, Jaya, the first day I met you at your Ramukaka's house, you were talking to your brother, Dinkar, and somehow you sounded so much like that girl, I think it was at that moment that I decided I would marry you".

Mohan is a high ranking bureaucrat. He has reached the present prime position in his career by hook or by crook. He attributes his failure to get a decent accommodation at Lohagarh to the failure of his wife, Jaya, in winning over the favour of his boss. Here, we are reminded of Ammu's husband, in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997)[^] who would agree to send his beautiful wife to his white officers to avoid a transfer. But Ammu refused to go to the white sahib and returns to her paternal home. She prefers to seek divorce.

The action of the novel is triggered off by the crisis in the life of Mohan and Jaya. Mohan, in his pursuit of prestige and security, had indulged in certain malpractices, as a result of which he now faces an inquiry and may perhaps lose his job. Up to this point, Jaya has turned a blind eye towards her husband's illegal means of earning and corrupt practices. At a later point in her life, Jaya muses:

Mohan had managed to get the job. I never asked him how he did it. If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly. I did not want to know anything. It was enough for me that we moved to Bombay, that we could send Rahul and Rati to good schools, that I could have the things we needed [...] decent clothes, a fridge, a gas connection, travelling first class. And, there was enough for Mohan to send home to his father- for Sudha's fees, Vasant's clothes and Sudha's marriage.

Shashi Deshpande uses dreams, as a literary device, to describe, in symbolic and artistic terms, the reality about the life of her protagonists. In the dream, Jaya sees Mohan and herself walking together. Soon she is left behind, and for some reason, has to pass through a house.



She is helped into the house by a girl. Once she is in, she realizes in shock that she is alone and fears that she would not be able to find Mohan anymore. She is then led into a room where a number of girls are present. Although she feels that they are on her side none of them comes forward to help her. She feels ill and utterly helpless, and lies down like a corpse. The girls around her discuss her predicament in low tones. However, Mohan appears on the scene and asks her to hasten to a waiting taxi. But as she runs after him she realizes, "that it is too late anyway, we will never be able to make it, and we will never be able to get away, it is all my fault, all my fault". The dream signifies Jaya's mental state as she finds faults with herself because she is unable to do anything to help Mohan in his hour of need except neurotically rave and grieve.

Jaya is forced to take stock of her life when Mohan is caught in the jaws of bribery and they shift from their posh Churchgate flat to a small apartment in Dadar, where they had once lived soon after their marriage. Here, the couple sinks into utter silence in a mood of frustration and depression, without talking to each other and without sharing their ideas. Equivalently, Sarojni and Dandekar, in Kamala Markandaya's *A Silence of Desire* (1960), have led a life of complete inwardness with the brooding silence around them. Silence on the matters of mutual concern gives rise to an unprecedented crisis, which spoil their peaceful domesticity.

Jaya recollects to her dismay that there is only plaintive silence, which leads to unhappiness in her conjugal, domestic and social life. In a small old flat, Jaya is out of touch with others, continues her routine and becomes a silent introvert:

The woman, who had shopped and cooked, cleaned, organized and cared for her home and her family with such passion [...] where had she gone? We seemed to be left with nothing but our bodies, and after we had dealt with them we faced blankness.

Rarely, when he asks questions, she does not find a word to answer them .She states pathetically, "I racked my brains trying to think of an answer". She is silent even on crucial domestic issues. Veena Sheshadri comments, "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.""



Jaya's review of her relationship with her husband points to an unhappy past. To her, married life becomes unbearable and monotonous, as it moved in fixed pattern. She states, "Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony". Shashi Deshpande uses a beautiful image to describe Jaya's married life:

A pair of bullock yoked together [...] a clever phrase, but can it substitute for reality? A man and a woman married for seventeen years. A couple with two children. A family somewhat like the one caught and preserved for posterity by the advertising visuals I so loved. But the reality was only this. We were two persons. A man. A woman.

Behind this simple description lies the ground swell of frustration in married life of Jaya, who failed to be closer to her husband mentally.

Jaya is leading seemingly calm and serene life with Mohan and with two children Rahul and Rati. But behind this facade, her way of life seems to violate her very nature. For her, the wheel of life moves on small cogs - each well fitted in the groove of a traditional and cultural conception. In her traditional role of a wife, Jaya upheld the maxim that " husband is like a sheltering tree", and she has hardly ever stepped out of his shadow. Even the imagination of widowhood makes her hairs raise, "The thought of living without him had twisted my inside. His death had seemed to me the final catastrophe" . Jaya has arranged her life according to the needs of Mohan's life and his activities. In an unequivocal term, she states that Mohan is "my profession, my career, my means of livelihood". She reduced her wants and desires to the bare minimum. She, for instance, likes to see advertisements that precede a movie show, for they give her "the illusion of happiness" within the wall of the home. Since her husband does not like them, they start late for the movie. The dilemma of Indu in *Roots and Shadows* is a similar one. "I had learnt to reveal to Jayant nothing but what he wanted to see," opines Indu and adds, "I hid my response as if they were bits of garbage".

Up to this point, Jaya accepts a life of passivity for herself. Whatever she practices or whatever she follows is directed by only one consideration - and that is what her husband will think of it. Mohan also expects these things from her. Adjustment and compromise are, no doubt, the signs of maturity but every compromise shatters her individuality into pieces. Jaya is analogous to Tara, in Anita Deasi's *Clear Light of Day* (1980) who accepts her loss of identity, and is content to play the role a diplomat's wife. Equivalently, Nora, in Ibsen's



play *A Doll's House* (1879) shows her preparedness to adapt herself in every way to make room for her husband. Nora tells him, "I will do everything I can think of to please you, Torvald [...] I will sing for you, dance for you."^

Shashi Deshpande's women are neither passive nor static, nor do they remain mere clinging vines, depending parasitically upon their husbands. Jaya is no different. She has never been "a trodden worm" in relation to her husband. Initially, victim of self-denial, she is at conflict with her inner self because she denies her real feelings. A psychologist opines:

The denial does not mean that the feelings cease to exist; they will still influence his behavior in various ways even though they are not conscious. A conflict will, then, exist between the interjected and spurious conscious values and the genuine unconscious ones.

Jaya's psychic war is between the role she has been playing to please Mohan and the person she wishes to be. But this submissive, tolerant and taciturn Jaya is conscious of her own voice. She is conscious that she is "not free. I could feel the burden of his wanting, the burden of his clinging". It becomes a point of challenge for the personalities like Jaya's. Jaya, finally, resolves to come out of the cocoon when life becomes intolerable for her.

Jaya, in the opening of the novel (when she moves with her man to the Dadar flat), is already in the process of discovering her selfhood. Mohan has always taken her for granted, and this time too he is certain that she would follow him unquestioningly:

I remember now that he [Mohan] had assumed I would accompany him, had taken for granted my acquiescence in his plans. So had I. Sita followed her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails.

Jaya's sense of defiance can be gauged when she keeps back the keys of Dadar flat ignoring Mohan's out stretched hand and opens it herself indicating a role reversal and an extermalization of her unwillingness, unlike a true Pativrata, to concede any authority to him. Jaya confesses that it is only at the Dadar flat (a symbol of her roots and her past) where she finds that she has lapsed into the stereotype of a woman. In her moments of self-analysis and self-scrutiny, Jaya wonders, "how did I get this way? I'm sure I wasn't always like this. [...] When did the process of change begin?" She recollects how she was full of vivacity, intellect



and creative upsurge in her childhood. Her nostalgic recollection of her father's words inculcates in her an optimistic approach towards life and herself:

You are not like the others, Jaya. Appa had said [...] While I, Appa had said, and I had agreed, would get the Chatfield Prize, or the Ellis Prize, go to Oxford after my graduation [...] You're going to be different from the others, Jaya, Appa had assured me,

Fathers in Deshpande's world display supportiveness towards their daughters and inspire their growth as individuals. Saru's father supported her financially to achieve her goal. The father-daughter equation is excellent in short-stories like "Why a Robin?" and "My Beloved Charioteer." Here, Gita Mehta's Jaya, in *Raj* (1989)* and Nayantara Sahagal's Sonali, in *Rich Like Us* (1985)^ need to be mentioned. Both Jaya and Sonali, though grounded in traditional values, have been trained by their fathers to think aright and independently.

Shashi Deshpande's protagonists are not mere housewives; they are career women too- Saru is a Doctor; Urmi is a College Lecturer; Indu and Madhu are journalist. Jaya attempts to carve out a niche for herself in the realm of writing. She is a successful columnist and an aspiring writer of fiction who is "liberal in outlook, sensitive to the core, alive to hurts." Soon, Jaya has to make a choice between success at work and marital harmony. Although, Mohan takes pride in being the husband of a writer, yet he strongly objects to her themes. Her story about a man who "could not reach out to his wife except through her body" was not only seen as an honest probing into life but also won a prize for its authentic depiction of life. But Mohan's response to the story was most disheartening. He imagines that she is airing their family problems in her writings. Jaya was deeply distressed to know that the writer in her could not come to light because of Mohan, she opines:

I had known then that it hadn't mattered to Mohan that I had written a good story, a story about a couple [...]. For Mohan it had mattered that people might think the couple was us, that the man him. To Mohan, I had been no writer only an exhibitionist.

Undoubtedly, this incident had left a deep impression on Jaya's psyche and affected her career as a writer.



In having a writer as the protagonist of her novel, Deshpande depicts the problems that women writers have to confront with. Down the ages, a desire for identity and self-expression spurs the creative writers. Jaya, instead of expressing her true emotions and ideology shifts to a convenient style of writing, something that could be published easily. Jaya does not want to annoy Mohan lest that should break her marriage. She says ironically:

Perhaps, if Mohan had been angry, if he had shouted and raged to me, if he had forbidden me to write, perhaps I would have fought him and gone on. But he had only shown me his hurt. And I had not been able to counter that. I had relinquished them instead, all those stories that had been taking shape in me because I had been scared-scared of hurting Mohan, scared of jeopardizing the only career I had.

On Mohan's recommendation, Jaya has then started weekly column "Seeta" which has won the approval of the readers, the Editor, and above all of her husband. Here we are reminded of Indu in *Roots and Shadows*, who too finds her creative writing and self-expression being smothered by her husband. Indu, then, begins to write what her husband and readers want to read and not what she craves to write. Jaya has deliberately annihilated the creative aspect of her personality by ignoring the subject of women's suffering in which her imagination soared high. Thus, Jaya has faithfully practiced the traditional role of an "ideal" wife allowing her talent to "rust in unuse" as Lord Tennyson would express it.

In spite of Mohan's disapproval, Jaya keeps on writing serious stories under assumed name (as women writers have often done under patriarchy) but now her stories have been rejected. This reversal perplexes Jaya and she expresses her dissatisfaction to Kamat (her upper floor neighbour at Dadar flat) who asks her frankly, "Why didn't you use [...] anger in your story? There's none of it here. There isn't even a personal view, a personal vision". Like Kamat, Naren, in *Roots and Shadows*, is concerned about Indu's writing career and also give her suggestions about her wrong selection of themes. Here, Kamat makes it clear to Jaya that she has been feeding upon wrong sentimental notion like, "women are the victims," or, that there cannot be "an angry young woman". This male-chauvinistic idea about woman's anger is not her own, but have been thrust upon her by the society in general and her husband in particular.



Yet, surrendering tamely is not Jaya's life conception. Much later, in her moments of self-analysis and self-scrutiny, Jaya realizes that the Seeta column - a patriarchal construct, no doubt - is, "the means through which I had shut the door, firmly, on all those women who invaded my being, screaming for my attention; women [...] I could not write about, because they might resemble Mohan's mother, or aunt, or my mother, or aunt. Seeta was safer". Being a highly reflective woman, Jaya considers such writing as merely a form of escape, a creeping into a "safe hole". Jaya is too strong to be content with such devious tactics for long. She has given up this "Seeta" column which means, symbolically, giving up her traditional role-model of wife. Mohan persuades her to continue writing for the column but now she inwardly refuses to follow his suggestion. Shashi Deshpande hints at the modern woman's refusal to comply with the wishes of the husband.

Shashi Deshpande's women revolt against social taboos, and the cramped, wrinkled traditions and values of their ancestors. Jaya, too, liberates herself from the worn out social customs and traditions that hinders her growth. In India, a common practice is to give a new name to the girl on the day of her wedding. Ironically, this social practice seeks to supercede or supplant the identity of the woman. Jaya was rechristened as Suhasini by her husband on the wedding day. She has renounced "Suhasini" for "Jaya." This reminds us of Mira, in *The Binding Vine*, who was christened Nirmala at the time of marriage. She too refuses to relinquish her name and identity and proclaims, "I am Mira". But this strong assertion remains a private experience; it never becomes public in her life span. Jaya was named by her father "Jaya" especially to denote victory. In Sanskrit, the term jaya means "victory." Jaya was distinct from Suhasini because the latter was the replica of the "soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman". On the contrary, Jaya is a self-assertive woman yearning to break out of the yoke. In later stage of her life, Jaya muses, "Stay at home, look after your babies, keep out the rest of the world, and you're safe. That poor idiotic woman Suhasini believed in this. I know better now. I know that safety is always unattainable. You're never safe". Jaya's abandoning the name Suhasini becomes the manifestation of resistance to the stereotyping that is inflicted upon every woman in Indian society.

Jaya is symptomatic of the emerging New Woman. She has expressed her free will by aborting her third child without the knowledge of her husband. She did not consider it necessary even to inform her husband, not out of any sense of fear but because it was concerned with her physical well being and therefore she has right to decide. For a feminist,



the fundamental right of a woman is "to control her own body and reproductive capacity." Jaya muses, "I'm a free woman [...] I will conceive only when I want to". She seems to join hands with the protagonist in the story "Death of a Child" who asserts, "I cannot imagine that the main purpose of my life is to breed". The protagonist in this story is articulate and committed to her course of action — abortion — despite her husband's stiff opposition to it. Whereas Sita[^] in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*^J lacks Jaya's courage, she is perturbed by the idea of giving birth to a fifth child. Against all sane advice she goes to the island in an advanced stage of pregnancy. She lives in the world of Fantasy thinking that going to the island and to the world of childhood she could prevent the biological process of delivery.

Conclusion: "Feminism" emerges as "a concept that can encompass both an ideology and movement for socio-political change based on a critical analysis of male privilege and women's subordination within given society." It is an expression of resentment at the unjust treatment meted out to women. Though feminism has been entwined with political events from its very beginning, it appeared as a social and historical force with the passage of time. Through the long line of women writers, who protested against the inequities from Mary Wollstonecraft to the nineteenth century American Suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, through Simone de Beauvoir to Elaine Showalter and from French psychoanalysts to the present day feminist thinkers, an outlook, a theory, a feminist thought system evolves.

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