

Jaya's Quest for Self in Shashi Deshpande's 'That Long Silence'

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Shashi Deshpande occupies a distinctive place in contemporary Indian English fiction due to her unequivocal feminist stance. She has eight novels, six short-story collections, four children's books & numerous essays & articles to her credit. In her works, she concentrates more on the status of the woman in the traditional bound, male-dominated middle class society of the contemporary India. Her characters are educated, sensitive, intelligent, career oriented women who become hapless victims of married life & its responsibilities. Her women protagonists- Indu, Saru, Jaya, Urmila and Sumi invariably undertake an arduous journey which transport them from a state of self-effacement to one of self-realisation.

She minutely analyses the unwholesome situation in which a sensitive woman has to live and move about, caught between the powerful currents of tradition and patriarchy of tenor and suppression. Such a woman is subjected to physical tortures & sexual assault in society. As a result, her personality is crushed, her voice is hushed up, and her instinct of self-assertion gets catapulted. The loss of personality, voice, self-assertion leads her to confusion and tormentation, resulting in the loss of self-identity and even prestige. That's why her women protagonists are in constant search of their 'selves'. They perform several roles-daughter, sister, wife & mother thereby exhibiting several 'selves' and they thus are constantly engaged in recognizing their real self.

'That Long Silence' is a saga of suppressed women prisoned in the room of silence. It is Jaya's journey in search of one's true self who confronts the gender oriented traditional speculation. Jaya, the protagonist remains a sufferer in her childhood and adulthood. As a young girl, she is chided by her grandmother for her inquisitive and willing nature. She is reminded repeatedly that "a husband is like a sheltering tree and the happiness of your husband & home depends entirely on you".(138). These tips for a future wife became foundation of Jaya's married life. Jaya wanted to confront security, she accepted Mohan as a sheltering tree that is why she did not bother to know if he was following shortcut ways for earning money. Mohan, her husband commits an act of dishonesty at the instigation of Agarwal in contracts, tenders and commissions and seeks temporary absence from his job till his exoneration. The couple move into the seclusion of their Dadar flat and the children are sent away on vacation with friends. Jaya finds herself in a void. But Mohan who is perturbed because of the final disgrace which the enquiry will bring, takes excuse by saying that "I did it for you, for you and the children." (10). The silent resentment of Jaya paves her the way of self-evaluation and self-criticism. Jaya realizes "the nothingness of what had seemed a busy and full life." (25). In her enthusiasm to play the role of wife and mother to perfection, she finds she has obliterated that self in her, which as a child was "heady with the excitement of finding unexpected resources within herself." (187).

Introspecting her married life, she discovers that she is not really happy. Still she confides to her neighbour Mukta, "Without Mohan-- I don't know what I am." (185). For Jaya, this is the beginning of a crises in identity. Like mythical women- Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails, Jaya also follows Mohan to Dadar flat.

Jaya and Mohan are leading the life of 'a pair of bullocks yoked together'.(12) They have nothing better to do but to pretend the illusion of happiness. Here the couple sinks into utter silence in a mood of frustration and depression, without talking to each other. Jaya is terribly disturbed, her husband loses his status, and she her identity, her selfhood. She becomes a fragmented self with a tormented consciousness. She sees herself as someone's daughter, wife and mother, having no status of her own. Jaya, is named by her father which means 'victory' and on the other hand her husband renamed her as 'Suhasni' which implies soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman(16), loses herself and her identity. To Jaya, Suhasni became a symbol of the painstaking and fastidious house wife. She regards herself as a mere travesty of the noble Gandhari who had wrapped her eyes with a piece of cloth for her blind husband, Dhritarashtra. The conflict between her dual identities of 'Jaya' and 'Suhasni' leaves her confused and uncertain. Though Jaya is gifted with the art of writing, but she stops writing about the oppressed women because her husband did not like it. Till now, Jaya has faithfully and religiously practised the traditional role of an 'ideal wife', allowing her talent to 'rust in unuse'. She has been conditioned by her mother into thinking that silent submission is the only way to fulfilment. But, "Silences

distort the truth," observes De Beauvoir(5). She has been goaded to think that it is a sin for a woman to raise her voice against her husband. Mohan thinks that the silence of her mother is her strength. But Jaya feels the silence is the result of despair. She says: "I saw a despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter than silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender".(36) Silence becomes the chief motif of her life. Jaya, deliberately annihilated the creative aspect of her personality, accepted the role of traditional housewife, it is here where she actually negated her own 'self', her own identity. But, finally she decides to come out of her cocoon when life becomes intolerable to her. Kamat, a lovely young widower lives above Jaya's apartment. Jaya's writings receive comments, criticism & encouragement from Kamat. She finds in Kamat's writings an echo of her inner voice. He is, as it were, her alter-ego. She admires him for treating her as his equal and only in his presence she feels herself to be in her own self. As an iconoclast, Kamat urges Jaya to break free of her complexes. The unmarking begins with her serious writing. Rajeswarisunder Rajan urges: "Deshpande's protagonist breaks her silence at one level through the act of thinking itself, at another level through renegotiating interpersonal relations within the family."

But after Kamat's death and their return to Dadar flat, Jaya's same doubts resurface. It was only before Kamat that she breaks her silence, as she says, "With this man I had not been a woman. I had been just myself - Jaya."(153). She realizes the underlying hollowness and deceit in her relationship with Mohan- "we lived together but there had been only emptiness between us." (185) This kind of self-realisation helps her to find the reason for her unhappy married life. She

understands the consequences of her suppressed anger which is nothing only but silence. This silence had been the cause of her "marital incompatibility". She decides to "erase the silence" between Mohan and herself. "I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us." (192). With her panic groan she opens the door on all "those other women" – who really exist and whose silences underscored the pains of suffering womanhood. Jaya's initiative in breaking '*That Long Silence*' is decidedly a welcome step towards restoring normalcy and happiness in the family. Kamini Dinesh finds Jaya moving out of the 'cloistered self' as she seeks to escape from the struggles of everyday life and is forced to find inner resources that will allow her to return and engage more fully in her life and marriage.

Jaya bids good bye to her silence, anger and resentment. She realizes her self-worth and decides to give up the pre-fixed norms of the society. Rashmi Gaur observes: "The haunting riddle of the ultimate purpose of a woman's life within the family can be solved when she learns to assess her worth as an individual and shuns to be guided by pre-fixed norms about it." Though Jaya breaks through her silence, but other women characters could not come out of their shells as far as their silence is concerned. Her mother-in-law Vimla, her sister-in-law and Jeejabai, the maid, silently suffer the injustice of male oppression. In the novel,

there are many silences, some are imposed on the characters by long standing social mores and others embarked upon them willingly. But, it is only Jaya who through her struggle is able to regain her freedom, to live life on her own terms to establish her 'rear' self.

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