

Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence : A Women Centric Novel

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Abstract :

The very beginning of the novel sets the tone of a feministic novel where the female protagonist is ready to undertake QUEST FOR SELF IDENTITY. Deshpande expresses an ambivalent attitude of contemporary educated independent minded Indian women who can neither reconcile themselves to a situation when their husbands ignore them and crush their ambition in life nor can they cast off their husbands, for the husband is like a sheltering tree, which they can't afford to live without.

Keywords : Feminist Struggle, Libration and Gender Discrimination

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is a realistic depiction of women's oppression. It is essentially a WOMEN CENTRIC novel. About the novel Shashi Deshpande says: "*And then I wrote That Long Silence almost entirely a woman's novel nevertheless, a book about the silencing of one-half of humanity. A lifetime of introspection went into this novel, the one closest to me personally; the thinking and ideas in this are closest to my own.*"¹

Deshpande has made use of first person narrative to represent the psyche of the modern middle-class learned woman. To appeal to the readers, she uses flashback technique. The first chapter deals with the present, but the remaining chapters are more in reminiscence with the final chapter ending in the present. The narrator in this novel is Jaya, the protagonist herself. While narrating her heartbreaking experiences, her mind wavers and she unfurls her whole life – from her childhood days to her father's death. She is a typical modern woman who has her roots in tradition, while her husband Mohan, a traditionalist has his roots in customs.

The silence which has been mentioned in the title of the novel actually stretches across her life from childhood to middle age. Apparently Jaya belongs to the old-fashioned, conformist

family. She is cultured, middle-class smiling, docile, devoted woman. She has the innate strength of character but is stifled due to rigid outmoded powers. She leads seventeen years of troubled life in silence. Then she writes her story unfolding her feelings. She also relates incidents of ups and downs that caused her misery and dissatisfaction, and endangered her life. She starts her novel by saying that she is not writing a story of a cold-hearted, unfeeling husband and a sensitive suffering wife. She is writing of both. She has been born and brought up in such a family in which she could develop her personality under the extravagance of her father. She was educated in an English medium school. Her father named her Jaya that means victory. Her father had very high opinion about her and hence he did everything possible for him to inspire her and always kept on telling her that she is not like others. Unfortunately, her father died of heart attack before she completes her graduation.

She did not enjoy friendly relationship with her mother. Her mother often used to oppose her father. The death of her father at an early age was a great blow to her career. Her mother hardly felt the death of her husband and therefore Jaya opted to stay in the hostel rather than with her mother. Jaya is perplexed and disliked her mother's careless attitude. Jaya's mother immediately forgets her twenty years of life with her husband in Saptagiri and goes to Ambegaon, her parental home.

Jaya's decision to marry Mohan is an outcome of her rebelliousness against her mother and her desire to be free from the control of filial home. Mohan also prefers to marry Jaya because he wants to marry a well-educated and cultured girl. He wants to marry girl who can speak good English. He feels that she can understand him and support him better way to lead a quiescent and happy life. He is not concerned about conventional formalities of marriage. Jaya's comes to know from her brother that Mohan wants an educated and cultured wife. When Mohan saw Jaya speaking English fluently, he immediately decided to marry her. After marriage, she performs her household duties nicely.

Through Jaya, the novelist presents the image of a model, faultless woman. At the time of marriage, Mohan Jaya's husband changes her name to Suhasini. However, the change of name implied the change in behavior and personality of Jaya. Therefore, Jaya says:

“...Who was distinct from Jaya, a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman ... A woman who coped?”² Her husband becomes her profession, her career, and her means of livelihood. Everything she does moves around her husband, Mohan, even her hair cut and dresses. When she is asked by her mother whether she has gone mad and where all her lovely hair is, she replies very placidly that Mohan wanted to cut it. This Jaya is quite different from pre-marriage Jaya. Pre-marriage Jaya was quite independent and had resisted her mother’s slight probing of her whereabouts:

“She can’t dictate to me! I’ll do just what I want!”³

Jaya becomes a stereotyped woman. After marriage she learns everything that is essential to lead happy and safety life in a male-dominated society. She accepts all conventional ethics and rules. She image of her husband. She also absorbs to control her annoyance because according to Mohan irritation brands a woman unwomanly. She doesn’t want to be branded unwomanly and she wants to keep Mohan happy. In the male-dominated society woman is not expected to express irritation. She is expected to control it.

In patriarchy the roles of man and woman are fixed. Woman is supposed to cook and not man. Therefore, she comprehends that there is stringent role-division between man and woman in patriarchy. Once she asks Mohan to do the cooking but Mohan takes it lightly and considers it to be a joke. She also understands that woman is considered to be inferior to man and woman has no place whatsoever which she can claim as her own. She comes to know that woman does not belong either to her natal family or in-laws family. She has altered herself as per Mohan’s desires.

In a male-dominated society, a woman has no space to be independent. She is dependent on men either on father, husband or son. They are hardly given freedom and independence. Slavery to man makes them suffer from dual roles of child bearing and domestic chores. She has no freedom regarding the selection of her life partner and marriage. Marriage becomes their destiny as Jaya thinks;

...As we grew into young women, we realized it was not love, but marriage that was the destiny waiting for us and so, with young man, there was the excitement of thinking will this man be my husband? ...It had been our parents who had taken vague desires of ours and

*translated them into hard facts. It was like the game we had played as children on our buttons tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor....'*⁴

Jaya's parents and Vanita Mami go on hammering onto her that 'husband is like a sheltering tree'. Women should be dependent on the male member of the family in order to be safe and protected. In other words, a woman is undermined ignoring the fact that she is equal to men in all the spheres of life. Her abilities and strengths are undermined. However, she is inferior to men in patriarchal society. This is rightly pointed out by Deshpande as;

*...A sheltering tree. Without the tree you're dangerously unprotected and vulnerable. This... followed logically; and so you have to keep the tree alive and flourishing even if you have to water it with deceit and lies.*⁵

Jaya's husband Mohan is involved in corruption in the office at the instigation of Agarwal. When they are not able to do favour for minister's relative, they are forced to face an enquiry. Agarwal advises Mohan to move from church gate house to somewhere to avoid unnecessary publicity and shame. Jaya's family move to Makarndmama's flat at Dadar. Fortunately their children are away with the neighbor's family. Mohan who is disturbed because of the final disgrace which the enquiry will bring, takes excuse by saying that he has engaged in malpractices to keep his wife and children comfortable. Her stay with Mohan in silent resentment paves the way for self-evaluation and self-criticism. In her re-examination of her married life, she discovers that she is not really happy. Happiness in their married life is only an illusion. Jaya does not enjoy her individuality. Like mythical woman-Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails, Jaya follows Mohan to Dadar flat.

Hence an analytical study of the novel reveals the fact that That Long Silence is flooded with various instances which reflect various FEMINISTIC ISSUES.

To begin with Deshpande points out that silence and surrender are considered as virtue of women in the patriarchal Indian society. From beginning she developed fear of speech for fear of ridicule from males Appa, her father who always prevent her in doing any task of her taste. Her father and brother criticized whenever got opportunities to rebuke. Due to that she

jumps into silence which becomes easier to her. Later she avoids confessing to Mohan that she actually likes to watch heads in the movies more than movies, reasons behind this were liberty and freedom shown in threads. Her inability to find words loads Jaya to embark upon a long silent journey. Finally she holds silence, the utter silence.

“But the words remained unsaid. I know his mood was best met with silence”⁶

“But I said nothing. It was so much simpler to say nothing. So much less complicated”⁷

She is taught to take Mohan as her God. Her traditional upbringing makes her to sacrifice herself.

Despondency state seems to be the common factor in the mode of suffering in the case of both Mohan’s mother, Vimala, Nayana, Jeeja, Kusum, Tara. Mohan’s sister Vimala had an ovarian tumour with metastases in the lungs. She does not disclose it to anybody in the family. And ultimately she dies a silent death like her mother who died while trying to get her baby aborted with the help of the midwife.

Kusum, a relative of Jaya was in a very dejected mood forsaken by her husband. She was almost insane. Jaya took pity on her and brought her to her own house and took care of her to give solace and comfort to her. Yet she committed suicide not able to overcome her state of rejection and despondency. Even Mohan’s mother and his sister suffered and died because they never expressed their emotion and feeling but kept silent, succumbing to their own distress and mistakes Tara, another women character of this novel, reached the same destiny as other characters as mentioned above, unable to bear the torture of her drunkard husband. Jaya sees all the life of the women characters and realizes that keeping always silent, not showing any opposition or any resistance, will only lead to a disaster of the women.

Hence the novel is a study of silence not in the case of Jaya-Mohan relationship only but rather it extends to many other women who are victims in the patriarchal society. Jaya’s maid servant Jeeja is the epitome of the oppressed Indian women. Her husband gives her brutal beatings. She has to shoulder the responsibility of the family by earning the livelihood. Her husband takes a major share of earning and spends it all in satisfying

himself with liquor as he is a boozy and remains always drunk. She even brings up the children of other woman whom her husband married. But still she does not protest, never raises her voice in anger but does everything silently as women are destined to do it only. "Jeeja's main purpose was to go on living life and she believed in *"Enduring was part of it" that is why "she endured all that she had to."*⁸ Jeeja's endurance startles Jaya and she thinks *"what had surprised me then, what still surprised me, was that there seemed to be no anger behind her silence"*⁹.

Jeeja's daughter-in-law Tara's husband Rajaram is the copy of her father and beats his wife black and blue and remains intoxicated with liquor only. Jeeja scolds Tara whenever she abuses her husband *"Stop that, don't forget, he keeps the kumkum on your forehead. What is a woman without that?"*¹⁰ Mohan's sister Vimala too suffers in silence. She remains silent regarding her disease and does not spill the beans regarding her disease to her in-laws and is bled to death. The doctor is startled to know that she suffered in silence without opening her mouth. But Vimala knew that her in-laws would not have got her treated even if she had told them about her disease. So she chooses to die. Another victim of male oppression is a lady beaten by her husband in the building of Dadar flat.

Even Mohan's mother and his sister Vimala are victims of gender discrimination. Mohan's father was a boozy so Mohan's mother had to fend for herself and her family. She earned her bread by cooking for wedding feasts. In spite of all this labor she was beaten like a beast by her husband. Mohan's mother always kept on waiting for his father to come at night. She served dinner to all of his children and made them sleep. When her husband came she cooked fresh rice for him as he was hateful of taking the food she cooked for the children. After washing himself he sat for taking his meal. Noticing that Chutney (sauce) was not served, he flung the plate on the wall and moved out.

*"God, she was tough, women in those days were tough"*¹¹ is Mohan's remark. Though Mohan finds toughness in her mother Jaya has different notions. She finds not toughness as the prime trait in her mother rather she finds her as a victim and she suffered with a silent heart. *"I saw a despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender."*¹²

Deshpande has talked about the essential question of female foeticide in the novel. The preference for a male child is so much engrossed in the society that men victimize women for not having a son. Shashi Deshpande raises certain issues which the world in itself is grappling with. In India alone many cases of female foeticide are reported every year despite the best efforts by the government we have not been able to put a full stop to the menace. Nayana in the novel craves for the birth of a male child as she has two daughters. Though Nayana curses her husband, brother and even her father as all of them are good for nothing fellows just frittering away their time and are hedonists. Herself a victim of patriarchal values it is very ironic that she yearns for a male child. The reason being she tells Jaya as:

Why give birth to a girl, behnji, who'll only suffer because of man all her life? Look at me! My mother loved me very much, she wanted so much for me.....a house with electricity and water, shining brass vessels, a silver waist chain, silver anklets..... and what have I got? No, no behnji, better to have a son. And here she was again, saying confidently, This time it will be a son. He... "She gave a contemptuous shrug with the pronoun... "He says he'll throw me out if I have another daughter"¹³

The traditional, institution of Indian family is dwindling as the familial relationship does not have gender equality. Male member of the family is entitled to all sorts of comforts and excuses whereas female member has to sacrifice her life keeping silence, suppressing emotions and desires. The mechanical and artificial love is significant where GENDER DISCRIMINATION exists in family environment.

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