

THAT LONG SILENCE JAYA'S FEMININE SENSIBILITY - A STUDY

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Abstract

Shashi deshpane occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists. She is receipt of many prestigious accolades for her literary works. She won Sahitya Academic award for *That Long Silence*. She is a prolific writer of novels and short stories. She is feminist. She voices for the 'women'. Her attempt to given an honest portrayal of their sufferings, disappointment and frustrations. Her realistic vision of women's life in the family and the society based on personal observation are theme of her novels. Feminism has come to mean a movement in support of the principle that women should have the same rights and opportunities, in legal, political, social and economic matters as men.

A close study of Deshpande's short stories and novels reveals an author who is intelligent, frank in articulation and relatively free from prejudices regarding gender, but at the same time highly sensitive to the issues involving women. *That Long Silence*, the protagonist Jaya caught in dilemma whether to be a fit wife to her husband or struggling to express the kind of emotions that women experience. The relentless probing of man-woman relationships by the author intrigues the reader enough to question her stand on Feminism.

Keywords : Feminism, relationship, self-analysis, self-realization, ardhnarishwara.

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Shashi Deshpande occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists. She is undoubtedly an outstanding Indian English novelist with four volumes of short stories, four children's books and six novels to her credit. She is recipient of many prestigious accolades for her literary works. She won Sahitya Akademi award for *That Long Silence*. She is a prolific writer of novels and short stories. She is feminist. She voices for the 'women'. Her attempt to give an honest portrayal of their sufferings, disappointment and frustrations. Her realistic vision of women's life in the family and the society based on personal observation are the theme of her novels. She surfaces problems of women and their quest for identity. Her protagonists are modern, educated young women crushed under the weight of a male-dominated and tradition-bound society.

Feminism has come to mean a movement in support of the principle that women should have the same rights and opportunities, in legal, political, social and economic matters as men. Feminists try to identify the deep-rooted causes leading to oppression of women and endeavor to remove, as far as possible. They try to bring about a change in the social milieu where women are accepted as equals, in all respects, to men in the equitable sharing of rights, opportunities and also responsibilities in the process of evolution of the human society. Some restrict their demands to equality in matters relating to education and work with an eye on economic self-reliance.

Shashi Deshpande derives the title of her novel, *That Long Silence*, from the classic understanding by Elizabeth Robins made in a speech to a world body. This long silence was unfortunately punctured by a few early women writers who did not present facts as they prefer instead to dwell on superficial matters and more often than not churning out mushy, sentimental romance which had no connection with reality.

That Long Silence presents, Jaya caught in this dilemma; firstly, trying to be a fit wife to her husband and secondly, struggling to express the kind of emotions women experience, but seldom expressed in a male dominated chauvinistic society.

The smooth course of Jaya's existence has been disrupted due to her husband's business problems. He moves into an unfashionable Bombay apartment in Dadar relinquishing all company perks. Jaya finds herself free from the round of high order entertainment. She ponders on her far from successful writing career and her past memories. In the process of doing this she probes inward, thus emerging from her long moments of silence. Jaya is essentially a modern woman rooted in tradition, whereas her husband, Mohan is a traditionalist rooted in age-old customs. The difference between their outlooks is so marked that they fail time and again, to understand each other. This greatly affects their marital life. It becomes more of a compromise than a relationship based on love or mutual understanding. There grows a silence between the husband and the wife. It creates a tension between them.

Mohan had left home without a word after Jaya unconsciously laughed at him his absence shatters Jaya and she thinks that the world would fall apart. Then the situation changes, Mohan send a telegram information her that all is well, implying that the corruption case involving him has been settled without any harm to him. And finally Jaya goes back home. With the "All is well" news from Mohan, She finds herself slipping into the grooves of her marital life again. But a change has been wrought in her situation. By giving expression to her story she has broken her silence. Though Jaya makes a compromise with Mohan she does assert her identity. The novel thus seeks to portray a woman who becomes aware of the biased attitude of her husband. Jaya, who stands for the modern emancipation women, has asserted her individuality by challenging the taboos and destructive social norms.

Judged against this backdrop – *That Long Silence* comes relatively close to real life experience. The novel achieves greater credibility from the fact that Jaya, the protagonist is a very well read person, possessing a literary sensitivity which corresponds with her fictional role. Often, in spite of the writer's best effects the narrator fails to find a voice of her own and ends up mouthing the creator. In the words of Vimala Rama Rao " Jaya is one of the rare narrative

voices in Indian English Fiction who possesses and displays a literary sensibility commensurate with her fictional role as a writer telling her own story, one whose college education and reading habits are in evidence in her speaking voice, this indeed is an achievement". (p 72)

Jaya of *That Long Silence*, Like Indu of *Roots and Shadows* and Saru of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* Journey from ignorance to knowledge through endurance. Going through a process of introspection, self-analysis and self-realization, she emerges as a confident individual, fully in control of herself, significantly more hopeful and able to accept life just as they do. If Indu is a journalist and Saru, a doctor, Jaya is a successful columnist and an aspiring novelist, who likes explore the feminist world with guts.

Jaya to begin with, is a conservative, educated middle class smiling placid, motherly women who learns to suppress her own wishes and act according to her husband's. She who cannot dare to protest, "I had learnt it at last no questions, no retorts. Only silence". (p 143)

Jaya's husband, Mohan is an engineer who cares for money, status and material comforts. Working in the purchase section of his office, he prospers well, looks arrogant and brash. Unfortunately, he is caught taking commission and an enquiry is on. He has to leave his church gate bungalow to jaya's humble Dadar flat. He takes her so much for granted that she is not consulted about shifting. Yet she acquiesces to his decision and follows him. However, Jaya seems to have gained confidence as he begins to lose it being in trouble. When Mohan demands the key, Jaya refused to hand it over to him she opens the door herself symbolizing her refusal to be servile, she is aware that, "it was not he who had relinquished his authority, it was I how no longer conceded any authority to him".(p 9)

Her Dadar flat is in no way comparable to her elegant, well-furnished church home. Yet she is perfectly at ease here, relating herself easily to her neighbors and servants. Away from the routine, she is now prepared to look at herself with utmost objectivity and examine her relationship with her husband. Emulating Mohan's mother and sister, she tries to adjust and compromise with her lot through every compromise shatters her individuality. She surrenders herself so totally that she is afraid of expressing her likes and dislikes. Now she is a stereotyped housewife who is "nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support". (p 76)

Outwardly she is a satisfied housewife married to an apparently caring man, with a comfortable home, with no dearth of material comfort. But on security, it is revealed that to achieve this stage of fulfillment as a wife. Jaya has systematically suppressed every aspect of her personality that refuses to fit in with her image as a wife and mother besides a failed writer. As Suman Ahuja observes:

“Jaya caught in an emotional, eddy, 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 failed writer”.(p 2)

Ruminating on the post, Jaya sees how her marriage has reduced her to a mere automation. She realizes how she wasted away the most valuable time of her life in arranging and re-arranging things, dusting, polishing, washing, ironing, cleaning the fridge and changing the sheets. She is bewildered to find in her diaries that she had spent her life engrossed in such trivialities as what she bought, how much she paid for it,. The dates the children’s schools had begun, the servant’s absence, the advance they had taken, etc.

Jaya, as a girl, was taught by her father to have confidence in herself. He named her Jaya which stands for victory and has encouraged her to be resilient and courageous. He has made her feel that she is someone special, and someone different from the other girls who would normally end up becoming housewives. He would dream that Jaya either bags an international award or goes to Oxford. However, his untimely death shatters her dreams and makes her to face the reality that she is after all like any other middle class girl destined to be a wife and mother. As a child she was chided by her grandmother for asking too many questions and was told that no husband could be comfortable with a woman who asked question and retorts. It is ironical that although Jaya now has no question or retorts for Mohan, there is no comfortable relationship. Her early training at home has made her obedient and submissive towards her husband.

Jaya also has been renamed as ‘Suhasini’ by Mohan. “Suhasini” means soft, smiling, placid, motherly women, who makes herself loving and also lovingly nurtures her family. With this new name, it appears that the light-spirited and courageous Jaya has been reduced to a mere proud housewife and mother. Jaya wants to retain her own name given by her father, meaning victory.

Her refusal to adopt the name “Suhasini” becomes the manifestation of resistance to the stereotyping that is inflicted on every women in the Indian society. However, Jaya’s rejection of the name “Suhasini” now remains as a token of victory as she cannot afford to insist on longer as she has been thought to regard her husband as agree of projection and so represses her anger and resentment.

Jaya has abundant resources within to become a good writer. In the words of Vimala Rama Rao:

“Jaya is one of the rare narrative voices in Indian English fiction who poses and displays a literary sensibility commensurate with her fictional role as a writer telling her own story, one whose college education and reading habits are in evidence in her speaking voice. This indeed is an achievement “. (p 76 – 77)

In the early years of her marriage, Jaya has been on the threshold of acquiring name as a creative writer of some merit. It is Mohan who has been encouraging her to write. In fact, he introduces her to editors of various papers and magazines. On Mohan’s advice, she begins writing middles, “light humorous pieces about the travails of a middle-class housewife” (p 148) these mere skimming over life does not give her any satisfaction. She is an intense thinking women longing to confront life through her fiction. She has make a good beginning with a story about a man”... who could not reach out to his wife expect through her body”. (p 144) This story has won a prize for its realistic portrayal of life. Yet Mohan assumes that the story portrays their own personal life. He is very apprehensive that people of his acquaintance may assume that he is the kind of person portrayed in the story. But Jaya knows that there is no truth in his accusation, still she does not try to reason with Mohan, as she does not like to risk her relation with him.

Yet her writing lacks the intensity of expression which troubles Jaya. Kamat, her neighbor on the first floor, come to her rescue. He analyses her stories objectively and tells her how she could make them “more forceful and hitting”. Kamat also tells her that she had been feeding on wrong sentimental notion, “women are victims”. He rebuilds her morale and suggests her to send her writings to women’s magazines. Kamat who is a hard critic knows well that Jaya in capable of giving greater credence to the roles as wives, mothers and aunts and says: “I never can imagine you writing this. This you, I mean, I can see the woman who writes thishe’d narrowed his

eyes as if focusing on some vision. ‘She’s plump, good humored, pea brained but shrewd, devious, skimming over life...’ .(p 149)

Jaya is unhappy that the writer in her could not come to light in the estimation of Mohan to whom she “... had been no writer, only an exhibitionist. (p 144) she however does not stop writing. But she writes the kind of stuff, which pleased the publisher and made her husband feel proud of her as a writer, but she herself has fallen like an imposter. She writes a column for a women’s magazine where a character called ‘Seetha’ says and does thing in, which Jaya does not believe herself. “That column , yes. It had made me known. My profile silhouetted in stark black that accompanied each article frightened me each time I saw it. It was like seeing some one masquerading as myself or as if I was masquerading as the women who wrote that column”. (p 119)

Jaya suppressed at every stage of her life, compromises to conform to the role of an ideal Indian Women. In order to become an ideal wife, she has to snip off the bits of her that had refused to be Mohan’s wife. As a result, she has been masquerading not only as the writer of ‘Sheetha’ but also as Suhasini’. Jaya’s mother her despair at being forced to live a life of deception. She feels that she will ‘breakdown’ , that she can’t go on, and ‘can’t cope’ but does not give expression to these feelings because of her fears-her of hurting Mohan and jeopardizing the marriage, her fear of destroying the happy family she tries to project and fails as a writer. In the Indian context marriage is absolutely a sacrosanct contact and the image of the devoted wife and husband conforming to the concept of ‘ardhanarishwara’ have been held up as the imminent reality of the relation between sexes.

Jaya, more or less, feels in the same way when she says : “Man and Women – it was then that I realized the deep chasm between the two. They are separated for ever, never more than at the moment of total physical togetherness”. (p 98)

In spite of her flippant attitude towards Vanitamami and her advice later in the course of the novel, Jaya proves that she is no different from her. Jaya resembles Indu and Saru in having subdued her independent spirit to the desires of her husband. Just as Indu who obeys her

husband's wishes and fancies and like Saru, who thinks that a wife must be a few feet behind her husband's Jaya also bows to the male superiority.

Sometimes, Jaya appears to be not very different from other women – Nayana, who despises her drunkard husband but craves for a son; Mukta the widow who fasts; Mohan's mother, who suffer her husband's humiliations silently and Jeeja, who thinks that a women without her kumkum on the forehead is nothing. When the choice of selections comes between her husband and family, unhesitant Jaya chooses to be with her husband, however assertive and independent individual she may be. She holds on to her marriage and sees Mohan and herself as a pair of bullocks yoked together.

The image of the pair of bullocks yoked together suggests that yoked bullocks should share the burden, between themselves, but no one knows whether they love each other or not. The images of the beasts performing their assigned duties mechanically undermines the relationship of husband and wife, and are united in marriage for love, but not for leading a mechanical life which results in ending up in mutual hatred and distrust. The loveless married life which causes the wife and the husband to drift away from each other results in total failure.

By implication, the character of Jaya represents modern women's ambivalent attitude to married life. It is only by negating her own personality that a woman, who is a powerless in the patriarchal order, can survive. Jaya in order to maintain her marriage as a happy one, slowly transforms herself to this ideal of womanhood, where she learns to repress her anger. Jaya always works up to please her husband. Jaya even transforms her appearance to suit his idea of a modern woman – cuts her hair and wears dark glasses. She ultimately gets so completely absorbed into the stereotype of a woman. Jaya desperately clings to her husband as if her life depends on him.

Jaya's story, in the larger context, is the story of generations of women. She accepts the reality of the situation and her existence in relation to her family. Jaya has no necessity nor has she a wish to look outside world has so for not, affected her life though at times she feels dissatisfied with her life.

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