

Culture of Silence: Jaya's Transformation through Suffering in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

Debasisha Pati

Lecturer in English

K. K. S. Women's College, Balasore,

Odisha - 756001.

Received Nov. 12, 2015

Accepted Dec. 03, 2015

ABSTRACT

Silence, as choice, is strength; as compulsion, it is weakness. However, Indian women for long looked upon silence as a virtue for them to aspire to. Unlike in other patriarchal cultures where silencing of women was done through coercion, in India it was done through conviction. The possibility of resistance by women against male oppression was obliterated by the perpetuation of what may be termed as the 'culture of silence'. Consequently, women felt credited with martyrdom while they were indeed condemned to victimhood. To decode the patriarchy in India is therefore a more daunting task than it is for its western variants. The present paper aims at examining how a modern woman decodes the patriarchal politics of martyrization of women through the culture of silence by erasing that long silence of generations of women, hers included.

Key words: culture of silence, Resistance, Patriarchy, Martyrization

"Power is not limited to the oppressor. The oppressed have power to react and resist."

-Paulo Freire

"That Long Silence", the Sahitya Academy award-winning novel is a ground-breaking endeavour in Indian feminist fiction. It dramatizes a woman's journey from her state of suffering in silence to her realizing that she is suffering due to silence. The outstanding feat achieved by Shashi Deshpande in this fifth novel of hers is the summing up of the predicament of a vast majority of tradition-ridden Indian women - the housewives - in a single word - 'silence'. In his seminal essay titled "Culture, Power and Transformation in the Work of Paulo Freire", renowned Professor of English and Cultural Studies, Henry A. Giroux has said that domination and oppression engender what Freire terms as a

'culture of silence' by eliminating the paths of thought that lead to a "language of critique".

In this paper I have made an attempt at studying the plight of Jaya, the protagonist of Shashi Deshpande's cult feminist novel "That Long Silence" as the consequence of her being in a culture of silence which deprives her of the language of critique. Every civilization and every culture prescribed certain characteristics for a woman to fit into. This process of codification of ideal feminine behaviour by patriarchy still goes on. The following shloka seeks to define an ideal woman of Indian civilization:

Karyeshu Daasi, Karaneshu Mantri;
Bhojeshu Mata, Shayaneshu Rambha,
Rupeshu Lakshmi, Kshamayeshu
Dharitri, Shat dharmayukta, Kuladharm
Patni. (Baddena, Neeti Sastra)

What the shloka precisely prescribes for is women's subservience to men. An echo of this prescription is to be found in the Holy Bible:

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. (Holy Bible, Ephesians 5:22-24)

More lethal is the patriarchal intent of this desired subservience – silencing women. Thus patriarchy not only makes women secondary to men but seeks to perpetuate the status quo as well through the 'silencing' strategy. Deshpande, in her novel, sets out first to expose the strategy used to the detriment of women and then makes her protagonist counter it by shaking off that long silence which has wrapped generations of women, hers included.

That Long Silence tells a haunting tale of how Jaya disillusioned with her marriage and her life rediscovers herself. Like her conventional counterparts, she indulges in silence with the fear of loss. Jaya was a woman who did not ask questions, because she had learnt early in her life that when women ask questions, they would simply hang heavily around in the air, refusing to go away, causing eyebrows around her to rise at her audacity in asking such questions. Silence can be seen as an image of subjugation, alienation and absurdity of Jaya's existence. For seventeen long years of her life, Jaya allowed her family to possess her body and soul. She didn't think anything apart from that. All had their lives, but she gave up hers. She could neither

express herself nor achieve anything. Jaya was leading a life without any purpose. Jaya suffered silently in the name of family: "Yes, I have been scared, scared of breaking through that thin veneer of a happy family." (TLS, 191) Marriage is still a social necessity, where women seek security and men, respectability.

In orthodox Indian marriages, the husband not only expects approval and admiration from his wife but also wants her immediate unquestioned obedience to his commands. Women are trained to follow their husbands mutely. This is clearly witnessed in the case of Mohan's mother. Mohan relates at length to Jaya how his mother faced with fortitude the male tantrums of his father. He says: "God, she was tough. Women in those days were tough." (TLS, 36) What Mohan says is of crucial significance to our study as it reveals his ingrained patriarchal mindset. Even being a son and witness to his mother's suffering, what he chooses to see is not her suffering nor her sigh of resignation to her fate but what he thinks her calm courage that sees her through the hellish harassment. The extraordinary power of patriarchy in India lay in its avowed women worship. Women were literally forced into a state of slavery in the name of the virtue of obedience. A feminist study in the Indian context therefore has to look at what we may be termed as the *martyrization* of women.

Equally significant is the protagonist-narrator Jaya's response to what her husband, Mohan says about his mother and other women of her times. If she found his mother's a painful episode, she found Mohan's conclusive remark on it strange. The narrator says:

He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire, but I saw despair. 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. (TLS, 36)

Shashi Deshpande, through her protagonist-narrator, points in the above to a crucial factor at play in the lives of traditional Indian women. Much before the onset of western liberal education in India, Indian women were literate enough to see through the prejudice of patriarchy against them. And they had always resisted it in a way peculiar to them. That it did not change their fate was a different matter. But they were not ignorant victims. They were aware martyrs. Silence was their weapon against male subjugation. Martyrs accept suffering but they resist its cause. The sheer silence characterizing martyrs' suffering transforms it into a form of resistance. This feminist study of ours must therefore take into account what may be formulated as *suffering-as-resistance* while considering the plight of conventional Indian women. Sita in The Ramayana and Gandhari in The Mahabharata are two cases in point. Sita subjected to humiliation and suffering is finally disillusioned with life and asks Mother Earth to swallow her up. For thousands of years, patriarchy has chosen to see Sita's end as her supreme sacrifice, whereas it was her suicide. Similarly, Gandhari offers to remain blind-folded for life after she is married off to a blind prince without her consent. Patriarchy has chosen to describe it as a gesture of unflinching devotion of a wife towards her husband, an act of abnegation of

the privilege providentially denied to her husband, whereas it might well be a protest against male hegemony. Also, the so-called sacrifice of women like Sita and Gandhari has not improved the lot of women in the succeeding generations. Reading Sita's and Gandhari's as stories of sacrifice yields patriarchy double benefits. One, it validates silence as a supreme virtue for women to aspire to. Two, it obliterates the act of oppression causing the silence. Thus, silence is the power that patriarchy bestows on women which only serves to render them powerless.

Silence is a double-edged sword. A form of resistance through suffering, it, in effect, incapacitates women, on one hand, for any efficacious resistance against oppression. On the other, it validates, unwittingly though, the agency of oppression. Oppression not only engenders but also is engendered by silence. Silence of the oppressed thus helps oppression become a vicious circle. As its mode, silence renders resistance an end in itself. But resistance should be a means to an end- the elimination of the target of resistance. That is why resistance cannot be couched in silence. It has to be vocal for efficacy. Jaya's dilemma between silence and communication is resolved when she is reminded of Krishna's final words to Arjuna: '*Yathechhasi tatha kuru*'.(TLS 192) What should she do? Should she, like countless others of her ilk, contribute to the perpetuation of the culture of silence by her own silence? Or, should she help annihilate this patriarchal construct through its rejection? She does the latter.

Jaya in *That Long Silence* grows being an inheritor of the age-old culture of silence. It is through her emotional and intellectual suffering that she outgrows it. Communication is emancipation, she realizes. Being the narrator of her own narrative, she brings to the public domain her privations in a society and its culture hegemonized by patriarchy. From the silent, subdued, submissive, subservient and smiling wife Suhasini, the name her husband had given her after their marriage emerges Jaya, the victor that she always was deep within. That *Long Silence* might appear to be the tale of a bored housewife. But what makes it a classic of its kind is not what the protagonist-narrator details through her narration but what she does through it – *surmount her silence*. That long silence is not Jaya's acquisition but her inheritance from generations of women silenced by patriarchy. She not only erases her silence but that of countless generations of women martyred by it before her. Jaya rejects the patriarchal choice of becoming a martyr of patriarchy, unlike her mother-in-law, sister-in-law and Vanitamani, and chooses to become a victor in her rebellion against it. Hers is a journey from the (s) human status imposed on her by patriarchy to the human status that is rightfully hers.

Unlike Nora, the protagonist of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* who finally walks out on her

marriage to seek emancipation from the marital bondage, Jaya wants her marriage to work through communication. While her western counterpart rejects marriage, she seeks to renew it. With her realization that silence was not the consequence but the cause of her suffering in marriage making her look upon her and her husband as 'two bullocks yoked together', Jaya saw in communication a way out of the impasse, light at the end of the tunnel, a means to make her marriage work with her life in it worth it. Jaya's autobiographical account that the novel *That Long Silence* is, comes to an end with a radiant hope:

But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible.....

Life has always to be made possible. (TLS, 193)

References

1. Giroux, H. A. (2001). Culture, power and transformation in the work of Paulo Freire. In F Schultz (Ed.), *SOURCES: Notable selections in education* (3rd ed.) (pp. 77-86). New York: McGraw-Hill Dushkin.
2. Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*. Noida: Penguin Books India. Ltd., 1989.
3. Bupala, Baddena. Neeti Sara Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by [Biblica, Inc.®](http://www.bible.com)

It's kind of fun to do the impossible.

~ **Walt Disney**