

Shashi Deshpande as an adept in portraying the heroine in *That Long Silence* as the fitting example of an awakened and emerging new women of our times: An Appraisal

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ABSTRACT

*This research paper is an attempt to trace the growth of fiction in the hands of women writers by revealing how fiction by women writers constitutes a major segment of the contemporary Indian writing in English, providing insights, a wealth of understanding a reservoir of meaning and the ground for meaningful and critical evaluation and proving that Indian writing in English has entered a new phase – the phase of inimitable representation of the New Indian Woman who is dissatisfied with the inhibiting cultural, natural or sexual roles assigned to her from the patriarchal society, with particular reference to Shashi Deshpande who is projected rather neatly as an adept in portraying the heroine in her novel **That Long Silence** as the fitting example of an awakened and emerging new woman of modern times.*

Key Words: *fiction, major segment, reservoir, critical evaluation, patriarchal society, inimitable representation, New Indian Woman, an adept, awakened woman*

Fiction by women writers constitutes a major segment of the contemporary Indian writing in English, providing insights, a wealth of understanding a reservoir of meanings and the ground for meaningful and critical evaluation. Indian writing in English has now entered a new phase – the phase of inimitable representation of the New Indian woman who is dissatisfied with the inhibiting cultural, natural or sexual roles assigned to her from the patriarchal society. This new woman of the Indo-Anglian novel views herself as the object of cultural, social oppressions and attempts to rebel against them, consciously or unconsciously, within her living space. But at the same time, she reflects the inability to reject her cultural and social background totally and hence fails to transcend the horizons depicting a revolutionary spirit. She, therefore, stands at cross roads, caught between tradition and modernity.

With the sole intention of emerging as a new being, the individual self has to go through a continued process of reaching beyond itself, of expanding itself through varied experiences, through multiple identities and relationships. The awakening of a woman is essentially an awakening of the human soul. Her womanly sensibility, experiences and realisations contribute to it. The emergence of a new woman calls out merely for the realization of her individuality or of what she is, but also of what she becomes. It is only when she learns to accept life and her own self in terms of the opposites, only when she realizes that she has to sink in hate and despair to love hope again, that her emergence as a new woman becomes a possibility. Following Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal and other writers who documented the female resistance against a patriarchally maintained Indian culture, Shashi Deshpande has reincarnated the new Indian woman and reinforced the female dilemma in her novels.

Shashi Deshpande, one of the prominent Indian women writers, deals with “the inner world of Indian women in almost all her fictional writings” (Arvind 137). The focal point of her fiction is on a general observation that women mostly suffer injustice or social front. With advancing modernism and growth in education levels, the injustices are increased and not depleted. Shashi Deshpande’s approach lays focus on exploring how women groom notwithstanding the problems they are compelled to face. Generations after generations pass, situations and scenarios change but position of a woman is not that strengthened as expected. Through her efficiency and dexterity in portraying human beings, Deshpande holds a mirror to the society. His imaginary characters appear to us as our next-door neighbours.

Generally speaking, the Indian women writers by producing fiction so as to give an insight into human psyche and influence the conscience of the society are said to have added many feathers to the cap of the Indian English literature with their extraordinary talent. Substantial contributions have been made by them to “the vitality, variety, humanity and artistic integrity” (Iyengar 430). The women writers have

proved themselves efficient qualitatively and quantitatively. They have a stock of issues to deal with and are popular for their innovation and malleability in handling various themes. Having spread their own individual fragrances they have come out with flying colours, making the literary world more bright and full of wisdom. They have brought mirth in the field of literature. These women writers have given literary work in India an unmistakable edge. They have been able to sensibly portray a world that has in it women rich in substance. Shashi Deshpande is one among those women writers whose women are “real flesh and blood protagonists who make one look at them with awe, with their relationships to their surroundings, their society, their men, their children, their families, their mental make-ups and themselves” (Nikam 2). All women writers’ writings are nothing but a mirror of the social conditions. In her study of gender in literature, Clara Nubile writes aptly writes thus: “In the Indian context, women’s fiction is not a pure, creative act of writing but it is more a mirror of the social conditions” (Nubile 32).

It is said that the major factors in the life of Shashi Deshpande that shaped her literary career are her father, her education which was exclusively in English and the fact that she grew up in a “home which was a harmonious mixture of languages” (Jain 30). Shashi Deshpande gained confidence in writing and started writing in a spontaneous way. A scholar of Indian women writers by name Hatimi Nafisa rightly observes:

“Shashi Deshpande has emerged as one of the mainstream women writers in India and has drawn critical attention because of her detailed, sensitive and realistic representation of Indian middle class woman in the domestic sphere” (P 196)

In 1990, she was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *That Long Silence* (1988). She believes that her works have an impact on women’s lives. In her work, one finds a reflection of the plight of women in the male dominated society, where they suffer mental trauma and emotional conflict but face all the situations rather bravely and at the end, get a solution to their problems. The inner psyche of a female character is beautifully portrayed by her in almost all of her novels. She studies them, observes them and puts them in a furnace to fight the situation. Her protagonists rebel, protest and revolt against injustice and harassment but they do not disturb the peace and harmony of the family.

Shashi Deshpande’s characters are initially meek but at last gain courage to fight the patriarchal norms. Her protagonists are sensitive, self-conscious brilliant and creative. Her female characters are “in-between women” who fight for their own identity in urban contexts and who explore the female psyche. They revolt against the stereotype roles given to them by the society. Her *That Long Silence* which won her the Sahitya Akademi Award for 1990 tells the story of an Indian house- wife who maintained her silence throughout her life in the face of hardships that threatened to break it. “If I were a man and cared to know the world I lived in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy – the weight of that long silence of one – half of the world”. This statement brings out the intention of this talented contemporary Indian writer to break the long silence that has surrounded women, their experience and their world. For a long time, woman has not existed rather significantly or effectively in literature whether western or India. This is not only true of the fiction created by men, but also by women, who have mostly confined themselves to writing love stories or dealing with the experience of women in a superficial manner, creating the same kind of stereotypes of women which they find so reprehensible in the writings of men, women writers have also often fallen a prey to that prescriptive feminist ideology of creating strong women characters. Against this background, Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence* promises to be a refreshing departure from most of the fiction written by women.

The theme of *That Long Silence* is simple. Jaya, the heroine of the novel, recalls her married life with nostalgia. She was married to Mohan and lived with him at different places till he went away from her to clear himself of the charge of business malpractice. She bore him two children and the third child was aborted. She recalled her relationship with innumerable relatives and friends with compassion and understanding. She tried to come to terms with herself by trying to write about herself and her family and was determined to break a ‘long Silence’. The novel ends with the return of her son, Rahul, the promise of Mohan ‘to return’ on Friday morning and Jaya changing the idea of their marriage and learning the truth that ‘Life has always to be made possible’. Behind this simple story of the novel lies the ground swell of frustration in married life of the protagonist, who failed to be closer to her husband mentally. She suffered from isolation. Despite her marriage to Mohan and subsequently becoming a mother of two children, she was lonely. Her husband could not understand her feelings as a result of which she was torn from within. Shashi Deshpande uses a beautiful image to describe Jaya’s married life:

“A pair of bullocks yoked together a clever phrase, but can it be substitute for the reality? A man and a woman married for seventeen years. A couple with two children. A family somewhat like that 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” (TLS 8)

To an Indian reader, the image of a pair of bullocks yoked together suggests a world of meanings. It means that the bullocks so yoked shared the burden between themselves but no one knows whether they love each other or not. The image of the beasts performing the duty mechanically undermines the husband – wife relationship, who are united in marriage for love and not for leading a mechanical life terminating in mutual hatred and distrust. Jaya resents the role assigned to a wife in our country, who is called upon to stay at home, look after the babies and keep out of the rest of the world. Shashi Deshpande uses an apt image of a worm crawling into a hole to describe the state of Jaya, a budding writer doomed to dwindle into a stereotyped Indian housewife:

“Middle class. Bourgeoisie. Upper caste. Distanced from real life. Scared of writing. Scared of tailing. Oh God, I had thought, I can't take any more. Even a worm has a hole it can crawl into. I had mine – as Mohan's wife, as Rahul's and Rati's mother” (P148).

In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande has portrayed the irony of a woman writer, who is also a young housewife. Being a writer, she is supposed to present her views and ideas before the society but still she remains silent probing into her past, struggling with her present and trying to establish a rapport with her future. She is an intellectual who finds herself out of place in the society meant only for men. In this novel, Shashi Deshpande presents the condition of the woman in Indian society and how the different types of women act out their roles with their silence. The title emphasizes the silence that the protagonist Jaya wishes to break and to search her own self, role of a wife and her real individual self.

The novel opens with Jaya and her husband Mohan shifting from their well-settled, comfortable house to their old house in Dador, Bombay, where they had stayed immediately after getting married, when their financial condition was not good. Mohan the narrator's husband, in his pursuit of prestige and security, had indulged in certain malpractices, as a result of which, he now faced an enquiry to the effect that he might perhaps lose his job. Mohan was advised by Agarwal, his partner in the crime, to stay away from the office and his church gate flat till the storm blew over. Luckily for Mohan, the children were away on a tour with their family friends and it all ended well, for they need not even know about this disgrace. Mohan, therefore, decided that he and his wife would go and stay at the flat in Dadar. This flat had belonged to Jaya's maternal uncle. Jaya and Mohan had stayed there before shifting to a bigger flat in church gate. Jaya silently followed her husband.

What is narrated is that Mohan feels that Jaya, who cared much for him, no longer cares for him because of this crisis in his life. His life is centred around his office work and his family. Now as he has no office work, he becomes unsettled. He is a traditionalist and he has clear ideas about his role in life. When this is shattered, he is confused and he does not know what to do. He expects his wife Jaya not only to share his crisis, anxiety, unhappiness, his doubts but also to positively speak out and help him to face the crisis. He sees emotional gratification for his insecurity created by his own deeds. He wants to hold hand to Jaya in whom, he sees an anchor in this tempest. Jaya, on the other hand, reacts differently. Her whole life is revolved around the wants of her husband. Jaya gets out of touch with her daily schedule and becomes an introvert. She sits deep in contemplation, thinking of her childhood and tries to analyse herself. Jaya finds her normal life so disrupted that for the first time she can look at their life and attempt to decide who she really is. Not satisfied with her married life, Jaya recalls her past days, her upbringing, the environment in which she was brought up and the preaching that were thrust upon her when she was going up. She has been taught that “a husband is like a sheltering tree” (TLS 32).

Though Jaya has been educated and influenced by the modern thought of the west and other advanced countries, and herself a writer, she still wants to compare herself with the image of Sita, Draupadi and other ideal mythological characters. She has always tried her best to keep a balance between husband and wife:

“Ours has been a delicately balanced relationship so much so that he have even chipped off bits of ourselves to keep the scales on an even keel” (P 7).

On the occasion of Raveti's birthday, Jaya as well as her daughter, Rati, feels that Mohan loves his niece Raveti more than his daughter. But she does not say anything to Mohan. She always wishes to proceed as

per husband's wish. She passes through a train of confusion, uncertainty and silent sufferings. Even her writing career is not encouraged. She could not continue her writing as Mohan, her husband, discouraged her. "I gave up my writing because of you", she said to Mohan. She has deeply distressed to know that the writer in her could not come to light because of him. She evidently says:

"I had known that It hadn't mattered to Mohan that I had written a good story, a story about a couple, a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body. 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" (TLS 144).

She did not take a risk to annoy Mohan, that would break her marriage. She says rather ironically:

"Perhaps, if Mohan had been angry, if he had shouted and raged at 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 – scare of hurting Mohan, scared to jeopardizing the only career I had" (144).

She becomes fed up with the routine work like changing the sheets, scrubbing bathrooms and cleaning the fridge and so on. Jaya is not internally happy with her relationship with Mohan. He takes her for granted and it hurts her. She understands that it is nothing else but an 'illusion of happiness' and she becomes more stiff with her daily chores. Women often engage themselves in household works to keep them mentally sound if they are housewives. Jasbir Jain writes, "women occupy domestic spaces, their concern is with homes, flats, kitchen, courtyards. Where they live their lives out" (237). Quest for identity, self-realization and self-introspection begin in the Dadar flat. Jaya's life unfolds slowly, painfully and her the self-examination and self-criticism begins. Her mind is flooded with past memories, her earlier life and life after marriage. She remembers her old sorrows, frustrations and depressions in her marital life. She feels the need of assessing her own life. Quest for identity starts and goes on relentlessly taking to stock of her life. She tries to rediscover her own self and rejects the notion of patriarchy. Thus, Jaya, "rejects the patriarchy notion of a unitary self for identity" (Ahuja 2).

The novel *That Long Silence* highlights the patriarchal power structure in several man-woman relationships. Generally, a woman's identity is deprived by others in terms of her relationship with men as a daughter, as a wife and as a mother. The question 'What a woman does' is never asked, but 'who she belongs to' is always considered important. She doesn't have an identity of her own. Her name keeps on changing according to the wishes of others. A woman's identity is often defined by the roles which she plays. Jaya, in not submitting to her husband, becomes a sharp contrast to the legendary women. The Hindu myths suggest the passivity of women in marriage. There is Ghandhari, who tied her eyes to become blind like her husband; Sita who followed her husband into exile. Savithri striving to reclaim her husband from Death; Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's burdens, all these legends signify the woman's self-surrender in marriage. These legendary women reveal their meek submission to their husbands, whereas Jaya is against submission. She says she had nothing to do with these legendary women. She doesn't like to lose her identity.

Jaya belongs to a middle class orthodox Brahmin family which expects her to conform to the Hindu tradition she is not satisfied with her role. She questions her tradition. Meena Shirwadkar's statement on the ideal of girlhood is relevant here:

"... the girls as yet have no sense of identity no consciousness of self. Their ideal of girlhood is to obey the elders and follow the traditions" (P 31).

But Jaya questions such cultural expectations, she rebels against the authority of the elders, especially her mother. She is indifferent to her mother. She is more attached to her father and her Aiji, her parental grandmother, her father's death disturbs her life. She always has to struggle against a sense of wrong doing and is forced to explain herself. She retorts against her mother saying "she can't dictate to me! I'll do just what I want" (75). Another reason for her hatred towards her mother is that her mother always looked at her with suspicion. Jaya is angered by her mother's demands. "Why are you so late? who was that you were talking to? Why are you going now" (75). Jaya's dreams of going to oxford for higher studies are shattered by her father's death. She is thus forced to revert to her old role as a traditional daughter. She had learnt at an early age that a husband is like a sheltering tree, a protection, a security.

There is no harmonious relationship between Jaya and her husband, Mohan. Their physical relationship, always ends up with Mohan's question whether he has hurt her, Jaya cannot say 'yes'. She has to tolerate everything;

“The emotion that governed my behaviour to him, there was still the habit of being a wife, of sustaining and supporting him” (P98).

All this certainly reveals that there is no natural or harmonious relationship between the two, when we see that one is unable to express his or her real feelings to the other. Jaya is basically a modern woman rooted in tradition whereas her husband Mohan is a traditionalist rooted in customs. They were unable to understand each other. Due to difference in attitude, their marital life grows gloomy. It becomes more of a compromise than love, based on social fear rather than on mutual need of each other. The cause may be rooted in their choice of a partner. Mohan wanted a wife who was well-educated and cultured. He made up his mind to get married to Jaya when he saw her speaking fluently, sounding so much like a girl when he had seen speaking English fluently. He tells Jaya:

“You know, Jaya, the first day I met you at your Kamukaku’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” (P 90).

In her stream of thoughts Jaya too, looks at her marital relations where there is no conversation left between them. This unhappiness is reflected not only in her conjugal life but also in social life. Earlier she saw herself and her husband as “two bullocks yoked together ... it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction” (PP11-12). She realises that she considered her husband ‘a sheltering tree’ on whom to rely and that this attitude reduced her to rely and that this attitude reduced her awareness of her own responsibility. Finally, however, she rejects the bullock images as a way of condemning them to continue their same mistakes, to play their same roles. Instead, she hopes to be herself, not Mohan’s wife. There grows a silence between the husband and wife. It creates a gap between them. Mohan keeps on asking questions, but she does not find a word to answer them: “I lacked my brains trying to think of an answer” (31). But her silence on such issues, like her own writings, puts one into doubt. She does not like to submit to the male-chauvinistic ideas. Jaya is a good example of the emerging new woman, for she is very much conscious of her status and is prepared to listen to no one’s advice but her own. Mohan’s going away stuns her and awakens her to her real place in life. The portrayal of Jaya as an awakened women, thus, soon fades into that of a middle class romantic heroine whose courage fails at the first encounter with reality.

The novel ends with her resolve to speak, to break her long silence. She no longer remains a silent partner to Mohan. She breaks the long silence which she has assumed for years. Jaya pledges to erase her silence and assert the suppressed woman in her. She gives priority to her individuality which she aims to assert. She also seems to come to the fold of feminism. It is only through self-analysis and self understanding, through vigilance and courage that she is able to break the silence.

To conclude, Shashi Deshpande’s achievement lies in the depiction of her central character, the introspective and inward probing Jaya. This novel *That Long Silence* is an exceptionally accomplished portrayal of woman trying to erase a ‘long silence’ begun in childhood and rooted in herself and in the constraints of her life. Thus, *That Long Silence* is a typical Indian English novel that not only depicts the plight of an educated Indian woman of our time but also speaks to us of our own civilization and custom. For Jaya, the heroine of the novel, gives us “the new image of the Indian woman who now tries to stand on her own legs and seeks to break the age-old silence by refusing to dance to the tune of her husband” (Das 90).

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