



VOICE OF THE SILENCED: SHASHI DESHPANDE'S THAT LONG SILENCE AS A FEMININE MYSTIQUE

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Abstract:

Shashi Deshpande's novels reveal a world of complex human relations that weave together in an inextricable familial bond. The novelist projects modern Indian woman's search for self and role in the society and family because her relation with others is central to living. We are reminded of Simon de Beauvoir's observation that the factors that unite us are far more important in our lives than the gender differences that divide us. Deshpande puts female characters on the anvil of the situational crisis, trials, and makes them suffer through a series of uncanny events. As Sabitha Tripathy pointed out, she engages herself in a re-definition of woman as a biological entity for reproduction; however, tries to establish the separate identity and autonomous relation with others on equal footing with men by subverting patriarchal ideology and social tradition to view women in India. By rejecting the romantic notion of an artist as a hero, which excludes women, she emancipates the artist and the feminine spirit and depicts the woman's situation and her struggle in all spheres of life. The novelist shows that in a society it is only through relationship with others man can preserve his own identity. For women these relational ties are so strong that it is difficult to violate some of the bonds without yielding to patriarchal norms since Indian society is predominantly patriarchal and all social ties are measured in terms of woman's sense of subordination by men. That Long Silence, being a typical novel of Deshpande, tries to give voice for the silenced and the voiceless is trying to attain a new identity. The present paper is an attempt to read the novel from the point of view of Betty Friedan, the American feminist critic. It also focuses on Deshpande's presentation of the voice of the silenced.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Feminine Mystique, Silence, Identity & Oppression

Introduction: Voice of the Silenced: Shashi Deshpande's that Long Silence as a Feminine Mystique:

Indian fiction in English has a formidable line of women novelist from Kamala Markandaya to Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Shashi Deshpande, Attia Hosain and Anita Desai. They are writing of Indian women, their conflicts and predicament against the background of contemporary India. The women novelists explore the psychic and moral dilemmas and repercussions of the situation in their women characters trying to achieve a new harmony of relationship with themselves and their surroundings. Shashi Deshpande is one of the foremost voices to deal with this problem. Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, which won her the Sahitya Academy 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. The novel is a recalling of Jaya, the heroine, who is a writer. For her writing is like childbirth, both painful and risky. Jaya says:

I am not writing a story of a callous, insensitive husbands and a sensitive, suffering wife. I'm writing of us. Of Mohan and me. And I know this—you can never be the heroine of your own story. Self-revelation is a cruel process. The real picture, the real you never emerge. Looking for it is as bewildering as trying to know how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces (1).

The novel can be read in the light of the theory of the feminine mystique, put forward by the American feminist critic Betty Friedan. Friedan introduced the concept in her celebrated work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which grew out of an intensive questionnaire circulated by Friedan among her former classmates, in which she asked intimate questions about the problems and satisfactions of their present lives. The women's answer set Friedan to thinking that many of her classmate's 'personal' problems were very similar. The book begins with the question of American wives' nameless aching dissatisfaction and she calls it 'a problem that has no name'. When Friedan put this into words, many American women wrote to her by expressing their wonder that their problem is common among women. In the age after Freud, sex is the suspect. But Friedan denies it. When we read the novel *That Long Silence* from the point of view of Friedan, we can find Jaya is also confronting with such a problem. Friedan is talking about the American middleclass women, and Deshpande's protagonist, Jaya is an Indian educated middle class woman. Friedan does not discuss poverty or financial insecurity, Jaya does not have such economic problems. Like American suburban women Jaya too have a well employed husband and two children. As Betty Friedan's concept, we cannot name Jaya's problem. According to Friedan the feminine mystique stresses the highest value and the only commitment of women is the fulfillment of their own femininity. It says that the femininity is so mysterious and intuitive. It also warns that the root of women's troubles in the past is that women envied men, and tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination and nurturing maternal love. In the novel Jaya is forced to accept this idea from her childhood onwards. She is always warned to be a passive woman and demanded to prepare herself for a husband and children. Her husband, her family, and the society she lives in compel her to be a passive, silent object and to sacrifice her interests and likes. Her uncle Ramukaka prepares a family chart excluding her:

Ramukaka had shown me a family tree he had prepared. I have been able to go back for nearly two hundred years. There are a few gaps, of course but I will fill them up eventually. 'Look, Jaya, this is our branch. This is our grandfather, your great grandfather and here's father, and then us- Laxman, Vasu and me. And here are the boys-Shridhar, Jannu, Dinker and Ravi'. 'But Ramukaka.. I had exclaimed, 'I'm not here'. 'You!'. He had looked up, irritated by the interruption, impatient at my stupidity. 'How can you be here? You don't belong this family! You are married; you are now part of Mohan's family. You have no place here'. But I had said nothing-neither to Ramukaka, nor to Mohan. Ajji should be pleased with me. I had learnt it last-no question, no retorts. Only silence. (143)

Friedan shows that the term career woman has become a dirty word and women shown in the act of renouncing career and discovering that what she wanted to be a housewife. Jaya, being a creative writer forced to renounce her job as a columnist due to her husband's interests. Friedan pointed out the fact that women are human beings, neither stuffed dolls nor animals. Human beings set apart from animals by their mind's power to have an idea, vision and shape their future. From her own voice Deshpande asserts herself as a humanist, not a feminist, not a masculinist. She raises her voice for treating women as a human being.

Behind the story of the novel lies the ground swell of frustration in married life of the protagonist. She suffers from isolation and alienation. Despite her marriage to Mohan and subsequently becoming a mother of two children, she was lonely. Her life

partner could not understand her emotions as a result of which she was torn from within. Shashi Deshpande describes her married life by using an appropriate image:

A pair of bullocks yoked together ...a clever phrase, but can it substitute for the reality? A man and a woman married for seventeen years. A couple with two children. A family somewhat like caught and preserved for posterity by the advertising visuals so I loved. But the reality was only this. We were two persons. A man and woman (8).

The novel begins with the sensitive presentation of the loneliness of a woman and the haunting question of the ultimate purpose of her life in the context of her familial relationships. Jaya wants to understand her own bare self, devoid of all embellishments, as that alone can prove to be a reservoir of strength in her tedious, lonely journey towards self-actualization. Oscillating between desire and disgust, she constantly tries to bridge the gap between the mythic wife and mother and her own experiences of being a wife and a mother and is often racked by pangs of guilt and inadequacy. To come across as an ideal wife and mother, she suppresses her own emotional needs. The fear of failure to conform to the stereotyped model of ideal women makes her restless and she is afraid to acknowledge her desires decisively in petty day-to-day affairs. She is afraid that a frank admission of her desires may disturb the delicate balance of her relationships. She realizes the futility of a life, which lived only for the sake of others by suppressing her own passions, likes and dislikes strength and caliber. Jaya is a typical heroine of Shashi Deshpande. Her women characters are tired of a life with the pressures of their life. These women are the stereotyped images of weak, timid and sacrificing women, who are comfortable with a blind faith in patriarchy. They are forced to lose their faith in themselves.

Jaya, the heroine of the novel, gives us a new image of the Indian woman who now tries to stand on her own legs and seeks to break the old age silence by refusing to dance to the tune of her husband. With Jaya's assertion of life that 'long silence' is threatened to be broken. In a way the protagonist Jaya, is any modern women who resents her husband's callousness and becomes the victim of circumstances. By implication the character of Jaya represents modern women's ambivalent attitude to married life. Shashi Deshpande hints at the modern woman's refusal to comply with the wishes of the husband Jaya expresses her conflicts. As the epigraph of the novel, by Elizabeth Robins, "if I were a man and cared to know the world I lived in, I almost think it would make a shade uneasy – the weight of that long silence of one half of the world", the weight of the silence maintained by Jaya to this point in her life becomes unbearable. *That Long Silence* is about the silencing of one-half of humanity. Jaya succeeds in realizing and discovering herself. The need to establish herself as an individual comes to her after seventeen years of marriage.

The whole novel, *That Long Silence* is built around silence and making one silent. Mohan, Jaya's husband accuses that his mother never raised her voices against his father. However his father behaved in the same manner as Mohan. The novel is not only about Jaya's efforts to obliterate the silence that is suffocating her, but also about the despair and resignation of other "victims of patriarchy and also their silence" (Palker 168). Silence becomes an insistent metaphor in Deshpande. To her protagonist it becomes a part of their lives, a distinguishing mark. Most women in India leave behind them only silence. Deshpande does not extol this Indian habit of silence on the part of women, but shows how it can become a weapon in the hands of man, punishment inflicted upon women. Marriage is a weapon for them to make women silent.

When we analyse other novels of Shashi Deshpande, like *Dark Hold No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows*, *The Binding Wine*, *Small Remedies* and *A Matter of Time* we can find that she introduces similar heroines. Heroines with tongues but forced to be silent and bear sufferings. Though education elevates the status of Saru, the doctor protagonist in *Dark Hold No Terrors*, the decaying silence enters to her married life and her education does not alter her status in the family. The split personality springs from the sourness and silence pervades her marital life. She shelters under her silence for an articulation of her nightly terror would certify her mother's prophecy against love marriages. Indu of *Roots and shadows* too feel the pain, anger, frustration and disappointment over the absurdity of her life which develops an emotional polarity with her husband. The determination to remain silent is to avoid conflict and to keep the façade of a successful marriage before the indomitable marriage who prophesied catastrophe for an inter caste marriage. Thus like, other protagonists of Shashi Deshpande, Indhu uses silence as a weapon to carry on her life.

To any perceptive reader the relation between Jaya and Mohan is an epitome of failure and an emblem of disgust, disappointment and depression. Mohan has crushed both the writer and woman in Jaya as he neither loved her nor encouraged her. Jaya has every reason to be bitter with him, for he has been responsible for her misery. The similar experiences are reflected in Urmi of *The Binding Vine*, Madhu of *Small Remedies*, Sumi of *A Matter of Time* presents how a female child is indoctrinated to be passive, submissive and silent right from childhood. It is the same parental partiality conditions them to mask their feelings and to be silent. As writers both Indu and Jaya succumbed to dance to the tune of others, either the husband or the editor. On the threshold of establishing herself as a successful writer Jaya is forced to masquerade behind a safe 'Seeta Column', because her husband fears a close resemblance between her stories and their life. In a way it creates an obstacle for Jaya to break her silence through writing. From the traditional gender based roles Deshpande's protagonist struggle to emerge as individuals. Reconciliation with their own selves enables them to discard their silence too which is a strong symbol used by Deshpande for submission, anger, pain and frustration issuing out of helplessness. As Asha Susan pointed out, these novels are not mere documentation of female resistance to patriarchal ideologies but are the attempts made by women to forge an identity their own, to voice themselves. (164)

Whereas by the end of the novel, she has decided that she shall no longer be the subservient, silent wife she has decided to break her long silence. The force of Deshpande's indictment of women's lives lies in the way she is able to their condition as endemic, chiefly by drawing similarities among Jaya and variety of other female figures, in generations of women in her family (Jaya, her mother, her grandmother), among different classes of women of the same class and generation (Jaya, her cousin Kusum, her widowed neighbor Mukka) who have all been trained in Silence.

Although Jaya's creativity provides her an outlet for her frustration, she is not able to go beyond the social conditioning and somehow believes that a woman's choice, independent of that of her husband, should not have a significant role in her life. Her indefinable relationship with Kamat imparts an inner fulfillment. According to Charu Chandra Mishra, Jaya's need for Kamat also reinforces the truth of Maslow's theory of sequential motivational hierarchy. The motives and needs of human beings are considered as arranged in a hierarchy in order of potency to the unsatisfied organism, which has several levels. At the first level, the physiological needs are the most basic aspect of human motivation and action. At the second level, the motives pertaining to the organism's desire for a stable, secure environment become important. At the next

level is the hierarchy, love and belongings are the motives for having friends, companions, family and identification with a group or individual. These needs involve affiliation and friendship, and as they are satisfied, self-esteem motives become important, involving the desire for respect, confidence, and admiration. The desire for affectionate relationship is important in this motivation of this stage. Jaya's identification with Kamat tones in this category.

Expression of anger in silence is best evident in Jaya revolts in silence in an incident when Mohan accuse her for no fault of her. She wants to burn out in anger. But she fails to break her silence. She was fed up with the routine work like changing the sheets, scrubbing bathrooms and cleaning the fridge, and so on. Shashi Deshpande uses an apt image of a worm crawling in to a hole to describe the state of Jaya, a budding writer doomed to dwindle into a stereotyped Indian house wife.

Middle class. Bourgeoisie upper caste. Distanced from real life. Scared of life writing. Scared of failing. 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. (148)

Conclusion:

Shashi Deshpande in her writing has tried to see and define what an Indian marriage is. Getting the daughters married is a sense of achievement for the parents. There are no emotions involved in bringing the two different entities together. By this, the highly talented girls become a silenced puppet. A statue should be ready to bear anything. When thinking about these predicaments of women, Betty Friedan remembers the German phrase "kinder, kirche, kurche", a Nazi slogan for confining women to the biological role. Both Deshpande and Friedan wonder, why the patriarchal society limits women to one role, one position and one occupation. They concludes that the feminine mystique is so powerful that women grow up no longer knowing that they have the desires and capacities that mystique forbids.

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