



International Journal of Research in Academic World



Received: 10/January/2025

IJRAW: 2025; 4(2):25-27

Accepted: 18/February/2025

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*: A Myriad Tale of Self and Voices Within

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to evaluate Shashi Deshpande's novel, *That Long Silence* in order to highlight the realities of woman in Indian society. The introductory part of the research article focuses on how Shashi Deshpande significantly used Indian English allowing her readers to explore the world and expression of local languages. *That Long Silence* is a story of an ordinary middle class women Jaya who is educated and passionate about writing. Her husband Mohan who was asked to leave a job when the accusation of business misconduct against him are examined. She realizes that silence is not indication of love but it creates a huge gap between families.

Keywords: Existence, identity, patriarchy, awareness.

Introduction

Women writers in India contributed immensely to give the new heights to Indian literature in English. Their work reflects the life they experience and the life they dream about. The question of existence identity and evoking inner voice always takes a center stage in their works. The characters they build in their novel and drama or the theme they choose is from their surroundings. They represent the world of Indian women within her own limitation nothing outside it. The hushed yet thought provoking voices of Indian women are not only heard but appreciated by the world audience.

Shashi Deshpande is a prominent Indian English novelist and short story writer. She is one of the first Indian women writer who started writing in English language. The significance of her writing is that she wrote English by using the terms of her mother tongue. Allowing her readers to explore the world and expression of local languages. She represents the realities of Indian women's life. Shashi Deshpande in her interview with Lakshmi Holmstorm:

My novels do not have any Westerners, for example. They are first about Indian people and the complexities of our lives. Our inner lives and our outer lives and the reconciliation between them. My English is as we use it. I don't make it easier for anyone really. If I make any changes, it's because the novel needs it, not because the reader needs it. (1993: 26)

Deshpande is famous for her serious and sincere attempt to reflect the position of women in Indian society. She received Padmashree in 1990 for her academic involvement she is also recipient of Sahitya Academy for *That Long Silence*. Her other important works are *Roots and Shadows*, *The Dark*

Holds No Terror, *The Binding Vine*, *A Matter of Time* and *Small Remedies*. She is known for the powerful representation of feminist thought. Her works depict the Indian middle class educated urban woman who is aware of her abilities and the importance of her voice. She is also responsible for bringing marginal voices of Indian women into a mainstream Indian literature. Before her writings Indian women writing about women is considered non glamorous and nonfunctional in Indian tradition of writing.

The present research paper is an attempt to find out the theme of self and voices within in *That Long Silence*. As Shashi Deshpande says,

And than I wrote *That Long Silence* almost entirely a women's novel nevertheless, a book about the silencing of one-half of humanity. A lifetime of introspection went into this novel, the one closet to me personally; the thinking and ideas in this are closet to my own. (Jain 2003:210)

The story of an ordinary middle class women Jaya who is educated and passionate about writing. Her husband Mohan who was asked to leave a job when the accusation of business misconduct against him are examined. After Mohan's suspension from his job, they move from their expansive apartment into a small and dingy one, while their children stay behind with relatives.

The story of Jaya has been interwoven with the stories of women around her. The story begins when Jaya and Mohan are married for seventeen years yet they don't share strong bond. Both of them disagrees on many things. The dry companionship is the result of Indian tradition and customs which ask wife to be silent before her husband...daughters to

obey their male counterpart if she wants to call herself virtuous or an ideal woman...mothers to teach their daughters how to retain the pride of the family by adapting the values and rituals of their husband and in laws. If women fail to do so she is not ideal, and virtuous according to the society. And most important of all women should keep mum if they disagree on something. If women deny to do so it indicates that she is not raised up well by women of her family ...she is not taught well by male in her life. It was only father of Jaya who wanted her to be a writer. She wrote to peruse her dreams but her writing carries the stories of her personal life. As she says, 'I could sense a genuine hostility. He accused me of not caring about the children, of isolating myself from him and his concerns.' (Deshpande, 120).

Mohan hated the stories accusing her of exposing the privacy of their marriage. But in front of social gatherings, he proudly exhibits her. Jaya live in two personalities a devoted house wife with no complains and a woman columnist with strong convictions. Unfortunately, women with strong liberal thoughts are not appreciated in society. During the time of her husband's tarnish reputation in society she also questioned her individuality. She realized the fact that she is not the only one who is suffering of imbalance in marriage but the women around her like Kusum, niece of her aunt, Nayana, her house maid even the dead mother of Mohan are victims of Indian patriarchy. Women need to change after birth, after marriage and even after death. Nayana, the house maid's desire for male child and still birth reflect the thinking of society though she curses her husband along with the other male member of her family who did nothing good to her. Nayana asks, 'why give birth to a girl behnji, who'll only suffer because of men all her life? look at me! (Deshpande, 128).

Mohan's mother as well as his sister died due to the complications of women's life, one delivering to many children and one not being able to bear child. Before death they adopt silence...according to Jaya silence of women can project her tough "but I saw despair. I saw despair so great that if would not voice itself. I saw struggle so bitter that silence was only weapon. Silence and surrender. (Deshpande, 36).

All women like Jaya are taught to remain silent but there are few who gather courage to speak their mind. Jaya realized that she is not speaking Sanskrit she is speaking Prakrit...the language of women who are not permitted to show their outrage by the rigid rules of language they must speak in Prakrit...for Jaya Prakrit sounds like whispers from baby's lip. She is deliberately making a choice to be silent for whatever happening to her around her. She has been through a lot like other women around her. She was taught to remain silent in any circumstances knowing that her raising questions will be questioned by the society, by her loved one. She at the end decides ... "to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us. (Deshpande, 192)

These women ultimately came to an awareness about their own self. The realization of self is a systematic process it took fifteen years to Jaya to realize that her silence is making her family life difficult. She is silent hence frustrated disappointed and doomed. She started raising questions on her identity and her worth in front of her husband in front of Kamat. She revealed to Kamat who told her that her face is like her name "Jaya", she said she was Suhasini...a name her husband gave her. Her father named her Jaya...Jaya for victory, vigor and unstoppable attitude whereas Suhasini a soft nurturing woman. Custom of changing name after marriage here reflected as a complete change in identity. Jaya

was Suhasini after marriage. But after the fifteen years of marriage, she wanted to be Jaya again. She wanted to end her submissive wife tag.

The anguish despair fear and even death of women are normalized in Indian society. When Kusum died Jaya's mother wrote a letter to inform Jaya that Kusum had thrown herself into a well. Kusum have an abusive husband and she is unable to bear a child. This trauma had made her delusional and she was unable to keep up herself. According to Jaya's mother Kusum's death ... "was a good thing in a way. She was of no use to anyone after she went crazy, nobody needed her." (Deshpande, 22) As if women like Kusum and Vimala carried the aura of defeated women since they are incapable to bear children. Its ok for them to die.

Its not that all men in the life of Jaya are selfish her Father, Dada (elder brother) and Mr. Kamat an elderly man helped her to realise that she can do what she likes to do. It is Mr. Kamat who ask her to understand the passion of writing within her. Apart from the marital responsibility she also carries the burden of looking after her ailing mother and other relatives. Dada and Ravi, her younger brother escape from responsibilities calling it 'women issues.' She is becoming a sponge where all the family members come and extract their worries problems and insecurities. She was expected to give solution. Sadly, she doesn't have any escape from her problem neither her husband Mohan. When Mohan come to know that Jaya's younger brother Ravi is also talking about his fallen reputation. He blamed her and all women to despise and ignore men when he as a man needs the love support and care from his woman. Jaya was in shock, her confusion, frustration and the accusation of Mohan results into hysteria. When Mohan started accusing her, she started laughing uncontrollably. Mohan left the house in panic rather feeling humiliated.

The absence of husband and children increased the insecurities in the begging but she lost all the patience when she received a news that her son Rahul ran away and missing from her relative's house. Her insecurities turned into hopelessness. She blames herself for being a bad mother and a wife. It is her solitude which made her to realise the reason of imbalanced life is the long silence between both of them. This isolation also helped her to understand herself. She realised that even her husband is in need of emotional support and love during his hard times. Sometimes words of love and care are more valuable than feelings about it. But both are not comfortable to express each other even with the others. This communication gap between the family members results into a broken family syndrome.

In her loneliness she also realized that she cannot live without Mohan she remembered the words of Vanita mami, 'Remember Jaya, a husband is like a sheltering tree. Keep the tree alive and flourishing, even if you have to water it with deceit and lies.' (Deshpande, 31)

Though she as an educated girl don't like the ideology of Vanita but she now feels that she is not different from the rest. The novel ends with Mohan's telegram to Jaya saying that he will be home soon. He also informed her that he may resume to his job. Jaya took a sigh of relief with a pledge that she will remove silence between them to be emotionally allied with each other. Jehanara Wasi in her in her book review states, Deshpande may or may not be a formal feminist, but her novel is both actual feminine writing and potential feminist writing. It is patently the work of a woman on the life of a woman in India. It is also an attempt flashback to psychoanalyse the women, till she reaches the self-knowledge

necessary to enable her to answer the question the novel enunciates (1991:116).

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