

## SELF-PERCEPTION OF JAYA IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVEL 'THAT LONG SILENCE'

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### ABSTRACT

This Research paper refers to self-perception of Jaya, protagonist of 'That Long Silence' which is a prestigious novel of Shashi Deshpande. She is one of the most eminent novelists of contemporary Indian Literature in English. The present study is an attempt to show how the multi-layered 'silence' is used by her protagonist as a strategy to survive, understand and realize her identity and self-esteem, as also to establish and assert her status, role and contribution in the domestic and social domains. Jaya is in search for her 'self' in a tradition bound society. This research paper is an honest attempt to show how patriarchal impeded woman's assertion and tries to oppress her in each and every possible way; and how a woman projects herself as a subject and refuses to live her life in a servile manner. This paper beautifully traces the journey of Jaya, the protagonist from suppression to self-perception.

**Keywords:** Impeded, Patriarchal, Suppression, Self-perception

### INTRODUCTION

India has been a male-dominated culture for a long time. Indian women were surrounded by so many prejudices, conventions, superstitions and traditions. They were considered as an 'inanimate object'. They were always supposed to be placid, gentle, patient, submissive. But, with the change of time and advent of western education and culture the Indian women have come out as a 'new individual'. Now, the women have started to come out of their male dominated culture of being a 'caged bird'. They are not passive character now who easily conform to the conventions of a society. Now the women rebel, they reconcile showing that if a woman can be Draupadi, were not passive, submissive and servile. They had resisted the patriarchal norms in their own ways. The authentic meaning of freedom in the context of Indian women is the freedom from age-old male-domination and male-ordained social and cultural traditions. Father power had compelled woman to live in 'servitude'. She had been forbidden access to education, equal rights and the 'freedom to act and choose'. From few decades, a surprisingly change has come over and women have started to contribute significantly to life and literature. The women have started questioning of age-old conventions and exploring their identity and their fellow beings respectively. Sherry ortner observe 'the universal devaluation of women... by postulating that women are seen as closer to nature than men (who are) seen as ... occupying the high ground of culture The culture/ nature distinction is itself a product of culture". (ortner 83-84)

Shashi Deshpande is one of the brightest stars in the august galaxy of contemporary Indian women writers who in her various works has depicted the contemporary middle-class women outer and inner world with rare acumen and insight. Her women protagonists are modern, educated, career oriented middle-class married women, who are sensitive to the changing times and circumstances. Though her women protagonists are crushed under patriarchal norms yet they never understand about flouting the sacred institution of marriage. Really, they make clever strategic use of their 'multi-layered silences' in order to achieve their individuality. 'Silences' is a mysteriously fascinating word which implies different layers and meanings of absence of speech in relation to different categories of man and in different circumstances. 'Silence' of the oppressed and the marginalized is absolutely different from the silence of the privileged and the powerful and so is the difference in the silences of different categories and segments of society. The different nuances of long and oppressive silence, when peeled off in relation to lives and condition of women, reveal an altogether different world- a world of tyranny, a world of suppression and repression, a feeling of loss, pain, rebellion, confrontation, redefining and re-visioning the equations and relations of power and much more including the myriad attempts at affirmation and realization of self. In Shashi Deshpande's own words:

My novels are about women trying to understand themselves, their history, their roles and their place in this society, and above all their relationship with others....  
(Emphasis added) (Shashi Deshpande Biography Web)

What is remarkable about the whole aspect of using silence as a strategy is that her central woman characters might appear to be compromising with their lot in the form of seeking security within the domains of the family or bending to the dictates of their husbands or fathers in the family, or silently bearing up with all the trials and tribulations of life, but seen in the larger and correct perspective, There is no compromise as such and their silence speaks so loud and clear through their thought processes that at the end of the day, they are absolutely different human beings. The title of the present paper is '*Self-Perception of Jaya in Shashi Deshpande's novel 'That Long Silence'*'. '*That Long Silence*' is a modern novel, revolving around its central character Jaya, who is in search for her 'self' in a tradition bound society. She is an educated and fluent English speaking woman and having great literary sensibility. The name of Jaya which suggests 'Victory' is nowhere applicable in her life. She had to lead a traditional role of an 'obedient and ideal wife'. She has been raised with listening to stories of Sita, Savitri, Damyanti and Draupadi, depicting the sharing of their husband's trials and tribulations in difficult times. Like these legendary women, she also follows her husband Mohan dutifully. Shashi Deshpande says: "There is a frank brutal realization of this evil necessity in her conjugal life."(27)

Since her childhood, Jaya has always been reprimanded for being an 'inquisitive child'. But she was always supported by her father who brought up Jaya as an individual, who has equal rights in society and in family irrespective of gender. Throughout the novel, Jaya feels herself "trapped" and craved for the quest of self and identity. After her marriage Jaya tried hard to fit herself in the role of an ideal wife. Jaya transformed herself from an aggressive, inquisitive being to a meek, docile,

nervous, submissive and passive woman. In spite of being a wife and a mother of two children, Jaya suffered from isolation. Mohan had failed to understand her emotional self. The novel traces the journey of Jaya from being a passive protagonist to become a confident human being. Jaya rejects the traditional images of Sita, Savitri and Draupadi and instead, describes married couple as 'a pair of bullock yoked together'. The novel 'That Long Silence' veers around the silence of Jaya and her suppressed feeling. Jaya always suppressed her literary talent and gives priority to her role as a good wife. After the success of one of her short stories, Mohan expresses his ferment about her story writing. She thinks, "looking at his stricken face, I had been convinced I had done him wrong and I had stopped writing after that". (144) Mohan's attitude towards her writing skills, completely shows the deputation of woman to a secondary position. She is always made to believe that the aim of her life is only to make her husband happy. "Remember, Jaya, the happiness of your husband and home depends only on you." (138) Jaya was given a new name 'Suhasini' after her marriage. Jasodhara Bagchi writes that "Indian woman is the pure vessel of virginity, Chaste, wife weak and owned by her husband, or the self denying mother, never a free identity. (1-4)

After her marriage, Jaya has to shed her real 'self' and like an ideal house wife 'waiting for him' has become an important part of her daily activities. Jaya has no right to complaint about anything. Her romantic ideas of love shattered after her marriage with her husband 'Mohan'. She starts believing what the society wants her to believe. Once Simone de Beauvoir says, "Marriage subjugates and enslaves women and it leads her to 'aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently towards death without questioning its purpose'. (500) As Simone de Beauvoir further says, "One is not born but rather becomes a woman" is apt for Jaya's condition. Jaya always prefers to be a silent one rather than contradicting with Mohan's interest. She never told him about her likings for ads whenever they went for a movie fearing of being labeled as 'a woman of poor taste'. It would not be wrong saying that Jaya, herself marginalized her position by refusing to enter into the circle which society had drawn around Mohan. Jaya becomes 'Voiceless' because she never tries to voice it beyond her imagination. Jaya says:

I never asked him how he did it...I was an ideal wife...(Like Gandhari) I bonded my eyes tightly. I didn't want to know and see anything. (61-62)

After her first quarrel with Mohan, Jaya comes to know that anger makes a woman 'Unwomanly'. 'My mother never raised her voice against my father however badly he behaved well to her, he had said to me once'. (83) An ideal woman is always expected to be attractive to please their husbands. Since their childhood it is incorporated in their minds that they have to look beautiful to seek their husbands' attention. They should have good culinary skills in order to win their husband's favors and heart. But, in spite of doing all this, Jaya fails to get love from Mohan for whom the sex is only a mechanical process having no room for emotional bonding. Jaya admits, "The strength of my feelings for him had both shamed and terrified me. I had never confessed my frenetic emotions to my husband. It had seemed like a disease, a disability I had to hide from everybody." It is a tradition of our society that a woman always sees herself in relation to man. It is always considered very shameful on a woman's part to be 'sexually aroused.' Woman has no identity of herself apart from

being someone's mother or someone's daughter and someone's wife. She is always compelled to feel subdued whenever she tries to assert her individuality. It is always considered as a crime if she ever tries to think about herself. As Betty Friedan says:

Each suburban wife struggles with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured club scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—Is this all?

Jaya's neighbour, Kamat proves instrumental for awakening in Jaya the feeling of becoming an autonomous being. Jaya decides to express her real feelings, her anger; her resentment through her writings. She always realized her own contribution towards her oppression and understood that her silence is responsible for her failure. She admits that:

It's not just that life is very cruel, but that in the very process of our birth we submit to life's cruelty. I had learnt it at last no questions, no retorts, only silence. (143)

Jaya plays the role of an ideal wife and a good mother wholeheartedly but her loyalty as well as her identity receives a great blow when Mohan is found indulged in some wrong practices in his office, due to which, he had to leave his job. Jaya broke down when Mohan tries to release himself from this crime by saying that it was due to her and children that he slipped from the right track to give them more comforts. Jaya feels tormented that she always subdued her real self, her identity and her real character in order to happiness of her husband. Jaya always remained under the sense of 'fear' of losing her house, her husband and her children. Mohan pushes both the woman and creative genius in her. Once Jaya says,

I was full of sense of angry confusion. What was he charging me with? And, oh God, Why couldn't I speak? Why couldn't I say something. (119)

With the dawning of the 'excruciating painful' truth of the sham that her life has been, Jaya takes a pledge to break the shackles and be what she really is. Her giving up writing for the newspaper column 'Seeta' indicates giving up her subdued housewife role of Sita as she can be dictated upon to write according to her husband's desires: "What have I achieved by this writing? The thought occurs to me again as I look at neat pile of papers. Well, I have achieved this I'm not afraid any more. The Panic has gone" (Emphasis added) (191)

Sumitra Kukreti sums it up aptly when she says: "The realization that she can have her own way, really gives a new confidence to Jaya. This is her emancipation." (1998:197)

The knowledge and clarity that any fragmentation of the self in the form of being a dependent wife and an independent woman is just 'not possible' and that 'life has always to be made possible' (193), reconcile her to the necessity of bringing about a change in her life and she knows for sure now that any kind of wavering or a backward step would throw her into the same hell-like situation from which she has just stepped out.

## CONCLUSION

Finally it has proven that how patriarchy hampers woman's assertion tries to suppress and oppress her in each and every step. It also shows how this patriarchal system indoctrinate women to change themselves according to social standard. This society never gives them an opportunity to groom and assert themselves in their marriages, treat them as a commodity' and an object for satisfying their sexual urges. It is shown that how a woman can find herself and assert her individuality by shedding her all fears. This is what the protagonist does in the novel and projects herself as a subject and refuses to live her life in a servile manner. She decides to take harness of her life in her own hands and able to complete her journey towards self perception.

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