

## Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence: A Quest for Selfhood

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### Abstract

*Shashi Deshpande occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists who concern themselves with the problems of women and their quest for selfhood. In her novel That Long Silence the feminist struggle for liberation is looked upon within the framework of the freedom crisis. The quest for an authentic selfhood finds an artistic expression through the heroine's rebellion against the patriarchal core of society.*

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Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, deals with the protagonist, Jaya's passage through a maze of self-doubts and fears towards the affirmation of herself. In the novel Deshpande explores Jaya's public and private realms of experience. In the early years of her marriage, Jaya is on the threshold of acquiring a name as a creative writer of some merit. One of her short story bags the first prize and is published in a magazine. Mohan, who tolerates her writing as something quite harmless and even takes pride in being the husband of a writer displays an insensitivity and intolerance about a particular short story written by his wife. The story in question depicts a couple where a man cannot reach out to his wife except through her body. Mohan thinks that the story portrays their own personal life, and he is very apprehensive of the idea that the people of his acquaintance may assume that he is the kind of person portrayed in the story. This is enough reason to jeopardize Jaya's career as a writer. Though she knows that there is no truth in what her husband thinks, she does not try to reason with him. She feels that she had done wrong and she begins to write under an assumed name. But her stories are rejected by one publisher after another. Once while trying to analyze the reason behind the series of rejections, her neighbor, Kamath after reading the rejected stories, tells her that they are devoid of any strong emotion since she has carefully censored all the anger from the story making it impersonal.

Jaya later starts writing light, humorous pieces on the travails of a middle class housewife in a column titled 'Seeta.' This receives a good response from the editors and readers and more importantly, gets a nod of approval from her husband, Mohan. Jaya states :

"Seeta had been the means through which I had shut the door firmly on all these women who had invaded my being, screaming for attention, women I had known I could not write about, because they might, it was just possible, resemble Mohan's mother or aunt or my mother or aunt." (TLS 149)

The statement effectively conveys the fact that women writers have all along abstained from telling the truth, giving greater credence to their roles as wives than to themselves as individuals. Kamat, as a hard critic, is contemptuous of such writing, knowing full well that Jaya is capable of writing better stuff.

The other most important aspect of Jaya's personality which clashes with her image of wife and mother, is her association with Kamat, who is a widower and lives in an apartment above Jaya's flat at Dadar. He is a lonely man and showers his attention on Jaya. He is totally unlike most other men Jaya has known in the sense that he has no reservations about doing things like cooking which are usually considered to be a woman's domain. She feels totally at ease in his company because he treats her as an equal. In his company, she rids herself of all her inhibitions and opens up to him all her problems. He does not allow her to indulge in self-pity. Instead he analyses situations objectively and rationally. He is an advertiser by profession and is apparently well read. He offers constructive criticism to Jaya with regard to her writing. He understands her fears and even volunteers to receive her mail at his address, so that she could avoid a confrontation with her husband who disapproves of her writing.

The initial platonic nature of their relationship develops into physical attraction in course of time. She is more uninhibited in his company than in that of her husband. Her relationship with him cannot be placed into a particular category. At one moment he chides her like a father and the next moment he compliments her like a lover. In spite of the willingness of her body and the ample opportunity provided in the seclusion of his apartment, Jaya overcomes her yearning in the interest of safeguarding her marriage. As Y S. Sunita Reddy points:

"The man-woman relationship going by the norms of society is dictated by deceit and treachery. Human beings, more often than not, prefer to go by the dictates of society rather than be truthful to themselves as individuals." (76)

It is perhaps, this which prompts Jaya to behave in an utterly callous way on the death of Kamat. On one of her visits to his room, Jaya finds Kamat lying dead on the floor of his flat. She is unable to pay homage to her friend for the fear of getting involved in any scandal which might pose a danger to her marriage. She feels terribly guilty. Jaya perhaps does her role as a wife with perfection but fails as a human being. Through this situation Deshpande also highlights the plight of the so-called educated woman still bound firmly by the shackles of tradition and convention.

Though her creative writing and her close association with Kamat are two glaring examples of Jaya's inability to seek her own identity, there are several other factors which hinder her development as a complete individual in her own right. In her anxiety to perform her role as a perfect wife and a loving and caring mother, her identity is relegated to the background. Her name 'Jaya' which is given to her at birth by her parents is changed to 'Suhasini' at the time of marriage. To please her husband, she transforms her appearance to suit his idea of a modern woman. She cuts her hair, wears dark glasses and ultimately gets so completely absorbed into the family fold that from a fiercely independent woman she is transformed into the stereo type of a woman, nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support. She desperately clings on to her husband as if her life depends on it. At times she is beset with the fear that something many happen to Mohan. She feels :

"The thought of living without him had twisted my insides, his death had seemed to me the final catastrophe. The very idea of his dying had made me feel so bereft that tears had flowed effortlessly down my cheeks. If he had been a little late coming home, I had been sure he was dead. By the time he returned, I had, in my imagination shaped my life to a desolate widowhood." (96 - 97)

Jaya is a representative of the urban middle, class woman exposed to liberal western ideas. But she is unable to free herself entirely from the clutches of male chauvinist ideas. These ideas are a part and parcel of her culture, thrust upon her by those around her. Her aunt, Vanita Mami, for instance, counsels her just before her wedding. She would tell Jaya:

"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". (32)

Vanita Mami's long suffering role of a martyred wife prompts Jaya at one time before her marriage to think that maybe, she too had been similarly counseled as a bride. In spite of her flippant attitude towards Vanita Mami's advice, however, Jaya proves that she is no different from her, when it comes to the question of a choice between her husband and family, and asserting herself as an independent individual, she chooses the former without hesitation.

The sudden catastrophe of the corruption charges against Mohan and their exit to the Dadar flat, however, compel Jaya to excavate her own truths and those of the other women in her life and break that long silence. In the small, drab flat at Dadar, Jaya's carefully built facade cracks and she breaks her self-imposed silence. She proceeds to unmask layer by layer the superficial aspects of her married life to reveal the hard core of reality. As Indira Bhatt observes:

"Shashi Deshpande unmasks both Jaya and Mohan when they face the crises in their lives. They have run into stormy weather and their secure sheltered life washes away like a water colour in a rainy storm." (156)

Each of them reacts to the crises in a different manner. Mohan becomes restless and unsettled, away from his routine work. He feels insecure and confused. He expects his wife to empathize with him because he feels he has got involved in this mesh only because of her and the children. He expects that his wife should give him emotional support. But Jaya herself is in a traumatic situation. She too has been jolted out of a false complacency. Looking up to her husband as a 'sheltering tree', she had been lulled into a false sense of security. Whatever chaotic conditions prevailed outside, a home is a safe and secure place with the husband as the head of the family. This sense of security is shattered with the sudden prospect of Mohan facing an enquiry. Added to this is the weight of her husband's insecurity, fear and feeling of inadequacy that she has to put up with. It is the height of irony that when she desperately needs a shoulders to lean on. Jaya is accused by her husband of avoiding him. Jaya reacts to this by bursting into a laugh which makes Mohan lose his patience and he leaves the house in a huff in a seemingly permanent way. His absence unnerves her and she thinks her world will fall apart, to add to her despair, Jaya gets the news that her son Rahul, who had been holidaying with their family friend, has suddenly disappeared. This piece of news shatters her and hits her with the force of a bolt striking a tender tree. Later Rahul returns and she receives a telegram from Mohan that all is well.

But before this happens, however, Jaya lives for several days in a traumatic state. There is no one she can turn to in the despair. She struggles alone with the trauma and though it upsets her mental equilibrium, she emerges victorious. When she finally comes out of her emotional upheaval, she comes to terms with herself and her position. For the two nights before the return of her son and husband that she has to herself in the Dadar flat, she pours out on a paper her innermost thoughts, giving vent to her pent up feelings, her fears, her doubts and everything she had suppressed in her seventeen years of silence.

Thus Deshpande's novel reveals the Jaya's quest for self. Jaya in the end of the novel gets the guidance for her future through her journey into past. By the end of novel the crisis a mere storm in the tea cup has been averted and everything outwardly appears to be as it had been, except for what has happened to Jaya. Jaya can no longer be a passive, silent partner to Mohan. The novel ends with the resolve to speak, to break her long silence by putting down

on paper all that she had suppressed in her seventeen years' silence. Thus, she resolves to assert her selfhood.

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