

Silence : A Behavioural, Social and Cultural Trait of Female Identity in *That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande

Dipika Rani, Associate Professor of English, Govt PG College, Hisar, Haryana, India

Abstract- Exploitation of woman potential in a male dominated society is much common in Indian society which Shashi Deshpande, a promising Indo-Anglian novelist, depicts in her novels through the psyche of representative female characters. Her *That Long Silence* brings out the tragic destiny of characters like Jaya, Jeeja, Kusum and Avva who accept their fate as such without protest in the name of mutual adjustment, fear, social norms or cultural practices and remain silent. They struggle hard with themselves only to weigh the burden of silence for long years. However, the writer is not without an answer and paves a path of self-assertion or speech for women. She perfectly suggests through the chief female protagonist Jaya that silence can never be the solution of any problem.

Keywords: Dogma, Female, Patriarchal, Silence, Struggle

Shashi Deshpande has emerged as a forceful writer in the arena of Indo-anglian literature while giving voice particularly to the female concerns in Indian society. After long years of struggle of achieving fame academically she left her imprint in dealing with female psyche and highlighting worn out social dogmas and taboos responsible for tortured female experiences. She is rightly “acclaimed by the reading public ... regarded as a forceful writer, with an excellent command over English language” (Bala 9). Distinct from other Indian female writers such as Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Shobha De and Namita Gokhle, Shashi’s recognition is based on her treatment especially of middle class educated and economically independent Indian woman and derogatory stereotypes related to woman. Shashi’s female characters like Saritha in *The Dark Holds no Terror*, Urmila in *The Binding Vine* and Jaya in *That Long Silence* fall in

this category. They struggle hard to make their existence possible in a society inhuman and hostile towards woman.

Silence works out as a refuge for one-half of humanity in the face of harsh realities and cruelties of life. Discrimination towards woman and manipulation of power in the patriarchal society become clear when one reads Virginia Woolf, an eminent feminist writer, “A very queer, composite being ... Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically, she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry ... but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction ... some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips, in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell and was the property of her husband” (42). The present paper is an effort to bring out the various interpretations and causes of silence inhibited in the behaviour of some female characters of different age groups and social classes. “The word 'silence' bearing many connotations voices so many doubts, fears and conflicts. Where speech fails, silence prevails. Silence may signify mutual understanding, sense of responsibility, passive acceptance, lack of confidence, want of communication or denial of freedom to express – all depend upon the situation. In *That Long Silence*, Deshpande handles this word very subtly and tactfully. She uses it particularly to highlight the hushed up feminine voice for a long period of time in Indian patriarchal society. Without any intention to denounce any male or female and without being bitter, the writer underlines a dire need of self-assertion to make a better social set up favorable for family ties. It is also considerable here that silence can no longer exist and can never be the solution of woman’s problems. The writer depicts the necessity to smoothen this paralyzed communication between male and female.

That Long Silence is a saga of suppressed soul of woman prisoned in the suffocated room of silence as is portrayed through and described by the female protagonist Jaya Kulkarni. Jaya, like millions of other women, bears “the weight of that long silence of one-half the world” (Robin, speech). Here silence assumes many shapes and patterns. First and foremost, silence comes out as an image of female subjugation in patriarchal society. Indians, males or females, who still cannot cross the periphery of rotten social and religious traditions are responsible for the travails of woman. A woman

is bound in the restraints of archetypal images and is considered responsible only for reproduction or repetition than production or creativity. Biological factors also go along with it. Her work field is limited to home and children. She is also assumed not to speak, to express opinion or to oppose anything going on in the household. Consistent negation leads woman to the subsided position ultimately resulting in silence. This silence alienates her from the society and more prominently from herself and thus is created identity crisis. A question of recognition of the self emerges with it and looms largely in the mind of a woman. It makes her guilty of her own actions and thoughts.

Jaya brought up in an atmosphere of male dominance cannot think about to make herself free from Mohan, her husband, at any time. Her recognition is with Mohan only as Dr Vyas who is her brother's acquaintance hopes to meet her next time with her husband. Her thought, "Why I married Mohan; the truth is that he had decided to marry me, I had only to acquiesce" (Deshpande 94) clearly depicts that a woman has no right to choose. Mohan is a fastidious man with an air of authority and confidence and without reconciliation to failure. He always considers himself as a dutiful son, father, husband and brother. Jaya's silence too has become her sin and is mistaken as accusation by Mohan who justifies his financial corruption by saying, "I did it for you, for you and the children" (Deshpande 10). Jaya herself tries to play and rehearse her role as a wife very well as she knows that she is only Mohan's wife and his desires, his approval, his love are the most important things in her life. "A pair of two bullocks yoked together" (Deshpande 7) is the best-suited image for this relation in Jaya's mind as to move in the same direction is always comfortable for two persons or animals tied together unwillingly. Their relationship is like 'guerilla warfare'. Jaya finds nothing common in herself with Indian mythical women like Sita who went to exile with her husband or Savitri who reclaimed her husband from death or Draupadi who shared her husband's sufferings though she herself has to make compromise in life while living in a patriarchal social set up.

Fear is the very core of a female existence which makes her life so decrepit and meaningless that silence becomes the prop for her. Jaya's only memory of childbirth is that of fear because a woman loses control over her own body at this time. Like any

other lady, Jaya bears this pain also patiently as she herself accepts in the hard process of revelation. She subsides her personality in this biological conditioning. She never revolts against her husband or even thinks to enrage him. Ironically, in the last, a laughter of Jaya hurts Mohan's ego and he leaves home. In fact, they are "...two persons. A man. A woman" (Deshpande 8) even after seventeen years of marriage. Jeeja, the maid of Jaya and a stern representative of lower- class woman, asks calmly, "With whom shall I be angry?" (Deshpande 52) after the second marriage of her husband. She finds herself guilty because she is not able to fulfill the child-giving purpose of marriage. She underestimates herself and plays an active role in her own subjugation in this gender-biased society. Nayana, the sweeper, has a longing for a male child only because a girl child has to suffer all her life at the hands of man. Thus a woman is compelled for unwilling submission to man's whimsical attitude.

In *That Long Silence*, silence symbolizes the feigned power of woman to endure which necessarily comes out of desperation of her failed efforts to save herself from the tyranny of man. A woman when unable to express or resist, starts bearing all atrocities and cruelties of male dominated world. Mohan's mother (Avva) is a great example of endurance in the novel. Mohan's father comes late in night, wants fresh-cooked rice with chutney, throws off the plate of food and cries over and beats Avva. This poor lady, nowhere to go and nothing to say or do, was a scapegoat who has to remain silent accepting all as her destiny. It becomes more painful for us when her own son Mohan with a typical malevolent attitude describes her as "she was tough. Women in those days were tough" (Deshpande 36) However Jaya who is well-versed with the exploitation of a woman, comments, "He saw strength in the women sitting silently in front of the fire, but I saw despair... It would not voice itself... struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender..." (Deshpande 36). Avva dies ultimately under the burden of shameful act of abortion. Same is the fate of Vimla, Mohan's sister. The writer uses the phrase "silence intact" (Deshpande 39) for her stupefaction. Vimla dies due to an ovarian tumour but her mother-in-law indignantly remarks, "she's been lying there on her bed for over a month now... I never heard of women going to hospitals and doctors for such a thing" (Deshpande 39). In such a dismal scenario, silence is a weapon

to fight against injustice of society or a compulsion to surrender for her own dejected soul – only a woman can better decide. This fatal tragedy in the lives of Indian women for which males as well as females both are criminally responsible makes them merely a plaything in the hands of destiny.

Sometimes silence is observed in the name of pseudo- responsibility which reflects social victimization of a woman. Social status and dignity stop woman especially of middle class to give voice to her anger and ire. Her resentment is silenced because “anger makes a woman unwomanly” (Deshpande 83). While living in a traditional family, Jaya’s Aji does not utter a single word and accepts her cursed widowhood calmly. This close shaven-headed widow has only two sarees as her belongings. She sits and sleeps on the floor whereas a double bed as her husband’s memorial and two chairs are kept in her room. She does not show her resentment or exhibit her tears on the desertion by Jaya’s father, her dearest son but accepts this also quietly. She leaves the food and dies within six months silently after her son’s death. Jaya who believes in the concept of a happy family constantly lives under a kind of social pressure. She is horrified at every moment which seems to shatter her hopes of a ‘well-played’ married life. She can never talk with Mohan about Kamat as she does not want Mohan to be diminished or disfigured under the weight of her likings. Even, in the last, she finds herself unable to save Kamat and silently comes back to her flat. Kamat realistically explains her situation, “Don’t try to act the martyr now. It’s all your fault” (Deshpande 84). Jaya never tells her husband about her rejected stories by the publisher and the secret of abortion of her third child without taking permission from Mohan as she finds herself imprisoned in her own sense of social and moral responsibilities. Her soul is shriveled under this beastly burden of male oriented society.

In the reading of *That long Silence*, it becomes more than clear that factors like social fear, family ties and cultural conditioning in upbringing of a girl are responsible for the false cover of silence over deep-seated resentment in woman’s heart which certainly results in the effacement of her soul though unconsciously. Jaya as a writer too remains silent in the novel. Mohan discourages Jaya by calling her “only an exhibitionist” (Deshpande 144) in her stories and asks her only to write the column

“Seeta”. Mohan is not happy with her prize-winning story. Jaya in the name of Suhasini accepts her fate and fulfils her duties silently without questioning Mohan’s acts. Suhasini – “I chose that name for you” (Deshpande 15) reproachfully Mohan said, “distinct from Jaya, a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman” (Deshpande 16). A woman whom Jays finds as one who nurtures her family, stays at home and believes to keep out the rest of the world to be safe. However, in the course of the novel, Jaya feels, “Safety is always a unattainable” (Deshpande 17). Jaya feels guilty over her laugh and wants to explain to Mohan that she was not laughing at him but “at everything-marriage, us, this whole absurd exercise we call life...” (Deshpande 122) but Mohan has already left the house making Jaya alone with her silence. She learns at last, “no questions, no retorts. Only Silence” (Deshpande 143) as she was conditioned by her grandmother also. Beauvoir aptly writes, “A Woman is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (vii). To the utmost humiliation of a woman, she is not treated as the member of the family of any side either of her parents’ family as she is meant to be given to other family in marriage, or her husband’s family as she comes from another family. Jaya being a girl child and married to Mohan does not belong to the parents’ family tree which goes for nearly two hundred years back. At the same time, Ajji, Kakis and Ai also do not exist there and Ramukaka finds no justification for this. Jaya is scared of hurting Mohan which may devastate “her only carrer, her marriage” (Deshpande 144). Kamat finds Jaya's name like her face – small, sharp and clear except her eyes which do not have “exactitude but are too hesitant, wavering, uncertain...” (Deshpande 15) It clearly underlines Jaya’s hesitant approach towards everything - life, husband, friends and relatives which shows a lack of synthesis in the relationship of male and female.

The institution of marriage is also a hindrance in the freedom to express frank ideas by a woman. It prevents women, as Virginia Woolf also agrees, from realizing their creative potential. After marriage, Jaya finds that stitching, cooking, child-rearing, managing all household things are the pious duties assigned to a wife by the society but she herself is not perfect in all these works. So she feels guilty and accuses her mother for this situation. She depressively comments that women should be “so definite about their roles, so well trained in their duties, so skilful in the right areas, so indifferent to

everything else” (Deshpande 83). Another aspect of marriage i.e. domestic violence is given voice in the cruel treatment of Mohan’s mother by her husband. Nevertheless Mohan justifies it and proudly states in a masculine attitude, “My mother never raised her voice against my father however badly he behaved to her” (Deshpande 83). In a domineering husband’s tone Mohan tells Jaya, “you’re my wife...” (Deshpande 82) Under the “burden of his wanting, the burden of his clinging” (Deshpande 29) Jaya sighs heavily but is compelled to be silent because Mohan acts as “a sheltering tree” (Deshpande 32) for her. The advice of Vanitamami to Jaya on the occasion of her marriage, “If your husband has a mistress or two, ignore it; take up a hobby instead—cats, maybe, or your sister’s children” (Deshpande 31) shows the dark side of the social conditioning of a woman. Kusum, a neurotic female, less preferred in her family and devoid of care and sympathy in her husband’s family, loses her mental balance and jumps in a dry well. In a state of chaos and confusion, Jaya accuses the society for the death of mad Kusum. When Jaya is alone in Dadar flat, she thinks that insane Kusum has chosen death but she cannot choose life even in her sanity. In fact, our social rites, cultural taboos, biased thoughts and images deny woman merely a justifiable and humane existence which is her right as a human being. She is not treated as an equal and is forced to negotiate with the hurdles of the subsided life silently. She has become a dumb creature.

Thus silence becomes essential for the animal existence of woman characters in *That Long Silence* and of all women in the society as well only to avoid conflicts. Our narrow mindset and psychology is responsible for the mute sufferings of woman like Jaya, Kusum, Jeeja, Nayna, Ajji and Avva. “mutual reverence for life” and “desire to make something ordered and whole out of the flux” (Deshpande 37) is the solution of the problem. Transformation is possible only with self-assertion which Shashi Deshpande suggests in the end of the novel. Jaya decides to speak though she is doubtful for Mohan who is yet to return. So she thinks, “We don’t change overnight... But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible” (Deshpande 193). She overcomes her fears and insecurities and promises with herself to go ahead positively in her relations. Deshpande’s protagonists finally try their best to conform to their roles and the novel

ends with an optimistic tone with the possibility to some positive action in future. Now understanding is better than compromise for Jaya who thinks that life always gives us a chance to remorse, to repent and to retribute.

In fact, Shashi Deshpande is successful in highlighting the plight and silence of woman due to the patriarchal set-up of families and social conditioning of males as well as females. Her efforts are highly appreciable when she suggests an optimistic ending. She moves through the labyrinth of her woman characters' minds, searches the dark passages there and brings out the struggle, the confusion and the frustration with which a woman is battling alone and silently. In *That Long Silence*, this suffocating silence is, no doubt, explosive and bursts out at the moment of crisis and a soothing peace or calmness is restored ultimately. The real humane existence of male or female is possible only with humbleness than humility, expression than suppression, commitment than accusations and acceptance than rejection of each other.

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