

Self-discovery in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence and Roots and Shadows*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the self-discovery is emblemized through the momentous historical act of crossing the threshold of the house and into the world, and thus into the vortex of political action, sexual desire, intrigue, loss, and suffering. The women in these novels are already in the world. The choice of intellectual as protagonist within the context of the domestic space seems quite deliberate.

Reference to this paper
should be made as follows:

Rajalakshmi. S,

*Self-discovery in Shashi
Deshpande's That Long
Silence and Roots and
Shadows,*

Notions 2017, Vol. VIII,
No.3, pp. 142-
Article No. 20 (N619)

Online available at :
[http://anubooks.com/
?page_id=34](http://anubooks.com/?page_id=34)

In Deshpande's novels, the home stands in for a personal history whose physical and psychological claims must be negotiated by the protagonist in order to come to some sort of understanding of the contradictions in her social position. In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu, a successful and well-to-do young journalist, visits her parental home after twelve years of estrangement. Unable to ignore the summons of her dying great-aunt, she arrives in haste to discover that the old woman, who had been most hostile towards her for marrying outside her caste, has made her the beneficiary of all her wealth. Although angry and confused at first by this sudden entanglement in the affairs of a family from which she had long since removed herself, Indu stays on after her great aunt passes away. While the funeral arrangements are made, she tries to decide what to do with the inheritance.

During this period, she relives all the familiar rivalries, tensions, alliances, and betrayals of her large extended family, through the direct and oblique demands of its various members. Indu feels a tremendous urge to exercise the power she has never had the power to judge, act and bestow as she pleases. She longs to make one grand gesture with which she can calm the troubled waters and at the same time remain above it. With this realization, the prolonged sense of alienation slips away, but Indu does not and cannot belong to the family anymore. Before she leaves, she has another experience which, in spite of its tragic end, contributes to her decision-making and leads her to express herself in a way that she had never thought possible. She meets Naren, a distant cousin and an outsider like herself. Their old friendship and attachment are soon rekindled. Breaking a long-standing protocol, they make love. No new bond is created between them and neither is guilty or uncomfortable about the encounter later. However, within a few days, Naren dies in an accident. Claiming her inheritance as she does her roots, with a mixture of inevitability and distance, Indu chooses to put the money into a trust fund for needy and meritorious students, with the caveat that nobody from the family should have access to it. She returns home at last to Jayant with the resolution to see "if that home could stand the scorching touch of honesty" (205).

Deshpande's later novel, *That Long Silence*, also structures the protagonist's access to a personal history in the form of a return to familiar but estranged territory. Like Indu of *Roots and Shadows*, Jaya is forced to return to her past home because of unexpected and shocking circumstances. When Jaya's husband is caught and suspended for fraudulent business practices, the couple quickly leave their tidy, carefully maintained home in a posh locality of Bombay and escape to Jaya's maternal home in Dadar to avoid relatives and friends. Unlike the crowded atmosphere of the ancestral home in *Roots and Shadows*, there is no one in this old house. Only the

shadows of its previous inhabitants flit in and out of Jaya's memories.

During their sequestration, Jaya finds it difficult to keep up the "the habit of being a wife, of sustaining and supporting [Mohan]" (98). She can neither question nor criticize him on the recent events. Eventually, all communication breaks down between them. It seems that the silence within Jaya, bred by prolonged compromise and compliance, has at last externalized itself. The alienation that years of routine activities and responses had kept out of sight has suddenly taken actual shape. Jaya's exploration of "that long silence" begins at this critical juncture. The four sections of the book correspond to four main types of relationships Jaya revisits with the women in the family; with Mohan, her husband; with Kamat, a male friend and mentor; and finally, with her two children. Jaya describes her narrative position thus: "Self-revelation is a cruel process. The real picture, the real you never emerges. Looking protractedly, and more decipherably the isolated, bourgeois, middle-class, upper-caste contours of her existence. A very tentative reconciliation occurs between Jaya and her husband towards the end of the novel with Jaya resolving, like Indu, "to speak, to listen. . .to erase the silence" (192). Those different relationships and faces reveal the silence to be more than a continuing saga of victimhood.

As Jaya scrutinizes what she considers her most real face, that of the writer, she recognizes in it the same history of conformity and burial characterizing her normal, everyday existence. She finds it impossible to extricate any part of herself that was not, in some way, enmeshed in the social norms and expectations that had made Mohan who he was, that had contributed to Kamat's lonely death, or that had led to the suicide of her crazed cousin, Kusum. The novel thematizes the difficulties of approaching that reality by subordinating it to these various discrete stories, each one sketching more experientially, more Deshpande's heroines negotiate identity by trying to reclaim their past, not in terms of what remains or exists but in terms of what has become buried or erased. The fact that Jaya and Indu are both lodged in the familiar yet alien surroundings of their maternal homes, clearly associated with traditional values and lineage, brings to the process of retrieval a deliberate act of counter-memory. The focus accordingly keeps shifting from the characters themselves to the process of sifting, arranging, selecting, and assessing all those discrete parts torn asunder by the imperatives of their present existence. In each case, the formation of identity through the inclusion and exclusion of different aspects of the self-forms a central motif.

The return of the women to the family home takes the shape of an encounter with the past they have chosen to leave behind. Indu of *Roots and Shadows* arrives at a moment when the old joint family is on the brink of disintegration and the house

itself is up for sale. Her estrangement is quite apparent at the very outset of her visit as she struggles with names she has forgotten, faces she has begun to confuse, children who are afraid to come near her. More importantly, to those women in the family, who daily observe the ritual of circumambulating the holy tree (Julsi) for the long life of their uncaring husbands, women who would never utter their husbands names, Indu is “too clever” (36). For the young men struggling to make a living, her reputation as journalist and writer is unquestionably “formidable” (43). Indu obviously has very little in common with these members of her family, and, as she herself finds, she would always remain an outsider here.

Indu’s alienation is described in a way that makes it almost akin to that of the expatriate from the developed world visiting her original place of belonging. Like the expatriate also, her responses express nostalgia for the deep familial bonds of the past and a desire to bridge the chasm of privilege and cultural difference that divides her sentient, professional, and decidedly modern way of life from the semi-feudal, semi metropolitan existence of her parental home. While detail upon detail graphically renders the chaotic and state of the place, repeated statements of belonging attempt to sublimate the experience into a sense of homeliness that is more than the sum of its parts. Indu observes that “at home we changed our sheets twice a week . . . Here, the sheet was none too clean, the blanket smelt of Kaki’s body. Sometime some child had urinated on the thin mattress. . . . And yet I stretched myself on the bed with relief. Even joy” (34). Although appalled by such conditions as “the bathroom with its slimy stone floor and huge copper vessels so rarely cleaned that they had turned green inside, Indu insists that “This is our house. . . . I am home” (37).

Almost identically, Jaya’s narrative in *That Long Silence* misses nothing. From the stairs leading to the tiny, crowded flat, with its “trail of garbage . . . cigarette butts, scraps of paper, bits of vegetable peel . . . squirts of paan-stained spit” (7), to the interior of the rooms themselves, complete with its fungus-filled shoe, dust-laden surfaces, and a clanging toilet, everything announces the difference of this dwelling place from the one Jaya has left behind.

The emphasis on the sense of belonging in this disorderly setting serves another function besides highlighting the nostalgia and guilt of the estranged daughter; it brings into relief the self-sufficient, individuated, and tidy environment of the married home, which now appears to Jaya “like a glossy, coloured advertising visual” (4). There is, however, a crucial difference in the way that each character situates herself in the gap between the two frames of reference. Whereas in *Roots and Shadows*, Indu’s reclamation of her daughterly role takes place in opposition to her wifely role, in *That Long Silence* the two zones cannot be so clearly demarcated. Before her

husband's meteoric success, Jaya has lived in the old house. It contains many of her old diaries and manuscripts. Every ordinary object spurs her memory, and "the ghost of [her] old self appears at every corner, haunting her with the realization that she has become the obsessive guardian of Mohan's domestic happiness long before leaving this crowded place for the peaceful isolation of Churchgate" (13).

The most important function of the past in both narratives, however, is that it interrupts the performance of the present. Almost the very first sign of that interruption in *That Long Silence* occurs with the explosion of the laboriously carved persona of Jaya's monthly column in a woman's magazine, accompanied with her own photograph. In this column, Jaya states "light, humorous pieces about the travails of a middle-class housewife" who is pointedly called Seeta (148). She is the new independent woman of official male discourse, self-reliant, but also fully at home in her domestic space. This image, derived primarily from the urban, educated, middleclass career woman, is also the advertiser's choice for selling consumer products.

Although Jaya sees in Seeta "someone masquerading as [her]self," the character is a great favorite with her husband (119). Seeta had provided a safe subject, not only for Jaya, who until the sudden disruption of her life had been unable to write about women like herself, but also for Mohan. The only time Jaya dares to write a story resembling her real life with Mohan, he is devastated. It does not matter to him that the story wins a prize and gets published: "To Mohan, I had been no writer, only an exhibitionist" (144). Jaya's own investment in the column cannot be minimized, however. Seeta seems to have provided a rationalization for the Jaya who had obsessively and humorlessly "scrubbed and cleaned and taken an inordinate pride in her achievements, even in a toilet free from stains and smells" (13). The implications of the break with Seeta, when it does come, are quite far-reaching: "There was nothing left of her, not even bits and pieces that could be put together" (69). The demise of Seeta spells the end of Suhasini as well, the name given to Jaya by Mohan on their wedding night, signifying beauty and gentleness; it paves the way for the return of Jaya.

Jaya's moment of self-consciousness de-houses her from a second space of self-imaging or self-production. This time it is her diaries, those objects of intimate thought and expression, which appear to be almost entirely influenced by her domestic role. The interruption of the present through various strategies of de-domestication cannot take place without confronting the past itself. In order to refigure the past, she turns to the histories of women in the family that her present has buried. The project, however, is fraught with difficulties. Although the ghosts of those women

had “invaded [Jaya’s] being, screaming for attention, “they do not now arise phoenix-like from the

ashes of Seeta or the Sane Housewife” (149).

Jaya clearly cannot and will not identify with them. They belong to another class, another world: Mohan’s mother, who, suffering much physical and mental abuse at the hands of her husband, finally dies trying to abort her seventh child; Mohan’s sister, who hides her pain from everyone and is diagnosed with ovarian tumour only days before she dies; Kusum, her distant cousin and the mother of three daughters, who commits suicide by jumping into a well. Although Jaya undertakes the role of scribe, her biggest problem is that she lacks the language in which to speak of/for them. What she knows and understands of these lives remains linked to a decidedly male discourse of womanhood. If, for instance, she were to use Mohan’s words, his mother, sitting before the fire long after midnight re-cooking dinner for her husband.

Even women’s stories produced in women’s words follow the equation of silence and strength. In contrast to the victims, there are the women who come across as powerful figures, but their power is built upon a battlefield of dead hopes and desires. In fact, Deshpande too attacks the brahmanic code of womanhood that remains firmly entrenched even in middle-class families. Writing about these women is as difficult as writing about the victims, perhaps more so because they have turned their self-renunciation into a finely honed code of female conduct that they wholly endorse. In *Roots and Shadows*, it comes as a shocking revelation to Indu to learn that her great aunt, who is the ultimate figure of authority, wealth, and power in the household, rose to that position only by enduring silently a traumatic marriage of more than twenty years. She had entered the house as a child bride and in trying to escape the terror of her husband’s sexuality had been whipped and starved into total submission by her mother-in-law. Her husband spent most of his time with his mistress and his dying wish had been to see her by his bedside, the only wish that his wife denied him. Until her own very uncharacteristic act of making Indu the sole inheritor of her property, this long-suffering woman had enforced every domestic convention by the rule of thumb.

At this point it might be worth reviewing the question of self-positioning in *That Long Silence*. Jaya’s narrative enacts the struggle with identification and self-representation in different ways. When Jaya writes the stories of women from the past she adopts the objective mode, denoting distance, even alienation from them.

The protagonists move away from mothers and foremothers. Several critics have pointed out that in Deshpande's work there is no mother who could serve as a model for the daughter. Deshpande's novels, are usually ruthless, superstitious, manipulative, and sexist. They value the role of men, those who accomplish things in the real world, and their relationship with their daughters is shaped by the authority and desire of the father.

Deshpande's heroines, however, find no new space, no new context in which to exercise their newly realized selves. Creative unhomeliness, represented by wanderers and nomads, is still the exclusive privilege of men. In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu's cousin Naren "is incapable of living by any rules" (119). He comes and goes as he pleases. His only tie to the family is his aged grandfather for whom he returns time and again. Considered a wastrel by most of the family, Naren's sharp-witted, unpretentious, and candid personality holds special appeal for Indu. But what draws Indu to him most, what she finds truly reassuring, is his detachment.

Indu's admiration is not, however, an innocent one as she reflects upon what his absences meant to her and the prejudices they possibly concealed: "How else could he have parted with me, a fifteen-days-old motherless baby, to the family he hated and despised? He had not even come to see me until I was more than a year. But that, perhaps, was because I was a girl. If I had been a son" (179). In spite of such reservations, men without wives, family, and a settled domestic abode, occupy an important place in Deshpande's novels. In *That True* to his independent character, Kamat dies without burdening another person, leaving Jaya to cope with the ordinary feelings of guilt and self-pity. Jaya, who had needed him more than anyone else to sustain her anger, to keep herself from forgetting the writer she aspired to be, has to ask herself.

Deshpande's protagonists make sense of the events occurring around them as a function of gender and sexual relations experienced within the context of home. The awareness of their alienated female bodies, the reclamation of past ties and connections, and the desire to pry open concealed hierarchies all delineate a patriarchal social order expressed in the relationship of man and woman.

Deshpande women intellectuals search for their female selves in the autobiographical, coming-to-consciousness mode. As they unravel the multiple threads of home and familial ideology that weave the relentless pattern of their lives, they also implicitly critique the earlier but still influential ideology of Indianization, which metaphorized the home as the core of pre- and uncolonized cultural and moral resource. While no radical decisions are taken and no dramatic revelations made, the characters do arrive at new modes of self-perception. But a self-imagined in

isolation and on the plane of individual struggle leads to a dead end. The non-celebratory language in which the characters articulate their arrival bears testimony.

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