

Female Consciousness in Shashi Deshpande's Novel That Long Silence

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande, born in 1938 in Dharwad, Karnataka, won the Sahitya Academi Award for her Novel That Long Silence in 1990. The main theme of her novels is women's struggle in finding and preserving their identity of Women as a wife, mothers and as a human beings. She has expressed her feminist concern in her novels. The women of Shashi Deshpande, operating within the framework of a male-dominated and tradition-bound society, are conscious of the fact that they have no autonomous self-hood. These protagonists are also aware of their predicament as victims of inequality. They are in search of their authentic identity and distinct self. They are still greatly dominated by men and the society in general.

Keywords

Female, Feminism, Consciousness, Marginalization, Womanhood, Identity, Conventional.

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The concept of Indian womanhood is based upon the mythic models from the Ramayana and the Puranas. The entire image of the Indian woman has been personified by the model characters of ideal women like Sita and Savitri. During the Vedic age women were elevated to the height of Goddesses. But in due course of time, this attitude changed. A woman found herself living in a world where she has been reduced to the status of second sex and compelled to assume the position of the other. The study of this novel reveals that her main concern is women. The novels expose how even an educated, economically independent woman takes a long time to become conscious of their marginalization. Her novel *That Long Silence* is related to a woman's sense of isolation, the need for self-recognition and the quest for identity. The writer's concern is the women's survival in a gender-biased society. Deshpande is of the opinion that one needs to contribute to survival in one's own way and not in the way that someone else had decided for her. In the same way for a woman to survive, her co-dependence should be weakened and her own inner directions must be strengthened. Women should be ready to exercise autonomy and be free to pursue an interesting and challenging careers. The sweeping changes taking place on a global footing in relation to woman's self-position, power politics, their rights and responsibilities, prospects and problems, are the prime motif of her novels. She is not interested in the issues just pertaining to women but deals with human issues which are all of interest to all humanity:

“I have no doubt at all that it is the women's movement that has made it possible for an increasing number of women to have more space to breathe. I know that as a writer I am privileged to be living at a time when the women's movement has made it possible for my voice to be heard, for the things. I write about to be taken seriously as issues that concern all society and not just dismissed as Woman's Stuff.”

That Long Silence of Shashi Deshpande is the story of Jaya and Mohan, who live together as husband and wife in spite of the differences over some fundamental issues of life. In this novel, the novelist conveys the message that the women are bound to tolerate the tyranny of the men in Indian middle-class families. She highlights the climax of the sufferings of the women. According to the novelist, the women are callously neglected and left to die silently without raising their voices even if they become the victim of any serious ailment. Jaya is a living example of a woman who has no other alternative than follow before their husbands as Seeta and

Draupadi did in their lives while following their husbands even in the exile. Jaya, the protagonist says in this novel:

“ But for me, now that I had abandoned ‘Seeta’,
there was nothing; or, if there was, I had to
Search for it”

Jaya and Mohan, both belong to a lower middle class. Jaya’s mother belonged to an Ambegaon family and her father belonged to the Saptagiri family. Her father was a follower of Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian freedom movement. He was a devoted member of Hindu Mahasabha and believed in convent education. That is why he sent Jaya and his two sons to a convent school. Her grandmother opposed his decision of sending his children to convent schools instead of Kannada schools. She said, “No good will come of sending children to a Padri school. They’ll forget all our customs, and they might become Christians”. But finally, Jaya and her two brothers were sent to convent school.

Both Mohan and Jaya belonged to Saptagiri. Mohan belonged to a very poor family and got his education under the paid patronage of some stranger. He became an Engineer working at Lohanagar Steel Plant and was looking for a suitable wife. Mohan found that Jaya was bearing the exact image of a wife that he had already built in his mind because she was B.A. Hons, and could converse in English fluently. In the beginning, she was not ready but finally got married to Mohan on the advice of her family members. Jaya had dreamt like other girls of her age that there would be love and romance after marriage. She had imagined that her husband would be a handsome young man and would say to her ‘I love you’. But soon after her marriage, she realized that it was a marriage, not a love affair. Love had come to mean nothing for Jaya and Mohan but an urge for sex. She herself admits:

“what else could I call it but love when I thought of how
I longed for his physical presence, when I remembered
how readily, almost greedily, I had responded to his touch.
What else could I name it when I thought of the agony it had
been to me without him, when his desire, his approval, his
love had seemed to be the most important, thing in my life?”

After some time Jaya started thinking that her need for him had decreased. She could stay away from him without a twinge, or sleep with him without desire. She was fed up with doing it with the same person, in the same positions and movements- “His procedure had always been so unvaried, that I could almost stand back and watch the whole thing from distance-same positions, same movements,

same time.” She realized that it was sex which affirmed the aloneness of man. Perhaps it was so because we had never come together, only our bodies had done that. Nevertheless, she always sustained and supported him and cruelty to him was impossible. In spite of the fact that love as it was constrained, or perhaps did not exist between them, yet Jaya continued to be a wife. Thus they passed their married life without the passion of love.

The very title of the novel *That Long Silence* itself implies that women do not raise their voices against suppression. Jaya’s father named her Jaya because this word means victory but victory never comes into her life. He inculcated a feeling of superiority in his daughter. Once upon a time, her father called her daughter from the group of girls saying that those girls “asked for nothing more than the destiny of being wives and mothers”. Her father wanted her to be different from the others as he says “You’re going to be different from the others Jaya”.

Jaya’s father wanted her to go to Oxford University after her graduation and to be different from others. Jaya blamed her father for her habit of keeping herself aloof and not being social. She said “Why had he made me feel I was someone special? Why had he made me feel different from others? ... I did not want to be different from others. I wanted to be in that lighted room with them, not walking past, invisible, ignored.” However, Jaya’s father died before sending her to Oxford University and making her different.

Jaya, the protagonist succeeds in liberating herself from the prescribed and interiorized role of the author. It also deals with her effort to find her own identity as a human being capable of thinking and acting on her own initiative. She is torn between the claims of traditional values and modern-educated woman’s urge towards individuation. She is trapped by the instinct to be herself. The novelist uses the path chosen by Jaya to articulate the dilemma of the educated middle-class Indian Woman. The process of self-definition of Jaya creates awareness about many significant issues like women’s writing, female sexuality, motherhood, wifehood, and the necessity for discarding silence as a strategy for survival. In reality, one finds the urge for an educated woman like Jaya to extend herself beyond the confines of domesticity. Although she emerges on the surface as successful emancipated woman with a fulfilling career, she is yet to extricate herself from the patriarchal imposition. Jaya, apart from being a housewife she is a creative writer too. She realizes that she alone is responsible for both her achievements and failures. She says:

“Like one of those multi-colored patchwork quilts that kakis
make for any new baby in the family. So many bits

and pieces-a crazy conglomeration of shapes, sizes and colors put together.”

She begins to create a space for herself through her writing and she was successful up to some extent. But Mohan misunderstood Jaya on many occasions. One of her stories was prized and printed in a magazine. The story was about a husband who reached out to his wife only through the body. Mohan thought that she had made their personal life open to the public through this story. So he expressed his resentment toward Jaya for revealing their private life to the world through her writing. In reality, the story was not an attempt at self-revelation. It had nothing to do with their personal life. Jaya is discouraged in writing by her husband as she was earlier discouraged by her family members. She was encouraged only by her father who was no more alive in this world at that time to provide her with further support. It was her writing that helped her to break her own silence and the silence of others. She comes out of the weight of her own silence that had curbed her creative genius. Having faced the truth of her failure she courageously moves forward and emerges discovering significantly her identity as a writer and as an individual with a liberated woman's consciousness. There comes a change in the life of Jaya when her husband is asked to leave her job due to allegations of involvement in business malpractice along with his other colleague Swaminathan. She is completely disturbed because the reputation of her husband is questioned and the future of the entire family is in jeopardy. Jaya feels humiliated when Mohan accused her of losing his job, not carrying about her children, isolating herself from him and his concern, and of being a false wife. Jaya tried to speak in her defense but she was cringed under his anger and could speak nothing. Mohan left the house without saying anything to her and did not return for several days. This led Jaya to think in different ways. She first thought that Mohan would never leave her since she knew Mohan very well. When he did not return, she started having fears about his life.

The novelist exhibits her feminist concern by highlighting the female consciousness through the character of Jaya in *That Long Silence*. Jaya, a failed writer is drowned in the memories of her past. She starts recollecting her differences with her husband, and frustrations in their marriage even after seventeen years followed by disappointment in her two children. Jaya had feeling that she had not been true to Mohan. When she became pregnant soon after Rahul's birth, she got the child destroyed without bringing it to Mohan's knowledge. She thought it was her great act of treachery against Mohan. She had without a sense of loss and repentance. As Jaya was alone without Mohan, she remembered the words of Vanitamami that

"A husband is like a sheltering tree." Ramukaka, had exhorted, "Remember, Jaya, the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you."

Jaya clearly blames Mohan for discouraging her from writing work. She says, "I gave up my writing because of you." She was completely dissatisfied with Mohan but did not want to take the risk of annoying him despite the fact that he had crushed both her talent as a writer and the woman in her. She herself admitted that after bidding farewell to her writing work, she had relinquished because all her stories were hurting Mohan. They were endangering the only carrier she had i.e. Mohan's wife. Moreover, she cannot take any risk of desertion by annoying her husband, for she could not avoid accepting the role of a traditional Indian woman. She says :

"Even a worm has a hole it can
crawl into. I had mine-as Mohan's wife,
as Rahul's and Rati's mother."

The novelist has expressed the confused state of educated Indian woman who is neither satisfied with a loveless marriage nor can she cast off her husband from her life because he is still like "a sheltering tree". Her life is not possible without him. When Jaya got married to Mohan, she got a new name 'Suhasini' which means "a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman". Before marriage, she was Jaya which meant Victory. So after her marriage, her personality also changed according to her new name i.e. Suhasini as she is always adjusting, submissive and obedient to her husband in spite of her all frustrations and disappointments in her life. When she is suggested by Kamat to express her real anguish through her writings, she clearly says that no woman can ever be angry in her life. She says:

"Because no woman can be angry.
Have you ever heard of an angry
young woman?"

The novel shows that a husband's will and social obligations are more important for a woman. Jaya also tries to prove herself the best housewife. In spite of having depression, frustrations and disappointments in her life, she never puts a question mark on the ways of Mohan rather she expresses her subtle resistance through her silence. When Mohan left the house, Jaya realized that it was her failure as a wife as he said "He expected something from me, from his wife, and I've failed." she further said in repentance,

"All these years I thought I was Mohan's wife,
Now he tells me I was never that, not really.
What am I going to do ? What shall I do

if he doesn't come back ? – Without Mohan,
I'm I don't know what I am.”

The novel ends with the coming back of Mohan. Jaya received a telegram from Mohan, informing her about his return. Now another question started confronting Jaya rather life for her would be as it was earlier. After careful examination of the situation, she reached the conclusion that gender bias would always continue and the situation would remain the same. Finally, she concluded that her silence was responsible for her differences with her husband and the consequent depression and disappointment in her life. The things do not change – they remain as they have been. In the end, she decided to change the old pattern of her life – she would not remain silent, and stand at an equal level with Mohan. But Jaya was to fight for women's emancipation which required a long struggle but still, she hoped that women would rise ultimately, because “without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know now it is this, life has always to be made possible.”

Shashi Deshpande in *That Long Silence* shows that women have been controlling themselves in keeping silent for a long time under the dominance of men. Jaya imagined being an independent girl but it was not possible because the Indian women have always been under the pressure of circumstances, customs and traditions which have put a number of restraints on the women. Jaya says in this reference, “I had learned it at last no questions, no retorts, only silence”. These lines clearly reveal the oppressive situation of a housewife whose journey starts from ignorance to knowledge passing through the sufferings of life.

That Long Silence is a seething critique of the social institutions like marriage or family. The novel is mostly concerned with the silence of women like Jaya, Kusum, Mohan's mother and others and how these women have become victims of patriarchy because of their own silence. It is the history and evolution of women. It promises a better future for women through self-analysis and self-understanding, through vigilance and courage.

Shashi Deshpande's novels, like those of Jane Austen, have a narrow range. Her novels present a typical, middle-class housewife's life. Her main concern is the urge to find oneself and create space for oneself. The main theme of the novel is the predicament of educated women belonging to the middle class. Deshpande's characters are all human beings. To quote: “My characters take their own ways; I've heard people saying we should have strong women characters. But my writing has to do with women as they are.”

The relentless probing of the man-woman relationship by the author makes the reader label her as a feminist, and question her stand as a feminist. Although she

vehemently denies being a feminist, she boldly voices out the frustrations and disappointments of women. The modern women are torn apart by the conflicting forces of tradition and modernity. The plight of the working woman is even worse. It is aggravated by their problems of marital adjustment and quest for their identity and assertion of their individuality. The middle-class Indian woman represents a vast majority of working women who are struggling to make their ends meet.

Deshpande presents a very conventional idea of female consciousness. She seems to believe in gender equality achieved through women's share in material welfare, access to resources and benefits, and participation in the decision-making process. She also believes in control over one's body as a prerequisite for women's empowerment. The choice is the right of both men and women but the choice is relevant only when there is knowledge. In the same way, freedom is relevant when there is responsibility. Deshpande admits that her writings emerge from her suppressed feelings about what it is to be a woman in the Indian society. Though she has reservations about being called a feminist or a woman writer' she agrees that her writings are the experience of the difficulty of playing different roles enjoyed by the society. She quotes:

“My writings come out of my consciousness of the conflict
between my idea of myself as a human being and the idea
society has of me as a woman”.

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