



HEMCOMING FROM 'SOCIETY' TO 'SELF': A READING OF SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THAT LONG SILENCE*

T. Akki Raju^{1*}, Prof. K. Ratna Shiela Mani²

^{1*}(Asst. Professor of English, RRDS Govt. Degree College, Bhimavaram)

Email: akki411@gmail.com

²(Professor, Dept. of English, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur.)

ABSTRACT



The paper is an attempt to explore how Shashi Deshpande portrays the ambivalent attitude of the educated, Indian women through Jaya, the central character in *That Long Silence*. Jaya's journey from 'self' to 'society' and from 'society' to 'self' records the traumatic experiences she has undergone in patriarchal society. Though brought up in a traditional Indian family, she is able to maintain her individuality till she reaches marriageable age. Life after marriage has transformed her into a conventional woman of no voice. She has led her marital life for 17 years by means of unwilling compromise and suppression of her 'self'. Through her self-exploration at Dadar flat, the truth has dawned upon her that compromise has not brought her any happiness in life. She decides that the long-maintained silence has to be broken. Jaya is psychologically strengthened by the review of her life to speak out her feelings, and try to safeguard her identity as a person.

Keywords: *Ambivalent, Individuality, Traumatic, Patriarchal, Compromise.*

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Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* chronicles the homecoming of Jaya, the protagonist, from 'society' to 'self'. Before she attained marriageable age, Jaya has been strong and firm with her own dreams and aspirations about life. In an insensitive society, she has often nourished her assertive 'self.' However, notwithstanding her unwillingness, she is later made to adjust with patriarchal ideology. She has lost her 'self' and faded into a conventional woman of no voice. The traditional society makes her 'a woman,' a weak creature confined to pre-determined roles, as Simone de Beauvoir says, "One is not born but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch which is described as feminine" (Beauvoir 301).

Jaya's short stay at Dadar flat provides a chance for Jaya to probe into the past. She reviews her conjugal life with Mohan. Despite her disappointment on all fronts in life, Jaya emerges as a woman of hope. At the end of her soul-searching exercise, she decides to break her self-imposed, long-maintained silence and hopes to make life possible in the world. Through Jaya's journey from 'self' to society, and from society to 'self,' Deshpande portrays the chilling experiences of educated, Indian women, their strenuous efforts to voice their feelings, their agony to conform against their desires, and their psychological struggle in married life.

The 21st Century has witnessed progress in all walks of life in India. Women are increasingly educated and employed. But they are still unable to escape the influence of excruciating, chauvinistic norms. Jaya is one among them. The whole of her life, she was sandwiched between societal expectations and her inner urge to be free. She is well-educated, and mature enough to take her own decisions, but she is denied a chance to exercise her will in majority of the cases. She has freedom to think independently; however, she cannot mould her future life according to her views. She is forced to lead her life on the lines drawn by the head of the family.

As a woman born in a traditional milieu, Jaya has no say in marriage matters except to accept the man chosen by Dinkar, her brother and the head of the family. Marriage is a "vague and nebulous search" for Jaya who says that her brother "had wanted to be free of his responsibility for an unmarried younger sister, so that he could go ahead with his own plans" (93). In majority of the Indian families, it is still true that the marriage of a woman is considered a burden, and a responsibility to be discharged. Regarding women's role in society, and independence in decision-making, what Deshpande portrayed in her novel in the 80s is still true. Subhash Chandra rightly says that "phenomenal progress has been registered in economic, political, technological and industrial fields, but the social structure of the contemporary India remains tattooed with certain taboos when it comes to the woman-question" (147).



The married life for Jaya begins on a note of disappointment. She is shocked to see “the intimacy” between husband and wife arriving with “the physical link.” She then understands how the established institutions of marriage and family have changed the meaning of “love and romance” (95) in married life. Her views on man-woman relationship are utterly shattered. Mohan’s egoistic attitude aggravates disharmony in her life. She is desperate, but slowly tries to calm herself.

Jaya, the girl, is very expressive. She is not afraid of anyone or anything. When she is nagged by Ai’s pestering questions like “Why are you so late? Who was that you were talking to? Where are you going now?” Jaya boldly says to her brother: “She can’t dictate me. I’ll do just what I want” (75). Jaya’s father fails to convince her to love the music of Paluskar and Faiz Khan instead of Rafi and Lata. A girl of such strong convictions and firm opinions, Jaya has later become “almost the stereotype of a woman; nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support” (76). The psychological trauma in Jaya begins when she has her first quarrel with Mohan. Feeling sick of the smell of oil and spices in the first months of her pregnancy, she casually asks Mohan: “Why don’t you do the cooking today? ... I’m sure you cook well. After all, your mother was a cook” (81).

Mohan feels insulted for two things, one is for asking him to cook, and the other is for reminding him of his mother’s profession. He thinks that it is quite weird for a man to cook. He knows that the role of a woman in his parents’ home is clearly defined, and fixed in conformity with the existing conventions. In his view, a wife should be docile, and passive. His emotional and intellectual make-up is preoccupied with patriarchal mores. Hence, he openly says: “My mother never raised her voice against my father, however badly he behaved to her” (83). Jaya recognizes his underlying meaning and tries again and again to correct herself according to Mohan’s views of life. She says:

I had learnt to control my anger after that, to hold it on a leash. Terrified of his disapproval, I had learnt other things too, though much more slowly, less painfully. I had found out all the things I could and I couldn’t do, all the things that were womanly and unwomanly. It was when I first visited his home that I had discovered how sharply defined a woman’s role was. They had been a revelation to me, the women in his family, so definite about their roles, so well trained in their duties, so skillful in the right areas, so indifferent to everything else. I had never seen so clear, so precise a pattern before, and I had been entranced by it. (83)

Thus, Jaya has transformed herself into ‘Suhasini’ who is “distinct from Jaya, a soft smiling, placid, motherly woman” (15). She believes in the principle of “stay at home, look after your babies, keep out the rest of the world, and you’re safe” (17).

Jaya is disillusioned in life not only as a wife, but also as a writer. Mohan is proud to say, “My wife is a writer” (119), but allows her to write on the lines drawn by him. When she is a budding writer, he objects to a story by her. He complains that the characters in the story resemble them, and people will think of him as the one created in the story. Confining her



stories to the lives of conventional women, Jaya continues her career under a false name, but her stories are rejected, and commented to be “middle class. Bourgeoisie. Upper Caste. Distanced from real life” (148).

Jaya slowly limits herself to the column ‘Seeta’ which is liked by Mohan as well as the editors. ‘Seeta’ has been “the means through which” Jaya “had shut the door firmly on all those other women who had invaded” her emotional depths “screaming for attention” (149). She feels that ‘Seeta’ is “safer,” and continues to pose as a ‘house-proud woman’. Thus, Jaya’s intellectual progress and self-identity are jeopardized by Mohan’s compelling influence on her psyche. As a result, Vanitamami’s words that a husband is like “a sheltering tree. Without the tree, you’re dangerously unprotected and vulnerable” haunt her mind. Jaya tries to “keep the tree alive and flourishing” by watering it “with deceit and lies”. They are like “a pair of bullocks yoked together,” and so she feels that “it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction” (32). Despite her compromise in life by suppressing her individuality and sacrificing her freedom, she finds the life ‘unendurable.’

The conflict caused by the growing gap between her hopes and realities, Mohan’s egoistic nature, and the lack of strong emotional bond between them has given rise to a desire in Jaya for “a catastrophe, a disaster, no, not a personal one, but anything to shake us out of our dull grooves” (4). She realizes that “safety is always unattainable. You are never safe” (17), even if you have become “a sparrow” in the bed-time story.

Jaya is a wife in a couple-centered culture, and so she readily agrees, and walks behind her husband to Dadar flat when he proposes to move. However, she cannot fantasize herself to be a loyal, dutiful wife like “Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband’s travails” (11). She rejects these three images to fit herself into. She goes with Mohan just because she doesn’t want to do otherwise. Mohan too assumes that Jaya will accompany him and takes for granted her “acquiescence” in his plans.

At Dadar flat, Jaya gets “a curious sense of freedom” from her monotonous life and experiences “a queer sense of homecoming” (25) to her real ‘self’, a girl of unflinching opinions. Suddenly, she feels strange about the woman she has been. She is astonished to find (in the diaries) “the woman who had once lived here. Mohan’s wife. Rahul’s and Rati’s mother” (69), and says that it is not ‘myself.’ Looking at Mohan’s situation at Dadar, she is frightened by “the nothingness of what had seemed a busy and full life” (25). She is torn between her ‘self’ and the fearful woman. She is worried that the disturbance of her regular work as Mohan’s wife will lead to the disintegration of her marriage being protected for 17 years.

With all culture-imposed duties, the “waiting game” starts for women early in childhood. “Wait until you get married,” parents say as if the goal of a woman’s life is marriage alone. “Wait until your husband comes,” they say as if she has no life without her husband. “Wait until you have kids” (30), they say as if her life is meant for child-bearing and child-rearing. A woman’s life is caught up in the stranglehold of wifehood, and



motherhood. Jaya is disgusted with this waiting game in her life. At Dadar flat, she feels that she has escaped from it. Mohan too finds a change in Jaya after coming to Dadar. He knows “the woman who had lived with him as his wife”, i.e., ‘Suhasini,’ but not Jaya. Jaya agrees that “Suhasini was dead” and therefore, “Mohan was mourning” (121).

Jaya is, however, not willing to settle her problem by parting with Mohan. She has observed the plight of women who are divorced, or left. In the absence of Mohan from Dadar, Jaya thinks of various routes of solving her problem. Until now, she has followed the theory of “Close the doors, stay in and you’re safe” (17). She is surprised at what has happened to her. She is left alone inside, and everyone has walked out. She now understands that the threat has lain “inside.” She has perceived the life in its true perspective. According to her new vision of life, she should not try to suppress her ‘self.’ She should live with all the pieces of her ‘self’ intact.

Jaya is, by nature, not a submissive and self-effacing woman, but she has yielded to the forces of patriarchal culture who have transformed her into ‘Suhasini.’ Deshpande “does not make her women characters stronger than they actually are in their real life. We can see the elements of Deshpandean heroines in every woman of today’s Indian society. They hold the authenticity of flesh and blood. Deshpande has handpicked these characters from real life and readers can equate these characters with themselves or somebody they know” (Kazhungil 2). Jaya finally concludes that the best way of solving her problem is that “life has always to be made possible” (193). If she breaks away from marriage, she must live independently, which she thinks she cannot afford to.

A close observation of Jaya’s introspection reveals that she has a hope of getting the things better by breaking the silence in her life and by asserting her ‘self’ in the web of family itself. Human relationships are very much important for Deshpande’s protagonists like Jaya. Individuality is not to be sought on the debris of the collapse of marriage. Jaya hopes for working out a healthy balance between husband and wife. It may be difficult for her to pick up the threads and knit the fabric of life together again in the face of stark realities she is supposed to confront with. But she may try. This is the philosophy based on which, Jaya is going to build her future life. One cannot say she is portrayed as a stereo-typed woman just because she wants to continue her life with Mohan. There are chances open for her to assert her individuality in the life with Mohan.

Deshpande’s premise is perhaps that divorce should only be a last resort, if there is any major exploitation of either party. The social life in India is different from that in Western countries. Mohan might have cleverly destroyed Jaya’s progress as a writer. It is true that he has expected her to follow his footprints in every matter, but Jaya probing into her past, understands that all this happens because of her. She has kept silent. Jaya is psychologically strengthened by the review of her life to speak out her feelings, and try to safeguard her identity as a person. She may fail, or succeed in her efforts to find freedom in life. The result depends upon how she applies her decisions to the realities of her life.

***Note:** All exclusive page numbers in parenthesis refer to Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989. Print.

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