

Victimization of women in Shashi Deshpande's "That Long Silence"

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Abstract: *Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence portrays the unequal position of women within marriage and the wider patriarchal family structure. Through Jaya's troubled relationship with Mohan, the novel brings forward the emotional cost of silence, submission, and the gradual loss of personal identity. Jaya has spent much of her married life adjusting her wishes and behaviour to meet the expectations attached to a dutiful wife and mother. A crisis in Mohan's professional life gives her time to look closely at her marriage and confront the self she has long suppressed. The experiences of Vimla, Kusum, Jeeja, Aiji, and other women broaden this concern beyond Jaya's personal struggle, showing how gender inequality operates across different social and domestic situations. At the same time, the novel does not simply divide men and women into oppressors and victims. It also examines personal responsibility, dependence, communication, and the choices that sustain unequal relationships. Jaya's growing self-awareness marks her movement from passive silence toward a clearer understanding of her identity. That Long Silence therefore offers a thoughtful critique of patriarchal practices while presenting marriage and female emancipation with psychological and social complexity.*

Keywords: That Long Silence, Shashi Deshpande, gender inequality, women's identity, patriarchy

1. Introduction

Feminism is a Sheer reaction against male domination over women. The relation between husband and wife is that of the master and the slave. She is considered to be an object or an animal or the second citizen. She is exploited in many ways and the present article aims at the cause of her operation and slavery and/suggesting the ways for the emancipation of women.

That Long Silence presents strained relations between husband and wife. It is a tale of a dominated husband and a suffering wife.

Shashi Deshpande explores man-woman relationship in her novel That Long Silence. While exploring man-wife relationship in Indian society, she tries in this novel to other readers an intimate and domestic chronicle of the subtle tyrannies suffered by women and the pain of coming to self-knowledge. It is a story of personal journey, the heroine learns as she undergoes mental torture and suffering at the hands of her husband.

Disruption in the smooth course of Jaya's existence has been caused by her husband's business problems. The novel thus opens with Jaya and her husband shifting from cosy, comfortable house to their unfashionable, old apartment at Dadar, Bombay. They shift this house at a time when Mohan has been caught in some business malpractice and an inquiry is in progress. Here, in a small old flat, Jaya gets confined and becomes an introvert. She broods over the situation and fondly recalls her past.

In her zeal to play out the role of a loyal wife and caring mother, Jaya smothers her real self. Like the other women she has been indoctrinated right from her childhood. She does not protest the change of her name from Jaya to Suhasini at her marriage just to keep Mohan happy. Her dress and her appearance are proof of her submission to Mohan's liking replicating an absorbed family-woman. She

has systematically suppressed her free will as she has been taught "the importance and necessity of stable marriage and family-family as security, as a source of emotional strength."¹ But the same is denied to her. The crisis at Mohan's office begins to affect the affairs at home. She realizes that Mohan has lost interest in her. At the Dadar flat she has time to ponder over her relations with Mohan, and also to analyse and recognize her suppressed "self." Her emotional crisis comes to such a pass that she is afraid lest something should happen to Mohan. She cannot imagine a life without Mohan or his support:

The thought of living without him had twisted my insides, his death and 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.²

When the times are smooth, the relations between the two move on smoothly. But the crisis unmasks the two-Jaya and Mohan. Before the crisis, like her mythological counterpart Sita and Gandhari, she remains stuck to her husband and children. But after the crisis she is not willing to go to her husband. She is ashamed of the incident, and Mohan defends himself by saying, "It was for you and the children that I did this."³ Mohan's trouble is his own making and he expects her to share this crisis unconditionally. Indira Bhatt observes that Mohan wants to "use his wife as buffer, an opiate to soften the impact of the forces he has set into motion against himself."⁴

She feels herself totally lost as she is taken for granted by Mohan. She realizes that her own feelings and emotions don't mean anything to him. Her realization that she is a nonentity in his eyes hurts her. In an incident when her paternal uncle Ramu Kaka shows her the family tree wherein even boys in the family find mention but her name is missing, she questions this patriarchal family tree, Ramu Kaka says "How can you be here? You don't belong to this

family. You have no place here.”⁵ Jaya is also shocked to find no mention of her mother, her aunts and even Ajji who kept the family together. She is full of anger and desperation over such gross gender discrimination.

Shashi Deshpande canvas abounds in woman characters as victims of the gross gender inequality. Mohan’s mother and his sister Vimla, too, are such victims. Her mother made a living by cooking for wedding feasts. Mohan’s father was a drunkard who would frequently beat her up. Mohan narrates a poignant incident when his father returned home late one night and found that chutney had not been served with rice to him. He flung the plate and walked off. Mohan’s says “God, she was tough, women in those days were tough”⁶ But Jaya has a different point of view. She writes: “I saw despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender,”⁷ Jaya also comes to know about the tragic death of Mohan’s mother through Vimla. Vimla’s death is also tragic as she has developed ovarian tumor and bleeds herself to death in silence. She does not tell about her problem even to her mother-in-law, as she knew it would be in vain.

Kusum, Jaya’s mad cousin, is a deserted wife. Jaya keeps her at home despite the objections from her mother and brother. After she has recovered a little her brother takes her away home. But she commits suicide a day before her husband is supposed to take her home. Jaya’s help-mind, Jeeja, has her own story of oppression. Her husband is also a drunkard who frequently beats her. She does not protest when her husband takes up another woman because she thinks that she has failed him by not bearing a child to him and so he had every night to remarry. She willingly brings up their son after her husband and his mistress are dead.

He is no different from his father. When the son grows up he too becomes a drunkard who begins to beat his wife whenever she happens to abuse him: “Stop that, don’t forget, he keeps the kumkum on your forehead. What is a woman without that?”⁸ Then there is Jaya’s grandmother Ajji who, after she is widowed, keeps herself confined to a room. Jaya’s Vanita mami too is yet another case. She is barren, and desperately wants a child. She fasts and performs pujas and every possible ritual to be blessed with a child, but all is in vain.

Thus, Shashi Deshpande has woven the tragic tales of Jaya’s relations and her acquaintances into the texture of the novel, and so the novel inevitably takes on feminist character. The novel is about gender discrimination and inequality prevalent in society, and yet the novelist is opposed to being branded a feminist writer. She may not conform to the conventional concept of feminism, but she does have her own feminist ideas. She says:

The women in my books are people who realize what is to be a woman in their process of their own lives and situations they face not through books and theories. I think feminism is a entirely personalized perception. It is when you start questioning preconceived notion about your role.⁹

In her novels she does not present men as wholly bad and women as wholly good. She is realistic in the sense that her stories are very close to life. She is not writing about Jaya only but also about Mohan, as Jaya says: “I am writing of us.” The thought of living without him had twisted my insides, his death and 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.¹⁰ In the novel Shashi Deshpande does not put the blame marital crisis squarely on Mohan’s shoulders but also on Jaya’s. The novelist suggests that the women should accept their own responsibility for their victimization, instead the putting the blame on other. Jaya mostly blames herself for her suffering. Thus, *That Long Silence* is serious effort towards “maintaining a credible balance between the sexes.” The thought of living without him had twisted my insides, his death and 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.¹¹

It is often debated whether or not *That Long Silence* is a feminist novels. Shashi Deshpande is against the labeling of her novels as feminist. She says:

Any women who writes fiction shows the world as it looks to her protagonist is a women she shows the world as it looks to a women-to apply the tag of feminist is one way. I have realized, of dismissing the serious concerns of the novels by labeling them, by calling the work propagandist.¹²

The Protagonist has raised her voice against the straitjacketed role models of wife and mother, and rebels against the suppression of the age-old patriarchal setup. Thus, the novel is a feminist critique as Toril Moli says, “It seeks to expose, not perpetuate patriarchal practices.”¹³ Although she not be a formal feminist but she certainly is a potential feminist writer.

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