

Attaining Selfhood through Disillusionment in 'That Long Silence'

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Abstract: *In India girls are supposed to be the alien's wealth and must be sent off to some stranger's house. An identity of a woman is always screened with an anxiety, which you experience when you feel vulnerable and insecure, because of the norms of patriarchal society. Though woman is divided between her natural and cultural roles, both of them still assign only a submissive, secondary and marginal role to her. Shashi Deshpande's novels represent the contemporary woman's struggle to define and accomplish a sovereign selfhood. The problem of identity, the contradiction of being both oneself and fitting a traditional role as a 'good daughter', 'good wife' or 'good mother' occurs frequently in writing by women. Related to this theme is the propensity to define oneself in terms of others. That Long Silence's Jaya's sense of her identity is never certain. She is deplumed between Jaya, herself and specially her juvenile self, told by her father that she could accomplish something in the world. This paper is an attempt to depict Women's struggle, in the context of coeval Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, as mother and most important of all as mortal being.*

Keywords: identity, suppression, silence. Individual, realistic

1. Introduction

Every very human being is the product of many cross-cutting, multi-layered identities. For instance, a vital part of my identity is defined by my gender. But I am also (among other things) a daughter, a sister, a college teacher, a writer, a Punjabi, a Hindu, a resident of a particular neighbourhood, and citizen of India. Most identities (e.g., those based on nationality, religion, language) are acquired or mutable. A few are fixed and immutable, such as biological parentage. Identity based on native land, village or locale where a person is born and reared are also fixed. [Madhu 250]

These lines by Madhu Kishwar express the relevance of identity for a human being. A person takes step in carrying out to attribute a source of identity if he or she comprehends it as suppression especially in those conditions when this identity comes in a way of personal, social and economical well being. A woman intentionally conceived of identity as a woman only on that elite juncture when she is recognized or experienced the difference of impairment because of her gender. If a woman seems to be immured because of her gender, society is holding accountability in this regard to fit snugly that identity level on them, as,

“Motherhood, which is an enriching experience for many women and a key component of their self-identification often becomes a terrible burden for women under current societal pressures. Too often, young girls, who are not yet ready for marriage are forced into marriage and early motherhood. Too many women cannot decide for themselves when and how many children to have. A woman denied control over her own identity as a woman for want of any prospect of escape from her oppression”. [Madhu 251]

Shashi Deshpande's protagonists are those women who are struggling to find their own voice and are continuously in search to specify them. She is wreathed with state of affairs and keyed the troubles as the juncture of identity amidst growing laissez-faire conventions of conduct, love of the existential as well as realistic beliefs and modalities of manifestations which had, if not deracinated altogether at least jolted disadvantageously the fine-spun sapling of conventional Indian society.

The identity question Shashi Deshpande deals with is as old as human cosmos. Ever since man became cognizant of his self he made pace towards accomplishing it. Obtaining identity need not be likened with existential genuineness. Her characters are concerned with their 'selves' and they determine to be honest to themselves. Being true to one's self (not as being true in the sense that nature, culture demands of you) is the wisdom that Deshpande's protagonist learns. Culture allows woman to be a daughter or a sister in her parental home and to be a wife and mother in her husband's home. In accession, she has to play a professional role if she is a working woman. Above all, nature arrogates her, a sex-based role wherein she is limited biologically. Though she is divided between her natural and cultural roles, both of them still assign only a submissive, secondary and marginal role to her. The note of dissent against women's existing attitude in society, found its expression in her novels. The suppression and exploitation of women is viewed here in her novels from a woman's point of view. Deshpande's novels are committed to a purpose; they portray women struggling against iniquity done to them and then trying to establish their own identity in the male prevailing society. Women being sensitive, intelligent, career-oriented middle class woman of changed time feel asphyxiation and cooped (encaged) in the male defined codes of life. The consciousness of changed time and the socio-cultural modalities and values that has given them defined roles lead women to the conflicts, psychic and moral dilemmas.

In the novel, *The Long Silence* which gives an impression of being autobiographical Deshpande writes about the life of

Jaya, a middle class woman. In a gripping tale linking childhood, youth, and married life, Deshpande weaves a story in which, through descriptions of the characters of the family members, conversations with a friend, and through the picturing of daily life in two parts of Bombay, the relationship between the couple and the children become more and more placid. Jaya begins to realise that she is actually nothing more than the wife of her husband, and mother of her children, and that she is totally hampered from developing herself by the society, her husband and her kids.

The long silence begins at a point where the relationships snap, where silence becomes the norm of the day, where talking to each other becomes a rare event, and where no communication of any kind exists. Instead, like a sheet of fog which covers the entire landscape, isolation and silence stretch over her life, choking all relationships.

"Jaya does not ask herself, during this period of doubt, whether she should leave her husband and children to start a new life. Instead she begins asking herself, "Why does the silence become deeper and deeper between us? What has made us what we have become?" [p. 8]

Jaya falls sick. Just before that her husband has slammed the door, and has left the flat. An investigation is going on against him due to some misconduct in his office. Jaya is alone in her flat. She thinks about how her life was in the past, how it is in the present, and could be in the future. Through her analysis, she feels oppressed, but her knowledge leads her to see her life with a crystal like clarity. She thinks:

"Why am I making myself the heroine of this story? I do not want to write about a ice-cold husband, or about a woman hurt in her feelings. No, I want to write about us, about Mohan and myself. Why do I insinuate that only I can understand all that has happened to us? Is it not possible that Mohan, in the telegram which he has just sent with only four words, "Everything is all right!", actually wants to say that there is a life waiting for us together in the future?" [p. 15]

Through pain and anger, Jaya comes to a new understanding of herself, feels that she can still develop herself, and armed with this knowledge is ready to approach her married life from a totally different angle.

This Sahitya Academy award winning novel tells a haunting tale of how Jaya, who is disillusioned with her marriage and her life, rediscovers herself. Who is Jaya? Rather, who was Jaya? She is Mohan's wife. She is Rahul's and Rati's mother. She was a writer who had given up serious writing, and had taken up writing a weekly column on Seeta, a plump, good humoured, pea brained but shrewd and devious woman. Deshpande's Jaya was a woman who did not ask questions, because she had learnt early in her life that when women ask questions - particularly questions like, "Why, why this injustice?" [p.26] they would simply hang heavily around in

the air, refusing to go away, causing eyebrows around her to raise at her audacity in asking such questions.

Jaya is the sufferer. She is convent-educated girl with sense of being unique and extraordinary. Her name Jaya means victory. Generally woman's identity is determined essentially by others. Therefore her name undergoes a change; become different in essence; losing one's or its original nature according to the wishes of others. This new name befuddles Jaya in her search for an identity. This activity of looking thoroughly in order to find the distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity is never certain because she has been abruptly separated between being Jaya, the victorious and Sushasini, the good wife; and being an independent writer and a wife and mother.

"Both the names symbolize the traits of her personality. The former symbolizes revolt and the later submission" [Sarabjit 139]

Jaya is a woman who lost her identity and began to think herself as wife and as mother. She wants to make herself someone, as her husband wants specifically. Jaya is a sharply drawn portrait of a woman immobilized in her marriage. This is quite clear from her attitude towards the established set of social, cultural, moral and sexual concepts and deportment of common masses.

"Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces" [p. 1]
"The mirror is always treacherous; it shows you only what you want to see.
and, perhaps, others see in your face only what they want to see." [p. 1]

Jaya armed with her new awareness, does not reject marriage and family life. Most of the Indian girls grew up within the curtain of the paternal hearth. Girls raised in such a blind alley and behind cultural bars, such culturally-conditioned souls cannot dream of going against the social norms, values and ways of life.

The novel opens with Jaya and her husband Mohan moving from their well settled accommodation to their old house in Dadar in Bombay they have stayed there just after their marriage because at that time their financial condition was not so good and now after so many years this Dadar flat becomes the focal point for Jaya to retrospect her life. This time they are shifting here in order to incline to retreat from unpleasant realities through which Mohan has been caught in some improper professional conduct; an act that Mohan had no right to do so and its inquiry is under process:

"Shashi Deshpande unmasks both Jaya and Mohan when they face the crisis in their lives. They have run into stormy weather and their secure sheltered life washes away like a water- colour in a rainy storm. The disaster they face differently and they react differently." [Indira 156]

To Jaya, the experience turns out to be psychologically painful. She experiences the anxiety when she feels vulnerable and insecure because of the possibilities of Mohan's failing to keep or to maintain his job. She is afraid

of the anxiety that:

"The carefully built sparrow- house appears to be cracked and the insides cruelly exposed." [Rajeshwar 48]

What jolts Jaya up, whose main concerns in life were to do with what to cook for lunch, tea and dinner, is a problem which crops up in Mohan's life. At work Mohan is under suspicion of having done something dishonest. So he decides to hide for a while in Jaya's uncles flat in Dadar. It is when Jaya leaves with her husband (the children being away on holidays with some friends) their posh Churchgate home and enters the simple Dadar flat that Jaya suddenly wakes up to the kind of life she had been leading till then. The first step towards this reawakening she takes when she ignores - unconsciously - the outstretched hands of Mohan for the key to the flat, and opens the door herself. It is at that moment that Mohan's authority is shaken, and Jaya starts reassuming control over herself, and her life.

It is during the silent waiting in the first couple of days that Jaya realises what her marriage had come to. Mohan seemed to be no one at all, deprived of his routine, his files, his telephone, his appointments.

Just before she had got married to Mohan, her aunt had told her, "Remember Jaya, a husband is like a sheltering tree." [p.39] Though Jaya had not paid much attention to that saying then, it was as if that entire she had done during her married life was to nurture and keep that tree alive, even if she had to water it with deceit and lies. She had slowly given up her sense of being an individual and had moulded herself to suit the needs and principles of Mohan. Not that Mohan was a bad person. He was an ambitious person, and in the pursuit of his dream of success, he had neither the time nor the inclination to understand his wife as a person. Like it was at the time when a story written by Jaya, about a couple, about a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body, had won a prize in a magazine. Even in those ecstatic moment it did not take Jaya long to realise that Mohan was upset, that it had not mattered to him that Jaya had written a good story, and what mattered to him more was that people might think the couple was them, that the man was him. Jaya had convinced herself that she had done him wrong. And she had stopped writing after that. Slowly, one after the other, there was nothing left of the real Jaya, whose name meant victory. Marriage had changed Jaya. It had swallowed her, her principles, up - alive. The action takes place in the novel with an unstable situation of extreme difficulty in a family where we found a middle class essence.

"It was like a house collapse during the monsoon. There was something desolating about the case with which what had seemed so substantial fell away, almost contemptuously leaving behind an embarrassing nakedness." [p. 174]

While staying in Dadar flat, the period of self- analysis, consider in detail and subject to an analysis in order to discover essential features or meaning of her past life starts knocking the door of her past reminiscences.

"She is flooded by the memories of the past- her earlier life, her, marriage with Mohan, the frustration and disappointments in her seventeen- year- old married existence, her personal failures, all these begins to haunt and torment her. By her journeys into past, she gets the guidance for her future." [Palkar 164]

Jaya's mind travels back and forth between two points, past and present, which covers the whole span of time. In this process she delineates her carried actions as she has been justifying her ways towards truth about herself.

"Jaya recalls fragments of her enmeshed in her memory. Now revived and counterpoised they reveal a complex personality. Jaya is both the actor and the deeply involved narrator in this tale of long silence. She finds that the past she revives and relives modifies earlier perspectives and necessitates new way of looking at things." [Kamini 85]

The search for an individual identity, a reaching out beyond the self, is not an activity that varies from a norm or standard, that deviates from womanliness but it is a means of fulfilment.

Jaya's whole life revolved around the wants of her husband. She had learnt at an early age of life that a husband is like a sheltering tree, a protection, a security. Once a girl gets married to a man, the husband takes complete control over her whether the husband follows the right path or wrong, she has to blindly follow him. Shashi Deshpande presents the meanings of silence in this novel:

"You learn a lot of tricks to get by in a relationship. Silence is one of them you, never find a woman criticizing her husband, even playfully in case it might damage the relationship." [Kamini 85]

This novel is about woman, who always wanted to revolt but never could do so and all her revolts she suppressed in her long silence. But this silence fails as a protection, "I must not laugh, I must not laugh." [p.122]. Her husband could not understand her feelings and Ms. Deshpande gives a beautiful description of her married life when she says through Jaya:

"A pair of bullock yoked together ... a clever phrase, but can it substitute for reality? A man and a woman married for seventeen years. A couple with two children. A family somewhat like the one caught and preserved for posterity by the advertising visual I so loved. But the reality was only this. We were two persons. A man. A woman." [p.8]

Women had sharply defined roles and duties; they had no right even to be angry and Mohan feels that it is unwomanly to be angry and Jaya thinks:

"A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There's no room for anger in my life, no room for despair either. There's only order and routine today, I have to change the sheets; tomorrow, scrub the bathroom; the day after clean the fridge ..." [pp. 147-48]

Jaya's writing provides her a kind of solace from this frustrated life. Mohan also takes pride in his writer wife, but

he always suggest her to take up a middle way of writing, which should be free from all controversies. She was deeply distressed to know that the writer in her could not come to light because of her husband,

She says:

"I had known then that it hadn't mattered to Mohan that I had written a good story, a story about a couple, a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body. For Mohan it had mattered that people might think the couple was us, that man him. To Mohan it had been no writer only exhibitionist." [p. 144]

In conclusion I would like to say that the revelation of Jaya is the core of the novel. Her efforts pursuing towards the idea of separate identity of woman are admirable but she finds it difficult to imply it in her own life. *That Long Silence* not only raises difficult questions but also seeks to unearth the long-buried answers to these questions. It is through the story of Jaya that Deshpande explores the underlying pressures of being an Indian wife, mother, writer, and above all else, woman. Over the course of the fiction, Jaya asks difficult questions of not only herself but of the reader as well.

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