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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S THAT LONG SILENCE.

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## Abstract

The present paper focused on Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence*, on her portrayal of women characters like Jaya, Mukta, Jeeja, Manda, Nayana, Ai, Ajji, Other-Ajji. The novelist had tried to depict the cause of their subaltern position in society. According to the novelist, only patriarchy was not responsible for their miserable position in society. The passivity on behalf of the women and their succumbing to the traditional roles of wife, mother, etc. were equally responsible for their subjugation. Women should not victimise themselves, they should try to erase the silence and they should try to give voice to their inner conflicts.

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Silence is a symbol of oppression, a characteristic of the subaltern condition while speech signifies self-expression and liberation.

– Aparajita Ray

That Long Silence is the novel in which Shashi Deshpande has tried to portray the marginalised condition and the miserable plight of women in a traditional society. Through the character of Jaya, who is also the protagonist of the novel, the novelist has tried to delineate the women's attempts to erase the silence and to give voice to their inner conflicts and traumas, with which the women are destined to live since ages.

Sahitya Akademi and Padam Shree Award winner, Shashi Deshpande is a remarkable Indian woman writer writing in English. Born in Dharwad, Karnataka, she is the daughter of a renowned dramatist and Sanskrit scholar. Her works include the novels: *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *If I Die Today* (1982), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Vine* (1993), *Come Up and Be Dead* (1993), *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Small Remedies* (2000), *Moving On* (2004), *In the Country of Deceit* (2008); short-story collections: *The Legacy and Other Stories* (1971), *It Was Dark* (1986), *It Was Nightingale* (1986), *The Miracle and The Intrusion and Other Stories* (1993), *The Stone Women* (2000); Children's books: *The Hidden Treasure* (1980), *The Only Witness* (1982), *A Summer Adventure* (1983), *The Narayanpur Incident* (1992). Most of her works reflect the inner conflict of her women protagonists. She writes about the middle-class, educated women, who are mostly in conflict with the traditional values prevalent in Indian society.

The aim of the present paper is to analyse the women characters in Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* including the critique of search for identity by the protagonist Jaya. The novel indicates that the plight of women is miserable in a patriarchal society, whether they belong to the upper sections of society or they are from the lower strata of society. The characters like Jaya, Mukta, Jeeja, Manda, Ai, Ajji etc. used to lead a life of subjugation. They are conditioned by the society to be in the strict boundaries of mother, daughter, wife etc. Their life has no significance if they are not able to perform these roles of wife or mother perfectly.

The term “silence” has been used symbolically in this novel. The inaction or passivity while living in a patriarchal society is termed equal to silence in this novel. As Geetanjali Singh Chanda in her critical work *Indian Women in the House of Fiction* opines:

In Shashi Deshpande’s novels, womanly silence is often seen as a silencing of women by patriarchy. In *That Long Silence*, particularly, Jaya’s silence and her writing are linked. In the biography she has to submit to a newspaper she pares herself down to the barebones of “I was born. My father died when I was fifteen. I got married to Mohan. I have two children and I did not let a third alive.” In literary terms this would be the plot of her life. The sum total of the actions that happen. It does not at all reveal who she is. (2009, p. 45)

The breaking of silence or living a life of passivity not only on the domestic level, but the novel talks about breaking the silence of traditionalism by women writers also. The female writers should not write what the patriarchal society wants them to write, rather they should write about the inner trauma of female strata of the society, who are denied total independence and equality and they have no identity of their own. Indira Nityanandam observes:

Jaya in *That Long Silence* attempts to break not only her own silence but that of women, specially women writers, down the ages. A desire for identity and self-expression spurs the creative writer but Jaya finds it being smothered by her husband’s reactions. (2000, p. 45)

The novel *That Long Silence* is the story of Jaya, the protagonist, who is leading the roles of wife and mother perfectly. After the seventeen years of her marriage, she has to face a catastrophe. Her husband is caught in the malpractice of funds at his office and their marital life comes to a halt. They have to shift to the Dadar flat gifted to her by her uncle. Spending some days at that flat, Jaya introspects her married life with Mohan, while the children are away with some relative.

For seventeen years, Jaya has been leading a life of routine performing the roles of wife and mother, caring and handling her household works. She has never shown her feelings towards others:

A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There is 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 bathrooms; the day after, clean the fridge . . . (Deshpande, 1989, pp. 147-148)

An ideal wife has live according to the wishes of her husband. The society wants her to be an equal partner in the husband’s deeds. She is considered ideal if she does not question her husband, rather she does what he wants.

I remember now that he had assumed I would accompany him, had taken for granted my acquiescence in his plans. So had I. Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband’s travails . . . (Deshpande, 1989, p. 11)

Jaya herself believes what the society wants her to believe. She herself acts passively and does not want to act oppositely. She herself does not know what kind of woman has she become, as Simone de Beauvoir, an eminent feminist aptly says, “Marriage subjugates and enslaves women and it leads her to ‘aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently towards death without questioning its purpose’ (1997, p. 500)”. Jaya has no purpose in her life. Once she has tried to write something and tried to become a story writer, her story appears in a magazine and it gets the first prize. However, Mohan, her husband opposes her writing, and she has to be satisfied by writing short gossip in a magazine column. She cannot become a serious writer, due to her dependence upon her husband and the passivity to surrender herself to the family wishes. She becomes what Mohan wants her to be. As Beauvoir states, “a wife is what her husband makes her” (1997, p. 484). Her aim of becoming an ideal wife prevents her from rebelling:

If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly. I didn’t want to know anything (Deshpande, 1989, p. 61).

She is internalised by her in-laws that the husband is a sheltering tree and without this tree one feels totally unprotected, “Remember, Jaya, a husband is a sheltering tree.” And Jaya feels – “Without the tree, you’re dangerously unprotected and vulnerable” and “so you have to keep the tree alive and flourishing, even if you have to

water it with deceit and lies” (Deshpande, 1989, p. 32). At her Dadar flat, Jaya feels that she has become almost a stereotypical woman, having all the feminine qualities, who is not capable of doing any work without male help:

I’m scared of cockroaches, lizards, nervous about electrical gadgets, hopeless at technical matters, lazy about accounting . . . almost the stereotype of a woman: nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support (Deshpande, 1989, p. 76).

Now at Dadar flat, Jaya introspects her life and feels that she has become what she does not want to become. Her father names her – Jaya, Jaya for victory. Rather, she has moulded herself according to the wishes of her family, in-laws and society. She has modified herself as the society and the family needs. Now she thinks that such kind of modification is not possible:

What have I achieved by this writing? The thought occurs to me again as I look at the neat pile of papers. Well, I’ve achieved this I’m not afraid any more. The panic has gone. I’m Mohan’s wife, I had thought, and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan’s wife. Now I know that kind of fragmentation is not possible (Deshpande, 1989, p. 191).

In this way, Jaya, at the end of the novel, realises that killing of one’s own identity is not possible. At last, she feels convinced that she should break her silence and should make him believe that he should accept her as she is.

Through the characters of Jeeja, Tara, Manda, Kusum, Mukta, Vanitamami, Mohan’s mother, his sister Vimala, Ajji, Shashi Deshpande has tried to reveal the plight of the women in traditional society. Vimala, Mohan’s sister dies of “ovarian tumour with metastases in the lungs”, bleeding herself to death in silence. She does not tell anyone about her problem, not even to her mother-in-law as she knows that it would be useless and “sank into a coma and died a week later, her silence intact” (Deshpande, 1989, p. 39). Mohan’s mother also died while trying to abort her unwanted child. Her act is considered as “shameful” by Vimala, Mohan’s sister who only knows about it. Her mother used to make her living by cooking for wedding feasts. Her father was a drunkard who used to beat his wife frequently. Mohan tells Jaya about an incident when his father kicked the plate of rice away when he found that chutney had not been served to him. He walked off, whereas in the middle of the night his mother prepared fresh chutney for him by borrowing the ingredients from a neighbour. Mohan considered her mother a “tough” woman as she never raised her voice against her father.

Vanitamami, maternal aunt of Jaya, is a barren woman, who performs fasts and pujas so that she may get a child. But she developed an ovarian cancer. Hoping that she would get a kid, she did not let herself operated. Jaya thinks ironically: “Vanitamami’s uterus, having failed in its life-bearing purpose, was finally carrying death” (Deshpande, 1989, p. 106).

Jeeja is the help-maid of Jaya. Her husband was a drunkard who frequently used to beat her. Then he brought another woman to his house as a mistress, but Jeeja did not object as she could not give him a son. After some time, he and his mistress died, leaving a daughter and a son for Jeeja to bring up that Jeeja accept willingly. Her son is also like his father, to whom Tara, her daughter-in-law curses, but Jeeja shuts her up by saying: “Stop that, don’t forget, he keeps the Kumkum on your forehead. What is a woman without that?” (Deshpande, 1989, p. 53).

Jeeja is professional by nature, proves herself a good worker and knows her purpose of living: “She knew what her purpose in life was – it was to go on living. Enduring was part of it and so she endured all that she had to” (Deshpande, 1989, p. 51). Jaya notices “no anger behind her silence” because she thinks her husband had done a right thing by marrying another woman as she failed in giving him any children. Traditional society makes the women realize that they are unlucky if they are barren and they have to accept their fate as it is. They are not provided medical treatment and cursed for not having children. This attitude of society towards the women is the same whether they belong to the upper class or lower strata of the society.

Manda, the grand-daughter of Jeeja and daughter of Tara, “went to school in the morning, collected money for the milk in the afternoon, delivered the milk, stood in the queue for the rations, for kerosene, and helped Jeeja on her holidays, briskly scrubbing the vessels in a parody of her grandmother’s actions” (Deshpande, 1989, p. 53). In spite of doing all these works, being a girl she is unwanted child, shares agony along with her mother and grandmother. Her plight makes Jaya think about infanticides done centuries ago: “Where was it I had read an account of how baby

girls were done to death a century or so back? They were, I had read in horror, buried alive, crushed to death in the room they were born in; and immediately after that, a fire was lit on the spot – to purify the place, they said. Perhaps it was to ensure death” (Deshpande, 1989, p. 53). But Jaya thinks it “more merciful, that swift ending of the agony once and for all, than this prolonging of it for years and years” (Deshpande, 1989, p. 53).

Nayana is also a help-mate of Jaya. At the young age, she has to be pregnant again and again in the hope of getting a male child. She had two daughters and her two sons were died at the time of their birth. She curses her luck for not getting a male child. This time she is confident that it will be a son. It is evident from her condition that in a traditional society, the women who fail to give birth to a male child are threatened to be thrown out of their houses. She says to Jaya, “He [her husband] . . . he says he’ll throw me out if I have another daughter”, but she boldly challenges him, “Just you dare. . . Let me see your courage. Take yourself another woman if you want, roll in the gutters, I can’t prevent you, but just you try to throw me out of this house” (Deshpande, 1989, p. 28).

It is not that only the women of lower classes or poor sections of society have secondary or marginal position in society, but the women belonging to the upper middle class like Kusum or Mukta also have to face the same subordinate status in society. Kusum, a mad cousin of Jaya, is deserted by her husband. Jaya keeps her along with her for some time despite the objections by her mother, brothers and husband. After some time, her brother takes her away to their home. But she commits suicide by jumping into a dry well one day before her husband has to come to take her. Jaya is shocked when her mother (Ai) says, “. . . it was a good thing in a way. She was of no use to anyone after she went crazy, nobody needed her” (Deshpande, 1989, p. 22). As if a woman has no life of her own? Is she only a thing usable for others and when her usability diminishes or expires, she is a waste thing which can be disposed of?

Woman who dies before the death of her husband, is considered “blessed”, but who is widowed, has to lead a miserable life. Jaya’s grandmother (ajji) confined herself to a room, diminished her bare needs and slept on the ground, whereas Mohan’s mother in her photograph “looks like any other woman of her time . . . the huge kumkum on her forehead blotting out everything in that face but the ‘blessed woman who died with her husband yet living” (Deshpande, 1989, p. 38). Jaya surprises at her neighbour, Mukta’s fasts, as they have lost their purpose – the avoidance of widowhood.

In short, it can be said that Shashi Deshpande has presented women from every section of the society, in her novel *That Long Silence*. She has vividly portrayed these characters as they are found in actual society. Through their characters, Deshpande has depicted the marginal condition of these women. They face oppression, violence, threatening etc. in their own families. According to the novelist, the women have a subordinated position, whether they belong to high status families or they are from poor sections of the society. They have been marginalised, whether they are educated or not. The novelist suggests that the women should not victimise themselves, they should try to raise their voice against gender discrimination, as Jaya does so by writing about her life in a book.

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