



SHASHI DESHPANDE'S PALPABLE PROJECTION OF INDIAN MODERN WOMAN'S PLIGHTS IN THAT LONG SILENCE

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ABSTRACT:

The principles of tradition are not only impervious but also inflexible. Tradition does not allow them to go on smoothly and freely towards the point of fulfilment. So they are grabbed in the crossroad of tradition and modernity—they cannot leave modernity and cannot accept tradition. Shashi Deshpande shows how Jaya, the protagonist the novel and a budding writer, is not allowed to flourish either as a full-fledged person or as a writer by various unethical social forces. Gradually, she develops a feeling of disorientation and life becomes meaningless and futile to her. Finally, she is left with no option than to cling to her life with abomination.

KEYWORDS: *Disorientation, Annihilated, Male-domination, Middle-class women, Inhibition.*

INTRODUCTION :

It has been a tradition of Indian English writing to exhibit many-sided images of Indian woman. She is, occasionally, elated and elevated to the position of all powerful—*Shakti*, and at others, dragged and despaired as the underdog. But Indian women writers disclaim these traditional images nowadays. They strive to sketch a completely different picture. Veena Singh aptly remarks, "However, in recent years writers particularly Indian women writers writing in English repudiate these images."¹

Women, as it is commonly held, have been deprived of their rights and robbed of the opportunities that their male partners have been enjoying freely. They have always been the victims of male domination and conquest. In this context, Ashok Kumar states, "A woman's individual self has very little recognition and self-effacements in her normal way of life. Indian woman too, as a part of that set-up, has accepted it and lived with it for ages."²

Indian women novelists in English project the realistic picture of contemporary socio-economic and political ambience of India. As Amar Nath Prasad affirms, "they have tried their best to free the female mentality from the age long control of male domination."³ They have

“not only exhorted an exposition of the patriarchal ideologies and their oppressive tendencies toward feminist growth and expression, but have also envisioned ways of counteracting those attitudes.”⁴

Shashi Deshpande has mostly chosen the middle-class women as the protagonists of her novels who feel suffocated in the restricted bonds and bounds of the tradition where woman is considered as an appendage to man. So they come out of this unscrupulous environment to stamp their own identities. Subsequently, they find their own weaknesses and deficiencies in one hand, and the society's inhibitions on the other. Certainly, literature works as the mirror of the contemporary society and synthesizes different human sensibilities. “Literature, especially the novel, is a writer's response to society.”⁵

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* deals with the true picture of the woman's incompatible condition in the society. B. K. Das justly comments:

That Long Silence is a typical English novel that speaks to us of our own situation. The image of the woman underwent a metamorphosis when the contemporary woman decided to cast off her traditional role of living under the shade of her husband. Jaya, the heroine of the novel, gives us the new image of the Indian woman who now tries to stand on her own legs and seeks to break the age-old silence by refusing to dance to the tune of her husband.⁶

That Long Silence is “a story of a callous, insensitive husband and a sensitive, suffering wife.”⁷ Jaya, the protagonist, like Indu of *Roots and Shadows* and Saru of *The Dark Hold No Terrors*, journeys from ignorance to knowledge through self-analysis and self-realization. Experience is the mother of all knowledge and teaches better than wisdom. Jaya, an educated middle-class woman, is named as Suhasini by Mohan, her husband who wants her to be “a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman” (TLS 15-16). She, as a girl, was taught to be obedient and submissive towards her husband. Vanitamami said to her solemnly, “...a husband is like a sheltering tree... and so you have to keep the tree alive and flourishing, even if you have to water it with deceit and lies”. (TLS 32)

She recalls her married life with nostalgia and she also recalls her relationship with innumerable relatives and friends with compassion and understanding. She is suppressed at every stage of life but compromises to conform to the role of an ideal Indian woman. In order to become an ideal wife, she is compelled to relinquish her writing career and, in the process, sheds the bits of herself and a budding writer dwindles into a stereotyped Indian housewife: “I had mine as—Mohan's wife, as Rahul's and Rati's mother” (TLS 148). She indulges in self-pity and feels theirs is a loveless married life as “lived together but there had been only emptiness between us” (TLS 185).

Jaya is spun and squeezed by different forces of society. She is thrust into the jaws of perplexing difficulties and disorder where she gets “a feeling of total disorientation” (TLS 177). The opening page of the novel has references to Jaya's feeling of being “almost invisible” and “annihilated” (TLS 142). She reflects:

The different mirrors show you ten different faces.... The mirror is always treacherous; it shows you only what *you* want to see. And, perhaps, others too see in your face only what *they* want to see. Yet the fascination of seeing yourself in the mirror, of knowing how you look to others, never palls. (TLS 1-2)

Many sensitive and serious issues related to women other than the protagonist Jaya's disorientation are also highlighted. First of all, the deadly dowry system where a huge amount needed to fix the marriage of girls and it is none other than Jaya who is proved to be a victim of this sinful system. After having a distorted married life, she finds, behind her marriage, there had been "many thoughts...I would be getting away from Ambegaon; he wasn't asking for money; the *Kakas* and Chandumama wouldn't have to make up the money for my dowry" (TLS 94). Perhaps, the thought of Mohan's being indifferent to dowry propelled her to take that decision. Had she not married Mohan, her life would have been different.

Eternally, man tries to overpower in the act of sex which thrusts woman into a state of predicament. Her sexual predicament is not limited to the ambit of conjugal life only, but it is extended to extra-marital (both pre and post) relationships. Jaya has been suffering from sexual predicament since they got married as she recounts:

But, lying there, my body still warm and throbbing from the contact with his, it had come to me in one awful moment—that I was alone. The contact, the coming together, had been not only momentary, but wholly illusory as well. We had never come together, only our bodies had done that. (TLS 98)

Mohan appears to be domineering husband since patriarchal system is indelibly fixed in Indian tradition and woman here is necessarily viewed and destined to live under male control at all stages of her life. He has all the attributes of an orthodox husband. He married "a well-educated, cultured wife" (TLS 92). He did that because he, being an engineer, wanted to maintain his status high by projecting his wife to the society as a modern woman who could "speak good English" (TLS 90). Mohan's image of an ideal wife had been "Suhasini" (TLS 16), "Sita", "Savitri", "Draupadi" (TLS 11), "Gandhari" (TLS 61) and what not.

Every mother in India, intrinsically, longs to give birth to a son. She is cursed and despised if she bears a daughter. Indian society is shaped to a definite form of patriarchy where the culture considers the male as the first sex and female as the second. Jaya, the protagonist of *That Long Silence*, had an occasional visit to her ancestral home after her marriage. Her Ramukaka was very "exited" to show her "a family tree he had prepared" (TLS 142). The family tree contained male members emphatically which made Jaya exclaimed, "I'm not here!" (TLS 143). Ramukaka was "irritated" by the "interruption" considering her exclamation as her stupidity. In Jaya's Saptagiri *ajji's* home, the girls, her cousins were fed up with the monotonous job of "clearing up" after a meal (TLS 81). Sujata, one of the girls, angrily bursted out, "Then why can't the boys do it? Jaanu, or Shridhar? Why does it have to be me and Veena?" (TLS 81). The questions created "genuine amused laughter" which was really scornful indicating the fact that boys were special (TLS 81). Jaya's maidservant Jeeja did not resent and had no feeling of contempt when her husband "had married because Jeeja had been unable to give him a son" (TLS 52).

Indian culture is predominated with prejudiced constraints and dogmas relating to women. Indian women are obsessed with so many irrelevant dogmas and superstitions. In this novel, Jaya's father died when she was fifteen years old. Before his death, her mother, "a woman full of portents and omens", received a supernatural forewarning—"I knew something terrible was going to happen," by listening a "confused cry of a bird" (TLS 56). Jaya's *ajji* was a

“shaven widow” who had “denuded herself of all those things that make up a woman’s life” (TLS 26). It was mandatory for a widow to keep her widowhood undamaged. Jaya’s Vanitamami was accustomed to “*pujas* and fasts” (TLS 67). She maintained her fasts and her “ritual circumambulations of the *tulsi* plant, of the *peepul* tree” in the hope of having children (TLS 67). Mukta, the next-door neighbour of Jaya at Dadar flat, was more superstitious than her Vanitamami in spite of her widowhood, education, profession and urban-way-of-living. Women of the lower stratum like Jeeja, Tara and Nayana were of course superstitious.

Indian woman finds herself as a victim of various persons, societal institutions and her own self at all stages of her life. She is not allowed to control and contrive her own life with her own aims and objectives. Her life is a contract to carry on with her parents’ suppositions, husband’s presumptions, and later on, children’s expectations. Besides, the society itself holds a lot of age-old speculations in her life.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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6. B. K. Das, “Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence* and the Question of the Reader Response”, in R. K. Dhawan eds. *Indian Women Novelists: Set III; Vol. 4* (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1995), P. 59.
7. Shashi Deshpande, *That Long Silence* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989), p.1. All subsequent references to this novel are given parenthetically with abbreviation as TLS and the concerned page numbers.