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INVISIBLE AND ANNIHILATED NEW WOMAN OF INDIA: A STUDY OF SHASHI DESHPANDE'S THAT LONG SILENCE

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Abstract:

The major characters in Shashi Deshpande's novels are educated, modern and working women. They crave to establish themselves as individuals having their own identity. They dislike being considered as appendages to men. A crisis of identity crops up when the women develop relationship with others. Bereft of support and confidence, they find themselves fettered in the chains of alienation as the situation lacks congeniality and compatibility.

KEYWORDS:

Shashi Deshpande, Long silence, Gandhari, Suhasini, Women

INTRODUCTION:

They face the hard realities of life which make them aware of the fact that they have dearth of identity in their own capacity. "Shashi Deshpande's women wish to be the architects of their own fate. Here is the authentic, poignant tale of the middle class educated women and their exploitation in a conventional male-dominated society."¹ As a result, they are engrossed in a thinking-process—evidently a course of self-assessment. Consequently, it steers them towards a state of realization that life can gather force and substance only when it is cuddled up with relationships being properly accorded with adjustments and compromises, not by eluding realities. Kamini Dinesh, appraising the condition of Shashi Deshpande's protagonists, says:

Working outside the tradition of purdah as specified in the households where there are architectural divisions into the 'zenana' and the 'mardana' or the physically cloistered woman, Deshpande focuses on the emotionally cloistered woman who struggles to shade her inhibitions and the subordinated self.²

Jaya, the protagonist of That Long silence, had a completely different upbringing in her girlhood in comparison to the protagonists Shashi Deshpande's previous novels like Saru in The Dark Holds No Terrors and Indu in Roots and Shadows. Her position and provisions were kept at par with the boys of the family. She was provided good education but she was not kept away from being imparted the knowledge of patriarchal set-up and the status of a woman in the domestic ambience. She was aware and sure that "marriage" only was her "destiny" and "future", and it was impossible to shun the inevitable³.

Vanitamami, the woman of Jaya's family left no stone unturned to "offer her niece some words of wisdom" before her wedding—"if your husband has a mistress or two, ignore it; take up a hobby instead—cats, maybe, or your sister's children" (TLS 31). She said, "a husband is like a sheltering tree" (TLS 32). It means as she said, Jaya would have no identity of her own after her marriage. She would be recognized by her husband's individuality. So she had to "keep the tree alive and flourishing" even if she had to "water it with deceit and lies" (TLS 32). A "sheltering tree" could provide meaning and magnitude in her life; otherwise her life would be "dangerously unprotected and vulnerable" (TLS 32). It was not Vanitamami, but in his "pompous head-of-family manner", Ramukaka said, "Remember, Jaya, the

happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you” (TLS 138). Dada also advised, “Be good to Mohan, Jaya” (TLS 138). These pieces of advice conferred on her appeared as the precondition of her marriage which preceded her married life.

Jaya's marriage was arranged with Mohan, an engineer. After the marriage, he had “taken it for granted” that her wife should acquiesce and follow his thoughts and principles unquestionably (TLS 95). The early days of marriage “amazed” Jaya for having unrestricted “physical contact”, and a little deviation “angered” and “provoked” her—“provoked me enough to make me blurt out, actually my name is not Jaya at all. Not now, I mean. It's Suhasini” (TLS 15). “The fact that Jaya was rechristened as Suhasini by her husband on their wedding day confuses Jaya in her search for an identity.”¹³ Her father named her Jaya which stands for “victory” (TLS 15). But gradually she became the “damnably, insufferably priggish sparrow looking after their homes, their babies...and to hell with the rest of the world” (TLS 17). The story of the crow and the sparrow provided her the device for keeping herself safe—“stay at home, look after your babies, keep out the rest of the world, you are safe” (TLS 17). Though she knew Suhasini was “that poor idiotic woman” (TLS 17), she believed:

And I was Jaya. But I had been Suhasini as well. I can see her now, the Suhasini who was distinct from Jaya, a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped. (TLS 16)

Jaya, being a “soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman” (TLS 16), adopted the principle of “never mind whatever it is he has done, he's your husband, after all, and a husband can do no wrong” (TLS 115). She had “stopped writing because of Mohan” (TLS 145); because she had been “scared of hurting Mohan, scared of jeopardizing the only career” that was her marriage (TLS 144). To her, marriage assumed the chief and only career in her life where her professional career of being a writer had little or no importance. She had shaped herself “resolutely” to Mohan's wishes and desires (TLS 144). A budding writer converted into a conventional middle-class housewife:

Middle class. Bourgeoise. Upper-caste. Distanced from real life. Oh God, I had thought, I can't take any more. Even a worm has a hole it can crawl into. I had mine— as Mohan's wife, as Rahul's and Rati's mother...I had crawled back into my hole. I had felt safe there. Comfortable. Unassailable. And so I had stopped writing. (TLS 148)

“Shashi Deshpande uses an apt image of a worm crawling into a hole to describe the state of Jaya, a budding writer doomed to dwindle into a stereotyped Indian housewife.”⁴

There was “no room” for either “anger” or “despair” in Jaya's life (TLS 147-148). She could only be “neurotic, hysterical, and frustrated” (TLS 147). Her life was confined to “only order and routine— today, I have to change the sheets; tomorrow, scrub the bathrooms; the day after, clean the fridge...” (TLS 148). Jaya, who was once a determined girl, transformed to be docile, timid and dependent:

I am 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. But what puzzles me is this: how did I get this way? I'm sure I was not always like this. I can remember a time when I was not so full of fears, when the unknown, when darkness and insects did not terrify me so. When did the process of change begin? (TLS 76)

This revelation implies that her basic instinct and attributes changed without her intuition. She was transformed into a different person having different identity.

Actually, she had lost her identity in her husband and children. She “burrowed through the facts” that she became “Mohan's wife. Rahul's and Rati's mother. Not myself” (TLS 69). She was baffled to find out the answer of the question “what was that myself?” (TLS 69). It was not really “one self, intact and whole” which could be easily “discovered” (TLS 69). On the contrary, “there are so many, each self attached like a Siamese twin to a self of another person, neither able to exist without the other” (TLS 69). Jaya and Mohan shifted their house from Lohanagar to Churchgate and then to Dadar. She reflects:

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... (TLS 11)

She also made herself identical to “Gandhari” when “Mohan had managed to get the job” of her choice (TLS 61). She did not question him how he did it. She bandaged her eyes tightly like Gandhari since she was “an ideal wife” and didn't “want to know anything” (TLS 61).

Jaya realized that Mohan “did not know what waiting was” and “moved steadily from one moment to the next” (TLS 30). But in contrast, it seemed “waiting” was getting on her nerves:

But for women the waiting game starts early in childhood. Wait until you get married. Wait until your husband comes. Wait until you go to your in-laws' home. Wait until you have kids. Yes, ever since I got married, I had done nothing but wait. Waiting for Mohan to come home, waiting for the children to be born, for them to start school, waiting for them to come home, waiting for the milk, the servant, the lunch-carrier

man...(TLS 30)

It implies that Jaya's life is meant for waiting only. "Above and beyond this, Jaya has many other things to wait for. Though she wants to say something against this system, she can't speak anything because she doesn't like to destroy the peace of the house..."⁵ Moreover, she has to keep herself stick to the advice of her elder brother (Dada), Vanitamami and Ramukaka regarding her being an ideal wife.

Jaya's married life was like "two bullocks yoked together" (TLS 11-12). It was comfortable for them "to move in the same direction" (TLS 12). Since no animal would "voluntarily choose pain", they tried to avoid to go in "different directions" (TLS 12). Jaya thought this "clever phrase" could be a 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 visuals I so loved. But the reality was only this. We were two persons. A man. A woman. (TLS 8)

Jaya tried her best to preserve harmony and appearance at the cost of her self ___ "I had finally to bear it myself, the burden of wifehood" (TLS 121).

Jaya slowly developed a sense of being "almost invisible" and "annihilated" (TLS 142). She got frightened with the feeling:

And now the sense of confusion, of turmoil, towards which I had been rushing headlong, met me with brutal force. I could feel myself grasping, drowning in the darkness, the wild, flailing, panic-stricken movements that I was making taking me lower and lower into the vortex. (TLS 125)

Her feeling of disorientation seemed endless and undefined when she found herself "engulfed by the ghost of Kusum", welcoming her to the "category of unwanted wives, deserted wives" and finally claiming her as a "companion" (TLS 125). She asked herself, "Who I was?" (TLS 24); "What I want?" (TLS 25); "What I am going to do?" (TLS 185); "What I am?" (TLS 185).

Jaya had seen some Sanskrit words in her father's dairy after his death ___ "Yathechhasi tatha kuru" and Ramukaka made her understand that these are the final words of Krishna's long sermon to Arjuna which mean, "Do as you desire" (TLS 192). The words haunted her now and she got the discernment like Krishna conferred humanness on Arjuna, "I have given you knowledge. Now you make the choice. The choice is yours. Do as you desire" (TLS 192).

Ultimately, Jaya had to grind herself in a course of self-assessment and self-realization. She reached at the point of comprehension and judgment. Now the "panic" has gone (TLS 191). She has to shun her long silence. She knows "that kind of a fragmentation is not possible" (TLS 191). The "bits" of herself are to be carefully assembled into one. She realized, "The child, hands in pockets, has been with me through the years. She is with me still" (TLS 191).

Rahul has already come back. "Mohan will be back. 'All well' his telegram says" (TLS 192).

Mohan has perhaps "sorted out his problem" and there are no longer "fears of prosecution, joblessness and disgrace" (TLS 192). They can go back to their "original positions" (TLS 192). She affirms:

It is true. We don't change overnight. It's possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know now it is this; life has always to be made possible. (TLS 193)

Shashi Deshpande's message is very categorical here. Drawing an inference from That Long Silence, Paravati Bhatnagar says:

The message which the writer finally conveys is that a woman's emancipation lies neither in suffering quietly like a fatalist nor in repudiating all claims of the family and society like a rebel she must draw upon her inner strength. Which her education and knowledge has given her and bring about reconciliation between tradition and modernity without losing her own identity.⁶

Jaya strives to attain her identity and establish her individuality by defying patriarchal tradition in her own capacities. Finally, she succumbs to adjustments and compromises after having a course of evaluation of her own self and various factors working in her family as well as social set-up.

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