



Mapping and seeking the self: Indian women in 'That Long Silence'

Kshamata Chaudhary

HoD English

Vardhman Mahaveer Open University, Kota

Abstract

Independent India has seen the arrival of a number of Women Writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantra Sahgal, Bharti Mukherjee, Shobha De, Suniti Namjoshi, and Namita Gokhle. These writers have won International accolades. They have subtly projected their areas of human experience with feministic inclinations. They have mainly concentrated on women's problem in their lives. They have tried to point out that true equality does not exist even today. The burdens of marriage weigh much more heavily upon woman than man. There has always been power struggle but control over all situations is generally seen as a male prerogative. The Indian feministic writers have echoed the changes which are taking place in the contemporary society. Shashi Deshpande believes that "until Women get over the handicaps imposed by society, outside and inner conditioning, the human race will get over the realized its full potential". In the article, 'Feminist criticism of Indian Woman Writers,' Adele King remarks "The work of Shashi Deshpande tends itself particularly well to feminist themes. Her characters are not exemplary feminist heroes, but woman struggling to find their voice."

The social scenario of today has compelled the Indian English women writers to explore the possibilities of female existence beyond the simple dual conflict of good and evil. Though the archetypal roles of women as mother, wife or daughter continue to haunt the imagination of these writers yet they try to view the strength and weaknesses of the women as problems which are arising out of culture, social, sexual, economic, ideological, political and gender specific confrontations. The Indian women writers believe that the traditional standard equation has been radically altered, women are emerging with increased awareness of gender roles and gender identity. Indian women writers have highlighted the principles of female empowerment through inscriptions that emphasize the ideological and physical

struggle of women for searching, chaining and defining their true self. The modern Indian women as represented by Shashi Deshpande are protagonists in search of a goal. According to her, the statement of emancipation is the freedom and responsibility of choice.

Saru, the female protagonist of Shashi Deshpande's first novel's 'The Dark holds no Terrors' (1980), is both shocked and enlightened by the possibility that her life might be her own in the end. The social and political history of the Indian woman's subordination is well known. Indian women writers, almost without exception, chafe against being labelled as woman writers insisting that it implies and smashes of categorisation. 'to achieve something.....you have got to be hard and ruthless.....there is no other way of being a saint, or a painter, a writer.' The voice of narrator of 'That long Silence' gives us a clue to the author's approach to writing.

Shashi Deshpande's fiction is shorn of undue romantic embellishments and portrays women who - after a long, bitter struggle are able to overcome the authoritarian submission syndrome and free themselves from the stultifying traditional constraints. They then cherish a spontaneous surge towards life Saru in 'The Dark Holds No Terrors,' Indu in 'Roots and Shadows,' Sumi and Aru in 'A Matter of Time' and Jaya in 'That Long Silence' are some examples. The social and cultural changes after independence have enabled Indian women to have a defined role in society. However, this has led to a fragmentation of the very psyche of these women. They are caught between the two worlds and need to define themselves their place in society and their relationships with their surroundings. Their conflicts, psychic and moral dilemmas, their predicaments have been Portrayed by novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande on the contemporary Indian fiction in English.

The woman characters of Shashi Deshpande exhibit the belief that woman should play an assertive role, Yet their economic and intellectual emancipation does not negate their responsibility towards their family and society in general. They maintain that a

woman should not be confined only to the family. A woman can enjoy various relationships of wife, mother, friend, companion etc. and still learn to be herself, without requiring a sheltering crevice of male presence behind her. Only education can erase her conditioning and free her from her psychic fears and the bondage of centuries.

Jaya, the protagonist of *That Long Silence*, aptly represents these facets of the contemporary woman. She wants to understand her own bare self, devoid of all embellishments, as that alone can prove to be a reservoir of strength in her tedious lonely journey towards self-actualization. The novel begins with the sensitive presentation of the loneliness of woman and the haunting question of the ultimate purpose of her life in the context of her familial relationships. The silence of an Indian house wife is the major concern in this novel. The inner-conflict in Jaya is expressed in the novel, at the same time there is quest for identity. Shashi Deshpande says about the novel :

'And then I wrote *That Long Silence*, almost entirely a woman's novel, nevertheless, a book about the silencing of half of humanity.'¹

In this novel, Jaya represents one-half of humanity. Her husband thinks that in this dog-eat-dog world, you must fight to stay on top. The novel opens with these lines:

'To achieve anything, to become anything, you have got to be hard and ruthless. Yes, even if you want to be a saint, if you want to love the whole world, you've got to stop loving individual human being first.'²

Jaya feels that being ruthless and hard is the only way to achieve what you want. She also agrees that "self-revelation ruthless is a cruel process. The real picture, the real 'you' never emerges."

Shashi Deshpande uses apt images to describe Jaya's unhappy married life or partly happy life. "I envied her single mindedness. 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"³

Jaya is surprised as she sees "no anger behind her silence". Jaya thinks that it was Jeeja and her like who saved Jaya from the half of drudgery. She is unable to bear "all those agoniesfor days I had been unable to get it out of mind." She doubts whether it wasn't more merciful to crush to death, the baby girls, than "this prolonging of it for years and years."

Jaya was happy to move to Bombay. She was delighted that they could send their children to good schools. She could have decent clothes, a fridge, a gas connection, and could travel in first class. She is a typical modern Indian wife who is not very fussy about her likes and dislikes. She has a perfect understanding of Mohan's nature.

"I know you better than you know yourself," I had once told Mohan and I had meant it" (75)

Mohan's concern towards her shows in his words:

"I went on to the chemist's shop to ring you up. A man there told me there was some trouble in Lal Bagh. I reassured him. It was all over by the time I passed through those areas. The police had dispersed the mob and it was peaceful." (76)

When Jaya knew that to Mohan, anger of a woman makes her "unwomanly," she had learnt to control her anger. She understood that the duties of a woman are the most important thing for the woman in her family. All other things are of less importance. She had never seen such a type of clear cut rules for the women in her family. She thought that her Ai had not prepared her for any of the duties of a woman's life. She is unaware of her duty that she should take Mohan's shirt and sew on the missing button. (83)

Mohan completely misconceived Jaya, who considered her husband a "sheltering tree." Ramukaka told her that, "the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you....." (138)

Jaya's emotions are analyzed in the novel as Adele King says, "That Long Silence is Deshpande's finest novel so far because it analyses emotions within unexceptional situation and because it creates more detailed pictures of an extended family with its

odd misfits, its petty bickering over money, its jealousy over affections and of a marriage in which there is no right or wrong. The scene in which Mohan accuses Jaya in difference of to his plight and in which she is uncertain and confused about her responsibility is especially powerful." ⁴

The emotions in Jaya find expression in traditional style at the end- "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' (193)

Shashi Deshpande's Jaya is overweighed with age-old traditional belief but at the same time welcomes new ideas.

"Deshpande's protagonists finally try their best to conform to their roles and the novel ends with an optimistic tone with the possibility to some positive action in future. The novelist emerges in them as a bridge builder between the old and the new, between tradition and modernity" ⁵

The women in Deshpande's novel depict the women's struggle against all odds. One half of the humanity can't be neglected in this modern world. Therefore, Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer is her women characters, their plight, their suffering and their own solutions to the problems created by the world.

References:

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