

SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THAT LONG SILENCE*: A CRITIQUE

Dr. G. G. Patil, Asst Professor of English, P. C. Jabin Science College, Vidyanagar, Hubballi-580031

1

Shashi Deshpande is an Indian novelist in English. She is the recipient of Central Sahitya Academy Award and Padmashri for her outstanding contribution to Indian English literature. Her major novels include *The Dark Hols no Terrors* (1980), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988) and *Small Remedies* (2000). These novels are translated into many Indian languages.

Mrs Deshpande was born in Dharwad, Karnataka. Her father Adya Rangacharya was one of the pioneers of Kannada drama. She had her higher education in Mumbai and Bangaluru in economics and law. She did journalism too.

Shashi Deshpande began her career as a short story writer in 1978. She won the Sahitya Academy award for *The Long Silence* in 1980 and Padmashri in 2009. Her novel *Shadow Play* was shortlisted for the Hindu Literary Prize in 2014. She has written nine novels, many books for children and an essay collection called *Writing from the Margin*. She was once a member of Sahitya Academy and she resigned it in protest against M.M. Kalaburgi's murder.

Jon Mee in her enlightening article "After Midnight: The Novel in the 1980s and 1990s" thinks Shashi Deshpande tries to assert of woman's right in her fiction. Mee adds, "Translation becomes a governing metaphor in her novels for the gaps which separate the different cultures that make up the nation, especially as they affect the question of the place of women in the national community." (Mee 333)

2

Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* (the winner of Central Sahitya Academy award) is a feminist narrative. The metaphors of 'dark', 'silence' etc of women used by Shashi Deshpande speak of woman's oppression in society. Patriarchy is a bloody thing that keeps half of human beings in dark or silence as this scholar feels sadly. Marginalizing women means marginalizing ourselves too, which few men realize. All this undermines the growth of human resources.

According to M.H. Abrams, "Feminism is a distinctive approach to literature. It focuses on two centuries of struggle for the recognition of women's cultural roles and achievements and for women's social and political rights, marked in such books as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)". (Abrams 124)

That Long Silence

The novel sketches the story of an Indian woman who resorts to silence all through her life amidst difficulties, apprehensions and afflictions and finally breaks that silence. It presents Jaya Kulkarni, the protagonist's search for identity and the inner struggle she undergoes in the process of obtaining it. Deshpande reiterates in her novels that this process of self-fulfillment starts within the domestic sphere.

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is a woman's struggle for self-fulfilment if not for salvation in the Hindu sense. The title of the novel comes from Elizabeth Robbin's speech: "If I were a man and cared to know the world I lived in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy - The weight of that long silence of one half of the world." (Robin qt by Gantasali 120) This silence refers to the inhibition and introversion of women. The novel set against this background, is an outcry of the restrictions imposed on women.

That Long Silence is a delineation of memory and the relief the protagonist Jaya finally achieves. Her husband Mohan, an engineer, is indicted for corruption in a business transaction. Jaya and Mohan retreat to a flat at Dadar in Mumbai. Jaya reviews her life. The novel portrays the inner debate in the mind of Jaya besides her search for individuality. The novel is enlightenment on the inner self of people who fail to maintain their potentiality when exposed to harrowing confrontations. "Jaya of *That Long Silence* when required to face a traumatic situation temporarily seeks shelter in neurosis which evades her responsibility as an individual for her without her being aware of it. Her suffering has a beneficial effect on her. It initiates the process of self-discovery in her which leads in the analysis to her fresh perception of life. She emerges at the end of the ordeal as a woman with certain willingness to compromise with life's problems while earlier she showed a surprising lack of accommodation and expansiveness." (Rajeshwar, qt Gantasali 120)

Jaya Kulkarni, the protagonist and the narrator of *That Long Silence* is a bright and brilliant woman with good educational aptitude and a vocation with a significant degree of success. But these achievements fail to secure her a reputable status in Mohan's life.

Jaya feels lonely. Jaya constricted to the old shabby flat, isolated from the external world, slides into intense self-analysis. Mohan accuses Jaya's attitude for not sympathizing with him.

Dissatisfied with her married life, Jaya is engulfed with reminiscences of the past - her childhood, the backdrop in which she was raised and the assumptions which were imprinted on her.

Women are subjugated to waiting and silence in Indian context. The supremacy of the male is instilled in Jaya as a child. Deshpande exposes male-domination through child games that girls play, especially, the game of waiting. This is an excellent elucidation on the position of women in Indian society. She says, "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*" (*Long Silence* 30).

Nonetheless, Jaya likes to live a soulful life. She has learnt music. She faced her married life without the fires of anger, hatred and delusion. In fact, Jaya is wedded to Mohan, not because she feels he is the most acceptable companion for her, and also not because, he is her choice, but because she is the most favoured girl by Mohan.

Jaya is not happy with the Indian woman's lot though her people advise her contrariwise. Vanitamami's counsel that the husband is like a 'sheltering tree' resonates in her mind. She recalls the advice of Ramukaka on the occasion of her marriage, "Remember, Jaya, the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you." (*Long Silence* 138) Jaya is bombarded with advice but no one guides her about what to do after marriage.

Jaya understands that going against Mohan would not solve the problem but only intensify her mental trauma. So, she recurses to an acquiescent attitude. She learns that one's own self is a miserable exercise. She observes, "The ghost most fearful to confront is the ghost of one's old self (*Long Silence* 13) Yet Jaya has formidable courage, determination and faithfulness to explore her own self and apart from that, she is conscious of the fact that one needs to be sincere and objective while appraising one's personality. In her task of self-exploration, Jaya's understanding perceives herself through others: "I have to be honest with myself. It was not he who had relinquished his authority, it was I who no longer conceded any authority to him. But I have to be fair to myself as well." (*Long Silence* 9) She is mindful of the fact that she has to play a secondary role in the family and the power of decision making is vested in the hands of Mohan. She is distressed and troubled when she discovers that she is not even acquainted with prime concerns in her life.

Syamala Gantasala observes, "Gender discrimination is evident at every phase in a woman's life. For instance, at one point in the novel, to the utter astonishment and dismay of Jaya, she realizes that her name is not featured in the family tree. When Jaya questions her uncle, Ramukaka, why her name is excluded in the family tree, she is told that she is no more a member of her father's family but her husband's.

However, this is not completely true. She observes that neither her mother nor her Kaku (uncle's wife), not even her ajji (grandmother) that unyielding woman, “who single-handedly kept the family together” secure a position in the family tree. Vimala, Jaya's ajji, Sudha and the other Ajji (mother's mother) follow patriarchal values.

Finally, Jaya's life comes to a bad end when her husband is asked to leave his job as he was struck in a scandal. Shashi Deshpande, through the character of Jaya, conveys the idea that women should be accountable for their duties and admit position in family.

References:

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