



HUMANIST ATTITUDE IN JAYA IN THAT LONG SILENCE

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ABSTRACT

Humanism essentially is a philosophical and ethical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings and generally prefers critical thinking and evidence over established doctrine or faith. Humanism refers to a perspective that affirms some notion of human freedom and progress. Humanist movements are typically aligned with secularism, "Humanism" typically refers to a non-theistic life stance centered on human agency, and looking to science instead of religious dogma in order to understand the world. Many Humanists, such as Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., openly and clearly declare that Humanism is their "ultimate concern" or "principle motivational philosophy". People whose religion is Humanism may or may not believe in supreme beings, they believe that every human person who does something for somebody else, or engages in self-preservation is a humanist. This paper deals with the protagonist's humanistic approach its origins and influences that uplifts her individual identity.

Key words: Humanism, existential, self-preservation, accommodative, stereotype, subordinated

INTRODUCTION

Jaya, the protagonist allowed her family to take control of her, own her body and soul for seventeen years. Her family was her world she didn't think anything beyond that, thus she was a dedicated conventional woman. Her family members lead their lives and she sacrificed hers for them. Her life revolved around their comfort she could neither express herself nor achieve anything in life. Jaya lead a purposeless life. She had a misconception of happiness. She accepts that she should let that illusion go. "I had to admit the truth to myself-that I had

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often found family life unendurable. Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending, monotony.” Jaya’s introspection heightens the need for a critical analysis and self-detachment. Jaya wanted a change, she had hoped for a catastrophe, a disaster that would pull her out of the dull routine. Her self-analysis revealed her own flaws and she gradually prepared herself for facing the reality. Silence is seen as an image of suppression, distancing and meaninglessness of Jaya’s existence. Obliterating that long silence, she grows as a poised and independent being. Jaya says in TLS, “I had learnt it at last no questions, no retorts, only silence” (143). This line reveals the subjugation of emotions and the suppression of the self and from this understanding evolves a humanistic approach to life.

Post-Independence, Indian women writers have rejected the so called conventionally accepted standards of male dominance. That Long Silence is Shashi Deshpande’s most popular novel which won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for the year 1990. Critics tend to read the novel as a feminist writing or as a novel expressing woman’s struggle to achieve an identity in the male dominated society. S.P. Swain holds the view that in the present novel “the feminist struggle for liberation is looked upon within the framework of the freedom crisis. The quest for an authentic selfhood on the part of the protagonist finds an artistic expression through the heroin’s rebellion against the patriarchal core of society.” A.N. Dwivedi also highlights the conflict between man and woman in the novel from the feminist perspective. While Rajeshwar Mittapalli concentrates on the trauma of a house wife which initiates the process of self-discovery leading to a new perception of life, Bijay Kumar Das studies the novel as a portrayal of the contemporary Indian woman who becomes a victim of circumstances and revolts against patriarchy. G. Lakshmi Narasaiah ingeniously discovers the existential theme in the novel. According to the critic: “Jaya speaks not like a woman liberated from the burdens of either her humanity or her womanhood, but a woman redefining her existential situation in her own terms, having it out on her own premises”. Adesh Pal attempts to explore the novel as a quest for self or identity by Jaya as she feels having no identity within the framework of marriage. S.P. Swain says: “A sensitive and realistic dramatization of the married life of Jaya and her husband Mohan, it [TLS] portrays an inquisitive critical appraisal to which the institution of marriage has been subjected to in recent years.” So, most of the critics focus on the feminist concerns of Deshpande or they focus on the theme of search for identity in the novel.

That Long Silence is the story of an educated middle class girl, Jaya, who finds herself restricted in her married life. It is a lifelike image of an educated middle-class woman. Jaya is a modern, convent-educated, English speaking woman and a creative writer who represents the emerging new woman who is aware of her status in the society. The novel gains genuineness from the fact that Jaya, the heroine, is a well-read woman, bestowed with literary



sensibility though fostered in silence which matches with her fictional role. After seventeen years of troubled life in silence, Jaya pens her story revealing her feelings, the ups and downs that caused her despondency and distress. She begins the novel by saying that she is not writing “a story of a callous, insensitive husband and a sensitive suffering wife. I’m writing of us”. A lot of discussion takes place in the family whether Mohan ought to be Jaya’s husband. Jaya ultimately makes up her mind to marry Mohan. The silence between Jaya and her husband further worsens the situation. The marriage is on the brink of separation. Deshpande perhaps wants us to draw inference from Jaya: women should accept their own responsibility for what they are, see how much they have contributed to their own victimization, instead of putting the blame on everybody except themselves. The novelist brings an unexpected turn in the plot at the end of the novel. The end of the novel portrays Jaya’s humanist approach, she realizes that she should break the silence and try to achieve her identity as an individual through self-realization and self-assertion. Jaya believes that she has to stand up for herself and her happiness is her concern, she engages in self-preservation and thus comes across as a humanist.

The writer in her novels depicts two distinctly different pictures of Indian women at two analogous levels – the lower class and the middle class women. The lower class women are engaged in lowly domestic errands earn their living; and the middle class women are engaged in some jobs that give them some financial independence. In most of the stories of Deshpande the middle class women are divided into two categories: the ones who never question their marriage and submit to abuse and disgrace without any complaint; and the ones who, refuse to be victimized and raise voice against oppression. Jaya, the protagonist, belongs to the second category of middle class women. Initially, she never questions and submits to insults and humiliation, but towards the end, we notice a great change in her personality as she knows she has to stand up for herself. Jaya, her mother and Grandmother are among those in Deshpande’s novels who are from different generations. The novelist brings out the similarities and differences among them. There are also women from different classes like Jaya, Nayana and Jeeja, and there are women of the same class and generation like Jaya, her cousin, Kusum and her neighbour, Mukta. Nayana and Jeeja, the women of the lower class lead miserable lives. In fact their suffering starts with their birth as girls in poor families. They are not sent to schools and are expected to add to the family income at a young age, the way Jeeja’s granddaughter, Manda, does. They end up working all their lives even after being married. They are married off at the tender age by their parents, to any boy who has one head, two eyes, two ears, two hands and two legs like any man. Marriage is a dream to any teenage girl but in case of these women of lower class it is only a distant illusion. It does not bring any positive change in their lives, but it brings with it ceaseless pain, misery and affliction. The husband, who has to take care of the family fail to earn so these women end up being the bread winners of the family. As if this misery is not enough, they also become targets of their



husband's ill-treatment. Deshpande shows the lives of Jeeja and Nayana, housemaids of Jaya, as a life of continuous drudgery. They are treated ruthlessly by their husbands. Nayana says to Jaya, "Why give birth to a girl, behnji, who'll only suffer because of men all her life? Look at me! My mother loved me very much, she wanted so much for me ... a house with electricity and water, shining brass vessels, a silver waist chain, silver anklets ... and what have I got? No, no, behnji, better to have a son". Nayana wants a son not because she expects any help from him in her old age, but because she does not want her daughter to suffer at some drunkard's hands as she herself has suffered. Both Jeeja and Nayana's husbands are drunkards and often beat them. They take the burden of the whole household on their shoulders only because they don't get any support from their respective husbands. Nayana justifies her husband's second marriage as she fails to give him any child. She has only one question: "With whom shall I be angry" (p. 52). Tara's life is another example of the suffering and the marital problems of the lower class woman. Her husband, Rajaram, is a drunkard and he treats her brutally. Tara is beaten up when she refuses to give him her earning. Exasperated by such a wretched married life, she curses her husband and says: "So many drunkards die ... but this one won't. He'll torture us all to death instead" (p. 53). Jeeja shuts her up saying that husband is a symbol of social prestige because he "keeps the Kumkum" (p. 53) on her forehead, and "what is a woman without that?" (p. 53)

The Middle class women work outside the house which is not a compulsion but a matter of choice. They receive much better treatment as compared to lower class women. But they also undergo a lot of suffering in marriage and life. Their suffering is more mental than physical. Middle class girls get good education and caring atmosphere in family, but they are also conditioned to mould themselves to suit the requirements of their future life partner. As a girl she is conditioned to be accommodative so that she can be a good wife in future. She is taught to limit her identity in that of her husband. In childhood, Jaya used to be of witty and inquisitive nature which made her grandmother say, "Look at you – for everything a question, for everything a retort. What husband can be comfortable with that" (p. 27) Jaya is thus conditioned towards the comforts of her future life-partner. At the time of Jaya's marriage, Ramukaka tells her that the happiness of her husband and home depends on her. Dada advised her to be good to Mohan. And Vanitamami tells her about the importance of being with a husband: "Remember, Jaya ... a husband is like a sheltering tree Without the tree, you're dangerously unprotected and vulnerable" (p. 32). These words keep on echoing in the ears of Jaya and she realizes that since a husband is like "a sheltering tree," he must be nourished and nurtured adequately even if the wife has to suffer to give it nourishment. Jaya, who used to consider herself independent and intelligent, shapes herself to suit her husband's model of a wife. According to Indian tradition, a wife is expected to stay at home, look after the babies and keep out the rest of the world. She is expected to have the qualities prescribed in Indian tradition : Karyeshu Mantri, Karaneshu Daasi, Rupeeha Lakshmi, Kshamayaa



Dharitrii, Bhojyeshu Mata, Shayaneshu Rambha, Shat Karma Yukta, Kula Dharma Patni. (Like a slave while serving; a minister while counseling; Goddess Lakshmi in her looks; the earth in forbearance; a mother while feeding; as wife like Rambha, the celestial prostitute; these six are the true characteristics of an ideal wife.) She gets transformed into “stereotype of a woman: nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support” (p. 76). Outwardly she has all the physical comforts and is almost contented. But she has to compromise and suppress many aspects of her individuality for this.

Jaya does everything possible to change herself from a fun loving person to a devoted wife and ideal mother. There is an instance where the editor of a magazine asked her to give them her bio-data, and Jaya feels that she has nothing meaningful in her life, she in the process of becoming a good wife and mother is left with no identity and no status of her own. When asked for Biodata she thinks of only irrelevant facts: “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 one live” (p. 2). As expected of any Indian woman, Jaya keeps changing herself according to her husband’s likes and dislikes this destroys her individuality. She cuts her hair and wears sun glasses as Mohan likes it, whatever she does has only one consideration and that is, what her husband will think of it. From Jaya she is renamed Suhasini by Mohan. Jaya means Victory and Suhasini means a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman. “A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped” (pg. 15-16). The transition from Jaya to Suhasini is a slow and painful, she understands what is expected of her. Slowly she learns how sharply defined a woman’s role is. She learns that as a wife she cannot get angry as it questions the authority of the man of the house. She learns that to make the marriage work there are several tricks and one of them is to remain silent. To make her marriage work she silences her emotions as well as her physical desires.

The Indian tradition upholds a woman who is able to keep her man happy. Society believes that a woman who submits herself to her husband’s desires remains happy but often it is forgotten that a woman has an identity of her own and she is a person with flesh and blood who too can have her own physical desires. Jaya also follows the same tradition which results in frustration in her marital life. She pines for emotional communication between her and her husband. In her relationship with Mohan Jaya finds nothing except emptiness and the suppressed silence, she tells Mukta: “... nothing between me and Mohan either. We lived together but there had been only emptiness between us” (p. 185). She realizes that despite seventeen years of married life, they have not become one, only their bodies occasionally meet, not their souls. Jaya, like Indu of Roots and Shadows, mollifies her liberated spirit to the expectations of her husband. She describes her relationship with Mohan as a mechanical and forced relationship: “A pair of bullocks yoked together 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” (p. 8). The novelist uses the image of two bullocks performing their duties mechanically thus undermining the husband-wife relationship. Marriage is expected to make a man and woman feel complete in each other, it is expected to bring joy, glory and fulfilment to both. But in most cases across all generations and classes, as we see in the novel, marriage fails to give the promised happiness to the individuals, especially to the woman. Jaya scorns the role assigned to a wife in our country. To Jaya, married life becomes unbearable and monotonous. She gets frustrated and says: “Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony” (p. 4). Marriage stifles the growth and right to free expression of a wife. A woman’s role and contribution to the society is defined in terms of her role as a wife, daughter, sister or mother. Commenting on her married life, Jaya says that waiting synonymous to her existence: “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” (p. 30). Jaya’s being attracted to Kamat, a middle aged intellectual, is because of the emptiness in her marriage. She is herself in Kamat’s company as she is treated as equal. But our society does not accept the friendship of a married woman with another man, though there is no physical relation between the two. The friendship between Jaya and Kamat could not prolong due to this reason. Jaya’s friends and neighbours like Mukta, do not approve their relationship. One day when Jaya finds Kamat lying dead on the floor, she silently leaves the place because of the fear of social disgrace.

Jaya is a creative writer but has to stifle her creative urges to save her career as a wife. Jaya says: “I had relinquished them instead, all those stories that had been taking shape in me because I had been scared – scared of hurting Mohan, scared of jeopardizing the only career I had, my marriage”(p. 144). According to Mohan her creative writing reflected autobiographical details. To keep Mohan in good humour and avoid conflict in her marriage, Jaya gives up creative writing. Mohan has a traditional outlook and expects his wife to conform to his expectations so Jaya is forced to start writing middles in newspapers which cause no trouble to her husband. Mohan, at the time of marriage, wanted his wife to be modern and educated, but also expects her to have traditional qualities like obedience and submission. Sarbjit Sandhu remarks: “Mohan is a traditionalist rooted in customs. To him, a woman sitting before the fire, waiting for her husband to come and eat hot food is the real strength of a woman.” Mohan never tries to understand his wife’s emotions and her psychological needs. On the other hand, Jaya puts an end to the creative aspect of her personality to keep Mohan happy. But Jaya thinks differently as she says: “He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire, but I saw despair. I saw a despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and



surrender” (p. 36). As a wife she dedicates herself to the care and fulfilment of her husband’s and her children’s needs. Thus, obedience and loyalty, which are considered to be the virtues of Indian womanhood, degenerates into silent bearing of oppression. A woman is even expected not to be angry or revolting as stated in the novel: “A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There’s ... no room for despair, either. There is only order and routine” (pp. 147-148). Marriage not only hinders Jaya’s intellectual growth, but also undermines her sense of self. Mohan gives meaning to her existence. Her status as a wife, as mother, as a housewife owes itself to Mohan. She is aware that Mohan is her profession, her career and her means of livelihood. But this also denies her place as an individual. This realization that she has no existence as Jaya but only as a complement of Mohan becomes more acute when Dr. S.K. Vyas, her brother’s classmate, invites her to his house with Mohan: “And drop in some time—with your husband, of course. ‘With your husband, of course’ – what did he mean by that? Was it impossible for me to relate to the world without Mohan? A husband is like a sheltering tree ... Vanitamami, did you, without knowing it, speak the most profound truth I’m destined to heart in my life” (p. 167)?

A woman though is known as an ‘ardhangini’ according to the Indian scriptures, she is subordinated in a number of ways and this leads to unhappiness between the two sexes. The husband denies his wife the right of her individuality, he expects her to see the world around her only in the way he would like her to see. He expects complete dedication, complete commitment to his vision of life from his wife. When Mohan is charged with corrupt activities he expects Jaya to stand by him, understand that whatever he has done is for his wife and kids. He expects emotional support from his wife and when he fails to get any sympathy from Jaya, he leaves the house. This proves to be a traumatic experience for Jaya. Like any other traditional Indian wife, Jaya can not bear Mohan’s absence. Even the thought of his death horrifies her: “The thought of living without him had twisted my insides. His death had seemed to me the final catastrophe. The very idea of his dying had made me feel so bereft that tears had flowed effortlessly down my cheeks” (pp. 96-97).

Mohan’s leaving their Dadar home is a terrible blow to Jaya. After his departure, she feels that she has no identity without him, she is secure only with Mohan and has no face to show, no identity without him. His departure awakens her to her real place in life. Under these exasperating circumstances, Jaya gets terribly disturbed and starts questioning herself. She rethinks over her marital relationship. She realizes that she is not only Mohan’s wife, rather she is an individual having her own distinct identity as she states: “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 a fragmentation is not possible” (p. 191). She hopes to be on equal terms with Mohan, and at the same time, accepts the established norms and values. Now Jaya comes to know that the reason of her depressing



condition is not the society alone, but she has to take the responsibility of her own state and work according to it. She takes a humanist approach to understand herself and how important it is to ascertain her own self. The idea of marriage as “two bullocks yoked together” is rejected by her. Understanding that life cannot be lived in vacuum, she no longer looks at Mohan and herself as two bullocks, rather as two individual with independent minds. She realizes that meaningful co-existence can be achieved only through understanding and compassion, not through domination, subjugation or rejection. In the novel, women belonging to the older generation like Aiji, Mohan’s mother and Vanitamani endure the tyranny and injustice of male-dominated society as a natural way of life. They are depicted as docile and subdued figures following the tradition as a virtue. These uneducated women, though victim of male chauvinism, adapt themselves to the tradition completely. But there are other women who, like Jaya, belong to the middle class, but unlike her, suffer silently without protest taking the suffering to be their fate. The figures of Vanitamami, Kusum, Mukta, Mohan’s Mother and Mohan’s sister, Vimala can be quoted as examples. Vanitamami, “who had never known what it was to choose” (p. 45), represents another facet of the traditionally suppressed woman. The protagonist, being educated and awakened, fails to conform to the views of the women belonging to the older generation. Sarala Palker beautifully sums up the idea when she says: “The important insight that Shashi Deshpande imparts to us through Jaya is that women should accept their own responsibility for what they are, see how much they have contributed to their victimization instead of putting the blame on everybody except themselves.” Jaya makes her choice by refusing to become a victim of trends and is determined to break her long silence which has plagued her family since long. Woman should be courageous and should not allow the domination to continue. It is not only man who subjugates woman, the woman is responsible for her own predicament and should struggle to achieve her own individuality. She should first respect herself as a human being and this would make her command respect from others too. Adjustment in marriage is but natural but a woman should not be servile. Sumitra Kukreti remarks, “The realization that she [Jaya] can have her own way—yathechchasi tatha kuru – gives a new confidence to Jaya. This is her emancipation.” Jaya emerges as an individual with a distinct identity, as Indra Mohan writes: “She [Jaya] breaks herself self-imposed prison wall of mind and chooses to remain in the family at the same time comes out of the confining slots allotted to her by the patriarchal society.” Shashi Deshpande shows that woman aspires for love, respect and expression of herself in marriage, but they do not get what they aspire for. But Deshpande suggests that a balanced and purposeful life is not a utopian fancy for a woman if she liberates herself from the stereotyped conditioning of the society and does not depend on the male presence to authenticate her thoughts, emotions and actions at every step.

*Walk and arise your fist
Affirm your decision to be free*

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Don't walk three yards behind

It's your place by right

Mother, woman!

The Revolution is you.

- Indira Kulkshreshtha

Rightly said by Indira Kulkshreshtha, the revolution is the woman herself, Jaya is the revolution in *That Long Silence*. Critics see her in the colour of existentialism and feminism whereas this paper sees humanism in her which makes her rise above the realms of religious dogma, culture, tradition and societal norms. Jaya learns to accept herself as yet another human being who is all flesh and blood, who is alive like any other member of her family. She upholds her interests too like any of the members of her family and that makes her a humanist.

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