



SUBMISSIVENESS OF THE PROTAGONIST DEPICTED IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THAT LONG SILENCE*

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande, a powerful writer in Indian writer in Indian English Literature occupies a prominent position. In her works, Shashi Deshpande depicts woman in myriad roles-wife, mother, daughter and individual in her own right. Her writing reflects an on-going process of problematizing life's conflicts and compromises, resolution and irresolution, ironies and affirmations, triumphs and tragedies and so on. Shashi Deshpande stressed the idea of self realization in all her novels and demands a position for women in the society. Without the support of their masculine part Deshpande tries to carve out the effigy of a new woman who is more palatable and real to the mind of the reader.

Key Words: *irresolution, affirmations, self realization*

INTRODUCTION

The nineteen eighties mark a noticeable development in Indian English written by women. Among them Shashi Deshpande holds an important place among the Indo - Anglian novelists. She is a prolific writer as she has written several books for children and many admirable novels. A close study of Deshpande's novels reveals an author who is intelligent, articulate and relatively free from prejudices regarding gender, but at the same time highly sensitive to the issues involving women. Deshpande is perhaps the only Indian author who has made a bold attempt to give voice to frustration and disappointments of women.

Depiction of Protagonist's Submissiveness

S. SARAVANAN

1Page



That Long Silence, which has won the Sahitya Akademy Award in 1990, tells the story of an Indian housewife, who maintains silence throughout her life. The title of the novel *That Long Silence* itself implies that women do not raise their voice against suppression. The novel depicts the woman's struggle against all odds. It is true that women of the middle and lower sections of the society are still imprisoned in age-old superstition. Woman has no right in her own home. It is believed that women very often suffer due to male chauvinism. The story of gender discrimination is not a new development. That is it began since the beginning of civilization.

Deshpande carefully expresses the frustration and disappointments of women who experience great social and cultural oppression in the male dominated society. In that *That Long Silence* Indian women, unlike their western counterparts, have always been socially and psychologically oppressed, sexually colonized and biologically subjugated against a male-dominant social set-up. Any attempt by a woman to rise above the oppressive forces rooted in the middle class margins has either been curbed mercilessly or ignored in the name of social dignity.

Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* points to how family as a system creates a hierarchical relationship between the male and the female delegates a more difficult, strenuous and monotonous responsibility like homemaking and child rearing to the woman. Consequently men expect services from women as their right. For example Jaya realises that there is no qualitative difference between her authoritative father-in-law, who fumes at his wife and throws the food plate on the wall for not making fresh chutney and her soft spoken husband who retorts, 'You want me to cook?' when Jaya asks him to help when she was pregnant. Men distance themselves from 'womanly' activities like cooking, cleaning, washing, child-rearing, etc., and expect women to undertake such strenuous and monotonous work. Jaya realizes that education and employment automatically do not bring any change in the gender-based division of work within the families.

Family gives protection to the woman at some level, it also restricts her physically and mentally by imposing certain unwritten cultural codes. All ethical rules and principles preached by our elders stress the need for confining women within the bounds of family system. Woman needs to be protected by her father in her girlhood, by her brother and her husband in her adulthood and by her son in her old age and widowhood.

However man's protection of woman does not mean that woman is free from all other responsibilities. On the contrary, family system heavily depends on the woman's labour and energy for its nourishment. It is basically the responsibility of women to take care of house and children. Not only the traditional illiterate woman but also the educated and employed



woman is not liberated from the burden of familial labour and responsibilities. The family system imprisons woman and conditions her freedom of choice and restricts her profession. Like a tethered cow she has to move within a confined circumference and pretend to be free and satisfied. Such a pretend freedom or satisfaction only leads her to a mental vacuum and leaves her with the taste of bitterness and existential dilemmas. Shashi Deshpande has represented the predicament of such a woman in her novel, *That Long Silence* the novel represents how the decadent beliefs and value system in the Indian family affect the woman and paralyse her capacities to play a conscious role as an individual in the society.

Jaya dreams of going to Oxford but her dreams get sheltered with her father's early death and she agrees to marry out of compulsion to escape the detestable family now devoid of her father. But the escape root in the form of marriage turns out to be a trap. For her husband, Mohan is certainly not unconventional like her father. Mohan, like any other 'normal' husband in a patriarchal system, expects familial role from his working wife.

The family makes too many social demands on Jaya, that she virtually gets caught in the vicious cycle of fulfilling social expectations at the cost of her independent self- a self that wishes ardently to be free from the drudgery of household business and to pursue a literary career as a feminist writer. The resulting stagnation and paralyzes kills her spontaneity, self-confidence and identity. Despite all services and sacrifices, women do not get any recognition for their work becomes clear to Jaya.

Jaya's relationship with her husband is dominated by sex without love. Even sex becomes the facet of the monotonous and routine silence between the couple. Jaya's aim to preserve her marriage at all costs and avoid anything that poses danger to her family life, affects her career as a writer. Jaya's married life becomes unbreakable and monotonous. Jaya finds herself in the midst of a domestic tension when she tries to know about her husband's corrupt practices at office.

In order to avoid exposure in public, Mohan shifts from his posh church gate flat to a small apartment at Dadar, where they had once lived soon after their marriage. Here the couple sink into utter silence in a mood of frustration and depression, without sharing their ideas. Jaya is terribly distributed by the prevailing circumstances in the family and she starts questioning herself.

Shashi Deshpande gives perfect examples of women who submitted always to insults, injuries and humiliations with tremendous patience without any complaint. Despite her education and career, she falls in line with the patriarchal expectations of her husband and



relatives and suppresses the 'self' in her for saving her marriage at any cost. Like other women, she also learns to wait.

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... (p.30)

The hectic and monotonous responsibilities that she had to shoulder never gave her time to introspect what she has been doing all the years. But her temporary refuge in Ambegaon gives her time to reflect on all that has happened to her since marriage. While reading her past diaries, she becomes aware of her suppressed individuality.

While studying Sanskrit drama, I'd learnt with a sense of outrage that its rigid rules did not permit women characters to speak Sanskrit. They had to use Prakrit- a language that had sounded to my ears like a baby's lisp.(P 192)

CONCLUSION

Jaya also realizes that in performing her familial duties, she has alienated herself from her individual self. In other words, she realizes that she has started speaking Prakrit, instead of Sanskrit, like the women characters in Sanskrit drama. This realization makes Jaya take a vow to break her silence. Thus the novel *That Long Silence* centres on gender discrimination and male domination inherent in the patriarchal family structures.

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