

Images of Indian Woman in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence—Stereotypes, Myths and Realities*

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Abstract – Indian English Fiction portrays a lucid image of our Culture and Society. The consistent bondage to tradition has ignited an oppression and injustice against woman. Indian woman novelists have acknowledged the value of themselves by providing a valuable contribution to Indian English Literature. Shashi Deshpande is one among the prominent contemporary women writers in India. She began her career in 1970's and she created characters that are a replication of Indian middle class women. In the novels of Shashi Deshpande one is able to recognize credible female characters with flesh and blood. She presents the authentic life of a women and not shadowy abstractions. The heroines of the novelist are typical example of stereotypical virtues of Indian women, who explode the myth of man's superiority. The novelist is successful in creating real life characters that live their day today life; she has not merely created women puppets to act to the scene.

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INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande's novels present before us a sensitive portrayal of Indian womanhood without ever seeming to be defensive about it. Though in one of her interviews she has remarked that she does not possess any specific mission as a writer and has resisted the tag of a woman writer, her themes and motifs are based on the lives and problems of women only.¹ Her work passionately concentrates on the predicament of women, and men are pushed towards the periphery. Her plots and sub-plots provide a pointer to the catatonic status of women in the tradition-bound, male-dominated middle-class society of contemporary India, in which they are struggling to overcome the constricting dilemmas of pre-fixed definitions and pre-set norms, and thus attempting to redefine their status. The attitudinal postures of Deshpande's protagonists confirm the theory of Julia Kristeva that the consideration of femininity as marginality offers a position and not the essence, as they exhibit the courage to transcend the marginality and activate their epicurean participation in life.²

BALZAC WROTE IN 'PHYSIOLOGY OF MARRIAGE':

"Pay no attention to a woman's murmurs, her cries, her pains, nature has made her for our use and for bearing everything; children, sorrows, blows and pains inflicted by man. Do not accuse yourself of

hardness. In all the codes of so called civilized nations, man has written the laws that ranged woman's destiny under this bloody epigraph: "Vae-Victis" woe to he weak."

Deshpande's novels centre around women who are victims of such pathogenic misogyny. These women have suffered the atrocities of men in silence and without protest, as they were not aware of protest as an option to change their world. Their inner turmoil, flabbergasted emotional resilience and relational bondage has been suggestively juxtaposed against the desperate struggle of her protagonists to define and obtain a self-hood, thus putting it in a sustained and sharpened focus to indicate the changing dynamics of man-woman relation. Deshpande's narratives bear the authenticity of a woman's signature. She has rejected the masculine dialect and the masculine perception of virtue, relationship and content, and laid bare before us the subversive role of tradition in perpetuating the secondary role of women, emphasizing the need of discrediting its legacies if women have to emerge as liberated and emancipated beings.

In her march towards emancipation and self-hood, the contemporary Indian woman has to struggle against the insensitive fatality of options and the "womanhood" with a silent persistence. "The true woman", Simone de Beauvoir remarks, "is an artificial product that civilization makes as formerly

eunuchs were made. Her presumed 'instincts' for coquetry, docility are indoctrinated, as is phallic pride in man."⁴ Shashi Deshpande has portrayed women who exhibit the results of this indoctrination in their psyche and behavior. Her Ajis and Kakis are the women who could not have the opportunity to develop and grow except in home and family related roles and have surrendered to the traditional clap-trap about the women's-place-at-home-only. This self-deception also perpetuates the power-equations, as Veranda Nabar points out, "whereby the woman/mother eventually sees her imprisonment as empowering her by conferring on her the attributes of mother and wife. She sees these largely (perhaps naturally) in relation to the men in the domestic power-hierarchy (husband/sons). She thus becomes a symbol of what men later on expect their women to be. She is imprinted on the children's consciousness as sublime sufferer, selfless slave, tireless worker for her family's comfort and happiness."⁵

Deshpande's novels sympathetically record the lives of such women. Her approach is neither argumentatively vocal nor barrenly intellectual. She has endeavored to transmit the basic anxiety, loneliness and helplessness of their situation. She has also scathingly attacked the myths which the Indian men hold about women. The notions which her male characters express about the status of girls and women, their education, liberty, socializing, adjustment, marriage etc., reveal the crudity and insensitivity of the traditional male ethos, which stifles and amothers the individuality of women in a gradual and planned way. It is against these sketches of prevalent stereotypes and myths that Shashi Deshpande has balanced her portrayal of the realities of Indian womanhood.

That Long Silence (1988) is Deshpande's fifth novel which repeats and reinforces the thematic approach taken by her in the previous four novels. The quotation from Elixabeth Robins which has been used as an epigraph in the novel presents it with a sharper focus, "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 the world." The protagonist Jaya's journey towards a well-defined self-hood is mired in the labyrinthine mazes of societal pressures, feminine conditioning to fashion oneself according to the accepted norms of behavior, suppressive and egotistic male chauvinism and the continued dilemma of attaching a purpose to her life, culminating in a long silence. Her silence is symptomatic of alienation and apprehension rooted in every woman's soul in different forms—a silence which is often misunderstood by men a symbol of owns contentment.

Jaya was aware of an inner void, a hollowness in her life, even though it was shielded by the deceptively beautiful screen of her social graces and obligations. Her stream of consciousness makes it clear that even in the educated upper middle classes the intrinsic

value of intelligent and capable woman is invariable affected by her social/married status, since the society treats her as object or a possession—never as an individual. There are moments when for Jaya, social and familial responsibilities do not remain a pleasure, but become a bondage, because she is forced to accept these compulsively as a female. Her married life forces her to put herself on exhibition, but it did not enable her to understand herself successfully. Instead of taking her out of her isolation, it confirms her alienation from the personal and the social worlds. Her inability to establish a normal relationship with her husband enhances her frustration. However, she overcomes the barrier of this unnatural silence after a bitter struggle and realizes that negation of one's emotional needs never leads a woman towards self-hood. An understanding of one's motives, accepting responsibilities for one's decisions and clear bilateral communication of priorities and decisions is required to obtain peace, harmony and fulfillment on life.

That Long Silence presents the stereotypes and myths about Indian femininity through various peripheral characters. In the beginning of the novel the character of Kusum is portrayed as a counter-foil to Jaya, who mirrors the darker regions of her psyche. She is a touchstone against which Jaya tests and ensures her sanity and normalcy. Kusum, carrying an "aura of defeat about her" (23), represents a way of life in which women are made keenly aware of the low position they occupy in their society. Deshpande's control over her narrative, however, does not allow it to become a sociological rant. Kusum's mother was constantly burdened with child bearing. Her world "centred round her youngest, the baby" on her lap, while the rest of her kids ran around in wild abandon, unkempt, dirty, unfed....." (22) Kusum is later on adopted by her aunt Vanitamami, but her existence in the new family also remains a bit tentative. Passive surrender and insecurity which has been her lot in her mother's home, pursues her in the new family too, and later on in her new home after marriage. Kusum's madness and accidental death after having fallen into a dry well represent the lot of those women who are conditioned to succumb before submission. She epitomizes those women who submit to insults, injuries and humiliations with a stoic patience, without any complaint, as they have been trained to have an implicit faith in the virtues of patriarchy-being women they have been encouraged to have no faith in their own caliber.

Vanitamami, "who had never known what it was to choose"(45), represents another facet of the traditionally suppressed woman. After her marriage her life was ruled by her mother-in-law. As a daughter-in-law her role has remained at best, a passive one had she is allowed no participation in decision making. Jaya recalls, "Since the day she got married she, like the rest of

Ai's family was dominated and ruled by that ghoul her mother-in-law, my other-aji. Even Vanitamami's saris were chosen for her by the old woman, later, there was Ai, who went back to her old home after Appa's death; there still is Ai" (45). The adoption of Kusum was the only protest she could register successfully. For her, the husband is a sheltering tree, and marriage the only destiny for a woman. She advises Jaya to please her husband, even to the extent of accepting the existence of his mistresses....." if your husband has a mistress or two, ignore it: take up a hobby instead—cats, may be, or your sister's children', and so she thought she would advise me in her turn"(31). The image of Saptagiri aji also reinforces the traditional concept of docile wives and silent women. She is surprised and indignant at Jaya's behavior towards her husband, "Look at you—for everything a question, for everything a retort. What husband can be comfortable with that?"

Women are the unquestioning victims of generations of conditioning in which a girl/woman is unchangeably slotted. The husband is traditionally given the role of mentor and guide—to serve one's husband is to serve God ! Feminine incapacity is exaggerated to increase the authority of the husband. Writing in the 1950's Simone de Beauvoir had said that marriage "incites man to a capricious imperialism." In orthodox Indian marriages it is not enough for the husband to be approved and admired, he wants immediate unquestioned obedience to his commands." "He enacts violence, power, unyielding resolution; he issues commands in tones of severity This farce is a daily reality for his wife. He is so firm in his rights that the slightest sign of independence on her part seems to him a rebellion; he would fain stop her breathing without his permission."7

That Long Silence sensitively depicts how a woman's existence is confined within domesticity and how all forms of oppression perpetuated on her are convincingly rationalized generating a closed-minds syndrome. The figures of Mohan's mother and sister can be quoted as examples. In Jaya's narrative, the silent wait of Mohan's mother takes on diabolic features. "the woman crouching in front of the dying fire, sitting blank and motionless, the huddled bundles of sleeping children on the floor, the utter silence, the loud knock at the door...." (35). Mohan's mother had to wait for her husband late into the night, cooking the rice again and keeping it hot as 'he' wanted it fresh, hot and from an untouched vessel, declining to eat what he called, "your children's disgusting leavings" (35). The wife's long vigil and patient wait becomes futile when angry at not having fresh chutney to eat, he picks up the heavy brass plate, throws it at the wall and leaves the house. Silently, picking up the plate she cleans the wall and he floor of the spattered food and sends her son next door to borrow some chillies. Patiently and silently she prepares fresh chutney, lights the

fire, cooks the meal again and sits down to wait. When her children, who had woken up by the clanging sound of the plate, finally drift off to sleep again. "She was still sitting there in front of the fire, silent. Motionless" (36). What hurts a reader is not only the cruelty of a husband, but also the insensitivity of a son, which displays the continued discrimination against women. Her son Mohan, who has been a witness to this incident, never condemns his father. He eulogizes his mother, the 'virtuous woman' instead, "..... she was though. Women in those days were tough."(36).

The chains of traditional marriage are heavy. In the absence of any escape routes, wives often seek consolation in obsession, masochism or mental slavery leading to physical decay, disease and death. The social ethos which has which has seen to the continuity of women's suppression sees to it that unacknowledged martyrdom becomes a part of a housewife's existence. They suffer and die without uttering a single word in protest. Mohan's sister Vimla dies in silent agony without getting any help from her in-laws, relieving her mother's fate. Her mother's photograph reminded Jaya of "floury hands dealing out a macabre punishment to (her) face" (38). Jaya can sense red bruises showing through the white clown's mask. Vimla wanted and claimed to be different from her mother, but their suffering binds them together in a common fate. Jaya realizes it when she remarks, "Yet I can see something in common between them, something that likes the destinies of the two..... the silence in which they died"(39).

A major problem which the feminist studies and fiction face in terms of thematic clarity lies in the impossibility of a comprehensive representation of feminine problems within the Indian framework. Most of such work centres on the upper middle class urban society, it is considered that with better exposure to education and vocational opportunities the middle-class woman is learning to be more vocal and assertive about her rights. Enhanced economic prosperity and nuclear family pattern have liberated her from the clutches of the "cruel family", and she is free to manage her household as she wishes. It is perceived that owing to these reasons the role of tradition in perpetuating the bondage of women is gradually diminished. Such studies often ignore the plight of the rural/underprivileged women on the assumption that such women have always worked. This generalization ignores the socio-cultural realities as such women cannot choose not to work. *That Long Silence* underlines the fact that the drudgery and work does not liberate such women, it only reminds them of their economic and class oppression. Work does not constitute a choice in their life. For Mukta, Jeeja and Nayana work is a financial compulsion.

Mukta is a widow caring for her old mother and teenage daughter Neelima. She is economically independent, firm and competent in her handling of strange situations, yet unable to overcome the superstitions. However she wants her daughter to be free of them. She does not riddle Neelima with innumerable fasts on Hartalika and other days. Her desolate life has not sapped away her compassion towards others. She recognizes Jaya's and also of Kamta's loneliness and sympathizes with it. She comes across as a woman who has decided to stoically circumvent social complexities in order to live. Jeeja, too, has decided to live her life as it is given to her. She has accepted ill treatment at the hands of her husband, as she could not have a child. Nayana, the help-maid, too views life with a dispassionate objectivity. She wants to have a son, not because she expects any help from him in her old age, but because she does not want her child, her daughter to be discriminated against by the society. She knows that a boy shall at least have some effortless individuality, which is denied to a girl, "why give birth to a girl, behnji, who'll only suffer because of men all her life? No, no-better to have a son." (28)

Jaya, the protagonist is as complex as these women are. Her childhood experience had conditioned her to find social and psychological justification in her marriage. She wants to fashion herself according to the dreams of her husband imitating his life pattern of women in orthodox families, as that way "lay, well, if not happiness, at least the consciousness of doing right, freedom from guilt." (84) But her innate sensitivity revolts against these attempts to cram herself into the ideological mould of a conventional wife. To conform to the ideals of a wife and mother she suppresses her emotional needs which makes her lonely and vulnerable, "I had to admit the truth to myself that I had often found family life unendurable. Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony." (4) Marriage and home do not give any autonomy to her as a woman. Keenly aware of her own imperfect freedom she opts for silence—obedience, surrender, Subordination timidity and passive acceptance of things in life. Her husband, Mohan, never tries to understand the real nature of her silence.

That Long Silence projects, through the character of Jaya, the plight of the middle-class women and the fact that the basic male psyche has not undergone any fundamental change. Most of the men still join the "motivated campaign to eliminate women who step out of the accepted line of social conformism."⁸ The novel records that fact that the changing social dynamics had brought about a change in the socio-economic-educational-rights-awareness among the women, but they still have to create a niche for them. The recent upsurge of fundamentalism in various modes too threatens the emancipated future of women. Economically independent and financially liberated women are also driven to feel such constraints. The famous actress, product and media

person Nina Gupta gave vent to this feeling when she remarked that it was a curse to be a woman.⁹

That Long Silence portrays the sufferings and deprivations of feminine life by presenting certain characters as stereotyped representatives of traditional womanhood. The novel also presents a critique of the myths which are perpetuated and practiced in the context of femininity. But the strength of the novel lies in its bold analysis of the realities about the Indian womanhood. The novel assertively exhibits the thesis that women should have an assertive individuality which includes the capability to take decisions about their life and carry them out with a sense of responsibility.

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