



*Journal of Advances and
Scholarly Researches in
Allied Education*

*Vol. V, Issue X, April-2013,
ISSN 2230-7540*

REVIEW ARTICLE

FROM TRAUMA TO SELF-REALIZATION: WOMEN IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S FICTION

From Trauma to Self-Realization: Women in Shashi Deshpande's Fiction

Rupinder Kaur

Research Scholar, Sai Nath University, Ranchi, Jharkhand

-----X-----

THAT LONG SILENCE

I'm not writing of all those innocent young girls I've written of till now; girls who ultimately mated themselves with the right men. Nor am I writing a story of a callous, insensitive husband and a sensitive, suffering wife. I'm writing of us. Of Mohan and me. And I know this – you can never be the heroine of your own story. Self-revelation is a cruel process. The real picture, the real 'you' never emerges. Looking for it is as bewildering as trying to know how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces.¹ (TLS-1)

Shashi Deshpande claims that only a woman writer can portray and tell the complete story of a woman, from the inside as it were. Thus, her stories and novels are gender-specific. *That Long Silence* also portrays an educated middle class Indian woman's predicament with minute analysis of the unwholesome situations in which a woman is supposed to work, to live and move about. She feels herself caught between two currents that push her this way and that way that she feels crushed and annihilated. She loses her voice of self-assertion, which ultimately leads to confusion and tormentation. Thus the writer shows her female protagonist on the road to self-discovery.

That Long Silence is a story of a female protagonist, Jaya, who suffers in her childhood days and after marriage faces the worst crisis of her life, pushing her towards insanity and madness. She has been receiving the over-dose of advice at the time of marriage that husband is like a sheltering tree and a woman should not leave it at any cost. Unfortunately, differences crop up between husband and wife and Jaya is forced to live along all by herself, while nothing is heard about her husband for a considerable time. This long period of silence between Jaya and Mohan creates emotional upheaval in her and she experiences worse traumatic experience of her life. Ultimately, she gains inner strength and discovers her true identity. She comes to realize that one must learn to compromise with life's problems and realities. At the end of the novel, Jaya is an altogether different lady with new perception of life. Thus, she redefines her relations with the world.

Now she realizes that each and every individual has distinct personality and identity of his own. All the members of the family, including herself are independent individuals and there is no need to feel alarmed for the safety of each other. She has come to the conclusion on the basis of her personal experience that woman outside the family-fold loses her identity and is subjected to the unbearable harshness and cruelty of society. So one must be ready to compromise with the realities of life with courage and inner strength.

That Long Silence is a psychological novel with little of incidents and episodes but more of reflection, introspection and retrospection. It states in the very beginning that self-revelation is a cruel process and real picture seldom emerges as it ought to be. Moreover, it is in the fitness of the things that one must see one-self from a distance with detachment.

Jaya, the heroine, was born in a middle class family and her father died when she was just fifteen. She was married to Mohan, who had qualified himself as a Junior Engineer and was working in a steel factory at Lohanagar. They belonged to the same area, Ambegaon and Saptagiri - adjacent villages.

Jaya and Mohan led a very happy and peaceful life for some time before Mohan was promoted and was transferred to Bombay. He got his official residence near Church Gate and thus both led conjugal and happy life without any friction and bitterness in their relationship. They had two children, named Rahul and Rati, son and daughter who could go to public school as they were leading a prosperous and comfortable life.

As ill luck would have it, Mohan was falsely implicated in a bribery case. His colleague, Mr. Aggarwal was the chief culprit and both were suspended, pending enquiry against them. Mr. Aggarwal assured him that they would soon be absolved of charges. He advised Mohan to go on leave till the case was decided in their favour and should not be available. Mohan agreed and shifted to Dadar flat which had been passed on to Jaya and Mohan by Jaya's elder brother, Dinkar.

Mohan's involvement in a shady deal and consequently the possibility of losing his well-paid job shattered him completely that he began to behave in excited, irrational and whimsical way. Jaya, too, felt a sense of insecurity and financial crisis making their life most miserable and unhappy.

As time moves on, Jaya and Mohan begin to feel mentally more disturbed and tortured. Mohan accuses Jaya of being indifferent in the hour of crisis when he needs her moral support.

'If ever I'd been irresponsible and callous,' Mohan was saying and I knew he was thinking of his father, 'but I've never been that. I've always put you and the children first, I've been patient with all your whims, I've grudged you nothing. But the truth is that you despise me because I've failed. As long as I had my job and position, it was all right ; as long as I could give you all the comforts, it was all right, But now, because I'm likely to lose it all... (TLS-121)

Jaya, being an educated and conscious lady could not support him or justify his action that illegal gratification for the sake of family does not look fairly convincing. He tells Jaya that he had done all this for the comfort of the entire family and she should stand firmly beside him. But Jaya could not support him openly and this long silence on the part of Jaya made Mohan peevish, irritable, short-tempered, suspicious, easily excitable and prejudiced against his wife without any valid reason.

The story takes a serious and grim turn when Mohan, after a tiff with Jaya on rather a trivial matter concerning her talk with Ravi, her brother, disturbs him mentally so much that he leaves the house in a threatening mood. Jaya, being all alone, as her son, Rahul and daughter, Rati, have already gone out on a trip to South with a family, living in their neighbourhood. Moreover, she receives no information about the safety of her children and her husband for a considerable time, which makes her pass through traumatic experience of her life. Thus, the carefully built sparrow-house appears to her cracking and inside being cruelly exposed.

That story, Ai, about the foolish crow who built his house of dung, and the wise sparrow who built hers of wax ...'

And when it rained, the house of wax stood firm, while the crow's house was washed away. And the poor crow, shivering and sodden, went to the sparrow's house and knocked on the door, calling, 'Let me in, sister, let me in.' And the sparrow said, "Wait a minute, I'm feeding my baby.'

And so the story goes on, the foolish credulous crow standing out there in the rain, begging to be let in, while sister Sparrow spins out her excuses. (TLS-16)

It seems as if nothing is safe and secure for her and her whole dream- world is crumbling and breaking into pieces. The realization that she may lose not only her husband, a sheltering tree but her children may not return safely, frightens her out of all proportions. She is in the grip of frenzy and mania. She has been expecting something terrible to happen and now it befalls her, all of sudden, with full intensity and with no support from any quarter.

Mohan used to tell her stories of the appalling condition of the beggars and the unemployed men and women, in big cities like Delhi, she is bewildered and shocked.

'Those women were sitting on the bare ground, right in the dirt, mind you, not even a bit of a newspaper or a mat under them. Just sitting there on the ground like – like beggars. Imagine, Jaya, people like us in that situation !' (TLS-5)

She comes to the conclusion that happiness in life is an illusion as, she is already feeling the prick because of suspension of Mohan. Formerly, she felt dull, monotonous life unbearable and wished for a catastrophe, a disaster or anything to shake them out of their dull groves, but now she is experiencing the worst crisis of her life all alone in the grip of fear and terror.

Before Mohan's involvement in bribery case and suspension, life was full of boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony. She often wondered that wars were taking place in other countries, tidal waves and earthquakes were causing untold miseries and sufferings in the far-off unknown places and that murders, adultery, and heroism had the places in other people's lives but their life was dull, monotonous and dreary and that boredom was almost killing her. That they were just living and one day death would come to them in a natural way. She was always possessed by such destructive and negative thoughts.

I had often wondered, that wars always took place in other countries, tidal waves and earthquakes occurred in far-off, unknown places, that murder, adultery and heroism had their places in other people's lives, never in ours ? The very words disaster, wrongdoing, retribution seemed wholly irrelevant to our lives. (TLS – 4)

There had been for me that other waiting... waiting fearfully disaster, for a catastrophe. I always had this feeling – that if I have escaped it today, it is still there round the corner waiting for me ; the locked door, the empty house, the messenger of doom bringing news of death. With Mohan's confession, was actually relieved. Here it was at last – my disaster. No more waiting, no more apprehensions, no more fears. (T.L.S. - 4)

Jaya often wondered how the analogy of pair of bullocks yoked together is valid and true, while the

reality is that the two bullocks (husband and wife) never go together in the same direction.

“A pair of bullocks yoked together ... that was how I saw the two of us the day we came here. It was an eerie sensation I had while climbing up the stairs with him.” (TLS – 7)

Thus, the theory of equality of status is no longer based on reality. It is always the woman who bears the burden. A pair of bullocks yoked together is simply a misleading phrase, and is no longer the substitute for the reality.

A pair of bullocks yoked together... a clever phrase, but can it substitute for the reality? A man and a woman married for seventeen years. A couple with two children. But the reality was only this. We were two persons. A man. A woman. (TLS – 8)

In another mood of reminiscence, Jaya recollects how Mohan lamented his involvement in the case under investigation. Her perpetual silence irritated him so much that he cried out, “I did it for you, for you and the children.”

Jaya takes no notice of these outbursts of Mohan and she remembers the scene of group suicide by Nair and his family. All the members of Nair family, four in number, including Nair himself roped together, walked into the sea. They were disgusted with the shameful life they were forced to live and wanted a peaceful and colorful death. All these four persons walked peacefully into the sea in the mellow light of the setting sun what they were soon disintegrated from one another. From the debris, it was evident that a girl desperate, anguished had made effort to come back to the sea-shore, though it was an unsuccessful attempt. She was the daughter of Nair who had unbound herself from the rope that had harnessed the entire family together and struggled back to life. When Jaya exclaimed that women could not have that sort of escape from life, Mohan had remarked that an escape from life was a foolish adventure. Jaya, too, now calls that adventure a foolish one. She wondered when there is no agreement on small matters even, how people take decision of group suicide. It was just the plain stupidity. But now Jaya is not sure of her belief in him. She is now convinced that a moment comes in every human being's life when he or she, like prophetess Sibyl, would wish to die.

Surely there comes a moment in every human's life when he or she says, like the Sibyl – I wish to die. (TLS – 11)

As a matter of fact, Mohan had assumed that he would get full support from Jaya and she would agree to his plans. She would follow him as every Indian orthodox wife follows husband, Sita followed Rama, in exile,

Savitri dodged the God of death and Drupadi shared her husband's travail.

I remember now that he had assumed I would accompany him, had taken for granted my acquiescence in his plans. So had I. Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails ... (TLS – 11)

But Jaya is a woman of independent views and she is different from the mythical women. She could not follow anyone blindly.

Mohan and Jaya's married life has been dry, drab and dull. Mohan feels himself all alone, having lost his importance and identity as an individual and important member of society. Being deprived of his routine life, his files, his telephone and his appointment, he loses zest and interest in life. Jaya, too, feels herself in a pitiable condition. She is no longer Jaya of herself as wife of an Engineer, shopping with a sense and dominating all, being wife of an important man. Now, all these things have gone and had become things of the past and she finds her own role as house-wife in jeopardy.

My own career as a wife was in jeopardy. The woman who had shopped and cooked, cleaned, organized and cared for her home and her family with such passion ... where had she gone? (TLS – 25)

In the absence of Mohan, she feels as if she is really shelter-less, deserted by all with no ray of hope of better days to come. She has no desire left in her to clean the glassware that had to sparkle or the furniture that had to be kept spotless and dust-free. She cares little for the pile of clothes that had to be washed and cleaned and ironed so that they could be worn, washed and ironed once again. She would often think of her early childhood days. She would imagine herself back in her Aiji's room at Saptagiri to console herself. Jaya would pass much of her time in retrospection, in a reminiscent mood. She would think of the plight of a woman in the family set up.

Women's position and status is inferior to men in a family where husband's will reigns supreme and wife is orderly pushed into background. She is there in the house to serve, to obey and to suffer.

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. 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 ...
(TLS – 30)

She is destined to go on waiting throughout her life as if she has no independent will and power to regulate her life. Her life is a series of endless waiting. With Jaya, life has become an endless game of waiting, no doubt, but this habit of waiting seemed to have gone deep into her psyche as well. She would be waiting for some catastrophe and disaster, as she would often reflect on the news how floods, accidents, natural calamities, death and destruction brought untold miseries to the people living in the other parts of the country but nothing would happen to disturb their dull monotonous, mechanical life.

And above and beyond this, there had been for me that other waiting ... waiting fearfully for disaster, for a catastrophe. I always had this feeling – that if I've escaped it today, it's still there round the corner waiting for me ; the locked door, the empty house, the messenger of doom bringing news of death. With Mohan's confession, I was actually relieved. Here it was at last – my disaster. No more waiting, no more apprehension, no more tears. (TLS – 30)

She would find herself on the brink of disaster with Mohan's involvement in bribery case and his suspension from service alarms her sensitive mind that she becomes uneasy and restless. She suffers more because she is told that husband is a sheltering tree, a place of refuge and protection and without husband, she is non-entity for everybody in society. She is supposed to stand by her husband, though thick and thin, justification or no justification. Here is a grim situation developing which crack the relations of husband and wife. Mohan, wants Jaya to support him and justify his act but Jaya's silence makes him restless and irritated. He expects a few words of sympathy and support in this hour of crisis but Jaya is silent and dumb about this matter, which touch him most. Though Jaya is fully aware of her vulnerable position if she goes against the wishes of her husband yet she could not openly justify his action, being an educated and sensitive lady. The advice of her relatives given to her is that after marriage husband is God to her and she is supposed to stand by him in all circumstances otherwise she would face a dangerously unprotected and vulnerable position. Being an educated lady and a woman of independent nature and spirit, she cannot follow husband blindly. Even she treads a different path and refuses to follow the path suggested by Mohan. She gives Kusum all co-operation, help and her attitude towards Kusum is marked by sincerity, love and affection for the poor miserable helpless and despised woman.

Jaya's silence in not speaking in favour of Mohan's act is misinterpreted by Mohan as indifferent attitude to the problem that he faces and touches him most. As a matter of fact, Jaya, too, is feeling agitated and worried and anxiety, is writ large on her face. She cannot control her tears when all alone. They gush out often

and makes her sad. At last, Jaya realizes her sense of confession without any reason. She feels herself foolishly inadequate for not giving him satisfactory answer to his charges when she is not at fault. Why does she allow the situation to drift to such as pass ? Mohan has a genuine hostility because of misconception about her attitude towards him, and she fails to remove it. He had accused her of not caring about children, of isolation from husband and his concerns and that she is behaving in a very revengeful way. When he taunts her with his accusations, she cannot restrain herself and cries out. "No, that is not true. It is terrible thing to say, it is stupid." Mohan in his mood of annoyance, retaliates in the same tone. "It is not just you... it is all women. My mother." Jaya is now feeling highly enraged. She bursts into laughter. She laughs and laughs hysterically and it alarms even Mohan.

Soon, she realizes that she laughs in mad manner, unwarranted and uncalled for. But this realization comes to her too late. Now she speaks to Mohan in a conciliatory mind and says. "I am sorry, I did not mean to laugh. I was not laughing at you. I was laughing at every thought, marriage, as this whole absurd thing and exercise, we call life." Thus she speaks to Mohan, offering a sincere apology, that she feels a strong palpitation. Her fast pounding of the heart calms down and she notices the coming of Mohan. She sees Mohan retreating and retracing her steps towards the door. He opens the door violently and then with a bang it closed. He has gone forever. She rushes to the door but cannot find Mohan anywhere. She rushes to the balcony and looks out. Mohan emerges from the building and walks away briskly on road and soon he stops a taxi and gets in. He is out of sight and Jaya is seized of terrible thought as Mohan has gone away in threatening mind as if he would never return. Jaya feels as if life is oozing out of her and she feels down senseless and to mumble in a delirium. As she lies on the bed, she thinks of Rati's little song, "bed time, candle time, time to go to sleep, time to close the story book, not another peep."

She lies in the bed waiting for the arrival of Mohan. In the absence of Mohan and fearful thoughts about his safety create a wave of restlessness and anxiety. She tries to sleep but sleep is far from her painful eyes. Frightening thoughts make her uneasy and sick. She would say as if in sheer frustration. "He would not come now he must be dead some where." Rahul once said these awful words when Mohan was late and she stopped Rahul for uttering such dreadful things. She had a horrible dream:

At first we are walking together. Then he goes on ahead and I am left behind. I am unperturbed and go on at my own pace, walking now between rows of houses, so close to one another that there is a slight sense of claustrophobia. For some reason, I have to pass through a house, but it is impossible for me to climb the flight of stairs that leads. As I struggle, a girl comes to me. She helps me up, but suddenly when I

am in the house it comes upon me with a sense of shock that I am alone. I will never be able to find him now. The realization that I am lost overwhelms me. I lie down, stiff as a corpse. The girls talk in low tones among themselves, discussing my predicament, while I continue to lie there, paralysed, aphasic. Suddenly, he is there in the room. He comes straight to me through the girls. 'Come,' he says, 'we have to hurry. The taxi is waiting. If we don't hurry, it will go away.' But as I run after him. I realise that it is too late anyway, we will never be able to make it, it's all my fault, all my fault ... (T.L.S. – 86)

The room is dark and a film song "come back, my love come back to me" increased the intensity of her affections for him. Jaya is now apparently in desperate mood, highly shocked and perplexed. The thought of Mohan's leaving home for good pushes her to a trauma and she felt as if she was losing not only peace of mind but her sanity and mental equilibrium as well. Without Mohan life has no meaning and charm for her. For some time it appears to her as if her whole body has been paralysed. There is light in the room but she finds darkness and dumbness in her mind and heart. She feels herself like a lonely maniac in a dark world. She thinks of her mother when she has fumbled her way in her parents house at Saptagiri after the death of his father.

She recollects how people would use two names together – Jaya and Kusum. Formerly there was a lot of difference between the two. She thought for herself far superior and more intelligent than Kusum, both were the victims of hostile circumstances. Now she developed feelings of sympathy for Kusum and felt that she was maltreated by the world. She felt repentant for their dislike for Kusum.

She recollects how she was warned against worldly sins that we indulge in. She remembers the words of Aiji, "Tell lies now and you be a lizard in next life, steal things and you will be a dog, cheat people and you will be a snake." She now realises the truth and validity of these statements. She has come to believe that we have not to wait for next life and every act has its own retribution in this very life. As you sow, so shall you reap – is not a saying now applicable now. This is the lesson we learn from history, from our mythological stories. Dashrath killed an innocent young boy whose parents cursed him with similar fate and also died crying, "Rama, Rama". She remembers the fate of Kusum. How Kusum got maltreatment at the hands of cruel world and how she cried out to her, "Do not go Jaya, do not leave me here and stay with me." But she paid no heed to her and reasoned with her, that she must go to husband and children. And what came out of it? She remembers how Kusum was shedding copious tears and crying helplessly, though in vain, and met her tragedy.

REFERENCES :-

- Acharya, Shanta, "Problems of Self in the Novels of Anita Desai". Explorations in Modern Indo-English Fiction, ed., R.K. Dhawan, New Delhi, Bahri Publications, 1982.
- Aggarwal, KA : Indian English Fiction, Book Enclave, Jaipur 2007.
- Asnani, Shyam M. "Anita Desai's Fiction: A New Dimension". Indian Literature, Vol. XXIV, No. 2, March-April – 1981.
- Barnabas Sarala ; "Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*" The Winds of Change. Common Wealth Literature Vol. I, ed. Dhawan, et al, N.D. Prestige, 1989.
- Basavraj Naiker ; "The Feminine World of Inside – Haveli" Indian English Literature, Atlantic, ND 2003.
- Belliappa, Meena. Anita Desai: A Study of Her Fiction, Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1971.
- Bhatnagar, MK : Ed. Feminist English Literature, Atlantic Publishers, ND, 1999.
- Bhatnagar, O.P. "Indian Womanhood : Fight for Freedom" in Shashi Deshpande's Roots and Shadows."
- Beauvoir, Simon de : The Second Sex , Parshaley Hermonds Works, 1974. London : Pan Books 1988.
- Cunningham, John 'Indian Writers Block', The Indian Post, March 6, 1988.
- Dalmia, Yashodhara, An Interview with Anita Desai", The Times of India, April 29, 1979.
- Dhawan, R.K.: Indian Women Novelists, Prestige N.D. 1995.
- Desai, Anita : Voices in the City, Orient Publishers, Delhi 1982.
- Gupta, R.K.: "Feminism and Modern Indian Literature" Indian Literature (157) Sept. – Oct. – 1993.
- Haru, M.R.: "Psyche-analytical Study of the Characters of Shashi Deshpande" in Indian English Fiction Ed. K.A. Aggarwal.

- Iyengar K. Srinivasa : Indian Writing in English, Sterling, N.D. 1983.
- Inder Mohan, TMJ : Ed. Shashi Deshpande : A Critical Spectrum, Atlantic, Delhi 2004.
- Inder Mohan, TMJ : Ed. "Feminist Perspectives in Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence in Critical Spectrum."
- Jain, Jasbir, "Anita Desai" Indian English Novelists, ed. Madhusudhan Prasad, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1982.
- ----- "The Use of Fantasy in the Novels of Anita Desai". Explorations in Modern Indo-English Fiction.
- ----- "Gender and Narrative Strategy," Between Spaces of Silence: Women Creative Writers (New Delhi: Sterling 1994) p. 35.
- Journal of Indian Writing in English, "Anita Desai: The Woman and the Novelist". Vol. IX, No. 1, January, 1981.
- Kakar, Sudhir, "Feminine Sensibility in India," Women in Indian Society: A Reader, ed. Rehana Ghadially (New Delhi: Sage, 1988) p. 94.
- Khan A.G. "Inside the Haveli, The Silent Transformation" Feminist English Literature, ed. M.K. Bhatnagar, Atlantic, ND 2003.
- Kirpal, Viney "How Traditional can a Modern Indian be—An Analysis of Inside the Haveli," Indian Women Novelists, Set I, Vol. 4, p. 186.
- Kukrethi, Sumitra : "Female Protagonists in Shashi Deshpande's Novel", Ed. R.S. Pathak, The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande, Creative Books, N.D. 1998.
- Kumar, Shiv K, "The Fiction of Anita Desai: Another View". The Humanities Review, Vol. III, No. 2 (July – December 1981).
- Lal Malashri ; Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli, A Discourse on Gender & Class. The Law of Threshold Writers in Indian English, Shimla, Jas, 1995.
- Malhotra, Neena : Feminism & Fiction, Wisdom House Academic Publishers, Ambala 2005.
- Masilamani, J.G. "J.G. "Feminism in Anita Desai", Kaktiya Journal of English Studies, Vol. III, No. 1, 1978.
- Millar, Jean Baker, Towards a New Psychology of Women : Harmondsworth, 1983, p. 63.
- Misra, Nirja "An Analysis of the Purdah Culture," Margin, p. 81.
- Mohan, Medhavi K. : "The Crisis of the Feminine", Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence Commonwealth Quarterly Vol. 18, December – March 1993 No. 46.
- Mwttapalh, Rajeshwar "The Trauma of a Household Wife : Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence in Critical Spectrum."