

FIGHTING THE SYSTEM, BREAKING THE SILENCE SHASHI DESHPANDE'S: 'JAYA'

Kamini*
Prof.(Dr.) Neelam Raisinghani**

ABSTRACT

In That Long Silence Jaya is forced to be subservient to her husband Mohan. He is unaware how their relationship is reduced to marital rape which Joya allows in order to maintain family integrity and not to disturb the order. But she herself breaks, disintegrates from the inside and suffers alone. She grows afraid of her own emotions and desecrates. However, towards the end of the novel she regains her equilibrium and accepts her happiness in the role she is asked to perform. This does not transform the outside world but transforms her own self. The paper discusses how this comes about.

Keywords: *Subservient, Integrity, Equilibrium, Transform, Tremendously, Feminist, Hegemonic Pressures, Dilemma, Contemplate, Subalternity, Suppression, Discontentment, Predicament, Emerged, Sympathetic, Confrontation, Submissive, Jeopardizing, Chauvinistic, Subjugation, Victimization.*

Introduction

Human relationships according to Shashi Deshpande are "the most mystifying things" and she continues to "wonder about it, puzzle over it and write about it" (1994, 11). This tremendously intriguing and fascinating subject she weaves into her novels making it the woof and the wrap of her writing. Relationships in their myriad forms are the focal points in her work especially man-woman relationships. Despite the fact that Deshpande writes against the background of the prevalent feminist thought where equality is being attested, but she is aware that the Indian context is still patriarchal, parochial. Within this social milieu women are still the passive beings who have to follow the male hegemonic pressures. Though, as in *That Long Silence*, the protagonist is born Jaya (victory) she has to change to Suhasini (Soft, smiling, meek) as Simone de Beauvoir also says in *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Truly, the society is responsible for demeaning a woman's stature, of cutting her wings and then it is she who is blamed for not being able to fly. It is this dilemma of what is said and what is expected of a woman that Deshpande takes up to voice in her novels. Jaya in *That Long Silence* as the title suggests, has been silenced for long. She is educated, she is intelligent and like the author herself, a columnist. But in the eyes of Mohan, her husband, this makes her all the more envied. How can a woman ever contemplate to overcome her husband as Jaya is wont to – it goes against his masculinity and he tries every way to suppress her, to cut her wings so to say. Mohan is typically insular, he has been socialized into believing that women must be *Sitas, Savitris and Draupadis* – weren't his mother and sister both submissive wives? What powers had they? So the reins of running a household should be his monopoly; he is the 'master'. And this brings us to the critical dynamics in Deshpande's novels – the man as 'master' therefore the woman as 'slave'. Such a subalternity is what a woman is born with and must be cultivated to keep the pristine balance intact.

Jaya is given no 'room' to herself; her space is confined, contained. She was dependent on her father and now on her husband. Freedom, independence, equality are hollow words, drummed loudly but followed ineffectively. She has no choice but to marry according to her father's will, behave according to her husband's commands, bear children and complete all domestic chores and yet not complain. Jaya says, 'As we grew into young women, we realized it was not love, but marriage was a destiny waiting for us...' who would be her husband? Eena, Meena, Myna Mo, "... tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor...." (*That Long*

* Research Scholar, Department of English (Apex School of Arts & Humanities), Apex University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.

** Supervisor, Department of English (Apex School of Arts & Humanities), Apex University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.

Silence: 19). And so she is bonded to the best bidder and waits what fate has to unfold – not such a happy one. She was told that a "husband is like a sheltering tree", but soon, too soon she finds out that her tree is rotten to the core. She has to be the support but she is not supported, rather derided in every way. She had to keep her sheltering tree "alive and flourishing (even when) she had to water it with deceit and lies." (*That Long Silence*: 32). Soon after her marriage she realized that her dream to be loved was a fantasy, she was a mere object of lust for her husband. Hers became a mechanical relationship of giving, giving and giving – one sided, a total failure. Jaya could not reconcile to her suppression and yet could not utter her discontentment. She said not a word after each 'rape' encounter," It had been as if the experience was erased each time after it happened, it never existed in words. The only words between us have been his question, 'Did I hurt you?' and my answer, "No". (*That Long Silence*: 95). This continued to undermine her moral, to keep silent. But then Kamat, her neighbour came into her life. He instilled into her new energy to face up the consequences, to talk about love and sex, to break 'that long silence."

This man... it had been a revelation to me that two people, a man and woman, could talk this way. With this man I had not been a woman. I had been myself – Jaya. There had been ease in our relationship, I had never known in any other. (*That Long Silence*: 153)

Regaining a selfhood, her lost identity was not a far cry now but still she could not muster up enough courage to challenge the hegemony of patriarchy. Even though she lost faith in Mohan yet she went along with the system. Rebelliousness was not a value that had been inculcated in her and she continued to submit till Mohan became a victim of the rampant corruption and lost his job. Now Mohan wanted her support to ease out the financial predicament the family had fallen into. Jaya's habit of silence makes her say nothing and yet she knows that she has emerged victorious – Jaya.

Elizabeth Robin's epigraph to Deshpande's *That Long Silence* says it all:

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. (*A Modern Woman Born 1989*: 55).

For seventeen long years Jaya has been able to contain her feelings, to suffer silently. She has to silence her creativity from the early years of marriage as Mohan is not happy with her stories. In order to maintain outward peace she puts down her pen."Looking at his stricken face, I had been convinced I had done him wrong. And I stopped writing after that." (*That Long Silence*144) The story was about a man whose only way of communicating with his wife was through her body. Mohan finds his own parallel and his ego is hurt. However, Jaya's inner self surfaces and she starts writing under a pseudonym but is now faced with rejection from her publishers. Her stories lack conviction but she cannot express her anger lest Mohan is hurt. She tries to control her rage and anger for Mohan considers these emotions unwomanly. "Because no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman?" (*That Long Silence* 147) She asks her sympathetic neighbour Kamat.

Later she writes light humorous pieces on the travails of a middle-class housewife in a column entitled "*Seeta*." She not only gets encouraging response from the readers but Mohan's nod of approval as well.

Her association with Kamat, a widower living above her flat, lends yet another dimension to Jaya's personality. She is drawn towards him as he treats her as his equal, and offers her constructive criticism on her writings. She receives her mail at his address to avoid confrontation with her husband who disapproves of her writings. He showers his attention on her as he is lonely. Her ease in his company makes her womanly inhibitions wither and she opens up her problems to him and their relation leads to physical attraction. He warns her against wallowing in self-pity and asks her to pursue her literary career by giving expression to her real inner self.

In her zeal to play out the role of a loyal wife and a caring mother, she smothers her real self. She does not protest the change of her name from Jaya to Suhasini after her marriage just to keep Mohan happy. Her dress and her appearance are proof of her submission to Mohan's liking, replicating an absorbed family-woman. She represents the urban, middle-class woman who is educated and has had exposure to liberal Western ideas. Her upbringing demands the suppression of the self so that the marriage can survive. When the occasion to choose between her family and husband arises, she chooses the former.

Jaya complies with her husband's decision and accompanies him in silence to their present exile. It is here, that the process of self-examination begins for Jaya--her reminiscences over her seventeen year old marriage, its frustrations and disappointments and her personal failures. All her fears,

guilt, strangulated anger and silence begin to haunt her and consequently through a period of intense introspection she kills Suhasini, the silent, submissive partner of Mohan. Her association with Kamat proves to be fruitful for she realizes that justice has not been done to herself and her talents. She renews her creative activity as a writer and shortly emerges as a new being.

Thus, Shashi Deshpande has woven the tragic tales of Jaya's relations and her acquaintances into the texture of the novel, and so the novel inevitably takes on a feminist character. It can be said that Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* traces Jaya's passage through an excess of doubts to convinced expression and attestation.

Jaya, like Indu of *Roots and Shadows* and Saru of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, journeys from ignorance to knowledge through suffering. Going through a process of introspection, self-analysis and self-realization, she emerges as a confident individual, fully in control of herself, significantly more hopeful and able to accept life like the other two characters. If Indu is a journalist and Saru a doctor, Jaya is a successful columnist and an aspiring novelist.

She who could dare to protest, "I had learnt it at last no questions, no retorts. Only silence." (*That Long Silence* 143) has finally unlearned her silence, refuses to be led by the nose and affirms with confidence, "I'm not afraid anymore."

Outwardly she is a satisfied housewife married to an apparently caring man, with no dearth of material comfort. But on scrutiny, it is revealed that to achieve this stage of fulfillment as a wife, Jaya has systematically suppressed every aspect of her personality that refuses to fit in with her image as a wife and mother, besides a failed writer.

Jaya, suppressed at every stage of her life, compromises to conform to the role of an ideal Indian woman. She feels that she will 'break-down', that she can't go on, and 'can't cope' to live in deception but does not give expression to these feelings because of her fear of hurting Mohan and jeopardizing her marriage, her fear of destroying the veneer of the happy family she tries to project and her fear of failing as a writer.

Just as Indu, who obeys her husband's wishes and fancies, and like Saru, who thinks that a wife must be a few feet behind her husband's, Jaya also bows to the male superiority. Sometimes, Jaya appears to be not very different from other women -who suffer their husband's humiliations silently and who think that a woman without her *kumkum* on the forehead is nothing.

Marriage to Jaya portrays the image of the pair of bullocks yoked together and suggests that yoked bullocks should share the burden between themselves, but no one knows whether they love each other or not. The image of the beasts performing their assigned duties mechanically undermines the relationship of husband and wife who are united in marriage for love, but not for leading a mechanical life which results in ending up in mutual hatred and distrust.

Jaya, in order to maintain her marriage as a happy one, slowly transforms herself to this ideal of womanhood where she learns to repress her anger. At times she is beset with the fear that something may happen to Mohan and Jaya feels:

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. (*That Long Silence* 140)

Jaya's story, in the larger context, is the story of generations of women. Jaya is in search of an individual identity.

Jaya thinks that real emotional involvement is unlikely between a man and a woman. Her blunt confession is "Love? No, I know nothing of it" (*That Long Silence* 153) Jaya is romantic to begin with, but later she is so disenchanted that she gives up her efforts to please Mohan and look attractive for him and describes it as "a man and a woman married for seventeen years without mutual love or understanding".

For Indian women marriage and motherhood are considered mandatory for fulfillment and happiness. Jaya is caught in this dilemma, firstly trying to be a suitable wife to her husband and secondly, struggling to express the emotions of women's experience, seldom expressing them in a male-dominated, chauvinistic society. Deshpande herself admits this kind of dilemma when she says that women have this kind of emotions but never come out. Jaya knows that her relationship with Mohan is spoiled by incompatibility and lack of communication. If she suffers, it is in silence, if she revolts, it is also in silence. She suppresses her feelings lest they should spoil her relationship with her husband.

Jaya knows about Mohan's involvement in a case of bribery and the fears of prosecution, loss of job and societal disgrace on Mohan's part. She does not want to laugh but she does laugh at Mohan and finally lands herself in a more hopeless situation. "Laughter burst out of me, spilled over, and Mohan stared at me in horror as I rocked helplessly. When finally, I recovered myself I was alone in the room." She bursts out into a hysterical laughter which upsets Mohan so much that he leaves the Dadar flat without a word. Jaya understands Mohan's agony. He is agonized to see Jaya in place of Suhasini. A change is discernible in Jaya, a change in a different direction. The earlier impulsive Jaya becomes a mature woman.

Jaya also observes that meaningful co-existence can come only through understanding, respect and compassion, not through domination or subjugation. Jaya makes a powerful statement on the totally unfair system prevailing in our society of the subjugation of women. As she realizes, it is fear on the part of woman that has allowed the subjugation to continue. Women need not succumb and assume the roles cast upon them. She says, "...in this life itself there are so many cross roads, so many choices." (*That Long Silence* 192) Women have allowed victimization instead of bargaining for partnership.

Jaya understands that she also has contributed to her victimization and that she had to fight her own battle and work out her own solution. Accordingly she feels the necessity to break the silence, articulate her predicament, and establish her identity. She decides that she will live from now onwards without sacrificing her identity or individuality. She will make adjustment but it will not be a servile one. Her giving up writing for the newspaper column '*Seeta*' symbolizes giving up her traditional role-model of wife, now she will write what she wants to write and will not look up at Mohan's face for an answer she wants. This makes her voyage of discovery complete.

Jaya can no longer be a passive, submissive and silent partner to Mohan. The novel ends with her determination to speak, to break her long silence. *That Long Silence* depicts Jaya's self-doubts, fears, guilt, silent indignation towards articulation and assertion. Jaya seems to be caught in an emotional crisis. She endeavours to come to terms with her prescribed roles, but vain. She tries to re-discover her true self, which is but an illusion. She becomes an unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and a failed writer. The novelist presents some elements of new-woman in the novel *That Long Silence*. The pre-matrimonial love of Jaya and Mohan is a good paradigm of new-woman. Mohan was enamoured of Jaya's modernity and her modern education. With a new feminist frankness Jaya presents interdependence of love and sex: "First there's love then there's sex - that was how I had always imagined it to be. But after living with Mohan I had realized that it could so easily be the other way round." Woman's realization between her solitude in the "act of sex" and the possibility of love without bodily union (as in the case of the affinity between Jaya and Kamat) are delineated clearly and add an unorthodox frankness to an abstruse awareness.

The advancement from maintaining absolute silence to the breaking of the silence speaks of a transition that Jaya has accomplished. The connotations of 'Silence' in the novel could possibly be categorized under the following heads: i) Suppression and Security, ii) Loss of Identity, iii) Death and Realization, iv) Social milieu. Generally, a woman's identity is defined by others, in terms of her relationship with men, i.e., as a daughter, as a wife, as a mother, and so on. Her name keeps on changing according to the wishes of others. In *That Long Silence*, the writer has presented this phenomenon through the character of Jaya, who is known by two names: Jaya and Suhasini.

Jaya's husband, Mohan, interprets things in relation to the effect it may have on the society. He likes to conform to the social norms even if they are wrong. The success of the novel depicting the relationship between man and woman is weighed in relation to what society would think in future. He wants to make Jaya also think like him and induces her not to deliberate on such themes that would endanger their marriage. When she leaves her home after getting married, her father advises her to be always good to Mohan and she, at all times, tries her best to follow his advice. Shashi Deshpande presents the meanings of silence in this novel. As she puts it: "You learn a lot of tricks to get by in a relationship. Silence is one of them..."

References

1. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. 1949. Trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley. London: Vintage, 1997.
2. Deshpande, Shashi. *Roots and Shadows*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1983.
3. Deshpande, Shashi. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1980.

