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Shashi Deshpande's "That Long Silence": Novel of Restoring Conjugal Life

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Abstract- Shashi Deshpande (1938-), as an award winning feminist writer, focuses on the tortures and sufferings of middle-class Indian women who are educated, sensitive and are aware of their legal, social and conjugal rights. She highlights the domestic conflict between wife and husband operating at the emotional, intellectual and sexual levels. The novelist, being fully aware of the patriarchal system of Indian culture, does not plea for any kind of conflict or aggressiveness between man and woman; husband and wife. There is an old but true maxim that silence, tolerance, sufferance is golden and though the novel is in the feminist framework, the novelist does not cross the limits of Indian socio-cultural authenticity. That Long Silence is essentially a domestic novel. Shashi Deshpande has superbly picturized the ins and outs of a conjugal life. The novel endeavors in launching peace between the pained, sensitive wife and the egoistic and selfish husband. Lack of proper communiqué between them is the real culprit. And it is seen that when Jaya decides to communicate with her husband, the gloomy silence is broken. Deshpande's approach of feminism is not aggressive and emotional as the western writers have. Indian feminist activist do not accept a still attitude towards the males as their western counterparts do. They are alike culture-oriented and gender-oriented.

Keywords: feminism, conjugal, patriarchal system, culture-oriented, gender-oriented.

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Shashi Deshpande's "That Long Silence": Novel of Restoring Conjugal Life

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Abstract- Shashi Deshpande (1938-), as an award winning feminist writer, focuses on the tortures and sufferings of middle-class Indian women who are educated, sensitive and are aware of their legal, social and conjugal rights. She highlights the domestic conflict between wife and husband operating at the emotional, intellectual and sexual levels. The novelist, being fully aware of the patriarchal system of Indian culture, does not plea for any kind of conflict or aggressiveness between man and woman; husband and wife. There is an old but true maxim that silence, tolerance, sufferance is golden and though the novel is in the feminist framework, the novelist does not cross the limits of Indian socio-cultural authenticity. *That Long Silence* is essentially a domestic novel. Shashi Deshpande has superbly picturized the ins and outs of a conjugal life. The novel endeavors in launching peace between the pained, sensitive wife and the egoistic and selfish husband. Lack of proper communiqué between them is the real culprit. And it is seen that when Jaya decides to communicate with her husband, the gloomy silence is broken. Deshpande's approach of feminism is not aggressive and emotional as the western writers have. Indian feminist activist do not accept a still attitude towards the males as their western counterparts do. They are alike culture-oriented and gender-oriented.

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I. Introduction

That Long Silence expands to become mass autobiography of women as biological homo-geneous group. The novel is remarkable in that it presents Jaya is the female protagonist and numerous secondary and fringe characters, both male and female, who do not hinder the flow of the narrative (as so many critics have derided the novel for) but who often serve as oppositions and contradictions which help the writer to make her point in term of highlighting differences and divisions of gender crucial to the story.

The novel is the first person narrative; the story is unfolded by Jaya—symbolizing victory, but in actual life, she has to lead a traditional, passive, and obedient wife's role. Since her childhood days, she has been told stories about Sita, Savitri and Draupadi, portraying the sharing of their husband's travails and their silent sufferings. Jaya refuses these role models because they have lost all significance in modern period. Sita, Savitri and Draupadi, the legendary women followed their husbands willingly, but Jaya followed her husband, Mohan, because of compulsion: "There is a frank brutal realization of this evil necessity in her conjugal life." (*That Long Silence* 27).

Before her marriage Jaya has been taught the importance of the husband in the life of a woman. Vanita Mani tells her that "a husband is a shethering tree". Ramu Kaka reminds her that the happiness of her husband and home depends entirely on her. When Jaya is leaving home after her marriage her elder brother advises her "to be good to Mohan." She has to shape herself to the wishes of Mohan. So she has given up the job that she wanted to take, the baby she wanted to adopt and the anti-price campaign she wanted to take part in since Mohan has accused her of not caring for the children, of isolating herself from him. So, her silence begins. Silence, "no questions, no retorts, only silence." Unable to communicate her anxieties to the unapproachable, incommunicable indifferent Mohan, she engulfs herself by a sense of seclusions and silence. Ever since her marriage she has done nothing but wait. This sense of waiting causes tremor in Jaya's mind. "Waiting for Mohan to come home, waiting for the children to be born, waiting for milk, waiting for the servant, waiting for the lunch carrier man" (30). This mechanical process of waiting causes tremor leading to the existential nothingness. Deshpande uses a beautiful image to describe Jaya's married life:

> A pair of bullocks yoked together. It is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful and what animal would voluntarily choose pain? We were two persons. A man and a woman. (11-12)

The image reveals a world of meaning. Bullocks yoked together, shared the burden between themselves. But no one knows whether they love each other or not. The ideological difference creates a wide chasm between them and they fail to understand each other. The result is their marital life grows shaky and shady. It rests on a thin thread of compromise like that of the bullocks between them rather than based on love. Out of social fear they continue to be husband and wife and not for their mutual need for each other. Mohan has married Jaya not out of love but simply because she resembled his drama girl when she talked fluently in English. He proudly asserts: "You know, Jaya, the first day I met you at your Kamukau's house, you were

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talking to your brother Dinkar and somehow you sounded so much like that girl. I think it was at that moment that I decided I would marry you" (90).

The attitudinal difference between Jaya and Mohan brings in a matching silence. She only answers to all his questions. She adopts to be silent. It is only towards the fag end of the novel, she decides to break her long silence. The novelist very wisely keeps the areas of consequences. If she actually breaks the silence, the end thus is left to the thoughts of its reader. Jaya's silence and her anxieties are rooted in every woman's soul in different form. Generally woman's silence is often understood as her symbol of satisfaction. But the novelist, through the stream of consciousness technique, makes it very clear that even in the educated upper middle classes, the inherent value of intelligent and talented woman is affected by her social and married status, for the society treats her as an object or as an ownership—never as an individual. Being a woman, Jaya is forced to accept the social and domestic responsibilities. Mohan's losing job and misfortunes, his allegation turns out to be Jaya's shocking experience. If an enquiry is called against Mohan, it will certainly lead to social humiliation. She is quite sure that Mohan would scoff at this idea, for they have never agreed together even on small issues like a meal or a movie without some argument. Finally, allowing her soul its own measure to manage the crisis, she dismisses all options as impracticable. And Mohan named Jaya at the time of marriage as Suhasini, meaning—". . Suhasini who was distinct from Jaya, a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped" (15-16). Ever since she is named as Suhasini she feels that her identity is in dilemma and feels confused.

Among human beings the attraction to dominate is universally irresistible and traditional marriage provides this opportunity to men. In traditional Indian marriages, it is not enough for the husband to be approved and admired; he wants instant and unquestioned respect to his commands. All the angers occurred during childhood, later life or daily among other men—all of it gets purged from him at home as man lets loose his authority upon his wife. He enacts violence, power, rigid resolutions; he commands in tones of sternness. This force is a daily reality for his wife. This very image of this traditional husband can be seen in the portrayal of Mohan's father. He is so firm in his rights that he demands, and his wife [Mohan's mother], silently acknowledges the complete authority of patriarchy. This is vividly narrated by Mohan to Jaya that—the woman [Mohan's mother] always stoops in front of the fire sitting blank and motionless and the groups of sleeping children [Mohan, his brothers and sisters] on the floor. They all had their food, except her. Though she always waited for him, their father, however late he was, she had asserted herself in this that she would not make the children wait for him. She gave them their dinner and even to the older ones and then she cooked rice for him again finally, when he entered into, he went straight to the bathroom to wash. By the time he returned, she had his plate ready. Hanging his shirt on a hook on the wall, he sat down, drank a glass of water, poured some water into his palm to sprinkle ritually around his plate and then he asked that why is there no fresh chutney today? He asked, not looking at her. She muttered something, the next second; he picked up his heavy brass plate and threw it, not at her, but intentionally on the wall, which it hit with a dull clang. He wore his shirt and went out of the house. This is silently watched by the children. The mother silently picks up the plate, cleans the floor and the wall of all the spattered food and wipes it. And she once again cooks rice and prepares fresh chutney and waits, when her children who had awoken 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). Mohan's reaction after his narration is quite revealing. "God . . . she was tough. Women in those days were tough" (36).

Jaya is quite a diverse personality when compared with Mohan's mother and sister who, within their duties, responsibilities and freedom, excelled without a murmur. But Jaya tries to set up herself in those distinct roles, the innate assertive traces inculcated in her by her father surfaces several times in her married life, whereas Mohan's mother's married life was spent in utter suffering due to her husband's insensitivity, which bolted everything. But when she died with a huge round Kumkum on her forehead, she was considered to be a very fortunate woman "blessed woman who died with her husband yet living" (38). His sister Vimala suffered in silence, her loss followed the footsteps of her mother. It was very well appreciated and was given a loud talk about their silence. Jaya, too, tries her level best to absorb the tradition of silence of her mother-in-law and sister-in-law by enacting the role of a devoted wife and dutiful mother, but the role playing is not as natural as it should have been, the cracks are soon observable. Once she cannot control her annoyance and she retorts back at Mohan, paying back his irritation in the same manner.

Jaya by nature has natural tenderness. She surrenders, for she cannot see Mohan shattered. Yet her entire repressed anger surfaces when Mohan's professional life faces crisis and the blame is showered on Jaya and children. She now realizes that the seventeen long years of her married life had failed to make them emotional and intellectual. Only their physical bodies had occasionally met, not their souls: "But the reality was only this. We were two persons. A man. A woman" (8). In creating a new woman, Deshpande opposes the patriarchal set-up which unnerves and upsets the innate creativity and

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individuality of women. Her protagonists got married with rosy dreams and a hope for getting respect, safety and status in the society, but they are completely disappointed and disillusioned. Jaya is such a character who experiences the gravitational jerk of patriarchy and tradition. Her interest into the family matter is so deep from a fiercely independent girl she gradually deteriorates into a "stereotype of a woman, nervous, incompetent always in hand of help, wanting to build an edifice of security around her husband and children, believing it to be a burrow into, which she can crawl like a reptile and feel safe." (148)

Jaya, like Gandhari of the Mahabharata, symbolically binds her eyes and grows blind to his weakness: "Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dodging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails ." (11). However, in the small apartment of Dadar, Mohan and Jaya due to frustration and depressions drop into silence without sharing their ideas, who is dreadfully disturbed, starts interviewing herself and she realizes her situation as: "The real picture, the real 'you' never emerges. Looking for it is a bewildering as tying to know how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces" (1).

The novel has three separate segments of feminism. In the first phase it is seen as the imitation of the role model protagonists who have crossed the limits. The second phase of feminism is found in Jaya's life—whenever she looks back in her life, there is a scene of nostalgia or longing, it is merely a feeling of suppressed anger and antipathy. In course of looking for shelter through her shocking situation in her neurosis state evades her personality as an adult. Her sorrow initiates the process of self discovery in her, leading in the final analysis to accept the fresh perception of life. Thus, her suffering has a beneficial effect on her personality. It further supports her to emerge with certain willingness to compromise with life and its problems. Therefore, to attain a state of complete family life, Jaya is forced to suppress every aspect of her desires that simply refused to fit into her role-model of a wife and a mother. In Jaya's life, another two most important aspects are—her writing career and her association with Kamat. Her relation with Kamat needs a clear understanding at the outset. Kamat's role in the novel is a shadowy one. Basically, he is an advertiser and lives alone in the above apartment of the Kulkarnis at Dadar—Bombay. He is somehow different from other men: a smooth, floating personality, sympathetic, objective in approach, listens very attentively to all the womanly talks, carries himself with ease and grace in the company of women. Kamat attracts Jaya but this attraction can be called only as a platonic affair. Kamat's approach of treating woman as an equal endears Jaya to the maximum extent only because she has observed men having different faces with a false smile. But Kamat is a natural, original, and sympathetic that brings Jaya into herself: "But this man . . . it had been a revelation to me that two people, a man and a woman, could talk this way. With this man, I had not been a woman. I had been just myself—Jaya" (153).

Mohan and Jaya have also sensual relationship; however, she has never known how to address her husband. But in Kamat's presence, she becomes uninhibited and sheds all the crippling silence she had been imposed on herself to be a part of erasing every public symbol of her identity. It is with Kamat, she gets the best of her father's concern for her reassurances and comfort. Kamat dares adequately to chide her like her father whenever she is wrong. He cares and encourages he like an elder brother. And at the same time, he gives beautiful compliments like a passionate lover. Kamat's confined nature forces Jaya to confide the things to him that she would never dare to mention to Mohan. Gradually she finds that Kamat has become her weakness. But again she overcomes and discards the instinctive urge towards Kamat. She aims at the man-woman relation especially within the limits of marriage. Very nicely she alienates herself from everything and everybody that posed threat to the peace of her family. Jaya fails to classify her identity and now doesn't enjoy her own individuality. She leads her life with an unfortunate past. She senses at this point that her married life has turned out to be intolerable and dull: "Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unchanging monotony" (4).

The third phase of feminism in the novel is Jaya's life. Her articulation and declaration is hinted at the end of the novel to be the future possibility for Jaya. The entire episodes of the novel are for the articulation, which will break Jaya's long silence. Even strong hints are quoted in the novel that Jaya is going to break her inactiveness: "I will have to speak, to listen to; I will have to erase the silence between us" (192).

Her initiative in breaking *The Long Silence* is a welcome step towards restoring normality and delight between husband and wife, between members of the family. Through her character, Shashi Deshpande transfers the message to the entire humanity that understanding is the root of domestic joy and there lies the joy, the bliss of the family.

That Long Silence is a masterpiece work as Shashi Deshpande has used the streams of consciousness technique in a most artistic and gratifying manner. Jaya's narration artificially unfolds her story in bits and pieces moving back and forth with significant contentment and borders on the incoherent which genuinely requires the stream of consciousness technique. V. Rama Rao in an erudite article writes:

> The metaphor of the silence under which the novel is organized helps to impose a quietude and discipline; the inner dynamics of a self-cut off from

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human communication. That Long Silence is not an intrusion into the world of silence but a silent communication with the oppressed self-straining for articulation, for a voice. (Rao 39)

In every sense, the novel *That Long Silence* is of enormous significance to us in the present day socio-cultural interaction. It is an assessment of selfhood as a mere form of expression.

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