

1 Shashi Deshpande's "That Long Silence": Novel of Restoring 2 Conjugal Life

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5 *Received: 14 December 2017 Accepted: 31 December 2017 Published: 15 January 2018*

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7 **Abstract**

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

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24 **Index terms**— feminism, conjugal, patriarchal system, culture-oriented, gender-oriented.

25 **1 Introduction**

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

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

38 Before her marriage Jaya has been taught the importance of the husband in the life of a woman. Vanita Mani
39 tells her that "a husband is a sheltering tree". Ramu Kaka reminds her that the happiness of her husband and
40 home depends entirely on her. When Jaya is leaving home after her marriage her elder brother advises her "to be
41 good to Mohan." She has to shape herself to the wishes of Mohan. So she has given up the job that she wanted
42 to take, the baby she wanted to adopt and the anti-price campaign she wanted to take part in since Mohan has

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43 accused her of not caring for the children, of isolating herself from him. So, her silence begins. Silence, "no
44 questions, no retorts, only silence." Unable to communicate her anxieties to the unapproachable, incommunicable
45 indifferent Mohan, she engulfs herself by a sense of seclusions and silence. Ever since her marriage she has done
46 nothing but wait. This sense of waiting causes tremor in Jaya's mind. "Waiting for Mohan to come home,
47 waiting for the children to be born, waiting for milk, waiting for the servant, waiting for the lunch carrier man"
48 (30). This mechanical process of waiting causes tremor leading to the existential nothingness. Deshpande uses a
49 beautiful image to describe Jaya's married life:

50 A pair of bullocks yoked together. It is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in
51 different directions would be painful and what animal would voluntarily choose pain? We were two persons. A
52 man and a woman. ??11) ??12) The image reveals a world of meaning. Bullocks yoked together, shared the
53 burden between themselves. But no one knows whether they love each other or not. The ideological difference
54 creates a wide chasm between them and they fail to understand each other. The result is their marital life grows
55 shaky and shady. It rests on a thin thread of compromise like that of the bullocks between them rather than
56 based on love. Out of social fear they continue to be husband and wife and not for their mutual need for each
57 other. Mohan has married Jaya not out of love but simply because she resembled his drama girl when she talked
58 fluently in English. He proudly asserts: "You know, Jaya, the first day I met you at your Kamukau's house, you
59 wereT Volume XVIII Issue VII Version I 27 (A)

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

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

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

100 Jaya is quite a diverse personality when compared with Mohan's mother and sister who, within their duties,
101 responsibilities and freedom, excelled without a murmur. But Jaya tries to set up herself in those distinct roles, the
102 innate assertive traces inculcated in her by her father surfaces several times in her married life, whereas Mohan's
103 mother's married life was spent in utter suffering due to her husband's insensitivity, which bolted everything.
104 But when she died with a huge round Kumkum on her forehead, she was considered to be a very fortunate
105 woman "blessed woman who died with her husband yet living" (38). His sister Vimala suffered in silence, her loss

106 followed the footsteps of her mother. It was very well appreciated and was given a loud talk about their silence.
107 Jaya, too, tries her level best to absorb the tradition of silence of her mother-in-law and sister-in-law by enacting
108 the role of a devoted wife and dutiful mother, but the role playing is not as natural as it should have been, the
109 cracks are soon observable. Once she cannot control her annoyance and she retorts back at Mohan, paying back
110 his irritation in the same manner.

111 Jaya by nature has natural tenderness. She surrenders, for she cannot see Mohan shattered. Yet her entire
112 repressed anger surfaces when Mohan's professional life faces crisis and the blame is showered on Jaya and
113 children. She now realizes that the seventeen long years of her married life had failed to make them emotional
114 and intellectual. Only their physical bodies had occasionally met, not their souls: "But the reality was only this.
115 We were two persons. A man. A woman" (8). In creating a new woman, Deshpande opposes the patriarchal set-up
116 which unnerves and upsets the innate creativity and individuality of women. Her protagonists got married with
117 rosy dreams and a hope for getting respect, safety and status in the society, but they are completely disappointed
118 and disillusioned. Jaya is such a character who experiences the gravitational jerk of patriarchy and tradition.
119 Her interest into the family matter is so deep from a fiercely independent girl she gradually deteriorates into a
120 "stereotype of a woman, nervous, incompetent always in hand of help, wanting to build an edifice of security
121 around her husband and children, believing it to be a burrow into, which she can crawl like a reptile and feel
122 safe." (148) Jaya, like Gandhari of the Mahabharata, symbolically binds her eyes and grows blind to his weakness:
123 "Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dodging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing
124 her husband's travails ." (11). However, in the small apartment of Dadar, Mohan and Jaya due to frustration and
125 depressions drop into silence without sharing their ideas, who is dreadfully disturbed, starts interviewing herself
126 and she realizes her situation as: "The real picture, the real 'you' never emerges. Looking for it is a bewildering
127 as tying to know how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces" (1).

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

146 Mohan and Jaya have also sensual relationship; however, she has never known how to address her husband.
147 But in Kamat's presence, she becomes uninhibited and sheds all the crippling silence she had been imposed on
148 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
149 concern for her reassurances and comfort. Kamat dares adequately to chide her like her father whenever she is
150 wrong. He cares and encourages her like an elder brother. And at the same time, he gives beautiful compliments
151 like a passionate lover. Kamat's confined nature forces Jaya to confide the things to him that she would never
152 dare to mention to Mohan. Gradually she finds that Kamat has become her weakness. But again she overcomes
153 and discards the instinctive urge towards Kamat. She aims at the man-woman relation especially within the
154 limits of marriage. Very nicely she alienates herself from everything and everybody that posed threat to the
155 peace of her family. Jaya fails to classify her identity and now doesn't enjoy her own individuality. She leads her
156 life with an unfortunate past. She senses at this point that her married life has turned out to be intolerable and
157 dull: "Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unchanging monotony"
158 (4).

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

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

167 That Long Silence is a masterpiece work as Shashi Deshpande has used the streams of consciousness technique
168 in a most artistic and gratifying manner. Jaya's narration artificially unfolds her story in bits and pieces moving

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169 back and forth with significant contentment and borders on the incoherent which genuinely requires the stream
170 of consciousness technique. V. Rama Rao in an erudite article writes:

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186 Novels of Shashi Deshpande. It is an assessment of selfhood as a mere form of expression)

187 [Deshpande ()] *That Long Silence*. Penguin Books, India, Shashi Deshpande . 1929. p. 27.