



Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence: Catharsis of the Gendered Self*

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Shashi Deshpande is an incredible writer from the Indian soil. She remains genuine in evoking feminine sensibility. Her plots unravel the complications of relationships in an astonishingly lucid manner. She projects a plethora of woes of a woman without being extravagant with its presentation. She submits the subtle realities of an Indian middle class household with a view that reformation and gender sensibility will come to play one day.

Her novel *That Long Silence* gives a vivid description of how Jaya, the protagonist, becomes Suhasini after marriage. The transformation of a girl into a woman is such a surprisingly change of personality that she herself is taken aback. Jaya was a courageous girl, competent of taking her own decisions and living life in her own terms but as soon as she gets married to Mohan, she changes herself to the extent of complete extinction of her personality. In this context, Veena Sheshadri says in her interview:

Why the author has chosen a 'heroine' who only succeeds in evoking waves of irritation in the reader? Perhaps it is because competent writer like her is never satisfied unless she is tackling new challenges. Also she believes in presenting life as it is and not as it should be and there must be thousands of self-centered women like Jaya, perennially groping about their fate, but unwilling to do anything that could result in their being tossed out of their comfortable ruts and into the big, bad world of reality, to fend for themselves. (94)

Jaya herself is more responsible than anybody else for her 'fate.' She keeps lamenting over her condition but is 'unwilling to do anything' about that. She does not want to break the chain of the routine that keeps her 'comfortable' and is thus resistant to change or what Sheshadri brings to light is that Jaya starts her journey 'perennially groping about their (her) fate.' This 'groping' will ultimately prove to be what the romantics call 'in agony and in the void' created for Indian women in this male dominated world.

In order to please her husband and achieve a kind of wholesomeness in the domestic sphere, Jaya converts herself into a dependent woman whereas she was a self-reliant girl. She becomes "A woman who coped" (16) because she keeps adjusting with her husband and his needs. The point to ponder is why she has to undergo such a transformation? Who forced her into this?

The feminine sensibility in an Indian middle class household and the society around it compels a female identity to accept the secondary position particularly in the household. Jaya is a non-working woman. She sees the world with Mohan's eyes. Whatever is told to her is accepted without questioning. This is the quality that is most expected of a woman- erasure of her real self in the name of family doctrines.

The question arises that who should be assigned the responsibility for this secondary position of women in the society. The firsthand responsibility is of the society because its mould shapes the lives of individuals living in it. As Freud remarks, "forced into the background by claims of culture" (73), people keep lamenting in the name of their roots and culture but do not understand that culture is created by man not man by culture. The Indian middle class society gives a picture of a woman to be docile. Indian feature films project the character of women to be honest, kind, caring, docile, simple and most

importantly without a tongue. This is the first reason that men crave for such a personality in women. But the subject of brooding is that, why Indian films show such character of women.

Literature is the mirror of the society. Films have become that too. Such representations in literature and films reflect the mind- set and the culture of the society. The society could not yet accept women as free individuals and that is what is casted in literature and films.

Now the narrower question is, even after so many reformations, why the society holds woman next to man. The analysis of our social structure gives an answer to that also. It is the age old indoctrination and mental conditioning given to men and women living in the Indian middle class society that considers woman's position secondary and man's to be the primary. The logic behind that is that man has been the bread earner and thus has a higher position in the family. If woman had ever been paid for the domestic or household works she performs in a family; probably the situation would have been something else. But even with economic independence that women cherish these days, they have not achieved freedom in totality. Some fault lies with women also. They are intrinsically submissive and easily surrender to their male-counterparts because they do not dare to protest and men take advantage of this mental configuration of women.

Coming to Jaya of *That Long Silence*, the bold girl submits to her husband at free will because questioning him would mean a conflict in the domestic sphere which she tries to avoid, "To go in different directions would be painful, and what animal would voluntarily choose pain?" (11-12) Even Mohan limits her by telling about his mother who used to bear all atrocities cast by his father without a word. Jaya interprets that if there is no conflict, it is a happy family. Her life rotates around her husband, Mohan and her children Rahul and Rati but in the process of being an ideal wife and a good mother, she almost exterminates her own self.

Later, when Mohan is accused of corruption in office and flees (with her) to their Dadar flat, she realizes that her long silence has been an unsuccessful attempt to achieve a successful family. She has to follow Mohan like "Sita following her husband into exile" (11) which is something that she does not wish because Mohan is no Ram. Yet she shifts with him. Her husband does not acknowledge the sacrifices she has done for him. She reaches a phase of utter confusion and hopelessness. Her depression oozes out in the form of dreams and nightmares and she reaches the verge of losing her mental tranquility.

As there is a Jaya (the victorious) inside her, she comprehends the real life situation and undergoes a phase of introspection. She analyzes the causes and effects of her long silence. Ultimately, she comes out triumphant on the face of all oddities of life with the realization of her true self and her feminine identity. She understands that silence can never help a healthy relationship. As Kamini Dinesh rightly observes, "The act of unburdening herself through self-expression becomes for her, a creative process. It is not merely a reliving of particular moments of the past but a coming to terms with herself."(88) The two people in a relationship have to communicate to each other to keep their relation healthy and Jaya finally decides to talk to Mohan and tell him her aspirations. She also gets ready to listen to his hopes too. Thus this 'self- centered woman' according to Sheshadri now, according to Kamini Dinesh 'unburdens herself through self- expression.'

Feminine sensibility has become the acceptance of secondary position of women. This sensibility has to undergo a phase of catharsis so that it can be purified and reach the real meaning of feminine sensibility, that is, equal position like men in the household- neither more, nor less.

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