

‘Feministic Perspective in That Long Silence’

Khushhali

Assistant Professor in English

Shashi Deshpande began her writing in 1970 initially with short stories which were published in magazines like ‘Femina’ and ‘Eves weekly’. Her first collection of stories ‘Legacy’ was published in 1978. Later on she published seven novels which are :- ‘The Dark Holds No Terror’ (1980), ‘If I Die Today’(1982), ‘Come Up and Be Dead’(1983), ‘Roots and Shadows’(1983), ‘That Long Silence’(1988), ‘The Binding Vine’(1992) and ‘A Matter of Time’(1996).

Striking feature of her novels is the realistic representation of women of Indian society. Her women characters are the victims of gender inequality. She is concerned about the status of women and that’s why portrayed the realities of women lives in high middle class surroundings. Shashi Deshpande has been called a feminist for her portrayal off the predicament of middle class educated Indian Women, their inner conflict and quest for identity, issues pertaining to parent child relationship, marriage and sex and their exploitation and disillusionment¹.

“That long silence” published in 1988, won the Sahitya Akademi Award for the best novel in 1990. It is a women oriented novel. It depicts the suppressed feelings aspirations wishes and agonies of women. Mainly it is a story of Indian housewife and her inner world i.e. the protagonist of the novel Jaya. Further novelist took pain to present different faces of women in the patriarchal society where women are given secondary place and the status of the ‘Other’.

Emancipation of women physically and mentally is the goal of the feminists. A women has to go beyond the society roles of mother/sister/wife/etc. She has to find out who she is².

About that long silence Shashi Deshpande says:

“I wrote that long silence almost entirely a woman’s novel-nevertheless, a book about the silencing of one half of humanity”³.

Through Jaya the author projects the plight of middle class women and also the fact that after so much advancement male psyche has not undergone any changes. Women are still in the clutches of men. Very cleanly Shashi has portrayed the suffering and deprivations of feminine life of India in the Novel and further it presents the stereotypes about Indian femininity through different characters.

It is also critiques of the myths and stereotypes that shape Indian wifehood and Motherhood. Simone De Beauvoir writes in her work “Second Sex”.

“One is not “born”, but rather “Becomes” a woman. No biological , psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as femine”⁴.

Jaya in novel plays dual role of an actor participant as well as an observer. Through her stream of consciousness we come to know about various women characters. The novel opens with Jaya and her husband moving to their old Dadar flat in Bombay from their cosy and palatial house as her husband was involved in a financial malpractice and an inquiry was set against him. Jaya like a typical Indian housewife followed Mohan, almost in the same way like the mythical characters ‘Sita’ and ‘Draupadi’ who followed their husbands in exile. She did not ask her husband any question and here she was struck with the image of two bullocks.

“A pair of bullocks yoked together.... That was how I saw the two of us the day we came here”(7)

In the silence of Dadar flat, Jaya starts serious introspection and her views about her life begin to change after Mohan’s accusation that he had been involved in business malpractice so that his family lives in comfort. He says:

“It was for you and children that I did this. I wanted you to have a good life. I wanted the children to have all these things I never had.”(9)

Adele King Opines:-

“Jaya finds her normal routine so disrupted that for the first time she can look at her life and attempt to decide who she really is.”⁵.

Jaya says that:

“The real picture, the real “You” never emerges. Looking for it is bewildering..... Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces”(1)

Individuality of Jaya moreover of woman's can be defined only in relation to others, it is fate of woman that she is always defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her, there is no self identity for woman. Jaya in the novel is known by two names Jaya and Suhasini which were given respectively by her father and her husband. It shows that even the name of a woman changes according to the desires of men. Jaya means “victory” and Suhasini means “a soft smiling, placid motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family A woman who coped”(16). Since Jaya and Suhasini are two facets of the same coin and these two collateral names of Deshpande protagonist are symbolical in their socio familial import⁶.

Her name Jaya symbolizes revolt whereas Suhasini symbolizes submission to the patriarchy, which is the fate of almost every woman in Indian Society. During her childhood days she, without her own choice, was forced by her father to listen to the music of Paluskar and Faiyaz Khan instead of Rafi and Lata as they were her father's favourite and again male dominance is seen after her marriage that she wanted to write stories and articles about men-woman relationship but she could not write because Mohan did not like such topic. She says:

“I had known then that it hadn't mattered to Mohan that I had written a good story about a couple, a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body”(144)

Mohan felt humiliated by Jaya's story as he thought it was his story. So Jaya thought to stop writing as she feared that it may break or have adverse effect on their married life. Though she continued writing but her subject matter changed and she started writing under pseudonym “Seeta” about light humorous pieces on the life of a middle class housewife. And by doing so, she got good response from the readers as well as approval from her husband.

She says:

“Seeta had been the means through which I had shut the door firmly on all those woman who had invaded my being, screaming for attention, woman I had known, I would not write about, because they might- resemble Mohan's mother or aunt or my mother or aunt”(149)

She denies her writings the reflections of her individuality just to play the role of an ideal wife. Kamat, her neighbor advises her that her stories lacking in strong emotions and that a woman's story is supposed to express anger. As a critic, Kamat warns her by saying.

“Beware of this ‘women are the victims’ theory of yours. It'll drag you down into a soft squishy bog of self-pity. Take yourself seriously woman don't skulk behind a false name.”(148)

Jaya echoed like her husband that it is unwomanly to be angry; for it is against the ideals of feminism. “A woman can never be angry; She can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There's no room for anger, no room for despair either.”(147) Jaya and Kamat were good friends. Jaya felt love that is more than gratitude but when Kamat was ill and wanted help from Jaya, she took it in other way and left Kamat alone in his bad time. She failed as a human being and that's too because of the fear of patriarchal society.

As it may arise question on her chastity.

“He tried to reach out to me in his loneliness and it had frightened me. I'm Mohan's wife, I had thought, I'm only Mohan's wife and had run away.”(186)

As a human, she can be criticized but as a wife she is appreciated. The relationship of Mohan and Jaya was a mechanical relationship where there was no love. Mohan married Jaya so that he can have “an educated cultured wife’, Who can speak good English. Mohan did not want reciprocating and loving wife, he was just conscious about his status in society, and

again as an ideal wife Jaya had to adjust all her life style to mould her as per Mohan's desire. She cut her long hairs, did not go for a job, aborted against her will, follows the modern trend in dressing and many other things⁷. Jaya can also be compared to Gandhari because she acted like her did not question on Mohan's work and decisions. Almost in the same way Gandhari chose to remain blind, Jaya also posed to be blind, not bothering about the ways adopted by Mohan for getting a better quarter and then a transfer to Bombay⁸.

At one place Jaya says:

"Mohan had managed to get the job. I never asked him how he did it. If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly. I did not want to know anything."(61)

Jaya's and Mohan married life like most of the married couples in India was dull and Monotonous. They did not have any emotional connection. Their relationship was on the ground of physical relationship and there was no spirituality. Jaya never talked on sex whether she wanted or not. Every time after it Mohan always asked "Did I hurt you" and Jaya's response was always 'No'.

Another example of gender discrimination is seen in Ramukaka's sketch of family tree wherein there were only names of males of family and the tree did not have any name of females whether it can be Ajji, Jaya's mother, her aunts who kept the family together and who were behind the flourishing of family. No acknowledgement is given to woman and her works. Deshpande in 'That long silence' has focused on position of women in male governed society by giving brief detail of some other women in character in the novel such as Kusum, Nayana, Jeeja, Vanitamami, etc.

Kusum can be said the darker regions of Jaya's psyche. She is the touchstone against which Jaya tests her sanity. Kusum was one of the neglected child of her parents. She was niece to vanitamami who being child less took up Kusum as her own daughter; but passivity and submission remained her destiny in new home too. The insignificant Kusum was married and gave birth to three girls. Desperate to have a male child of her own Kusum developed insanity and was rejected by her husband⁹.

She is symbolic of those women who tolerate injustices, humiliations and insults at the hand of patriarchal system.

Vanitamami, "who had never known what it was to choose" (45) represents another facet of the traditionally suppressed woman. After her marriage her life was dominated by her Mother in Law¹⁰.

She was just an object in the house and had no interference in household affairs. She tells Jaya that a husband is a sheltering tree and further advises Jaya to accept his mistress, "If your husband has a mistress or two ignore it; take up a hobby instead cats, may be or your sister's children."(31)

Jaya's Ajji believed in the traditional thinking of serving one's husband like God and that a girl should be silent and make a gentle wife.

Shashi Deshpande has sensitively portrayed feminine aspects through the novel. The figures of Mohan's mother and sister represents those women are socially conditioned to remain silent in every situation. Mohan's mother had to wait for her husband late into the night as her drunkard husband wanted fresh meal and further he would not eat from a touched vessel. He calls that food as "your children disgusting leavings"(35). And if he did not like meal then he throws the plate and the poor wife has to clean up everything silently and patiently and then prepares another meal with fresh chutney. This incident shows the cruelty of husband and as well as it shows the passive reaction of the son Mohan; who has seen his mother suffering praises her by saying the she was a victorious woman further "she was tough. Women in those days were tough."(36)

It's painful to see that a son too does not understand the pain of his mother. Jaya's view was different because she viewed the situation from a woman's point of view.

"He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire, but I saw despair. I saw a despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and Surrender."(36)

Beside Mohan's mother there is Mohan's sister Vimla who like her mother preferred to die in silence because no one was there to hear her. Vimla was suffering from an ovarian tumor but she did not tell anyone about her illness. She was a childless women, her mother-in-law taunted her by saying:

"God knows what's wrong with her. She's been lying there on her bed for over a month now. I never heard of women going to Hospitals and doctors for such a thing."(39)

The above passage displays woman's callousness, inhumanity and rudeness causing another women's death highlights the distinctness of Deshpande attitude¹¹.

She does not put blame only on the men for their hostile attitude, the women are equally to be blamed. At one place Jeeja, maid of Jaya, who herself suffered at the hands of her drunkard husband tells her daughter-in-law Tara.

"He keeps the Kumkum on your forehead. What is a woman without that. (53)

Most of the typical Indian women cling to their husbands despite their various tortures and cruelty simply because they own their Kumkum. Nayana, maid of Jaya wants to have a son because she does not want her daughter to suffer at some drunkard's hand like she herself has suffered. A boy will have an individual life, which she knows will be denied to a girl.

"Why give birth to a girl, behnji, who'll only suffer because of men all her life? No, no, better to have a son."(28)

To conclude, the novel is a story of woman rather many women in search of 'self'. Woman's own psychological conditioning is main reason behind the gender discrimination. Jaya and other women character in the novel has almost lost themselves to the clutches of patriarchy which has strangled their wish to speak to live. That long silence is about their suppressed feelings and the decisions that we make in our live and our preferences that lead us to take them. A woman in order to have a peaceful life in patriarchal setup has to break the silence and should raise her voice with courage. Concluding lines of the novel suggest hope and change for better life.

"We don't change overnight. It's possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible"(193).

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