

# Study of Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* Beyond Silence

Dr. Ritu Yadav

Associate Professor, Deputy Director, DGHE, Panchkula

---

## ABSTRACT

The novel, *That Long Silence*, traces the protagonist, Jaya's life of self doubts, guilt, fear and silence. She analyses her life and her relation with her husband and children and finds that she has miserably failed to be herself. She takes up writing as a means to express herself but finally gave up as it only disturbs the harmony of her life. The paper examines how she finally comes to choose the middle path where she can live with her husband without losing her identity.

**Keywords:** Silence, feminine, self assertion, self discovery, tradition, family.

---

## INTRODUCTION

*Silence from and about the subject woman was the order of the day. Some of the silences were broken and some were maintained by authors who lived with and within the policing strategies for breaking it. (Toni Morrison's Playing in the Dark)*

*That Long Silence* (1988) is a novel written by Shashi Deshpande, an Indian author who has been celebrated for her exploration of feminist themes in her writing. The narrator, Jaya, who is also rethinking her past in an attempt to find herself, at a time when her husband, Mohan, is under investigation for shady business activities. The setting of Deshpande's work is the middle-class India of an educated woman:

Well- educated, hard working people in secure jobs, cushioned by insurance and provident funds, with two healthy, well-fed children going to good schools. (S,5)

The novel tells the story of Jaya, a woman living in Mumbai with her husband, Mohan and their two children. Jaya is a housewife who has devoted herself to her family and to maintaining a traditional Indian household, but she feels suffocated and unfulfilled by her role as a wife and mother. The novel explores the themes of a woman's struggle to find her own voice and identity within the confines of a traditional marriage, and the ways in which gender roles and expectations can restrict and oppress women.

Throughout the novel, Jaya grapples with the expectations that are placed upon her by her husband, her family, and society as a whole. She is expected to be a dutiful and submissive wife who puts the needs of her family before her own, and she is expected to conform to traditional gender roles and to fulfill the duties of a wife and mother without complaint. However, Jaya feels trapped and suffocated by these expectations, and she longs for a sense of autonomy and self-fulfillment that she is unable to find within her marriage. Jaya decides to write to break her silence. In the words of Helen Cixous,

Every woman has known the torture of beginning to speak aloud, heart beating as if to break, occasionally falling into loss of language, ground and language slipping out from under her, because for women speaking- even just opening her mouth- in public is something rash, a transgression. (108)

But this writing, which is a private activity to find solace and self-expression gets resistance in this patriarchal world and it comes from her husband only. He says,

Jaya how could you, how could you have done it?...They will all know now all those people who read this and know us, they will know that these two persons are us, ...How can I look anyone in the face again? ... How could you write such ugly things, how will you face people after this. (S(143-144)

The themes of "That Long Silence" by Shashi Deshpande include the struggle for women to assert their individuality and to find their own voices within the confines of a patriarchal society, the power imbalance within relationships, and the ways in which women can be their own worst enemies in terms of upholding and reinforcing patriarchal norms and expectations. It also includes the importance of self-expression and creativity as a means of resistance and empowerment, the role of society in shaping gender roles and expectations, and the ways in which women can resist and challenge these gender roles. Shashi Deshpande questions the self-identity beyond the defined roles of wife and mother. In the *The Stone Woman* she says:

For me it is important that I should know who I am. If I'm just a docile, submissive Sita, then I would be feeling sorry for myself as a victim. But I'm not nor is Sita like that. I'm looking for Sita in me, Draupadi in me, Kunti in me. (De)

It seems that through *Jaya*, Shashi Deshpande is re-discovering the ways to express herself and liberates herself by writing and thus breaking the silence as,

It is by writing, from and toward women and by taking up the challenge which has been governed by the Phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence. (Cixous 131)

Like Deshpande's own life, *Jaya's* confinement in the flat becomes the greatest moment of her freedom through self-expression. Deshpande expresses herself through *Jaya's* narrative. She states about herself referring to a turning point in her life:

Despite marriage and motherhood, I felt very incomplete, even dissatisfied. That's when I read Betty Friedan's *The Problem Without a Name*....I am not only a woman. I'm not only a female. I'm a human being with a mind. It gave me lot of unhappiness that my intellect wasn't being connected to my female self. I was always Mrs. Deshpande, Raghunandan's mother, Vikram's mother...(De).

One of the key themes of the novel is the suppression of women's voices within Indian society. *Jaya's* husband, Mohan, is a domineering and controlling figure who seeks to silence her and prevent her from expressing her opinions and feelings. He belittles her and dismisses her thoughts and ideas, and he constantly undermines her confidence and self-esteem. As a result, *Jaya* is hesitant to speak out and to assert her own independence, and she feels that she has no power or agency within her marriage. Her sexual relationship with her husband is another experience of nothingness as 'the silent, wordless love making' appears to her like a caricature, particularly in Mohan's indifference in and after sex. In one situation she realizes, "A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical frustrated." (147) *Jaya* has been taught that "a husband is a sheltering tree". *Jaya* has also shaped herself according to the wishes of her husband. She learns to have "no questions, no retorts only silence." Deshpande's female characters find sensual satisfaction may be somewhat surprising, even though, as *Jaya* realizes, "sensual memories are the coldest" (S,95) and "it is the act of sex that really affirms your aloneness." (S,95). Another obvious difference as a middle-class Indian woman, *Jaya* has a different relationship to poorer women than would her Western counterpart. She becomes aware of how she exploits the poor:

All those happy women with husbands in good jobs, men who didn't drink and beat their wives...they were of no use to me. It was Jeeja and her like I needed; it was these women who saved me from the hell of drudgery (S, 52).

The problem of identity, the conflict of being both oneself and fitting a traditional role as a "good daughter", "good wife" or "good mother" occurs frequently. *Jaya's* sense of identity is never certain. She is torn between being *Jaya*, her true self and a good wife. She often ponders the problem of identity:

As if such a thing as one self, intact and whole, waiting to be discovered. On the contrary, there are so many, each self attached like a Siamese twin to a self of another person, neither able to exist without the other. (S, 69)

However, as the novel progresses, *Jaya* begins to question the role that she has been assigned within her marriage, and she starts to assert her own needs and desires. She begins to challenge Mohan's dominance and to speak out against his controlling behavior, and she starts to explore her own interests and passions. She takes up writing and she finds a sense of fulfillment and purpose in this creative outlet. Even when she is permitted to enter the realm of the public the spaces assigned to her within the public is entertainment or the like as she has written amusement articles for women's magazines. In *Jaya's* stories "they lived happily ever after", although she knows the falsity of that view of life. She also knows that any story will change in the telling, that she rewrites Mohan's stories of his impoverished childhood, that

she is now rewriting her own life. Her husband, Mohan, her private reader, Kamath serves as societal obstacles to her realization of herself through her writing.

Through her writing, Jaya is able to express her feelings and emotions in a way that she is unable to do through words. She is able to explore her own thoughts and feelings, and to assert her own identity and individuality. As she continues to write, Jaya becomes more confident and self-assured, and she begins to challenge the traditional gender roles and expectations that have been imposed upon her. For writing self-consciously as a woman would automatically pose question to the patriarchal norms and to avoid these, the protagonist, Jaya, blames herself for her predicament she says, "With whom shall I be angry? With myself of course."(192)

Deshpande's novel raises the question of identity not only for the protagonist but also for the readers of "being an Indian wife, mother, writer, and above all else woman".(Sales)

Jaya's decision not to write is probably a very realistic portrayal of one of the middle class societies in India whose effort of self assertion within the self is best represented as failed. Her step from private to the public and then back to the private as a consequence of patriarchal pressure is shown as a failed detour around emancipation and liberation of the self. What is significant to a female sensibility is that in her apparent gesture of submission and conformity to the order of the male world Jaya has actually internalized a resistance within her. After she has rediscovered herself, she is no more the same Jaya although she doesn't leave the house. She creates a different space of her own. Jaya's silence is also a mark of a failed communication between individuals although silence is not absence of communication. In the words of Deshpande. "Silence condensed everything I wanted to say"( cited by Menon). Deshpande allows Jaya to discover her human self within the woman as she herself so desired: "Basically mine is a quest for the human self within the woman"(De).

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is therefore a text which not only breaks the silence of a gendered subject through her desire to write but provides for a critique of the process of imposition of silence by allowing the protagonist Jaya to go back to her self-enclosed cocoon of silence in her decision to not write her text.

It is often a very positive experience for a woman to be alone. It may be the first time in her life she discovers what she wants, her own needs, without taking someone else into consideration....She may discover new possibilities, talents and horizons.... Indeed, perhaps she becomes stronger and attempts to do things that once seemed easier to avoid. She is free, as it were to create herself.(Brickerton.164)

In this sense, Jaya's retreat in writing her text of breaking silence is not a closure of possibilities but a refreshed beginning. That she had once decided to write a medium for her expression, as Helene Cixous says, "woman must write her body,...go beyond the discourse with its last reserves including the one of laughing off the word 'silence'"(63-64). The novel analyses emotions within rather unexceptional situations and because it creates more detailed pictures of an extended family with its odd misfits, its petty bickering over money, its jealousy over affections; and of a marriage in which there is no right or wrong. The scene in which Mohan accuses Jaya of indifference to his plight and in which she is uncertain and confused about her responsibility is especially powerful.

The richness of the novel lies in the refusal to propose any easy resolutions. Many questions remained unanswered; no one is capable of heroism. Jaya, at the end of the novel decides that she must try to change, to speak more openly to Mohan,

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. And if there is anything I know now it is this: life has always to be made possible.(S, 193).

Thus the novel succeeds in maintaining the balance between the oppositions; home and the world, the personal and the public, the tradition and the modern, the domain of the known and the unknown and the freedom and the unfreedom. Jaya's self knowledge is a step beyond feminine or masculine identity. Deshpande's strength lies "in portraying the uncertainties and doubts of women who cannot see themselves as heroic, but who want to make life possible."(Adele King, 167).

## REFERENCES

- [1]. Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*. London: Virago, 1988. References in the paper are marked as S.
- [2]. Brickerton, Tricia. "Woman Alone". *Sex and Love: New Thoughts on Old Contradictions*. Eds. Sue Cartledge and Joanna Rajan. Women's PRESS, 1983.
- [3]. Cixous, Helene. "Stories: Out and Out Attacks/Ways Out/Forays". *The NewlyBorn Woman*, 1986.



- [4]. De, Aditi. "Breaking That Long Silence". *The Hindu*. August28, 2003.
- [5]. Menon, Ritu. "No Longer Silent"part2, See <http://Ch.8No.Com/Ritu2.htm>.
- [6]. Sales, Ashley. "Women's Studies." *Zare Book Review*. October22, 2003.
- [7]. King, Adele. "Shashi Deshpande: Portraits of an Indian Woman". *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s*. Ed. By, Viney Kirpal.