

CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO: CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION AND FEMALE IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: A FEMINIST READING OF SHASHI DESHPANDE'S THAT LONG SILENCE

Abstract

Shashi Deshpande's *That long silence* underscores the challenges encountered by women, particularly Jaya Kulkarni, in a certain social structure. It thoroughly examines the female characters and enforces social norms, expectations, and traditions based on gender discrimination. The research paper analyses Jaya's submissive uprising against the ongoing psychological pressure of patriarchal dominance as well as social and cultural norms. Jaya finds it difficult to find comfort as many of her questions remain unaddressed. At last, with the lapse of time, she accepts the conventional rule of silence and submission, believing that life must always be made possible. she becomes acquainted with her own fate. Deshpande demonstrates her artistic brilliance that highlight the subtle human connections in which women's challenging lives are presented in all their complexity together with the writer's perceptive meanings. This paper aims to reveal Jaya's inner conflict and pain as she strives to construct her own distinctive identity in society.

Keywords: Culture, Society, Tradition, Identity, Silence and Submission.

Author

Dr. Vinodhini Chinnaswamy

Associate Professor

Department of English

Presidency University

Bangalore, Karnataka, India

drcvinodhini@gmail.com

I. INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande explores the secrets of the female ego and her desire for answers to develop a secure identity in society as he authentically and dramatically portrays the deepest sentiments of the feminine psyche. As she portrays in her novels the daily struggle of women to balance their dual roles as wives and mothers, Deshpande focuses more on the hardships of women as a result of cultural constraints, male child preference, early marriage, compelled marital sex, molestation, and sex role discrimination. Additionally, throughout her entire body of work, there is an everyday struggle and conflict related to the man-woman relationship. In her essay "Why I am a Feminist" she says:

"Women are neither inferior nor subordinate human beings, but on half of the human race." (2)

Deshpande does not want to be associated with any particular label, even though she practises feminism. Being classified as a woman writer makes her feel very uncomfortable. In an interview with Geetha Gangadharan, she says:

"My objection was to being called a feminist writer. Yes, I am very much against such a categorisation. It is just good writing and bad writing and not men's and women's writing." (2)

The fundamental challenges encountered by Deshpande's women characters are emotional conditioning and gendered distinctions, which forms the adult identity of the female child, Shashi Deshpande's women have generally culture-specific and tradition-bound Indian conceptions about womanhood. Her educated middle-class ladies acquire this delicate feminist consciousness as evident in the *The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande*, R.S. Pathak states that Deshpande's novels are considered as:

"The staple material of feminist thought: Women's sexuality, the gender roles, and discover." (3)

II. CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE IDENTITY

That Long Silence delves into the essence of the cultural construction of female identity and behaviour patterns, particularly as a "wife" and "mother." Jaya and Mohan's family life addresses the psychological, sentimental, and social implications of being a wife in a patriarchal system. The novel revolves around a woman's quest to understand herself better, as she embarks on a profound journey into the intricacies of the female psyche. Along the way, she learns to embrace the enigmas that life presents and finds her place within them, ultimately leading to self-acceptance. A part from Jaya's identity, the novel explores a variety of women's issues, including their challenges, setbacks, and struggles. The story's strength lies with the traditional bound, mute women who choose passive withdrawal from life, such as Kusum, Vanitamami, Jeeja, Jaya's grandmother, Mohan's mother, and Vimala. Deshpande develops the viewpoint that women should be seen, heard, and understood. She argues that they shouldn't be treated like caged birds and that they should proudly sing of their true selves and overcome all forms of discrimination.

1. **Jaya's Modernist View:** The protagonist, Jaya, is pro-modern, Western-influenced, and a writer, whereas Mohan is a traditionalist with deep ties to tradition. They are unable to comprehend one another because of the stark contrasts in their viewpoints and attitudes. Mohan believes that the actual "work" of a woman is to wait by the hearth serving hot food when her husband returns back home from his work, but Jaya sees this as nothing but dejection. They are deeply divided by their opposing ideologies and are unable to communicate with one another.

Jaya presents herself as a content housewife, married to a man who seems to care, and living in a cosy house with plenty of material comforts. However, closer examination reveals that Jaya has purposefully squelched every facet of her character that doesn't strictly adhere to her image as a wife, mother, and unsuccessful writer in order to reach this stage of marital accomplishment. In the review of *That Long Silence*, Ahuja opines that:

“Jaya caught in an emotional eddy, endeavours to come to terms with her protean roles, while trying, albeit in vain, to rediscover her true self which is but an ephemera. An unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and failed writer.” (2)

Jaya, who has endured a lifetime of suppression, succumbs to conformity in order to conform to the societal expectations of the perfect Indian woman. Despite being married to Mohan and having two children, she continues to experience a sense of seclusion and loneliness. Simon de Beauvoir states that:

“A gilded mediocrity lacking ambition and passion, aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently towards death without questioning its purpose” (447).

Her husband is unable to fully understand her emotions because she is shaken from within, as suggested by the comparison of -“Two 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?”(12) Due to Mohan's discouragement, she finds herself unable to pursue her passion for writing any further. The realization that her husband is suppressing the writer within her leaves her devastated and heartbroken. She confesses:

“I had known then that it hadn't mattered to Mohan that I had written a good story, a story about a couple, a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body. For Mohan it had mattered that people might think the couple was us, that man the man him. To Mohan I had been no writer, only an exhibitionist.” (144)

2. **Jaya's Rueful Silence:** Jaya recalls that she and Mohan have had no further communication; instead, there has been a solemn silence that has left her unhappy in her relationships with Mohan and other people. As there is no communication—either verbal or emotional—resigned Jaya's silence and gruesome suffering leave her feeling emotionally unsettled and mentally startled. Like a moth, she is muffled and strangled. Jaya bitterly says that:

“Nothing between as nothing between me and Mohan. We live together but there had been only Emptiness between us.” (185)

The forced prolonged silence between Jaya and Mohan lengthens day by day, and the investigation into her husband's unethical business practices disturbs their regular life. Due to this reason, they are forced to move out of their Churchgate apartment and into a small apartment in Dadar. In Rashmi Gaur's view:

“Jaya's journey towards a well-defined self-hood is mired in the labyrinthine mazes of societal pressures, feminine conditioning to fashion oneself according to the accepted norms of behaviour, suppressive and egotistic male chauvinism and the continued dilemma of attaching a purpose to her life, culminating in a long silence. Her silence is symptomatic of alienation and apprehension rioted in every woman's soul in different forms—a silence which is often misunderstood by men as a symbol of woman's contentment” (179).

- 3. Jaya as a Vigilant Woman:** Jaya's silent agony reaches a climax when Mohan departs the house silently and discreetly, without saying anything to his wife. Jaya's self-esteem is completely shattered because she does not want her family to fall apart. However, as a practical woman, she decides to modify the negative situation by rejecting the label of silent sufferer assigned to women and resolves to no longer be a mere shadow of her husband. Deshpande explicitly states here that Jaya is not one for settling for mediocrity in life. She develops into a vigilant woman who is determined to forge her own stable identity in order to be emancipated. Through the character of Jaya, she appears to convey an important message to Indian women.
- 4. Jaya's Rejection to remain as a Traditional Wife:** Deshpande presents Jaya as a woman in the process of self-transformation when she rejects the name "Suhasini" bestowed upon her by her husband. This act signifies her emergence as a new individual, asserting her autonomy and refusing to conform to the identity imposed upon her. The name 'Suhasini,' means "a soft placid, motherly woman." (15-16) when Kamat suggests her to express the real anguish in her writings, she replies, “because no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman?” (147) Jaya rejects the new name, Suhasini, and rejects to take on the subordinate role assigned by patriarchal society as an embodiment of her protest. Jaya has stopped writing for the newspaper column "Seeta," metaphorically abandoning her conventional role model of wife. Mohan convinces her to keep writing for the column, but she is now unwilling to be "Mohan's wife, Rahul's and Rati's mother.

III. CONCLUSION

That Long Silence rigorously challenges the notion of "normative national interest" and engages in a critical examination of how women's cultural self-representation is regulated. The novel also questions the dominant influence of patriarchal constructs in shaping the concept of nationhood, thus contesting their hegemony. Deshpande depicts not only her female protagonist, Jaya, but gives also a vivid portrait of the unhappy victimized women like Kusum, Vanitamami, Mohan's mother and sister Vimala who equally submit themselves to passive resignation. Kusum, Jaya's cousin, represents a tragic portrayal of

women who refuse to adapt their lifestyles to align with evolving societal norms. Her descent into madness and accidental death, resulting from falling into a dry well, symbolize the fate of those who resist adjusting their way of life to conform to shifting societal expectations and conventions. The blind pursuit of the custom forces Vanitamami is not to think independently. She is not allowed to make decisions. Despite being subjected to physical abuse by her worthless and alcoholic husband, Jaya's maidservant endures silently, offering unwavering support and even using her hard-earned money to provide him with liquor. After the death of her husband and his mistress, she willingly brings up their son, Rajaram, who also drinks and beats his wife, Tara. However, Jeeja does not allow her daughter-in-law even to abuse or curse her son. Both Jeeja and her daughter-in-law are victimized by such drunken, wife-beaten, crude men. By exploring into the intricacies of middle-class life, the novel constructs distinct narratives that serve as a means to explore the overarching met a narrative of the nation. It uses the specific stories and details from this social stratum to delve deeper into the broader themes and issues surrounding the nation as a whole. The novel exhibits an embedded imagination. The protagonist's story prefers to place women's places on an axis that cuts across class, caste, region, and time. Conflicts in the realm of cultural politics are deflected by the gendered space's universality, particularly when they relate to national identity.

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